

The Transcultural Situation of Contemporary Chinese-speaking Thought and Its Relation to the Chinese Script

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I. Some problems regarding “intercultural” and “cross-cultural” philosophizing

“Transcultural” philosophizing has, for quite a while, been identified with universalistic reasoning, striving at absolute truth and presuming to be situated “above” cultural diversity. Only recently has another—more refined as well as more fruitful—conception of “transcultural” thinking become possible. According to the “transcultural turn”, which has come up within philosophy and human studies, a “transcultural” disposition of thought represents the most appropriate mode of philosophizing in the age of globalization, especially for those philosophical communities which, up to now, remain outside the focus of dominant Euro-American philosophy. Reflection on methods of overcoming “cultural relativity”, in order to reestablish the realm of universal truth, seems as outdated as just describing “cultural diversity” in a merely affirmative, uncritical way. Instead, we ought rather to *critically rethink the modern situation through transcultural hybridity*.¹ The essentially *transcultural constitution of modernity* in all regions of a globalized world should be a major concern of contemporary philosophizing, as issues of “modernization” no longer cherish just one Eurocentric concept of modernity, usually opposing a “modern” state of mind to

¹ By the term hybrid I intend to designate a disposition of thinking or doing things which has melted heterogeneous elements together, pretending to be, by virtue of some presumed origin or essence, what it actually is not. A hybrid state is no more what it has been from the beginning on, or what it would be expected to be, in accordance with linear development. The metamorphoses producing hybrid states concern mutation of contents within a preexistent form. In this sense, modern use of the Chinese script yields an excellent example of cultural hybridity, as its large amount of neologisms purport a significant shift of meaning, a certain character pretending to mark an autochthone word, whereas it in fact often indicates an imported “Western” idea.

“traditional” societies and world views. Today specific modes of modernity may be related to each other, as well as to local histories.

From this perspective, “comparative” debates on various cultural affiliations apparently are outdated. Due to the *problematic relation* that exists between philosophy and cultures in the plural,² comparative philosophy more and more happens to be replaced by “intercultural” or “cross-cultural” approaches. As there are multiple phenomena of mutual overlapping, interfering, dominating, or neglecting, to be observed between diverse cultural adherences and resources, any generalizing way of contrasting and comparing “cultural entities” as a whole, has become obsolete. Transculturality may now be envisaged as a *living hybrid disposition of multiple modernities*, each in its own right striving at giving shape to human being-in-the-world. Transculturality designates the *ongoing process of open self-transformation* of historical societies, moving back and forth within a complex field of cultural preferences and power constellations.

This view implies a major revision of the usual discourse on culture. It may be claimed that the term “culture” does not designate any real and more or less fixed structure of sense and style, with respect to individual and social life. In modern times it has become ever more evident that culture has failed, as it were.³ What failed culture has left behind—or rather set free—is sort of a “desire for culture”. By an effort for “cultivation” or “culturation”, mankind is continuously striving at shaping culture, tackling resistances of all kinds. Thus the positive idea of culture, as well as any historical perspective on presumably fixed real cultures, should not be considered as the starting point of reflection after the transcultural turn. Instead of positively propagating cultural diversity or advocating the melting of multiple cultures, also instead of deconstructing alleged cultural entities by the bias of transcultural critique, it might prove even more challenging to pursue a critique of the more or less violent *imposition of pseudo-culture*, to be observed at the core of the present situation, fundamentally lacking any culture in the emphatic sense, or even being marked by the failure of shaping culture.

Due to its transcultural disposition, modern mutation does no more pertain to any fixed and closed cultural universe, now occurring from “in-between” diverse or even contrary cultural adherences, tendencies and ideals. Change is now driven by a deep *consciousness of cultural crisis*, and wherever change frankly declares to take a transcultural situation into account or to adhere to a transcultural ideal, it is bound

² Rolf Elberfeld, „Durchbruch zum Plural. Der Begriff der Kulturen bei Nietzsche,“ *Nietzsche-Studien* 37 (2008): 115-142.

