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Jacques Derrida and Chuang Tzu: Some Analogies in Their Deconstructionist Discourse on Language and Truth

Taoism as a classical Chinese philosophy is well-known in the West, although it might still be new to compare Taoism and deconstruction. Philosophers such as Hegel, Jung, and Heidegger have discussed Taoism in their works. For instance, Hegel says in one of his lectures: "Ohne Namen ist Tao das Prinzip des Himmels und der Erde; mit dem Namen ist es die Mutter des Universums" (146). Jung wrote, "If we take *Tao* as the method or conscious way by which to unite what is separated, we have probably come quite close to the psychological content of the concept" and he acknowledged that in his technique he "had been unconsciously led along the secret way which for centuries has been the preoccupation of the best mind of [China]" (quoted in Chang 5). Heidegger wrote: "Das Leitwort im dichtenden Denken des Laotse lautet Tao und bedeutet 'eigentlich' Weg. Weil man jedoch den Weg leicht nur äußerlich vorstellt als die Verbindungsstrecke zwischen zwei Orten, hat man in der Übereilung unser Wort 'Weg' für ungeeignet befunden, das zu nennen, was Tao sagt. Man übersetzt Tao deshalb durch Vernunft, Geist, *Raison*, Sinn, Logos" (Heidegger, qtd. in Walf 5). Jacques Derrida's theory and practice of deconstruction is built on assumptions which — as it will be argued in this article — can be found in Taoist philosophy. This notion can be exemplified with the opening statement of *The Tao Te Ching*:

Tao that can be spoken of,
 Is not the Everlasting (ch'ang) Tao.
 Name that can be named,
 Is not the Everlasting (ch'ang) name. (Chen 51)

This statement raises three fundamental issues. The first has to do with the concept of Truth. According to Lao Zi (Lao Tzu), the essence of Tao — similar to the Western ideas of God, Origin, Meaning, and Derrida's "transcendental signified" — can hardly be defined or captured. Another issue concerns the arbitrariness and instability of language. The name that we use

for Tao is nothing but a name; it can be changed; other words may serve to name it just as well. Still another relates to the status of the subject: whoever names the Tao does so from a necessarily subjective and temporary position; she/he is forever denied access to the objective, everlasting Tao. The above assertion was initially made by Lao Zi (571 B.C.), but it is Chuang Tzu, (also Zhuang Zi, 369-275 B.C.), the second master of Taoism, who carries the torch of scepticism and discusses at much greater length the problems of language and truth.¹ Based on these considerations, an inquiry into the writings of Derrida and Chuang Tzu will reveal that these two philosophers maintain many similar assumptions. Fully aware of language working against itself, the Chinese and the French thinkers take for their point of departure a highly sceptical stance towards all claims to truth. And both enjoy the textual free play which defies common-sense uses of language. Sceptical of man's efforts to discover Truth, Chuang Tzu argues that all discourses on Truth are movements of one biased system replacing another. Taking some cues from the first master, Chuang Tzu employs every resource of rhetoric to debunk the conventional propositions and values of his time. Perhaps the most vigorous force of Chuang Tzu's writing lies in the way it undermines the stability of language. He not only thinks that language is inadequate to describe the true Tao, but he deliberately uses words to mean the opposite of what they ordinarily mean, in order to reveal their self-contradictions. His chief device of rhetoric is paradox, which compels the reader to realize that "awareness of a truth outside the pale of ordinary logic," reduces "language to a gibbering inanity" (Watson 5).

In much the same manner, Derrida questions the fundamental propositions that have dominated Western metaphysics for over two thousand years. The whole logocentric philosophy since Plato, Derrida summarily declares, has taken for granted the correspondence between Reason and Truth. It defines Truth as a transcendental signified which is susceptible to Reason but exists outside the play of language. This transcendental signified has been given many different names such as Origin, Being, and God. Derrida argues that this transcendental signified is a myth. Each and every philosophy has claimed to discover Truth, and yet what actually happens is but a linked chain of substitutions of one discourse for another (cf. 1967a, 21-31).

