

Transcending Differences Between the Tao and the Logos

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Abstract: Contrary to what has been proposed by some former scholars, this paper argues that there is no phonocentrism in the traditional Chinese conception of language in consideration of the differences between “Logos” and “Tao”. Different from “Logos”, which can be objectified and functions as the prerequisite and fixed principle of all meanings, both imposing restrictions and offering possibilities, the characteristic of “Tao” is that it cannot be fashioned into any shape and cannot be grasped in a definite, concrete way, and it produces all beings without making any regulations for them. Nonetheless, these differences can be transcended by inspecting their similarities in the way to be conveyed and interpreted. Both “Zhi(指)” in Chinese philosophy and “signify” in Western metaphysics can lead to the play of signifiers. And in the process of mutual elucidation, Western metaphysics can find a way out of the restriction of logocentrism, whilst Chinese “Tao” can obtain a more logical discussion and avoid being distorted by arbitrary interpretation.

Keywords: signify, Chinese characters, phonocentrism, logocentrism

1. Introduction

In *Of Grammatology*, by quoting Jacques Gernet’s view that although Chinese characters have phonetic properties, they are suppressed by writing, Derrida attempts to prove that “writing did not reduce the voice to itself, it incorporated it into a system” [1], thus Chinese civilization is termed by Derrida as civilization developing “outside of all logocentrism” [1], which gives rise to discussions on whether there is phonocentrism in Chinese. Spivak points out in the preface to the English translation of *Of Grammatology* that the East is never seriously studied and deconstructed in the Derridean text, and she suggests that Derrida’s insistence that “logocentrism is a property of the West” shows “a reverse ethnocentrism” [1]. Sean Meighoo argues that Derrida’s claim that there is no phonocentrism in Chinese is based on his prejudice of China’s lack of metaphysics, and that Derrida conflates Chinese writing with Japanese writing, “inserting his own reference to Japanese writing into the discussion of Chinese writing” [2]. Therefore, whether phonocentrism exists in traditional Chinese conception of language remains controversial. Considering that phonocentrism in the Western conception of language reflects logocentrism in traditional Western metaphysics, this question can be transformed into whether there is logocentrism in traditional Chinese philosophy. Since Western traditional metaphysical thinking can be best captured in “Prinzipienlehre” – the study of the problem of “Arche” [3], namely the principle [4], this question is further transformed into whether “Tao”, the first principle of Chinese traditional philosophy, can

be compared with “Logos”, the first principle of Western metaphysics. Qian Zhongshu believes that “Tao” is the counterpart of “Logos” [5]. Zhang Longxi continues this comparison, considering “Tao” to be an ultimate presence just like “Logos” [6]. Hongchu Fu endorses Zhang Longxi’s analysis, arguing that writing is another way to pursue “presence” [7]. However, I argue that there is no phonocentrism in the traditional Chinese conception of language, since unlike “Logos”, which is a timeless and definite source that can be objectified and analyzed, “Tao” is formless chaos that has not been fashioned into any shape and cannot be grasped in a definite, concrete way. Nonetheless, in spite of the differences between “Tao” and “Logos”, they have similarities in the way to be conveyed and interpreted, and therefore they can be mutually elucidated in this respect. In this process, Western metaphysics can find a way out of the restriction of logocentrism, whilst Chinese “Tao” can obtain a more logical discussion and avoid being distorted by arbitrary interpretation.