³ “Failed civilization” (mißlungene Zivilisation), also pinpointed as the “failure of culture” (Mißlingen von Kultur), is a recurring theme in Adorno’s thought (Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente* [Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 2000], S. 137, 292, 327; Theodor. W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie* [Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1973], S. 32).

to get inhibited by institutional resistance, alleging to represent “culture”, provoking resistance, too, like social antagonism or intellectual revisionism. However, in times of self-inflicted natural, as well as thoroughly man-made, catastrophes menacing human life as a whole, even the ancient “project of modernity”, centered on reason, subjectivity and individual freedom, appears to have lost much of its attraction, at least from a Euro-American perspective. Thus the global present-day situation of mankind yields to a quite important change in the notion of what may be a desirable future. “Modernity” nowadays may primarily be concerned with general survival, as well as with a transcultural reinforcement of “human values” in a much broader sense, compared with those ideals once put forward during the era of enlightenment.

Without intending to preclude discussions on inter- or transculturality with respect to premodern non-European civilizations such as the Maya, as well as regarding the present-day situation of non-European philosophers in Southern Asia or Africa, from the scope of this essay, it still seems necessary to sharpen the focus by concentrating on the case of the East Asian world, notably encompassing Taiwan, China, and Japan. In all of these places, as well as in the respective research going on abroad, comparativism has flourished during a century of East-West encounters, frequently not so much striving for scientific insight or philosophical exchange, but for sort of a “rehabilitation” of ancient Eastern societies, feeling deeply humiliated by so-called Western civilization. More recent attempts have first become vigorous in a French- and German-speaking scientific environment and have exerted a significant influence on East-Asian studies, at least within a European context.⁴ What has been propagated by Ram Adhar Mall, Heinz Kimmerle, and Franz Martin Wimmer, under the title of “intercultural philosophy”⁵, have been aiming at an opening of European philosophy to ancient as well as contemporary philosophizing outside of Europe and North-America. Yet as Mall’s focusing on “the three birthplaces of philosophy”, i.e. China, India, Europe,⁶ clearly shows, the pitfalls of comparative philosophy are repeated, without even exploring fundamental Eurocentric prejudices on “metaphysics”, “ontology”, “logic”, and “ethics”. As this inter- or cross-cultural approach remains dominated by European habits and convictions, widely lacking any critical moment, the hypostatized non-European “Other” has to contribute to

⁴ Authors originating from other cultural backgrounds and orientations, such as for instance Paulin J. Hountondji, Kwasi Wiredu, or Kwame Anthony Appiah, have been and still are concerned with somewhat divergent problems, referring to different historical conditions of inter- and transculturality, so as to become more influential in other contexts. It is only for the sake of relevance and focus, but not due to any judgment on the value of those philosophical contributions, that they are not discussed in this study.

⁵ Franz Martin Wimmer, *Interkulturelle Philosophie: Geschichte und Theorie* (Wien: Passagen, 1990); Heinz Kimmerle, *Die Dimension des Interkulturellen* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994).

⁶ Ram Adhar Mall, *Die drei Geburtsorte der Philosophie. China, Indien, Europa* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1989).

philosophy in the narrow sense, i.e. European philosophy, without yielding fruitful insights into philosophy herself. Such discussions obviously get prevented by their own philosophical formation from actually stepping into the “in-between”, whence any inter- or cross-cultural reflection might eventually become a reasonable enterprise. The same holds true for François Jullien’s “spacing” (écart) as a philosophical device for deconstructionist philosophizing “between” China and the Occident.⁷ Like Mall, Jullien is by no means willing to sacrifice the (European) quest for (Europeanizing) “concepts”,⁸ when determining the peculiarities of ancient Chinese thought from without, from above,⁹ or even when attempting to make (European) philosophy “re-appropriate” Chinese thought.¹⁰ Thus while putting much more emphasis on cultural difference, Jullien ends up at quite similar results, somehow still adopting Eurocentric universalism as his vantage point. His reflections, too, get entangled in uncritical judgments and self-contradiction, besides yielding quite common insights on the cultural “Other” ancient China represents for him.¹¹

Contrasting with the above mentioned perspectives, Wimmer’s pronouncedly universalistic reflection on methods and rules of any philosophical debate between diverse cultural stances is concerned with philosophizing in the global age. Yet he has to deal with similar doubts. Wimmer’s guiding principle lies in the combination of a “generic concept of philosophy” with “transcultural hermeneutics”,¹² presupposing that any kind of philosophy has inevitably to rely on “universally used reason and logic”, in order to “ascertain insights” by “adequate expression” which should be “arguable in an intersubjective way”, regarding “definitions” and “general statements”.¹³ Despite being

⁷ François Jullien, *L'écart et l'entre, Leçon inaugurale de la Chaire sur l'altérité* (Paris: Galilée, 2012).