1 According to Lin Yutang's calculation, Zhuang Zi has written about one hundred thousand words, twenty times as many as Lao Tzu. Lin also describes the differences between Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi in this way: "while Laoise [different spelling of the same name] spoke in aphorisms, Chuangtse [Zhuang Zi] wrote long, discursive philosophical essays. While Laoise was all intuition, Chuangtse was all intellect. Laoise smiled; Chuangtse laughed; Laoise taught; Chuangtse scoffed. Laoise spoke to the heart; Chuangtse spoke to the mind..." (7).

Derrida's critique of logocentric thinking is based on his assumption that language, meaning, and thinking are all the sign of a sign. In a certain sense, Derrida's philosophy of the sign is contained in his favourite paradox that "le signe est cette chose mal nommée" (1967a, 31). There is no absolute identity between signifier and signified. In other words, the word can never be purely replaced by its referent; the referential relationship between word and meaning is always a temporary identification, which is to be displaced and supplemented endlessly. This phenomenon of "endless supplementarity," in Christopher Norris's words (1982, 32), is termed "différance" by Derrida:

The Gram as *différance*, then is a structure and a movement no longer conceived on the basis of the opposition presence/absence. *Différance* is the systematic play of difference, of the traces of differences, of the spacing by means of which elements are related to each other. This spacing is the simultaneously active and passive ... production of the intervals without which the "full" terms would not signify, would not function. (1981, 27)

The term "spacing" is of key importance in this passage. It is what Fredric Jameson calls the "interrelationship" of words or signifiers. The meaning or the trace of meaning "is an effect produced by the interrelationship of material signifiers" (119). Spacing makes possible the signification of words in a text, but it always resists fixation and is to be ruptured and shaped afresh in endless alternation. Therefore, the meaning of a text is only a moment of *différance*-present absence.

With his theory of the sign of a sign, Derrida casts doubt upon Saussure's structuralist theory of the sign and the signified. Derrida develops the notion of *différance* out of Saussure's proposition that signifier and signified obtain their identity through their differences from all other signifiers and signifieds (Norris 1982, 32). But Derrida takes the argument one step further, he calls in question the identifying relationship between signifier and signified (Latimer 175), and asserts that the sign derives its meaning not only through its differences from other signs, but also through the differences within itself. The sign carries an infinite number of alternative meanings. Therefore, the choosing of a particular meaning results in the absence of all other alternative meanings, and that chosen meaning is part of the presence or trace of the sign.² The absence of full presence "étend à l'infini le champ et le jeu de la signification" (Derrida 1967b, 411).

2 In his *Literary Theory*, Terry Eagleton pushes Derrida's notion of the presence/absence of the sign to the moment when the concept of "I" (subjectivity) is also put in doubt. He writes: "Not only can I never be fully present to you, but I can never be fully present to myself either" (130).

Derrida's sceptical stance towards truth-claims recalls Chuang Tzu's discourse on language and meaning, although Chuang Tzu does not make as systematic and microscopic an analysis of the sign as Derrida does. Chuang Tzu assumes that words cannot define Tao. Transcendentally immanent, Tao is the centre of everything, but "it is also exterior to them, above them and anterior to them; it is an autonomous reality in its own right" (Kaltenmark 87). Chuang Tzu's concept of Tao mirrors the concept of the centered structure held by Western metaphysics, but he denies any possibility of capturing Tao in language as he argues, "Tao by its very nature can never be defined. Speech by its very nature cannot express the absolute... [The] perfect Tao cannot be given a name ... for the Tao which is manifest is not Tao. Speech which argues falls short of its aim" (Lin 1948b, 53-54). Here, the notion of the perfect Tao points to Derrida's presence of meaning. Chuang Tzu pushes further his sceptical argument by saying that Tao cannot be affirmed. The name designated for Tao is merely an artifice for practical purpose: "While there are names and realities, you are in the presence of things. When there are no names and realities, you exist in the absence of things... In calling it the Way [Tao] we are only adopting a temporary expedient" (Watson 293). Different schools of philosophy claim to know Tao, but each of them has only its own words about Tao rather than Tao itself. "Tao is obscured by our inadequate understanding and discourses are obscured by flowery expressions," Chuang Tzu says, "Hence the affirmations and denials of the Confucian and Motean Schools, each denying what the other affirms and affirming what the other denies, [and this] brings us only confusion" (Lin 1948b, 48). Two phrases need to be clarified in order to grasp Chuang Tzu's deconstructive tendency. The first, "inadequate understanding," does not presuppose that there is no adequate understanding *per se*; rather, it means that our understanding is inadequate in its larger context. The second, "flowery expressions," is reminiscent of what are termed by Derrida as metaphors and metonymies for Truth. Chuang Tzu is close to Derrida in his belief that Reason only achieves self-authorized projections of itself rather than access to Truth. Schools of discourse betray "the force of a desire," a desire to replace, to exclude the Other.