2. Transcending the Difference Between “Tao” and “Logos”

Phonocentrism is Jacques Derrida’s generalization of the basic features of Western metaphysical language concepts, according to which, speech is the reproduction of thought, and writing is the reproduction of speech. Therefore, speech is prioritized as “the original, privileged means by which the presence of the logos is expressed”, whilst writing is deemed to be “at best a meditation”, by which the intentions, consciousness, or presence of the users of language can hardly be relived [8]. Writing might even be seen as “a corruption of the pure presence of speech” [8]. As far as language alone is concerned, the feature that distinguishes Chinese writing from alphabetic writing – namely, the emphasis on writing has been widely discussed. From the perspective of the generation and evolution of language, there have been many Chinese researchers who consider the marks on painted pottery as the original Chinese characters [9]. From the perspective of the characteristics of written symbols, Ming Dong Gu believes that there is a direct connection between Chinese characters and thoughts, without sound serving as an intermediary [10]. From the perspective of traditional theory, Chad Hansen starts from the interpretation of Confucian classics, and arrives at the conclusion that in Chinese theory, it is the written word rather than the sound that conveys the intention of the sage-kings, and what plays a decisive role in explaining how language works is “the historical, conventional community rather than the rational individual” [11]. But their discussions at the language level have not yet touched the essence of phonocentrism, which is essentially an extension of logocentrism – the traditional Western metaphysical way of thinking – in the conception of language. The origin of phonocentrism lies in the philosophers’ pursuit of a complete expression that carries the presence of “Logos”. Therefore, behind the question whether there is phonocentrism in Chinese language conceptions, the real question is whether there is logocentrism in Chinese philosophy, and the core of the latter question is whether “Tao” possesses the properties of “Logos”. Some researchers have already dealt with this issue. In addition to the above mentioned scholars, including Qian Zhongshu, who are positive about the comparability of “Tao” and “Logos”, there are also scholars who hold contrary views. For instance, Bai Yanxia emphasizes that “Tao” is unformed and constantly changing chaos, and there is no binary opposition that elevates one side while devaluing the other in the philosophy of Lao Tse and Chuang Tse [12]. Joseph S. Wu highlights that “Tao” is not a static entity [13]. However, the relationship between “Tao” and “Logos” remains understudied, and the essential characteristics of “Tao” have not yet been fully investigated. This paper attempts to explore this issue by examining the images of Chinese characters and the language activities in the light of *liushu* or “six graphic principles”.

2.1. Different Understandings of “Arche”

Although both having probed into the first principle, philosophers from China and the West have

developed different understandings of it, which, to some extent, create their different attitudes towards language and writing.

In Western traditional metaphysics, as the first principle and basis of all beings, “Logos” is presupposed to be identifiable and attainable, thus requiring the medium used for identifying and expressing it to be absolutely transparent. Beginning with Plato and Aristotle, speech has been conceived to share the certainty and presence of the principle “Logos”, and even itself is considered to be an extension or a variant of “Logos”, due to the fact that it can justify itself by giving incessant interpretations of the objects it involves, and in this way making the objects attainable. This is why linguistics can be seen as the metaphysics of the medium used for communicating the first principle. Speech contains the possibility of infinitely approaching the first principle and conveying it. And then inevitably, “there is a clear logical and indeed chronological hierarchy between the spoken and the written word as modes of signification” [8]. This hierarchy has continued, and can be discerned in Saussure’s exclusion of writing from the internal linguistics: “Language and writing are two distinct systems of signs; the second exists for the sole purpose of representing the first. The linguistic object is not both the written and the spoken forms of words; the spoken forms alone constitute the object.” [14]

However, “Tao” is not a present-at-hand and definite entity. “The Tao that can be trodden is not the enduring and unchanging Tao. The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name.” [15] That is to say, what can be identified and named are tangible things that can be seen and analyzed, but the distinct of Tao is that it is invisible and unanalyzable. Different from the eternal “One” of Parmenides, Lao Tse’s “The One” has such property: “Ceaseless in its action, it yet cannot be named, and then it again returns and becomes nothing. This is called the Form of the Formless, and the Semblance of the Invisible; this is called the Fleeting and Indeterminable” [13]. In contrary to the certain, preconceived “Logos”, “Tao” is amorphous chaos. For instance, “the greatest system doesn’t need to be embodied by specific regulations” is also to emphasize its amorphous nature. The original Chinese “大制不割” is translated into “in his(the sage’s)greatest regulations he employs no violent measures” by James Legge [15]. Whereas, I suppose, it would be more accurate to translate it as I do, since the original meaning of “制” in Chinese is “cutting out clothes”, and further, “大制不割” means the greatest system doesn’t need to be embodied by specific regulations just as the best clothes doesn’t need to be fashioned into a specific piece of clothes. Why does “Tao” have no definite form? Because once it has, it can become only some of all the beings but not others, and it will be impossible to give birth to all beings. It is precisely because Tao has no form that it can produce and nourish every being. Chaos is a state where all the possibilities do exist, but are held in abeyance, none of them have yet sprouted.

