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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.<sup>1</sup>

- 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.

## I

The first issue that interests me is whether or not the Chinese have a phonocentric mind and debase writing compared to speech. Zhang Longxi raises the issue in an article that brings the Tao and the Logos into comparison.<sup>2</sup> His argument is largely based on a quotation from "Xici zhuan" [Commentary on the Appended Judgments] in the *Yi jing* [The Book of Changes]:

"Writing [*shu*] cannot fully convey the speech [*yan*], and speech cannot fully convey the meaning [*w*]." Here the debasement of writing is based on the same considerations as in the West: written words are secondary signifiers; they are further removed than speech from what is conceived in the interiority of the mind, and they constitute a dead and empty shell from which the living voice is absent. (1985, 394; cf. Zhang 1992, 29)

Zhang sees here a metaphysical hierarchy between speech and writing, similar to what Derrida calls "phonocentrism," which "debases writing considered as mediation of mediation and as a fall into the exteriority of meaning" (12-13). It should be pointed out that Zhang's translation of the "Xici zhuan" passage presupposes his understanding of the original. For comparison, we may compare it with Richard Wilhelm's German translation: "Die Schrift kann die Worte nicht restlos ausdrücken. Die Worte können die Gedanken nicht restlos ausdrücken" (245). An English translation based on this German version reads as follows: "Writing cannot express words completely. Words cannot express thoughts completely" (Baynes 1, 346).<sup>3</sup> Notable here is that, while Wilhelm translates *yan* into "Worte," Zhang chooses the word "speech." Zhang's translation apparently valorizes the speech/writing dichotomy as implied in the passage. This dichotomy, however, is not emphasized in Wilhelm's version, as "Worte" may be either spoken or written.<sup>4</sup> However, the two versions do not differ significantly in

meaning as the term "Worte," when contrasted to "Schrift," can very well be understood as "spoken words."

Zhang's understanding and translation of the "Xici zhuan" quotation, however, was questioned by James J.Y. Liu. Quoting another scholar, Liu suggested that the term *yan* may mean "words" in general, whether spoken or written,<sup>5</sup> while the term *shu* may simply mean "books." Thus the first part of the quotation from "Xici zhuan" may be interpreted as "Books cannot put all words in writing (because of limits of space)" (Wang 78; trans. Liu 1988, 27). The hierarchy between *yan* and *shu*, accordingly, differs in nature from what is meant by the Derridean term "phonocentrism." That writing cannot fully convey spoken words is not due to the inferior quality of the former representing the latter but to the limited space of writing.

While his understanding of the "Xici zhuan" quotation is in my opinion a little rigid, Liu might be right to maintain that the speech/writing dichotomy in the "Xici zhuan" quotation should not to be exaggerated. Even though the term *shu* and *yan* in the context can be reasonably understood as meaning "writing" and "spoken words" respectively, there does not seem to be any implication in the passage that "the voice, producer of the first symbols, has a relationship of essential and immediate proximity with the mind" while writing is twice removed from it, as Derrida comments on an Aristotelian quotation (11).<sup>6</sup> The "Xici zhuan" author, traditionally known to be Confucius himself, may have merely pointed out the fact that writing cannot record all spoken words. This may be especially true of Classical Chinese writings. As Rosemont has argued, Classical Chinese, which may involve little loss of information to an experienced reader, would be hardly intelligible in speech unless there were more combinations of monosyllabic into bisyllabic words than we now find in Classical texts (73f). The logical conclusion from this argument is that when scholars wrote they did not include every spoken word. Writing may be regarded as an abbreviated representation of spoken words during the time "Xici zhuan" was written when the divergence of speech and writing was not as great as in later years. Only when speech [*baihua*] diverged from writing [*wenyan*], did the *wenyan* writing seem like a writing system that is far from being a direct representation of speech. For a long period in history, the Chinese language seems to have had two systems of representation; this situation lasted until the May 4<sup>th</sup> literary movement in 1917 which strove to replace the old writing system with *baihua* writing which is closer to speech. Nevertheless, the divergence of speech and writing in Chinese might have been an extreme

2 This article, which appeared in 1985, is incorporated in Zhang's newly published book *The Tao and the Logos: Literary Hermeneutics, East and West*, Chapter I (1-33). Despite the lapse of time between the two publications, Zhang has not changed the views I discuss here in this essay. As I am dealing with his debate with James J.Y. Liu, I deem it appropriate to base my discussion mainly on his article but give a footnote, where necessary, referring to his book.

3 Cf. another English translation by Graham: "Writing does not exhaust the said, saying does not exhaust the idea" (1981, 364).