⁸ François Jullien, *Chemin faisant, connaître la Chine, relancer la philosophie* (Paris: Seuil, 2007), p. 62; *Un sage est sans idée ou l'autre de la philosophie* (Paris: Seuil, 1998), p. 70; *Du «temps». Eléments d'une philosophie du vivre* (Paris: Grasset, 2001), p. 37.

⁹ François Jullien, *Du «temps». Eléments d'une philosophie du vivre*, p. 131; François Jullien et Thierry Marchaisse, *Penser d'un dehors (la Chine). Entretiens d'Extrême-Occident* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), p. 418.

¹⁰ Jullien, *Un sage est sans idée ou l'autre de la philosophie*, p. 76.

¹¹ A more detailed evaluation and critique of Jullien’s transcultural research in general and his contributions to aesthetics in particular is given in: Mathias Obert, „Buchnotiz: François Jullien: Umweg und Zugang. Strategien des Sinns in China und Griechenland. Wien 2000,“ *Philosophische Rundschau* 49.1 (2002): 65-72; Song Hao 宋灝 (Mathias Obert), “Dangdai siwei bushu yu shuhua lilun shang de dongshi 當代思維部署與書畫理論上的動勢,” *Newsletter of the Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy, Academia Sinica* 25.1 (2015): 91-112.

¹² Franz Martin Wimmer, *Essays on Intercultural Philosophy* (Chennai: Satya Nilayam Publications, 2002), p. 66.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

concerned with the “dilemma of culturality”,¹⁴ and precluding any sort of “centrism” by advocating a “polylogue” between different cultures,¹⁵ Wimmer still devotes himself to retrieving a “set of common ideas”.¹⁶

Wimmer’s whole enterprise, quite ironically, remains Eurocentric, by the method exhibited. This inter- or cross-cultural “polylogue” all too naturally presupposes a clearly defined concept of philosophy as rational discourse, based on elements such as “cognitive insight”, “conviction”, “position”, “statement”, and “argument”, ruling throughout any encounter with the “other” —be it a historical or rather a present-day counterpart. From the very outset, these strong assumptions do not allow for different *ways* of and *motivations* for thinking, precluding various kinds of philosophy such as investigation into the life-world, expression of the human experience of sense and meaning, or self-cultivation.

If any kind of cross-cultural “spacing” or intercultural “polylogue” is meant to be a sort of plurifocal exchange of experiences, ideas, and values, doesn’t this imply, from the very beginning, that there is kind of a fundamental, albeit hidden, *responsiveness*, running through such attempts? Someone, coming up with a philosophical “request”, challenges a “response” from his or her “other”. Is not “the non-European philosopher” —if this kind of generalization is meaningful at all—just that “other” who has shown up during colonial history, at the gates of European philosophy, appealing to a “common philosophizing”? Or is, quite to the contrary, the European philosopher this omnipresent “other” who constantly stirs all others, as to make them join in the “common” philosophical project? Any transcultural philosophizing evidently is rooted in a *situation of corresponsive encounter in place and time*, being pervaded by “external” conditions of thinking, such as *occasions* for meeting the “other”, *power structures*, *political motivations*—whether it is mutual knowing or ignoring each other which prevails.¹⁷

For instance, any philosophical encounter with “China” should specify its motivations and goals, whether it takes contemporary philosophy speaking and writing Chinese as its target, whether it intends to dialogue “with” Confucius and so-called Confucianism, or whether it aims at re-interpreting and re-evaluating ancient Chinese texts from the perspective of a modern philosophical engagement. Although such methodological distinctions and critical self-reflections, regarding the stance of philosophizing together with the “other” seem decisive for any serious transcultural reflection, they are not to be found in the writings of intercultural philosophers. Of course, such clarifications eventually might appear as counter-productive, from the perspective of those intercultural philosophers, as such specifications necessarily would impede attempts at generalization and universalization, so precious to modern

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 56.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 56-61.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 55.

¹⁷ Jullien, *Chemin faisant, connaître la Chine, relancer la philosophie*, pp. 85-87.

science.