In “Discussion on Making All Things Equal”, Chuang Tse says:

“Words are not just wind. Words have something to say. But if what they have to say is not fixed, then do they really say something?... What does the Way rely on, that we have true and false? What do word rely on, that we have right and wrong?... But if we want to right their wrongs and wrong their rights, then the best thing to use is clarity.” [16]

He emphasizes the doctrines and theories put forward by philosophers like Confucius and Mozi have veiled the absence of certain entities in both spoken and written words, which are in nature not as aimless as wind, and that fixed criteria are actually the corruption of “Tao”. For the truth to be revealed, the prescriptive ideas of constructed substance must be abandoned.

Different from “Logos”, which functions as the prerequisite and fixed principle of all meanings, both imposing restrictions and offering possibilities, the characteristic of “Tao” is that it produces all beings without making any regulations for them. Moreover, this characteristic can be shown in sentences such as “[Tao] produces [all things] and nourishes them; it produces them and does not claim them as its own; it does all, and yet does not boast of it; it presides over all, and yet does not

control them” [15], and “all things depend on [Tao] for their production, which it gives to them, not one refusing obedience to it. When its work is accomplished, it does not claim the name of having done it. It clothes all things as with a garment, and makes no assumption of being their lord” [15]. These sayings all highlight that “Tao” cultivates all beings but does not enforce on them to satisfy a present-at-hand standard, with which some beings will conform while others will conflict. It’s the same with “heaven and earth do not act from the impulse of any wish to be benevolent” [15] and “the Tao in its regular course does nothing” [15]. Benevolence exists only under man-made moral standards, and encouragement to some beings are to suppress others. “Tao” allows all beings to develop on their own without its favoritism, without subjective desire, without aim or action.

The “Tao” as the the principles of governing a country in the ecumene(天下), “the carrier of human society” [17], is created and legitimized by emulating the highest principles of cosmos(天地). It can also be seen that it is not present-at-hand and possesses the characteristic of no predetermined rules. “Chî Kang asked Confucius about government saying, ‘What do you say to killing the unprincipled for the good of the principled?’ Confucius replied, ‘Sir, in carrying on your government, why should you use killing at all? Let your evinced desires be for what is good, and the people will be good. The relation between superiors and inferiors is like that between the wind and the grass. The grass must bend, when the wind blows across it.’” [18] “Killing the unprincipled for the good of the principled” essentially regards the “principle” namely “Tao”, as a definitive standard that can be explicitly explicated and directly applied to any situation, which is prone to degenerate to the rules for rulers to set as they please. Confucius’s way of governing the country is to purify the ecumene through the “wind” of rites and music in a dynamic process in the way the cosmos operates.

All above mentioned distinctions of “Tao” constitute what is called as “xuan(玄)”, a concept originally used for describing the color black in Chinese, and further referring to something that is abstruse and dim. “Xuan(玄)” makes it impossible to conceptualize and refer to “Tao” with precise and fixed words, so Lao Tse says, “I do not know its name, and I give it the designation of the Tao (the Way or Course). Making an effort (further) to give it a name I call it The Great.” [15] From this we can see that by questioning the ability of “shu(书)” to communicate the meaning, the ancient Chinese philosophers suspect not only the ability of writing, but also that of speech. As a matter of fact, “shu(书)” and “yan(言)” in Chinese cannot fully correspond to writing and speech in English, but they have overlaps. To be specific, “yan(言)” includes both oral and written words, while “shu(书)” is in particular defined as written words. It is the limitations of language that they are skeptical about. Then comes the question: If concepts made up by words cannot convey ideas without loss of meaning, how could the meaning be communicated? When interpreting “the Tao that can be trodden is not the enduring and unchanging Tao. The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name”, Qiu Xigui and other scholars caution against equating “cannot be named” can not necessarily be equated with “cannot be expressed in words”; rather, it means “cannot be spoken in the usual way of strictly matching name and reality” [19]. Moreover, if the meanings cannot be expressed in words, what is the point of those philosophers writing books? What “cannot be spoken in the usual way”, however, can be conveyed through the “image(象)”.