4 Here are two definitions of the word "word": "a) a speech sound, or series of them, serving to communicate meaning and consisting of at least one base morpheme with or without prefixes or suffixes; unit of language between the morpheme and the sentence; b) a letter or group of letters representing such a unit of language, written or printed usually in solid or hyphenated form" (*Webster's* 1538).

5 Cf. Hansen simply renders *yan* as "language" (85).

6 "Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words" (Qtd. in Derrida 11; cf. Aristotle 43).

case. It is true of all languages that writing and speech differ in style. In this sense, writing may never be an exact representation of speech unless an author purposefully imitates a colloquial style such as in a fictional dialogue. There is little reason to believe, therefore, that the "Xici zhuan" author intended to debase writing *vis-à-vis* speech as carriers of meaning.

To support his view, Zhang quotes the story of the wheelwright P'an in *Zhuangzi*, who tells Duke Huan that "what you are reading there is nothing but the chaff and dregs of the men of old" (1985, 394; cf. Zhang 1992, 30). It seems to me, however, that the wheelwright's argument is that the Tao cannot be transmitted effectively through language, whether spoken or written. "You can get it in your hand and feel it in your mind. You can't put it into words, and yet there's a knack to it somehow. I can't teach it to my son, and he can't learn it from me" (Guo Qingfan 491; trans. Watson 1968, 153).<sup>7</sup> There is no implication here that the wheelwright believes that he can teach his "knack" to his son in speech but not in writing. The condemnation is directed at language in general rather than at writing specifically.

While Liu might be right to maintain that phonocentrism as understood in the contemporary Western theoretical discourse is not a problem in traditional Chinese discourse on language and meaning, his account for the absence of phonocentrism in Chinese thinking seems problematic. According to Liu, this absence is "due to the lack of a mimetic conception of writing as a representation of oral speech" (1988, 23). Liu considers the Chinese script to be an independent sign system which does not represent speech but concepts directly. To support his view, Liu quotes a well-known legend of Cangjie, who, it is said, created Chinese characters by observing the patterns of traces left by birds and animals on the ground or natural phenomena in general. Liu's argument, despite his intention to rectify Western misconceptions about the Chinese language, echoes the views of many Western philosophers and critics such as Hegel, Leibniz, Ernest Fenollosa, Ezra Pound as well as Jacques Derrida. Hegel, for example, maintains that the Chinese written language "does not express, as ours does, individual sounds — does not present the spoken words to the eye, but represents the ideas themselves by signs" (135). While Hegel considers the Chinese script, because of this, to be inferior to phonetic languages, Leibniz praises the Chinese language for the same reason. According to Leibniz, as understood by Derrida, the Chinese language represents "a model of the philosophical

language thus removed from history" because "what liberates Chinese script from the voice is also that which, arbitrarily and by the artifice of invention, wrenches it from history and gives it to philosophy" (Derrida 76). In the Chinese script there is "the testimony of a powerful movement of civilization developing outside of all logocentrism" (90). Derrida further considers Pound's "graphic poetics" as the "first break in the most entrenched Western tradition" (92). This "European hallucination" (Derrida's term), however, is only an assumption which might never be proved. The legend of Cangjie alone is no sufficient evidence to refute the contrary assumption that the Chinese script is also a secondary representation of speech like alphabetic languages. It might well be assumed that there already existed spoken words before Cangjie, if there was indeed such a figure, invented the Chinese script. Before the character was invented, for example, there might have existed the spoken word [niet], meaning the "sun." Although the character is truly an icon of the heavenly body, it might *at the same time* represent the pre-existing spoken word. This might be a reasonable assumption considering that Chinese characters, especially the simplified ones, have actually lost much of their ideographic or pictographic significance; they are now largely written signs which contain concepts as well as inherent though not directly recognizable sound patterns. Their original ideograms or pictograms are usually ignored by a modern native speaker of Chinese. Few Chinese speakers, for example, will notice the image of the sun in the character before they recognize its concept and sound pattern. The shape of the character itself immediately reminds them that it means the "sun" and that it is pronounced as [r] in modern Mandarin.<sup>8</sup>

Thus the Chinese script might be no less a secondary system of signifiers representing spoken words than phonetic languages like English and German though the Chinese do not have a phonocentric tradition. It is a complex system of representation which involves, chiefly, simple pictograms, simple ideograms, composite ideograms and composite phonograms. Chinese characters, therefore, are no less arbitrary signs representing what Ferdinand de Saussure calls the "sound-images of words." This, of course, is also a mere assumption. My purpose, however, is not so much to prove this assumption as to call into question the attribution of the absence of phonocentrism in Chinese thinking to the ideographic or pictographic quality of the Chinese written language, an assumption that treats the Chinese script as a separate system of representation independent of speech.