Furthermore, the whole sphere of *linguistic expression* and *hermeneutics* is dismissed in a systematic way, especially by Mall, Kimmerle and Wimmer. However, isn't the difference of languages and written traditions precisely the primary difficulty "intercultural" thinking is facing, and is supposed to deal with in a productive manner? The actual implementation of reflection and debate "in-between" diverse parties implies that *cultural resources* and *preferences*, as well as *linguistic patterns* and *practices of thinking*, have a serious impact on transcultural thinking. This inevitable *conditioning of form and content* makes any discussion of "purely philosophical problems", promoted or monitored by just one side—contemporary European philosophy and science, as it were—and performing within *one single linguistic and conceptual framework*, look simplistic and naïve.

Actually, the problem of *translation* should be a big issue. This also refers to difficulties and potentials that the *Chinese language* may pose to any transcultural thought, all the more so when this thought happens to be spoken or written in Chinese, as it is in Taiwan or China. Here I shall focus on the philosophical relevance of the *Chinese script* only, as I am convinced that this script is at the core of transcultural reflection and critique taking place between European and Chinese-speaking thought today.¹⁸ Written sources evidently form the basis of any serious philosophical debate. Even if Chinese-speaking philosophers today sometimes may use English as a communicative tool, they still take advantage of a depth of textual evidence which generally remains invisible to their "international" counterparts, the latter not even taking notice of this twofold dimension inherent in the English expression of their Chinese-speaking partners. In most cases, allegedly "international" English used at conferences is but the visible surface of philosophy, by far not representing the *totality of thought* and its *actual resources*.

Particularly challenging are certain features of the Chinese way of writing, deeply influencing on *how we think in Chinese*, up to the present. The millennial Chinese writing practice should not merely be understood as a communicative tool; it represents a historically determined *territory*, as well as an encompassing *orientation, of thought*, i.e. what Martin Heidegger used to call "fundamental decision of thinking" (*Grundentscheidung des Denkens*). To me the continuing use of the Chinese script appears to be a crucial issue, in order to elucidate the place of contemporary Chinese-speaking philosophy, its peculiar conditioning, and its possible contributions to contemporary philosophizing in general.

¹⁸ By expressions such as "Chinese-speaking thought" or "Chinese-speaking philosophy" I intend to designate the totality of philosophical ventures going on within a Chinese language environment, and in an essential way taking advantage of features of written as well as spoken Chinese, which also encompasses all historical materials of philosophy written in Chinese.

II. The transcultural situation of contemporary Chinese-speaking philosophy

Although any genuine “Chinese philosophy” seems to belong to the past, philosophizing in the Chinese language vigorously goes on, within as well as outside the People’s Republic of China. During the past century, this new “Chinese philosophy” has developed a considerable diversity, drawing from European philosophical traditions and Anglo-American methods of logical investigation, as well as doing research on pre-modern thought in China, or pursuing transcultural self-reflection. These orientations all share a distinct feature with their life-world, viz. transculturality. Plenty of modern philosophers, while speaking and writing Chinese, also deal with texts and scientific contexts in other languages, such as Japanese or European languages, at the same time. Some of them even publish in languages other than Chinese, still intimately being related to the Chinese culture and its historical depth, or even primarily referring to research materials written in Chinese, while simultaneously using Euro-American sources. Besides this very modern situation of interweaving divergent resources and contexts of philosophizing, even genuine European and Anglo-American philosophy, as soon as they get transplanted into a Chinese-speaking environment, turn into modes of philosophizing which, by principle, are *transculturally constituted*, as there are *different strata of linguistic and philosophical tradition* simultaneously running through all of them. Each of these dispositions of modern thought—not just the “traditionalist branch”, concerned with so-called Chinese philosophy proper—is pervaded, to a certain extent, by widely differing sources of inspiration, and all of them have a debt to premodern Chinese thinking, as soon as they begin to *speak and write Chinese*.

By the intermediary of the ancient writing system, any contemporary philosophizing in Chinese remains intimately related to a huge bulk of literary materials pertaining to the so-called Chinese tradition. Yet these textual resources of contemporary thought are vastly inaccessible to, as well as ignored by, the great majority of non-Chinese philosophers, all around the globe. Contemporary Chinese-speaking philosophy not only inherits but even, to an easily underestimated extent, continues to procreate from this particular *ambiance of thinking*, the main reason for this *geo-philosophical continuity within diversity* lying in the uninterrupted use of the Chinese language and writing practice.