There exists another parallel in Chuang Tzu to Derrida's metaphor of the linked chain of determinations of the mythical centre. Derrida deconstructs the centre from within the structure by seizing upon the contradiction the concept of centre entails. In order to govern the structure, the centre has to escape structurality, the relations of structural parts. Therefore, the centre exists, "paradoxalement, *dans* la structure et *hors* de la structure. Il est au centre de la totalité et pourtant, puisque le centre ne lui appartient pas, la

totalité à son centre *aillure*" (1967b, 410). In other words, the centre is a myth, whose function is indispensable for writing.

Since the centre is only a functional myth, speaking or writing is doomed to undergo erasure. The self-effacing utterance does not simply negate the effect of meaning, but leaves it as a structure of difference. The necessity of writing under erasure is argued by Derrida as follows:

... la valeur d'archie transcendental doit faire éprouver sa nécessité avant de se laisser raturer elle-même. Le concept d'arche-trace doit faire droit et à cette nécessité et à cette rature. Il est en effet contradictoire et irrecevable dans la logique de l'identité. La trace n'est pas seulement la disparition de l'origine, elle veut dire ... que l'origine n'a même pas disparu, qu'elle n'a jamais été constituée qu'en retour par une non-origine, la trace, qui devient ainsi l'origine de l'origine. (1967b, 90)

Here, the "arche transcendental" and the "origine" both refer to the "transcendental signified" or the centre of an utterance; the non-origin and the "trace" are both different versions of the temporary result of the structure of difference. There is never the origin of meaning in an utterance, and what there is instead is a seeming effect or a self-effacing trace of meaning. Derrida's centre as a temporal image is analogous to a spatial one in Chuang Tzu:

To diverge into disputation balances tile on tile and ties the cord in knots, chiselling phrases and hammering sentences to make the heart stray among questions about "the hard and the white," "the same and the different," and fatuously admire useless propositions, do you deny it? — but Yang and Mo did that. (Graham 1981, 200)

Both Chuang Tzu and Derrida speak metaphorically of the increase of epistemological explorations aimed at grasping Truth. One describes the diachronical movement; the other the synchronical accumulation. "The hard and the white" and "the same and the different" refer to concepts of categories of binary opposition. Chuang Tzu argues that conceptual distinctions will ultimately break down, because there is always a point where conceptual boundaries are not tolerated: "When the distinctions of true and false appeared," he asserts, "then Tao lost its wholeness. And when Tao lost its wholeness, individual bias began" (Lin 1948b, 44). The term "wholeness" is of crucial importance concerning the connection between Chuang Tzu and Derrida in their understanding of the sign. The wholeness of Tao is equivalent to the transcendental totality of meaning, and the notion of "individual bias" echoes Derrida's notion of the "trace" of meaning. Chuang Tzu — although less explicitly than Derrida — pointed out that conceptual language based on binary oppositions can never close off the play of the signifying sign. The wholeness of Truth or Tao exists beyond any linguistic activity which invariably happens in time and place. If we

substitute "Tao" for "centre," then we can have Derrida speak for Chuang Tzu: "On ne peut déterminer [Tao] et épuiser la totalisation parce que le signe qui remplace [Tao], qui le *supplée*, qui en tient lieu en [Tao's] absence, ce signe s'ajoute, vient en sus, en *supplément*" (1967b, 23).