7 Cf. Graham's English translation: "What my lord is reading is the dregs of the men of old.... I feel it in the hand and respond from the heart, the mouth cannot put it into words, there is a knack in it somewhere which I cannot convey to my son and which my son cannot learn from me" (1981, 140).

8 It is true that many Chinese find themselves unable to pronounce certain written words correctly. This does not suggest, however, that the characters were necessarily created before there were spoken words. There might be many other factors such as the gradual divergence of speech and writing as well as the variety of regional dialects.

Liu even went so far as to claim that the Chinese are a "graphocentric" nation (1988, 16).<sup>9</sup> This, however, is an exaggeration. I will not deny that the Chinese written characters do have the function of distinguishing meanings of spoken words. Chinese monosyllabic words in their modern pronunciation have a large number of homophones. Although their combination into bisyllabic words as well as the context may dispel most of the ambiguities in conversation, the Chinese do often feel the necessity to resort to characters in order to clarify ambiguous spoken words. On such occasions, the shapes of Chinese characters may help determine the meanings of spoken words. This may account for the strong resistance to the idea of replacing the current Chinese script with a romanized system. Yet it is an exaggeration to assert that this signifies a graphocentric attitude toward language among the Chinese. In any event, Liu did not give substantial evidence to support the idea that the Chinese have valued writing over speech. It is only fair to say that the dichotomy of speech versus writing is not valorized in Chinese thinking.

## II

In the Derridean theory, the notion of "phonocentrism" is intricately related to the concept of "logocentrism." As the Chinese do not have a phonocentric mind, one may assume that they are not logocentric, either. Things, however, are more complicated than this simple reasoning. Whether or not the Chinese have a "logocentric" thinking is an intriguing question. Before dealing with it in detail, however, I will clarify a confusion in the debate between James J.Y. Liu and Zhang Longxi. They disagree on the presence of "logocentrism" in Chinese thinking. This disagreement is largely due to their different understanding of this Derridean term. Liu takes logocentrism as "synonymous with phonocentrism or phonologism, namely, the bias in favor of oral speech over writing" (1988, 15). Since the Chinese are not phonocentric, logocentrism, according to Liu, is naturally not a problem in Chinese thinking. Liu further says: "Even if we take logocentrism in a broader sense to include writing as well as oral speech, the Taoists are still free from this prejudice, since they regard writing and oral speech with equal scepticism and treat both in the same paradoxical fashion" (1988, 23). Liu may have understood "logocentrism" as meaning something like

"linguocentrism," suggesting the valorization of linguistic power in the expression of thought. This, obviously, is an unusual understanding of the Derridean terms. On the other hand, Zhang clearly states, in his 1985 article, that the debasement of writing as suggested in the "Xici zhuan" statement "is based on the same considerations as in the West: written words are secondary signifiers" (394). Later in his review of Liu's *Language-Paradox-Poetics*, Zhang seems to have modified his view by acknowledging that "phonocentrism does not seem to inhabit the Chinese mind" (192) and "phonocentrism may not be a problem in the way the Chinese think about language" (193). This revised view, however, is not incorporated in his 1992 book (cf. Zhang 1992, 29). Probably, Zhang does not treat the so-called "debasement of writing" in Chinese thinking as a phenomenon of phonocentrism but logocentrism in general. Hence the need to clarify the terms "phonocentrism" and "logocentrism" and their relationship. Perhaps Liu is right to complain that Derrida does not make a clear distinction between logocentrism and phonocentrism (1988, 23). My understanding is based on Gayatri Spivak's explanation:

In the *Grammatology* Derrida suggests that this rejection of writing as an appendage, a mere technique, and yet a menace built into speech in effect, a scapegoat is a symptom of a much broader tendency. He relates this *phonocentrism* to *logocentrism*, the belief that the first and last things are the Logos, the Word, the Divine Mind, the infinite understanding of God, an infinitely creative subjectivity, and, closer to our time, the self-presence of full self-consciousness. In the *Grammatology* and elsewhere, Derrida argues that the evidence for this originary and teleologic presence has customarily been found in the voice, the *phonè*. (1976, xviii)

Thus, the debasement of writing *vis-à-vis* speech is first of all the phenomenon of phonocentrism. This "is a symptom of a much broader tendency," which I understand as referring to logocentrism, i.e., the belief that language has an ultimate and originary signified. This is epitomized in the term Logos or the Word, which is supposed to be the origin of myriad things in the world. Logocentrism refers to the metaphysical hierarchy between original meaning or truth and language. Phonocentrism, on the other hand, denotes the notion that spoken language is close to the Logos while written language as a secondary system of signifiers is removed from it. The two concepts are related but not identical. Logocentrism subsumes phonocentrism; phonocentrism is part of logocentrism. Perhaps it is due to this intricate relationship between the two notions that even Derrida sometimes uses them interchangeably to the dismay of other scholars who try to follow his thought.