2.2. The Similarities Between “Zhi(指)” and “Signify”

Despite the fact that the understandings of the first principle, the attitudes towards speech and writing, and the ways of reasoning in the West and in China are all different, the means of expression related to the first principle is not completely different. Specifically, the thoughts of

Chinese and Western traditional philosophies about image and “signify(指)” have something in common.

The theory of liushu is said to be the way Chinese characters are created, among which Zhishi(指事) or “indicating conditions” is put at the first place by Xu Shen and interpreted by him as “knowing something abstract when it is indicated” [20]. According to Xu Kai, Zhishi differs from Xiangxing(象形) – or “imitating forms” – for a lack of concrete shape which can be imitated in the objects it refers to [21]. Apparently, Xu Shen uses the term Zhishi instead of the earlier Xiangshi(象事) or Chushi(处事) because he uses “Zhi(指)” in the sense of what is used by Kung-sun Lung-Tzu. “If there existed ‘Zhi(指)’ itself as a independent name, but didn’t exist ‘Wuzhi(物指)’, which is a designation regulated by the object it refers to, who would directly say that ‘Zhi(指)’ differs from ‘Wuzhi(物指)’?” emphasizes that “Zhi(指)” can be separated from the a real, actual thing. “Zhi(指)” is interpreted as “finger” in Shuowen Jiezi Zhu, and Duan Yucai suggests that “Zhi(指)” is expanded on the meaning of intent [20]. It can be concluded that with the original meaning of the movements of hand, the functions of “Zhi(指)” multiply from signifying the specific objects to indicating the invisible thoughts, which is the intention expressed by the sender and the meaning generated in the mind of the receiver. Zhang Xiaomei uses liushu to analyze the learning process of sign language, pointing out that people’s acquisition of “Zhi(指)” is a process from pointing to the actual things around them to abstract gestures [22]. “Signify” in English has something in common with Chinese “Zhi(指)”. “Signify” originates from the Latin “significare”, and its original meaning is also the movements and gestures of the hand. On this basis, it has the meaning of “gesticulating” and “pointing out”. By quoting Augustine, Wittgenstein points out that “the essence of human language” is: “the words in language name objects.....[The meaning of every word] is the object for which the word stands.” Further, he extends to the relationship between the meaning and the use of words, “The teaching of language is not explaining, but training.” “An important part of the training will consist in the teacher’s pointing to the objects, directing the child’s attention to them, and at the same time uttering a word”; this is so-called the “ostensive teaching of words” [23]. Michael Tomasello quotes Wittgenstein’s *The Big Transcript* at the beginning of *Origins of Human Communication*: “What we call meaning must be connected with the primitive language of gestures.” [24] Liszkowski’s experiment suggests: “These results demonstrate that the ability to communicate about absent but mutually known entities depends not on language, but rather on deeper social-cognitive skills that make acts of linguistic reference possible in the first place.” [25] It is precisely because of the specific meaning of “pointing with fingers”, the act of “pointing” can remind people of an image, which can be a specific image embodied in the Chinese characters such as “sun (日)” and “moon (月)” in oracle bone script, or it can be abstracted as Wittgenstein’s “picture of facts” [26]. “Zhi(指)” is further naturally endowed with the possibility of referring to things that are not present and abstract meanings in the process of cognition.