Chuang Tzu thinks that meaning is ineffable, because what language says is undecidable. His awareness of the instability of language is affirmed by "Speech is intended to say something, only what it is intended to say cannot be determined. The words of arguments are all relative" (Lin 1948a, 48). Different speakers have different centres, hence they have different interpretations of words. Therefore, the signification of words becomes an endless process of supplementarity. The indeterminacy of the meanings of words makes Chuang Tzu utterly distrust language:

Men of the world who value the Way [Tao] all turn to books. But books are nothing more than words. Words have value; what is of value in words is meaning. Meaning has something it is pursuing, but the thing that it is pursuing cannot be put into words and handed down. The world values words and hands down books but, though the world values them, I do not think them worth valuing. (Chuang 152).

The sign as materialized consciousness always signifies a present absence: half of it is always absent; the other half is always not it (Derrida 1967a, xxii). That is why Chuang Tzu says that what speech intends to convey cannot be determined. If words cannot capture meaning, then the words and their referents constitute a relationship of restless difference, hence the notion of *différance*. As the meanings of words are relative to time and place, they only signify an open-ended process of relativity.

The awareness of the bottomless relativity of meaning runs through the writings of both Derrida and Chuang Tzu. They both question the stability of all concepts and the validity of binary oppositions: "Le concept de signe," as Derrida argues, "est déterminé par cette opposition: de part en part et a traverse la totalité de son histoire" (1967b, 412). Both Derrida and Chuang Tzu constantly push language to the moment when it can no longer tolerate categorical distinctions. And both remind us that conceptual polarities are convertible as they are ultimately complementary sides of the same thing.

The convertibility of antinomies is by no means new to Western metaphysics. It has been one of the primary themes for philosophers such as Hegel and Marx. What is new in Derrida's treatment of it is his methodology. In Jameson's words:

Language as model! To rethink everything through once again in terms of linguistics! What is surprising, it would seem, is only that no one ever thought of doing so before; for of all elements of consciousness and of social life, language would appear to enjoy some ontological priority... [Structuralist] content — the organization and status of

language — furnishes a new body of material in terms of which the old problems are raised in new and unforeseen ways. (1972, vii)

Although Jameson is not dwelling on Derrida's theory, he identifies in it the new paradigm. Derrida differs from conventional philosophers in that he treats philosophy as a microscopic analysis of language. Part of his strategy is to read every text closely, concentrating on a number of key terms whose significations threaten the logic of the text. To have a glimpse of Derrida's deconstructive textual practice, one can focus on the dismantling of some common binary oppositions: signifier and signified, nature and culture, writing and speech, etc. Derrida's textual commentary involves, as Norris puts it, "the dismantling of all those binary oppositions ... to the point where opposition itself — the very ground of dialectical reason — gives way to a process where opposites merge into a constant undecidable exchange of attributes" (1987, 35). Signifier and signified, for example, no sooner enter into opposition when they slip into an endless cycle of interchangeability. Since the transcendental signified can never be captured at all, the signified is always a signifier of the forever deferred signified. The opposition between the two sides of the sign is functionally necessary. The practice of translating messages from one language to another affirms the opposition; the infinite possibilities of translation of the same text problematize the opposition (Derrida 1981, 20).