Because of its structural constitution, any contemporary thought using Chinese *simultaneously* draws from an ancient textual canon, as well as from present day translations of and commentaries on European or Anglo-American philosophy. There is a sort of *irritation*, a vigorous “*alienness*”, profoundly pervading Chinese-speaking philosophy which cannot but constantly mutate *together with her language*.¹⁹ However,

¹⁹ Martin Heidegger has pointed to this linguistic dimension of any philosophical engagement: “As a result of an ongoing change within our existence, we are compelled to find another language.”

contrary to traditional European languages of philosophy, current philosophical Chinese undergoes change, together with thought, depending on a *profoundly transcultural structure*.²⁰ This also means that philosophy *writing* Chinese, consciously or inadvertently, keeps taking advantage of particular features of its script.

Jacques Derrida advocated a “change of territory” (*changer de terrain*), “speaking more than one language and producing more than one text at a time” (*parler plusieurs langues et produire plusieurs textes à la fois*). That is exactly what is going on within contemporary Chinese-speaking philosophy, by its “simply practicing language” (*la simple pratique de la langue*).²¹ When philosophizing goes on in Chinese today, whether spoken or written, this thought inevitably works on different linguistic levels at the same time, much like subtitled movies. A modern philosophical statement in Chinese cannot but *simultaneously* employ “autochthone” Chinese expressions, already incorporated “neologisms”, as well as markedly “translated” terms. A modern Chinese thinker knows and has to know and constantly use foreign languages—even when limiting expression to Chinese.

Speaking and writing Chinese, today, is intrinsically constituted in a transcultural way, at any moment combining ancient and new modes of expression with inspiration taken from European linguistic sources. Although modern philosophical Chinese is still in the making, it constantly refers to a plurality of sources, simultaneously relying on diverse strata of historical textual materials, stemming from the Chinese as well as the European tradition, and it is able to take advantage of a large choice of ways of linguistic expression, an unequalled wealth of Chinese vocabulary. Contrary to a stereotype even shared by Chinese-speaking philosophers themselves, Chinese tradition actually delivers peculiar possibilities of philosophical precision, more than two thousand years of philosophical work being treasured within the language and the script. The main task of contemporary Chinese-speaking philosophy consists in giving more or less creative responses to European thought and European languages, in a new and rapidly mutating Chinese idiom of philosophy. As a result, sort of a “shift of sense bestowal” is not only made possible by but even enforced on this contemporary philosophizing.

To be more precise: this change is what occurs together with that other language.” (my own translation from Martin Heidegger, *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik. Welt – Endlichkeit – Einsamkeit* [Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 1983], S. 298: „...Wir sind zu einer anderen Sprache gezwungen aufgrund einer Verwandlung der Existenz. Genauer, dieser Wandel geschieht mit dieser anderen Sprache.“).

²⁰ Such a radically transcultural shift already happened once when Buddhist thought was transplanted into and challenged by the linguistic environment of the Chinese language and script. To a minor extent, the transposition of Greek philosophy into Latin terms, as well as in the transformation of scholastic philosophy into German-speaking idealism, may be considered similar events.

²¹ Jacques Derrida, *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Minuit, 1972), pp. 162-163.

Chinese-speaking philosophy is not to be confounded with contemporary philosophy, as led by the so-called Western world, just speaking and writing Chinese, in addition. Chinese-speaking philosophy does not just coincide with contemporary thought, originally operating in a European language and then getting translated into Chinese, i.e. with a mode of thinking that only on a secondary level gets transposed into a Chinese language environment. Chinese-speaking philosophy should be understood as an original mode of thinking which takes full advantage of features of a Chinese linguistic environment with its peculiar cultural background and its peculiar textual resources. The Chinese language makes up, so to speak, for some of the major characteristics of this Chinese-speaking philosophy. Yet, on the other hand, the latter may not be regarded as a mere offspring of ancient Chinese philosophy either. While still belonging to a markedly non-European life-world, while still owing much to an immense amount of non-European thought and textual material, too, Chinese-speaking philosophy has already become an integral part of global contemporary philosophy, no longer representing that simple outsider—the “other”—European philosophers still keep talking about. The *transcultural adventure of contemporary thought in a Chinese-speaking environment* has to be considered as an important contribution to modernity. However, at the core of this amazing work of transformation stands the—mostly overlooked—intimate relation any Chinese-speaking philosophy has with its ancient script.