Besides the action to describe specific tangible objects, the “image(象)” of “Xiangxing(象形)” which ranks second in liushu can have a transcendent dimension. The process of using concrete images to present abstract meanings is just a kind of “Zhi(指)”, in which the meaning conveyed by “images” needs to be understood beyond its literal meaning, similar to metaphors or allegory. What Zhouyi says “Endless toing and froing is called development. What is then perceived is called a figure”, “Sages made the hexagrams, having observed the figures” [27] is to use “images” as the manifestation of the mystery of the changes in cosmos and to express abstract laws of cosmos with hexagram images. The characteristic of the writing in Zhouyi is to communicate abstract meanings with concrete objects, such as using “dragon” to explain “Qian(乾)”, and “mountain under ‘dangerous’” to explain “Meng(蒙)” [27]. Lao Tse’s “eluding sight, eluding touch, the images of

things all in it crouch” obviously uses “image” as a way of presenting “Tao”, and Lao Tseï does use some particular images such as “bellows”, “infant” and “new born baby” to illustrate the “Tao” of cosmos. Here we can see the commonality between “image(象)” and Plato’s “Eidos”. In fact, the original meaning of the Greek word Eidos is to know by seeing, and the vision in the Greek period, as Heidegger pointed out, was also endowed with metaphysical meaning [28]. “The Master said: ‘Shu does not fully convey yan. Yan does not fully convey meaning.’ Can we then not fully know the sages’ meaning? The Master said: ‘The sages arranged figures to convey all meanings; invented hexagrams to convey truth and deviance; and added oracles to convey all in words.’” [27] Why “shu(书)” and “yan(言)” may not entirely convey “meaning(意)”? Because the cosmos and all creatures in it are constantly changing, so do the laws of their changes, hence the writing in Zhou Yi used to explain its doctrines needs to change continuously. People can’t take Zhou Yi as timeless truth [27]. The real problem is not that writing and speech cannot convey meaning accurately and completely, but that the specific content of meaning itself is in continuous change. However, the change of content does not mean that we cannot understand the sage’s words, because “image(象)” can be employed as a supplement to “shu(书)” and “yan(言)”. The point of using “Zhi(指)” and “image” rather than being confined to “shu(书)” and “yan(言)” for the sake of entirely conveying meaning is similar to Frege’s purpose of distinguishing between “sense” and “nominatum” [29]. Frege highlights “nominatum” is to “strive for truth” [29].

“Zhi(指)” has the ability to refer to things that are not present, and thus can lead to the play of signifiers, which is to say, there is a relational movement of signifieds becoming signifiers ad infinitum. Kung-sun Lung-Tzu’s “A Discourse On A White Horse”, “A Discourse On Hard And White” and “A Discourse On Names And The Actual” are to reveal that a signifier is always separated from the signified and refers to other signifiers. “Zhi(指)” can lead to a play of signifiers, so do “signify”. Through Derrida’s deconstruction, Western alphabetic writing automatically shows the signifiers’ “movement of supplementarity” [30]. According to Saussure’s theory of structural linguistics, a sign in a semiotic system is composed of signifier (sound-images) and signified (concepts). Moreover, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, so the meaning of a sign depends on its position in a larger system, that is, the language system [14]. When Derrida deconstructs Saussure, he points out that such a definition of sign would make the meaning of sign impossible to be included in sign itself. When examining the meaning of a sign, we will find it necessary to use several other related signs to establish the signified of this sign, and each new signified turns the original sign into a signifier. And if we want to establish the meaning of these signifieds, these signifieds must become the signifiers of new signifieds, that is, there is play of signifiers. And if the center of the structure is to have a stable, definable meaning, it must be a point at which the permutation or the transformation of elements is forbidden. This center is within the structure, dominating it, and on the other hand outside the structure, escaping the structurality of it. However, now that the center is not part of the totality, it is no more the center [30]. As a result, the semiotic system of language shows the absence of the center of semiotic system, and the infinite extension of the domain and the play of signification [30]. Stable language — thought correspondences are pointed out to be in constant dissolution, leaving only free play in which differences are constantly produced.