In his essay "La structure, le signe et le jeu," Derrida dissolves the opposition between nature and culture. In representing Lévi-Strauss's definition of the nature/culture opposition, Derrida says that nature is what is "universal et spontané," while culture is what "depend d'un système de normes ... pouvant ... varier d'une structure sociale à l'autre" (1967b, 415). But this opposition breaks down, for instance, in the case of incest prohibition, which is at once institutional and universal. In treating the nature/culture opposition, Derrida drives through to the point where the signifier can no longer be replaced, for this opposition ultimately finds itself erased. He seizes upon this moment of indecision and turns to question "systématiquement et rigoureusement l'histoire de ces concepts" (1967b, 416). One can never trace back to a pure moment which divides nature from culture; rather, there is ultimately a moment which is neither purely inhabited by nature nor culture. Humans, at whatever stage of social interaction, i.e. history, always live in a cultural context, for human nature is always culturally informed or instituted.

The best example of Derrida's textual practice is the undoing of the speech versus writing distinction. As Western metaphysics is phonocentric and it has always believed in the primacy of speech over writing — holding speech as self-presence — writing is considered as a supplementary inscription twice removed from meaning. According to Saussure, the spoken

word is naturally related to the meaning in the speaker's mind, while the written word is a sign of the spoken word. Derrida appropriates the notion of the "sign of the sign," extending it "to every kind of discourse, spoken language included" (Norris 1987, 85). Since the meaning of the sign is a result of difference, the imaginary self-presence of the sound is a signifier of the ineffable signified as well. Therefore the spoken word has no primacy over the written word in relation to meaning. Traditionally, writing is thought of as the material doubling of speech, but even this traditional view supports Derrida's subversion of the hierarchic order of speech and writing. "Si 'écriture' signifie inscription et d'abord institution durable d'un signe (et c'est le seul noyau irréductible du concept d'écriture)," Derrida writes, "l'écriture en général couvre tout le champ des signes linguistiques... L'idée même d'institution — donc d'arbitraire du signe — est impensable avant la possibilité de l'écriture et hors de son horizon" (1967a, 65). What occurs at the first moment of language is not speech, but writing in general, archiving or proto-writing, of which speech is only a species. Both Rousseau and Levi-Strauss, in their discourses on speech and writing, always refer to the former as good and spontaneous and the latter as corrupt and institutional. But Derrida contends that writing in the sanctioned sense already exists in the so-called natural, primitive society, because language is already there. Language, whatever its form, is an institutionalized system of differences. Thus, Derrida's notion of writing violates its conventional definition. In much the same way, Chuang Tzu, in his writings, deconstructs binary oppositions. As "reversion is the action of Tao" (Lin 1948b, 207), no concept, no entity, has a stable status. Everything is a "synthesis of opposites, or what Hegel calls an 'identity-in-difference.'" That is to say, "A is A, but at the same time A is not A" (Chang 32):

Emptiness and fullness alternate, and their relations are not fixed.... The succession of growth and decay, of increase and diminution, goes in a cycle, each end becoming a new beginning. In this sense only may we discuss the ways of truth and the principles of the universe. (Lin 1948b, 207)

The endless conversion of things and concepts makes it impossible to pin down anything of a determinate meaning, thus proving conventional thinking problematic.

Chuang Tzu's insight about the vulnerable binary oppositions is well expressed in his discussion on the question of origin and non-origin:

If there is a beginning, then there was a time before that beginning, and a time before the time which was before the time of that beginning. If there is being, there must have been non-being. And if there was a time when non-being existed, then there must have been a time when even non-being did not exist. All of a sudden there is non-being.

Could any one then really say whether it belongs to the category of being or of non-being? Even the very words I have just now uttered — I cannot determine whether they say something or not. (Lin 1948b, 52)

This passage brings to mind Derrida's discourse on origin. In commenting on Mallarmé's *mime*, Derrida elaborates Mallarmé's assumption that the question of "mimesis" or "origin" is a false one. We can never think back to the origin of a text, and what we have instead is "an endless series of inscriptions, a perpetual redoubling of text upon text" so that the origin of mimesis is always lost beyond recall (Norris 1987, 50). Chuang Tzu has exactly the same notion of origin in his discourse on the priority of being or non-being. One cannot determine which of them exists at the "real" moment of origin, for one cannot define "origin." What one performs is an endless backward movement of tracing the untraceable origin, hence the origin attained is perpetually a non-origin or a trace of the origin. The indeterminacy of the origin, as Chuang Tzu's deconstructive logic evolves, effects the breaking down of the distinction between being and non-being. Chuang Tzu readdresses the problem of origin in discussing the crisis of the identity of the subject "I":