With this understanding of the Derridean terms, I now return to the question whether the Chinese have a logocentric tradition. Derrida has made

9 The legend of Cangjie is also quoted by Zhang Longxi. Although he believes in a phonocentric hierarchy in Chinese thinking, Zhang also maintains that "Chinese writing is never considered as a mere recording of oral speech but as originating independently of speech" (1985, 395). This apparent contradiction is interpreted by Zhang as an inherent deconstructive move in Chinese philosophy. "In the Chinese tradition," Zhang writes, "the power of writing as such avenged itself the very moment it was debased" (1985, 397).

it clear that logocentrism is related to Western thinking alone. As Spivak puts it, "Almost by a reverse ethnocentrism, Derrida insists that logocentrism is a property of the *West*" (xxxii). In other words, logocentrism is not considered a problematic in Chinese thinking. This might be a conclusion from the allegation that the Chinese language is not phonocentric. My question, however, is whether the Chinese have a way of thinking similar to logocentrism though phonocentrism is apparently not a problem to them. Looking closely at the citation from "Xici zhuan" ("Writing cannot express words completely. Words cannot express thoughts completely"), one cannot but agree with Zhang Longxi that the hierarchy does demonstrate a "logocentric" way of thinking, i.e., language as inadequate for conveying the original meaning or thought. Zhang Longxi's argument is related to Qian Zhongshu's comparison of the Tao and the Logos. According to Qian, the Logos in Greek has the two meanings of "reason" (*ratio*) and "speaking" (*oratio*) which can be compared with the famous opening sentence of *Laozi*: "The way [Tao] that can be spoken of [tao-ed]/is not the constant way [Tao];/The name that can be named/is not the constant name" (*Laozi* 1, 1a; Lau 3). The same word "Tao" is used in two senses in this sentence: "reason" and "speaking" (Qian 2, 408). Zhang carries this comparison further and comes to the conclusion that "we find conceptual oppositions like inner/outer, thought/speech, signified/signifier, and so forth, not only in the *logos* but also in the *tao*" (1985, 393). While Laozi claims that the Tao is the ineffable beyond the naming power of language, Plato also maintains that "no intelligent man will ever be so bold as to put into language those things which his reason has contemplated, especially into a form that is unalterable.... Names, I maintain, are in no case stable" (343). This, in my opinion, is a reasonable analogy, which may be pursued even further. For, more fundamentally, the Tao may be understood in the same way as what defines the notion of Logos, i.e., "the rational order of the universe, an immanent natural law, a life-giving force hidden within things, a power working from above on the sensible world" (Eliade 9, 9). This understanding might be endorsed by a passage from *Laozi*:

There is a thing confusedly formed,  
Born before heaven and earth.  
Silent and void  
It stands alone and does not change,  
Goes round and does not weary.  
It is capable of being the mother of the world.  
I know not its name  
So I style it "the way." (25, 24b-25b; Lau 37)

Much in the same way as stated in the prologue to the *Gospel of John* regarding the Word, i.e., the Logos,<sup>10</sup> which shows its author obviously aware of the Greek background from which he has sprung, the Tao in this passage is regarded as the begetter of myriad things in the universe. "Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men" (1978, 788). The author of *Laozi* further says: "The way begets one; one begets two; two begets three; three begets the myriad creatures" (42, 8b; Lau 63). There is here a contrast between something formed out of chaos, i.e., the ineffable "Tao," and the absence of a proper name for it. The Tao cannot be manifested through language. One can only give it an arbitrary and provisional name. The idea here may indeed be compared with the "logocentric" way of thinking, for Laozi establishes the metaphysical hierarchy between the transcendental signified "Tao" and its signifier. This is very close to what Ernst Cassirer describes as the inadequacy of language:

For all mental processes fail to grasp reality itself, and in order to represent it, to hold it at all, they are driven to the use of symbols. But all symbolism harbors the curse of mediacy; it is bound to obscure what it seeks to reveal. Thus the sound of *speech* strives to "express" subjective and objective happening, the "inner" and the "outer" world; but what of this it can retain is not the life and individual fullness of existence, but only a dead abbreviation of it. All that "denotation" to which the spoken word lays claim is really nothing more than mere suggestion; a "suggestion" which, in face of the concrete variegation and totality of actual experience, must always appear a poor and empty shell. That is true of the external as well as the inner world: "When *speaks* the soul, alas, the *soul* no longer speaks!" (7)