III. Scriptural iconicity revisited

With respect to the situation of today’s Chinese-speaking philosophy, in this paper I shall, from a phenomenological stance, try to elucidate some important philosophical features of the Chinese writing system, starting with a few critical remarks, regarding current linguistic theories about this script. Since the Jesuit mission began in the late sixteenth century, the peculiar nature and theoretical status of the Chinese script has been subject to much speculation among European philosophers, later on becoming an important topic in linguistics and Western sinology, developing during the nineteenth century. Today consensus has been reached that Chinese characters represent a phonetic writing system, somehow analogous to the Japanese syllabic script. Western as well as Eastern linguists tend to interpret this script in accordance with the basic Aristotelian conception of graphic signs denoting and fixing spoken utterances.

In harsh opposition to the clearly mistaken belief that Chinese characters yield sort of a *symbolic* depiction of things or ideas, being “pictographs” or “ideographs”,²² the most representative scientific claim goes that they should rather be understood as “logographs”:²³ each single graph stands for a particular *word* of the spoken language,

²² Bernhard Karlgren, *Sound and Symbol in Chinese* (London: Oxford University Press, 1923).

²³ William Boltz, *The Origin and Early Development of the Chinese Writing System* (New Haven:

each scriptural sign roughly representing a distinguishable combination of *sounds* replete with meaning,²⁴ the writing system having developed along phonematic patterns and phonological laws, since early antiquity.²⁵ Besides, character simplification in the People's Republic at least in part appears as a radical practical application of this Western theoretical reductionism.

Unfortunately, this scientific view ruling outside as well as within China, has led to totally neglecting the rich iconic, aesthetic and bodily dimensions of Chinese characters, to be clarified by phenomenological investigation. What I want to propose here is by no means related to ancient pictography with all the corresponding paleographic discussions.²⁶ Instead, I aim at a *critical revision* of our present-day understanding and use of the Chinese script. I intend to deal with the *iconicity* of Chinese characters, taking them as *objects of perception and intuition endowing meaning*. For this purpose, I shall refer to the “written word” (*wénzì* 文字 or *zì* 字) as the basic unit. For in Chinese, besides words of speech representing the basic semantic units, there is a second level of *language expression*, to be distinguished, though functioning as an *integral and necessary* part of any enunciation, i.e. the written “graph-word”. At any time, the written dimension underpins Chinese speech in its more complex forms, and the totality of word-like graphs or “graph-words” *cannot* be reduced to mere visual representation of utterances, i.e. to “graphic signs”. A written *zì* 字 or “graph-word”, due to its iconic dimension, reaches beyond notation, vigorously *radiating into and operating within* the spoken language.

I do not subscribe to pictography, but I would strongly maintain that, quite different from any merely phonetic script, a graph-word, taken as an object of visual perception, *ineluctably* unfolds peculiar pictorial values and forces. My claim is that graph-words should be considered as structurally complex visual icons, or even like gestures, embodying a plurality of *expressive and affective qualities*. According to Bernhard Waldenfels' terminology, the graph-word constitutes an “instigative picture” (*Erregungsbild*)²⁷ and an “embodied affect” (*inkarnierter Affekt*).²⁸ I argue that like any

Eisenbrauns, 1994), pp. 4, 6, 177.

²⁴ Peter A. Boodberg, “Some Proleptical Remarks on the Evolution of Archaic Chinese,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 2.3/4 (1937): 329-372; “‘Ideography’ or Iconolatry?” *T'oung Pao* 35.4 (1940): 266-288; Ulrich Unger, *Kleine Schriften*, hg. von Hans Stumpfeldt/Martin Hanke (Gossenberg: Ostasien Verlag, 2009), S. 31-52.

²⁵ Bernhard Karlgren, *Grammata Serica Recensa* (Stockholm: The Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, 1957), pp. 90-125.

²⁶ In this respect, my approach also differs from Tze-wan Kwan's research as discussed in Tze-wan Kwan 關子尹, “Abstract Concept Formation in Archaic Chinese Script Forms: Some Humboldtian Perspectives,” *Philosophy East and West* 61.3 (2011): 409-452.