In the process of change, [one] has become a thing [among other things], and [one] is merely waiting for some other change that [one] does not yet know about... What is more, we go around telling each other, I do this, I do that — but do we know that this "I" we talk about has any "I" to it? (Chuang 88)

This concept of the subject "I" strikingly coincides with Derrida's notion of the subject as a structure of *différance*. The "I" as speaker is an ever changing process of fathomless unconsciousness; the "I" as the subject of the speaker is only a momentary, unreliable conscious part of the self. The "I" as a pronoun serves as a make-shift designation "for the ever-elusive subject" (Eagleton 168). Therefore, to resort to language is to be severed from the "real," from the "inaccessible realm which is always beyond the reach of signification" (Eagleton 168). It is from such assumptions about language, origin, and identity that Chuang Tzu proceeds to deconstruct the concepts of binary opposition. Derrida's deconstructive operation runs the same course as Chuang's deconstruction on antinomies: juxtaposition, subversion, and transformation. One of the examples of this strategy is Chuang's discussion on the relationship between "this" and "that":

There is nothing which is not "this;" there is nothing which is not "that." What cannot be seen by "that" (the other person) can be known by myself. Hence I say, "this" emanates from "that"; "that" also derives from "this." This is the theory of the interdependence of "this" and "that." (Lin 1948b, 49)

Here, language as a signifying system of signs seems no longer to have any referential relationship to reality. It is reduced to a floating structure of signification. "This" and "that" may share the same signified, hence the disappearance of the boundary between them as between signifier and signified in Derrida's writing. The interdependence of "this" and "that" suggests that their identities derive from their intrinsic differences. Thus, language is condemned as self-contradictory or self-deconstructive in tending to articulate reference on the basis of binary oppositions.

The constant process of change does not tolerate determinate language with its metaphysical categories. "There is no end to the weighing of things," Chuang Tzu says, "no stop to time, no constancy to the division of lots, no fixed rule to beginning and end," (Chuang 177), and the determinacy of reference is a matter of circumstance. Difference is constant and absolute; identity is relative and temporary:

From the point of view of difference, if we regard a thing as big because there is a certain bigness to it, then among the ten thousand things there are none that are not big. If we regard a thing as small because there is a certain smallness to it, then among the ten thousand things there are none that are not small. If we know that heaven and earth are tiny grains and the tip of hair is a range of mountains, then we have perceived the law of difference. (Chuang 179)

What Chuang Tzu means here is that if we try to determine the identity of an object, we will constantly get caught in a moment of indecision, for that identity which we wish to delineate is a result of difference from all other things. According to this logic, the contradictory attributes of a certain thing compose its identity and, as differences are infinite, the fixed designation of utterance never signifies the thing in full. That is why and how the distinction between big and small breaks down.

In discussing the distinctions between noble and mean, few and many, Chuang Tzu further elaborates his notion of infinite supplementarity:

From the point of view of the Way [Tao], what is noble or what is mean? There are merely what are called endless changes. Do not hobble your will, or your will will be departing far from the Way [Tao]! What is few and what is many? There are merely what are called boundless turnings. Do not strive to unify your actions, or you will be at sixes and sevens with the Way [Tao]! (Chuang 181)

To attempt to determine the boundaries of binary oppositions is to attempt to determine Tao, which, as the totalization of all those "changes" and "turnings," is only a utopian ideal. The absolute Tao is incompatible with any claim to Truth or identity. Here, the endless "changes" and "turnings" resemble Derrida's "ruptures" and "play" of the structure.