The same idea is also explained in *Zhuangzi*:

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.<sup>11</sup> (Guo Qingfan 488; Watson, trans. 1968, 152)

Here "the thing that it is pursuing" refers to the ineffable Tao. Thus, language is inadequate as a means to express the Tao as the original presence. Zhuangzi further says:

<sup>10</sup> It is interesting to note that several Chinese versions of the *Gospel of John* translate the Word as "Tao." See, for example, *The New Testament* (257).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Graham's English translation: "It is when it is to be found in a book that the world values the Way. A book is no more than sayings, but there is value in sayings; what is valuable in them is the thought. A thought is about something; what the thought is about is untransmittable in words..." (1981, 139).

We can use words to talk about the coarseness of things and we can use our minds to visualize the fineness of things. But what words cannot describe and the mind cannot succeed in visualizing — this has nothing to do with coarseness or fineness.<sup>12</sup> (Guo Qingfan 572; Watson, trans. 1968, 178)

Here "what words cannot describe and the mind cannot succeed in visualizing" also means the Tao. In other words, while language can represent the coarseness of things and the mind may reach the fineness of things, the Tao is something that neither language nor the mind is capable of full representation.

By inserting the mind between things and the use of language, Zhuangzi touches on the issue of the inner versus the outer language, believing that the mind may perceive more than language can describe. The mind therefore is closer to the Tao than language. The object, the mind and the language are thus put in a hierarchical relation. This may be compared with the words of Cassirer, quoted above, who suggests that the mind itself cannot "grasp reality" and one has to resort to language to represent it. One may also quote Derrida's understanding of logocentrism for comparison:

[Speech] signifies "mental experiences" which themselves reflect or mirror things by natural resemblance. Between being and mind, things and feelings, there would be a relationship of translation or natural signification; between mind and logos [sic], a relationship of conventional symbolization. And the *first* convention, which would relate immediately to the order of natural and universal signification, would be produced as spoken language. (11)

Here the term "logos" must be understood as language (oratio) in order to make sense. What Derrida is saying here is that there is a natural relationship of signification between things and mind while the relationship between mind and speech is conventional. If one adds on the relationship between speech and writing, the hierarchy of things, mind, speech and writing is all too visible.

Thus I agree with Zhang Longxi that the Chinese, especially in the Taoist tradition, do seem to have a way of thinking similar to the Western "logocentrism" despite the lack of phonocentrism.<sup>13</sup> But the term

"logocentrism," with its obvious cultural overtones and its involvement with phonocentrism, does not seem quite appropriate to represent the Chinese way of thinking. Perhaps a new term must be coined: "Tao-centrism." The term may be defined as a metaphysical way of thinking that assumes the hierarchy of meaning and language and regards the Tao as the original and teleological presence. Without involving phonocentrism, Tao-centrism assumes that the mind may come closer to the transcendental Tao than language.

### III

Regardless of what is discussed in the last section, Chinese philosophers seem to believe that language, inadequate as it may, is capable of suggesting or pointing to the meaning beyond words after all. While Laozi complains about the inadequacy of language, he is still employing contingent words to describe the indescribable Tao. When Zhuangzi says: "Once you've gotten the meaning, you can forget the words" (Guo Qingfan 944; Watson, trans. 1968, 302), he presupposes the use of language as a necessary carrier of meaning. When challenged by Huizi about the usefulness of his words, Zhuangzi replies wittily: "A man has to understand the useless before you can talk to him about the useful.... It is obvious, then, that the useless has its use" (Guo Qingfan 936; Watson, trans. 1968, 299). Earlier in this paper, I cited a statement from "Xici zhuan": "Writing cannot express words completely. Words cannot express thoughts completely." This quotation