²⁷ Bernhard Waldenfels, *Sinne und Künste im Wechselspiel. Modi ästhetischer Erfahrung* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2010), S. 122.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, S. 70.

picture, yet unlike what graphic signs of purely phonetic writing systems presumably do, a graph-word cannot but, on the level of *perceptive affection*, release an abundant cluster of imaginative, emotive, and even bodily, affections upon the reader.

IV. Scriptural association and imagination

Script development has been ruled by phonematic principles from antiquity on. Nevertheless a vast majority out of about 50,000 graph-words still directly appeal, by their formal elements, to *iconic imagination*, inducing the reader to instantly associate other graph-words, images, and emotions, when perceiving a particular graph-word. For instance, it will be impossible for any Chinese thinker not to associate the line patterns in a piece of jade, with the philosophical notion of “principle” *lǐ* 理, *imperatively* perceiving the jade-component *yù* 玉 (abbreviated to 王). Although this observation, at first sight, may seem somewhat exaggerated, yet, as a matter of fact, every time when reading or imagining the idea of “principle”, i.e. *lǐ* 理, a Chinese thinker *necessarily* has to perform, in his or her mind, a clear-cut distinction between the character *lǐ* 理 and a couple of homophonous graph-words, such as *lǐ* 里, “village”, *lǐ* 裡, “inside”, or even *lǐ* 禮, “the rites”, etc. This disambiguation of meaning relies mainly on the jade-component in the written form of the term “principle”. This argument may seem as inconspicuous as the jade-component *yù* 玉 (or 王) itself; it is sufficient, however, in order to prove, at least *ex negativo*, to what extent—even in the current use of tiny imprinted graph-words—linguistic differentiation of meaning ineluctably is linked to iconic disambiguation. Of course, this linguistic conditioning of any Chinese-speaking philosophy does not pretend to make any statement concerning the actual weight particular character components may or may not be given in the use which is made of a certain philosophical idea. This argument only refers to a *possible* association of meaning, as unavoidably put into effect by the *iconic* peculiarities of the Chinese script.

Likewise Aristotle could not but conceive of a “principle”, *archē*, as “domination”. Any Latin thinker necessarily associated with *principium* the “prince”, i.e. *princeps* or *primum caput*, the “leading one” or “first head”. Yet a Chinese philosopher does not rely on etymology. Instead, there are associative lines, *visibly* running through any written text, due to the iconic structure of the script figures. When the philosophical notion of “order” is perceptively associated with the disorderly grain of “jade”, it has to be emphasized that it does not make any difference whether such iconic associations sustain the conceptual contents of the graph-word or whether they rather seem to disturb or misguide proper understanding. Yet imagination is involved in speaking and thinking Chinese, *at any time*, as there is an *associative power* embodied by almost every written figure. My point is that *visual* induction functions more or less *independently from*, or even *prior to*, semantic analysis by reading. That the *perceptible shape* of a graph-word leads to imaginative association, by and large is being neglected or thoroughly denied by linguistics, submitting to Western predilection for phonetic

writing.

Strong emphasis put on perceptive qualities by the Chinese script is a general condition of this kind of associative induction of meaning. Any interfering with the shape of a graph-word will inevitably exert an influence on semantics. Distinct meanings sometimes get differentiated only by very little iconic differentiation, training the Chinese reader in intuitive awareness and pictorial imagination. This may be shown by the following observations. For instance, “to see” 見 (*jiàn*) is to be separated intuitively from the “cowry-shell” 貝 (*bei*) by just one small hook, which is also the case for “authentic” 真 (*zhēn*) and “chaste” 貞 (*zhēn*), the “hare” 兔 (*tù*) and “to avoid” 免 (*miǎn*), as well as the *iconic series* 戒戎戎戎戎. The astounding similarity in shape of these totally distinct graph-words demands considerable *perceptive effort*, while reading, in order to accurately grasp these meanings: “to warn” (*jiè* 戒), “weapons” (*róng* 戎), “the second last of the twelve earthly branches” (*xū* 戌), “border garrison” (*shù* 戍), “the fifth of the ten heavenly stems” (*wù* 戊). What about “stomach” (*wèi* 胃), “descendants” (*zhòu* 冑), or “helmet” (*zhòu* 冑)? English “to meet” and “meat”, or French “sans” and “sang”, seem to represent similar difficulties. Yet the challenge for intuition much more prevails throughout the Chinese writing system, necessitating a keenly developed and precise perception of minute clues. Besides, this peculiar feature will also most naturally train the Chinese reader’s intuitive capacities.