3. Conclusions

When it comes to the first principle, there is a fundamental difference between traditional Chinese philosophy and Western metaphysics, that is, as the ultimate origin, “Tao” is in relentless transformation and cannot be referred to by specific words, while “Logos” is predetermined to be attainable. Under the influence of different understandings of the origin, different ways of

expressing and interpreting the origin are given rise to. Western metaphysics expects an exact correspondence between language and thought, whereas traditional Chinese philosophy questions the possibility of this correspondence from the very beginning. Therefore, it is inappropriate to declare that phonocentrism as a special form of logocentrism exists in traditional Chinese language concepts. Although the understandings of the origin and ways of explanation are different, there are parallels between “Zhi(指)” in Chinese philosophy and “signify” in Western philosophy, and this is where both of them turn to the free play of differences and find a way out of phonocentrism. However, firmly sticking to differences is not the only solution to logocentrism in the postmodern era. In fact, as Hegel’s dialectics reveals, focusing on a certain concept often leads to its opposite. The same goes for heterogeneity. If heterogeneity is fixed as a concept, a slogan, there is a risk of losing it, eventually dissolving heterogeneity itself and falling into homogeneity it tries to avoid. The real difficulty may lie in how to express and interpret the thoughts about origin. The way of constructing a fixed concept to express thoughts will eventually either result in endless play of signifiers or return to the strict correspondence between language and thought just as that brought about by logocentrism. At this time, the way of image(象) of traditional Chinese philosophy shows its value. “Image(象)” is like a ladder, which only helps the thinking to achieve a certain understanding. Once reached, the ladder can be discarded, and it will no longer participate in the next advancement of thinking. “Image(象)” is by no means a concept or category derived through generalization, but can only be understood in a horizon—rising way. Through the connection between different “images”, the meanings can trigger each other and start a ingenious play in which they can be understood. Therefore, the philosophical issues raised by rigid designations (such as “the meaning of existence” and “the essence of truth”) are deconstructed into the issue related to “formal indication” [31], the entity becomes the interweaving of presence and absence, and the presuppositions of the origin manifests themselves to be shaken by themselves. “Image(象)” is not a superficial metaphor or analogy. With the help of tangible “images”, what is ultimately to be conceived is the invisible “image(象)”, the embodiment of “Tao”. Lao Tse’s “great image has no shape”, “the Form of the Formless, and the Image of the Invisible” is exactly indicating the close association between “image(象)” and “Tao”, which cannot be preliminarily determined or objectified, but can elucidate “Tao” in a more explicit way.

While “image(象)” can help Western metaphysics find a way out of phonocentrism, the way of interpreting in Western metaphysics can also help the philosophy of Lao Tse and Chuang Tse to avoid the danger of falling into obscurantist, confusing phrasemongering. Due to the absence of defined concepts and the neglect of establishing a clear logical deduction process, the interpretation of traditional Chinese philosophy often relies on the understanding and interpretation of elite scholars, and thus is easily influenced by specific historical and social backgrounds. The fate of philosophical theories is either to be like Confucianism, which has been elucidated by countless Confucian scholars and moralists, completely detached from the original all-round thinking about cosmos and ecumene, transformed into a ruling theory purely serving politics; or, like Taoism, which under the circumstances of coercion, has been distorted into self-cultivation, pragmatic skills and other miscellaneous studies with clear practical purposes, or “Qingtan”, an intellectual current among social elites during Wei-Jin Dynasty who tried to hide from political oppression by indulging in debates on philosophical themes. In this way, traditional Chinese philosophy is extremely vulnerable to the political influences in specific eras, and it easily degenerates into a political tool. Its original metaphysical dimension in this process becomes an empty shell that can be transformed and utilized at will. However, if Chinese philosophy can be interpreted with concepts and logical deduction borrowed from Western philosophy, the metaphysical dimension of

Chinese philosophy may be revitalized. Actually, the interpretation of Lao Tse and Chuang Tse's philosophy in this article is carried out in virtue of the thoughts of western philosophers.

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