of the Mean] which may indicate Tao-centric metaphysics: "The way of Heaven and Earth may be completely declared in one sentence. — They are without any doubleness, and so they produce things in a manner that is unfathomable. The way of Heaven and Earth is large and substantial, high and brilliant, far-reaching and long-enduring" (*Zhongyong* XXVI, 188-89; trans. Legge 405). Here the Tao of Heaven and Earth is similar to what Laozi said about the Tao as the begetter of myriad things in the universe. Professor Anthony Yu of Chicago University has reminded me of the presence of Tao-centric metaphysics in the following passage from *Xunzi*: "Names and combinations of names are the instruments of discourse and explanation. Discourse and explanation are the means by which the mind gives form to the Way [Tao]. The mind is the supervisor of the Way, and the Way is the foundation of good government. The mind should be in accord with the Way, explanations in accord with the mind, and phrases in accord with explanations..." (*Xunzi* 65; trans. Watson 147). Although the Tao in this passage refers to the "foundation of good government," a specific kind of Tao rather than the transcendental Tao, it may be understood as a kind of reason that the mind tries to be in accord with. There is an obvious hierarchical relationship between the Tao, the mind and the use of language, similar to what Zhuangzi says. In both cases, language is regarded as a medium that tries to represent the Tao as comprehended by the mind. For a detailed discussion of various meanings of the Tao, the reader may refer to Disson Hsueh-feng Poe (1975).

12 Cf. Graham's English Translation: "Those which can be sorted in words are the more massive among things; those which can be conveyed through ideas are the more quintessential among things. As for what words cannot sort or ideas convey, we do not specify anything in it as quintessential or massive" (1981, 146).

13 Although the Tao as the transcendental being is mainly a Taoist notion, it is occasionally used by Confucians as well. The "Xici zhuan" first of all has been traditionally attributed to Confucius though probably written and compiled by later Confucians, as the *Book of Changes* is known to be a Confucian classic. Here is a passage from *Zhongyong* [Doctrine

alone may attest to an obvious Taoentric attitude toward language. This Taoentric statement, however, is qualified by what immediately follows:

Are we then unable to see the thoughts of the holy sages? The Master said: The holy sages set up the Images [*xiang*] in order to express their thoughts completely; they devised the hexagrams in order to express the true and the false completely. Then they appended judgements and so could express their words completely.<sup>14</sup> (Ruan 2, 82; Baynes trans. 1, 346)

As is clearly explained here, the inadequacy of language is no obstacle to the holy sages in their expression of meaning. They may use images, hexagrams as well as verbal judgements to exhaust what they want to express. The term *xiang* here refers to images as represented by the hexagrams and described by the verbalized judgements. Any concrete phenomenon or situation can be analyzed into the symbolic system of sixty four hexagrams and the various images correlated with them. For a better understanding, we may quote a passage from Wang Bi (226-249), an annotator on *Yi jing*:

*Xiang* helps meaning emerge, words elucidate *xiang*. To exhaust meaning, nothing is more effective than *xiang*, while, to elucidate *xiang*, nothing is more effective than words. Words produce *xiang*, so we may search words for *xiang*; *xiang* produces meaning, so we may search *xiang* for meaning. (11a)

Wang Bi here suggests that the holy sages' teachings are expressed in the hexagrams. These symbols, however, may be described in words. Thus language is useful, after all, in the expression of meaning with the aid of hexagrams. This idea may have influenced Chinese poets, so that imagistic description became a major means for the expression of thought and/or emotion, an important concept in traditional Chinese poetics. The imagistic use of language serves for Chinese poets as a solution to the problem of linguistic inadequacy.<sup>15</sup>

Thus the negation of language as an adequate medium of conveying thought is closely related to the affirmation of the suggestive power of

language in Taoentric metaphysics. This feature was further strengthened with the rise of Chan Buddhism in China during the Wei-Jin period (220-420). Similar to Taoists, Chan Buddhists also discredited language as an effective medium for communication. However, Chan Buddhists seem to emphasize the suggestive power of language more than Taoists. While Taoists deny the possibility of a complete access to the Tao, Chan Buddhists acknowledge the possibility of reaching Buddhahood even without the aid of language. As a legend goes, when Sakyamuni held up a flower, his disciple Kasyapa smiled with instant understanding without either of them saying a word. This has been regarded as the beginning of Chan Buddhism. To Chan Buddhists, such wordless communication may point directly to the human mind and to reach Buddhahood. There is a short four-line stanza that contains the essence of Chan Buddhism:

A special tradition outside the scriptures;  
No dependence upon words and letters;  
Direct pointing at the human heart;  
Seeing into one's own nature and the attainment of  
Buddhahood. (Eliade 3, 185)

Buddhahood therefore is something that cannot be described rationally in language. It all depends upon the intuition of the human mind to reach an understanding, whether gradual or sudden. Language, therefore, is useless to Chan Buddhists.