The comparative discussion of Chuang Tzu and Derrida, so far, has demonstrated their respective deconstructionist assumptions. Chuang Tzu assumes that there is a transcendental Tao, but its access is forever denied to language. Derrida claims that there is no transcendental Truth because it has never appeared in language. Their apparent difference in wording does not obscure their essential similarities. Actually, these two philosophers exchange positions because in their textual practice each seems to speak the other's words. This exchange between Derrida and Chuang Tzu not only further emphasizes their substantial likeness, but, more importantly, reveals their respective inconsistencies.

Derrida, for example, alternately deconstructs and reinvents the centre. His problematic situation is described by Jameson as follows:

Derrida's own dilemma lies in the fact that he is himself part of that tradition, inextricably involved in its language and institutions, and condemned to the impossible situation ... of denouncing the metaphysic[s] of presence with words and terminology which, no sooner used, themselves solidify and become the instruments in the presentation of that illusion of presence which they were initially designed to dispel. (1972, 174)

As there is no escape from metaphysical language, Derrida must reinvoke the decentered centre and, in his textual practice, he never claims to have exorcized the centre. His allegorical readings of Plato, Rousseau, and Lévi-Strauss only manage to reveal himself tied back to the centre. This is because, in reading texts differently from their authorial intentions, Derrida has to base himself on a centre of his own, which can hold together his tropes and images, justifying his own choosing of meanings of the key terms in those writers' texts. This kind of textual practice is characteristic of "a double-dealer in language" as Abrams argues. In deconstructing logocentric language, Derrida "assumes the stance that his language works, that he can adequately understand what other speakers and writers mean, and that competent auditors and readers will adequately understand him" (Abrams 573).

To read or write competently is to read or write coherently. And coherence exists only in relation to a centre. Coherence of thoughts means words and concepts functioning in convergence upon that centre. One can unravel, as Derrida does, the elements of indecision in any text, but one always already has a centre in one's own text whenever one begins to use language. Even the term "deconstruction," already implies a kind of centre or coherence of thoughts. And this is especially true when the term is applied to the heterogeneous textual activities wide-spread in Europe and North America. Therefore, what Derrida does is to repeat the cycle of deconstructing the centre and reinvoking it. In textual practice, he falls back

to Northrop Frye's position. Frye assumes that "there is a centre of the order of words," because "[unless] there is such a centre, there is nothing to prevent the analogies supplied by convention and genre from being an endless series of free associations" (Frye 118). Derrida's inconsistency can be further examined with regard to his notion of meaning as a trace of that forever deferred signified. That notion seems to presuppose an origin or a totality of meaning as well. His formula that "the sign is that ill-named thing" not only stresses the infinite play of the sign, but also the insufficiency of language or consciousness. But how can one determine "insufficiency" if one has no idea of "totality"? As Wayne Booth argues, "a universal openness" in signification is well-nigh impossible (1988, 62-63). That is why Richard Rorty, when commenting on Derrida's notion of "trace," argues that "in developing this alternative, Derrida comes perilously close to slipping back into what he and Heidegger call 'the tradition of onto-theology' (151). Derrida's theory makes his readers suspicious of a kind of nostalgia for 'the Ineffable,' for 'what can be shown but not said, believed but not known' (Rorty 153).

In spite of this deficiency, Derrida, when compared with Chuang Tzu, allows for more room for textual free play: he does not create a new type of binary opposition in his terminology. Derrida employs a series of terms such as "trace," "arche-writing," "différance," and "in fact quite a few other words" to describe his new concepts and new findings (cf. 1967, xv). One has the impression that Derrida even refuses to be bound by his own terminology, that he moves ahead, persistently and consistently, in his deconstructionist journey, approaching closer and closer to certain truths, if not the absolute ones. Each step is accompanied by some discovery, by something deconstructed. There seems to be no end in his deconstructive operations, nor falling into the trap of binary oppositions of his own coinage like Chuang Tzu's Being and Non-Being and Origin and Non-Origin. Hence, Derrida's deconstructive movement is progressive; his deconstructive method, thorough-going; and his deconstructive practice, fruitful.