Chinese Taoentric metaphysics, especially when strengthened by the rise of Chan Buddhism during the Wei-Jin period, had great impact on traditional Chinese poetics. As early as the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.- 220 A.D.), the notion of poetry as the expression of a poet's aspiration was expounded in the famous "Great Preface" to *Shi jing* [The Book of Poetry]:

Poetry is where a poet's intent goes. Residing in his mind, it is his intent; expressed in words, it becomes poetry. When an emotion surges in his mind, the poet expresses it in words; seeing this expression inadequate, he sighs over it; not satisfied with this, he sings of it; still not content, he cannot help dancing with his hands and feet. (Ruan 1, 269-70)

The idea that poetry is capable of expressing the poet's intent or emotion as stated in this passage has been much discussed by scholars. What has been overlooked, however, is the implication that, in the dichotomy of meaning and language, the latter is an inferior term as it is inadequate for the expression of the poet's thought and/or emotion. Language is even regarded as a less effective means of expression than music, dance or a simple sigh. This hierarchical relationship between meaning and language is a clear

14 Cf. Richard Wilhelm's German version: "Dann kann man also die Gedanken der Heiligen und Weisen nicht sehen? Der Meister sprach: 'Die Heiligen und Weisen stellten die Bilder auf, um ihre Gedanken restlos auszudrücken, sie stellten Zeichen dar, um Wahr und Falsch restlos auszudrücken. Sie fügten dann noch Urteile bei und konnten so ihre Worte restlos ausdrücken'" (245). Graham's English translation: "Then would it be that the ideas of the sages are unseeable? The master said: 'The sages established models to exhaust the ideas, provided diagrams to exhaust genuine and false, attached verbalisations to them to exhaust what they had to say...'" (1989, 364).

15 I have discussed the traditional Chinese theory of poetic imagery elsewhere (cf. Zha 13-27).

reflection of Taoentric metaphysics. This problem was later discussed by Lu Ji (261-303) in his "Wen fu" [The Rhymed Essay on Literature]:

When I compose my own works, I am more keenly aware of the ordeal. Constantly present is the feeling of regret that the meaning apprehended does not represent the objects observed; and, furthermore, words fail to convey the meaning. The fact is, it is not so hard to know as it is to do. (Guo Shaoyu 1, 70; Birch, trans. 1, 204)

Here, Lu Ji distinguishes the objects, the thought in the mind that tries to match the objects and the words that try to express this meaning. This clearly expresses the Taoentric metaphysics. The hierarchy of the object, the mind and the use of language is similar to Zhuangzi's idea as discussed above. Liu Xie (ca.464-ca.520) elaborates on the hierarchical relation between the mind and language in greater detail in his *Wenxin diao long* [The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons]:

At the moment when a writer first picks up his pen, and before anything has yet been written, he feels as if his creative vigor were doubled; but at the completion of the piece, he usually has succeeded in conveying only half of what he had at first contemplated. Why is this so? Because one's ideas may easily be extraordinary when he is free to work in the realm of fancy, but it is very difficult for one to give beauty to his language when he is tied down to the factual details. (Fan 493-94; Shih, trans. 301)

Thus, language cannot fully capture the poet's imagination which contains subtleties of meaning simply beyond linguistic expression. This has led to the emergence of a concept in Chinese poetics that poetry should have *yan wai zhi yi* [meaning beyond words]. As Tao Qian (365-427) writes in one of his "Yin jiu" [Drinking Wine] poems:

Plucking chrysanthemums under the eastern hedge,  
I saw the Southern Mountain stretching far away.  
The mountain mist is fair as the sun sets at dusk,  
The flying birds return in company and in pairs.  
Within this is found a true significance,  
I want to explain, but have forgotten the words. (63)

The poet was inspired by the setting sun and returning birds. He felt there was some philosophical truth in the scene but just could not find the right words to express it. What he did was simply resort to words for a description of the scene, leaving the "true significance" unsaid. This is typical of the poet who is known to be fond of reading books but never tries to have a thorough understanding.

This notion of *yan wai zhi yi* is much discussed in traditional Chinese poetics, albeit in different terms. The most popular term is *jing* [realm], variously known as *yijing* or *jingjie*. The attainment of this poetic realm is regarded as the highest goal in poetry writing. The first scholar that used this term in literary discourse was Wang Changling (? -ca.756), who distinguished three realms in poetry: material realm [*wu-jing*], emotional realm [*qing-jing*] and intellectual realm [*yi-jing*] (Guo Shaoyu 88). The *jing* was later defined by Liu Yuxi (772-842) as: "born out of *xiang*" (173). While *xiang* here refers to images or scenes in poetry, *jing* is something to be imagined outside the images and scenes. This *jing* is in fact a manifestation of the transcendental Tao. It refers to an entity which lies beyond what words can describe but can be intuitively reached by the mind through the suggestive power of language. Yan Yu of the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279) described this notion in the following words:

Poetry involves a special kind of talent, which is not concerned with books; it involves a special kind of gusto, which is not concerned with reason. Yet one cannot achieve perfection unless he has read widely and reasoned thoroughly. The best poetry is what is called "not touching the path of reason and not falling into the trap of words." Poetry is what sings of one's emotion and nature. The poets of the High Tang [8th century] relied only on *xing-qu*, like the antelope that hangs by its horns, leaving no traces to be found. Thus, the miraculousness of their poetry lies in its transparent luminosity, which cannot be pieced together; it is like sound in the air, color in appearances, the moon in water, or an image in the mirror; it has limited words but unlimited meaning. (3b-4a)

Yan suggests here that the best kind of poetry is an embodiment of the poet's emotion that lies beyond words. He uses images borrowed from Chan Buddhism — sound in the air, color in appearances, the moon reflected in water and reflection in the mirror — to describe the indescribable and elusive nature of poetry, suggesting the possibility of expressing something between the lines. To Yan Yu, meaning can be suggested and understood despite the inadequacy of language. James J.Y. Liu has described the contradiction between the accusation of linguistic inadequacy and eloquence with which the allegation is made as "a paradox of language" in Chinese poetics (1988, 3). Yet, as Zhang Longxi has already pointed out, there is also an affirmation of the suggestive power of language in Chinese poetic tradition (1988, 191). Chinese poets seem to believe that it is possible to point to the *jing* or the Tao through an exploration of the suggestive power of language. Those who can make the best use of language, inadequate as it may be, are good poets. Since meaning can be suggested by language, Chinese poets are often encouraged to try hard in a search for the best expression of their

meaning. Some poets tried so hard that they won the reputation, for better or worse, as "poets that compose painstakingly" [*ku yin shiren*].

In conclusion, "logocentrism" in the broadest sense does not seem to be an exclusive phenomenon of Western culture alone as the term *per se* might suggest. Its Chinese counterpart, however, has its own characteristics. The Chinese thinking does not have an element of phonocentrism associated with it. It is characteristically related to the Tao and, therefore, can be called "Taocentrism." Although denying a complete access to the Tao, Taocentric metaphysics seems to acknowledge that the mind may reach or point to the Tao through the suggestive power of language. This metaphysics is further strengthened with the advent of Chan Buddhism, which believes in wordless communication and acknowledges an access to Buddhahood without language. This Taocentric metaphysics is reflected in an important concept in traditional Chinese poetics, i.e., *jing* or poetic "realm," referring to an entity which lies beyond language but is attainable to the mind with the aid of the suggestive power of language. This poetic realm is in fact a manifestation of the transcendental Tao. Chinese poets' efforts to attain this realm is a reflection of Taocentric metaphysics in Chinese thinking.

*The University of British Columbia*

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## Beyond Self: A Lesson From the Concentration Camps

An Israeli journalist and writer, Boaz Evron, opens one of his essays with this statement: "Two catastrophes have hurt the Jewish people in the twentieth century: the Holocaust and the lesson drawn from it" (54). What Evron suggests in this, at first sight paradoxical sentence, is that the Jewish people have been hurt no less from the lessons they have drawn from the Holocaust than from the horror itself. I am not going to contest Evron's assumptions about the present state of Jewish consciousness, because my knowledge of contemporary Jewish society is limited. Rather, what interests me most in this statement is Evron's painful insistence on the fact that traumatic experience does not automatically translate into wisdom — and hence, that the relationship between experience and knowledge is more complex than we normally assume. If it were otherwise, we would probably have been spared most of the military conflicts and acts of genocide which have taken place in so many countries since the Second World War. But the Jewish predicament, as Evron presents it, tells us something perhaps even more important — namely, that our ability to make use of our own experience is not necessarily greater than our ability to learn from the experience of other people.

If this observation is true about collectives such as nations and societies, there is no reason to doubt that individuals encounter the same problems while trying to learn something from their own experience. The expatriate Czech writer Milan Kundera is convinced that experience is of very little use to the individual. For him, inexperience is one of the defining qualities of the human condition. He writes:

We are born one time only, we can never start a new life equipped with experience, we've gained from a previous one. We leave childhood without knowing what youth is, we marry without knowing what it is to be married, and even when we enter old age, we don't know what it is we're heading for: the old are the innocent children of their old age. In that sense, man's world is the planet of inexperience. (132)

This is the kind of statement any sinner must find profoundly reassuring, since it implies that error resulting from inexperience is such a natural