By contrast, Chuang Tzu is caught up in his deconstructive logic. Trying to release himself from the prison-house of language, he deploys the cycle of deconstruction and reinvocation. Apparently, he begins the cyclical process from the other direction, for he acknowledges the ontological status of Tao before reducing it to a myth. As Tao can never be determined, the name of Tao is not a real name, but a trace of that name. More importantly, the different meanings he assigns to "Tao" involve semantic contradictions. Tao is "Origin," "Being," and "Meaning," but it also means "Non-Origin," "Non-Being," and "Nothingness." As a result, new binary oppositions are established after the deconstruction of the old ones. Thus, in Chuang Tzu's philosophy, the world comes from Non-Origin, hence having no origin. By

his cunning doubling in interpreting Tao, Chuang Tzu's Taoism becomes a kind of mysticism.

Just as Tao constantly alternates in these two incompatible clusterings of meanings, so Chuang Tzu oscillates between the unknowable Tao and the knowable Tao, between Tao as Nothingness and Tao as the generative Being. He deconstructs Tao when it is defined and invoked by other philosophers; he reinvokes it and defines it when he is writing on it. Every time he argues for the ineffability of Tao he is actually close to preaching about how to reach it. His notion of the futility of language and the indecidability of meaning is counterbalanced by his own prolific, enthusiastic textual practice. Both the phenomenal world and its conceptual simulacrum, Chuang Tzu thinks, are a restless process of change and reversing; but when he is criticizing other philosophers, he arrests the mobile process of signification. Hence, Chuang Tzu's double gestures problematize his theory and practice of deconstruction.

Deconstruction as it is championed by Derrida and Chuang Tzu reduces philosophy to a kind of writing which is not superior to other kinds of writing. It regards philosophy as the exercise of rhetoric "that always insinuates its own workings into 'truth claims'" (Norris 1982, 49). It dismisses the history of truth as an onto-theology. It also exposes the inadequacy and instability of language. The fundamental difference between deconstruction and other discourses is that the former deconstructs Truth or meaning as a myth while reinvoking it as functional; the latter, more or less, take Truth in a spirit of faith. It is true that, to a certain degree, deconstruction is more self-conscious than useful, but this self-consciousness has seriously challenged our ideas about and habits of reading and thinking; when this self-consciousness becomes part of our consciousness, it changes our old ideas and habits altogether.

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PEIDE ZHA

Logocentrism and Traditional Chinese Poetics

The relationship between *yan* [language] and *yi* [meaning or thought] is known as one of the three major topics in Chinese metaphysical debates during the Wei-Jin period (220-420). It is also related to the notion of *jing* or "realm," a concept central to traditional Chinese poetics. For centuries, however, this remained a closed discourse among the Chinese literati without coming to the general attention of Western scholars. This is so in spite of the fact that there was a similar kind of discourse going on in the West ever since the time of Plato. These two discourses, however, are now showing signs of convergence. In recent years, some comparatists have started to reexamine the age-old Chinese topic in the light of the post-structuralist discourse on language and meaning. Especially worth mentioning is the dialogue between Zhang Longxi and the late James J.Y. Liu, whose joint efforts have shed fresh light on the issue in question by relating it to the Derridean theory of deconstruction. In my opinion, it is an intellectually stimulating dialogue which might generate further discussion among comparatists on this and related issues, bringing the Chinese and Western theoretical discourses into more fruitful comparison. This paper is the result of my reflections on the Zhang-Liu dialogue. After a discussion of their difference over the issue of "phonocentrism" in Chinese thinking, the focus of the paper will be on the Chinese variety of "logocentric" thinking which will be termed "Taocentrism" in this paper, followed by a discussion of Taocentric metaphysics as manifested in traditional Chinese poetics.¹

1 The ideas contained in this paper have been presented in different forms to the 1991 Conference of the Canadian Comparative Literature Association held at Queen's University and the 1991 Conference of Asian Studies on the Pacific Coast held at Western Washington University. With this study, I wish to pay special homage to the late Professor James J.Y. Liu. The English translations of Chinese texts quoted in this essay are all mine unless otherwise indicated.