Furthermore, when there exist variations in the writing of the same graph-word—so-called “differently embodied graph-words” (*yì tǐ zì* 異體字, *bié tǐ zì* 別體字)—an expert writer will decide which way to write with respect to the *iconic properties* of shape. “Inside” written as 裏 (*lǐ*) displays the meaning in a concrete way: the denominative element “garment” 衣 (*yī*) appears to intuition as split vertically between the top 亠 and a bottom part, embracing the phonetic element 里 (*lǐ*), just like a garment encloses an inner layer of lining, whereas putting the two graph elements side by side, writing 裡 (*lǐ*) instead, just will not directly suggest the meaning “inside”, on the level of iconic perception. In “standard script” (*kǎi shū* 楷書), 書 (*shū*), a “piece of writing”, clearly exhibits the two elements “brush” 聿 (*yù*) and “enunciation” 日 (*yūe*), whereas the more cursive variant in the “grass script” (*cǎo shū* 草書) resembles its modern simplified counterpart 书, obviously unfolding a much weaker intuitive indication of meaning.

Many of the simplified characters, nowadays used in the People’s Republic of China, systematically *deceive semantic intuition*, by way of *distorted graph perception*. In China—like in Japan, but not in Taiwan and Hong Kong—a “body” 體 (*tǐ*), now written 体, has not only lost its phonematic component 豊 (*lǐ*), roughly indicating pronunciation, but also its “bones” 骨 (*gǔ*). This abbreviated graph-word, combining “man” 亻 or 人 (*rén*) with the “stem” 本 (*běn*) of a tree, still may make sense, as this “body” apparently belongs to mankind and grows in an organic way, yet sacrificing the ancient universality of the philosophical notion of a “body”, as well as the customary implication of solidity. Wherever script simplification, due to an ideologically misled scientism, has dismissed the traditional rule of *simplification in accordance with the*

writing gesture, there have occurred quite unfortunate flaws. In oblivion of the iconic values of a graph-word, what might be termed a modern version of the ancient “loan writing” (*jiǎ jiè* 假借), often confounds two originally distinguished homophones, e.g. now writing both “cereals” 穀 (*gǔ*) and “valley” 谷 (*gǔ*) as 谷, which has inadvertently led to creating the confusing neologism “valley/ cereal”. The simplified “clouds” 云 (*yún*), wisely written 雲 in the origin, have lost their capacity of dropping “rain” 雨 (*yǔ*). Most grotesque are the “noodles”, originally written 麵 (*miàn*), with the radical “wheat” 麥 (*mai*); now “noodles” are eaten under the homophonous title 面 (*miàn*), indicating a human “face”. As a result of this “simplification” furor, a sentence like “his face reminds me of noodles” has become tautological and vague in meaning, either reading “his face reminds me of a face” or “his noodles remind me of noodles”.

The most important feature linguists have not deemed worth noticing is the suggestive power inherent in most of the so-called “radicals” (*bùshǒu* 部首), like the plain “sun” 日 (*rì*), the semi-adumbrated “moon” 月 (*yuè*), the erect “mountain” 山 (*shān*), the “tree” with its branches 木 (*mù*), the opened “mouth” 口 (*kǒu*), the “human” on two feet 人 (*rén*), the “female” with a broadened waist 女 (*nǚ*) etc. These iconic elements strike the reader’s eye at the very first sight, *intuitively pre-structuring* reading expectation as to meaning. However this obvious feature concerns the vast majority of commonly used graph-words, thus representing a major challenge to linguistics’ fixation on phonematics.

The iconic configuration of the graph-word 板 (*bǎn*) at first glance makes us expect this “board” to be made of “wood” 木. “Eating” 吃 (*chī*) evidently is done by, “taste” 味 (*wèi*) going through, the “mouth” 口. A “dowry” 妝 (*zhuāng*) intuitively pertains to the “female” 女 sphere. What is “clean and pure” 清淨 (*qīng jìng*), instantaneously evokes the image of “water” 氵 or 水 (*shuǐ*). As is equally the case with about 1800 other graph-words being written with the same determinative, these drops of water 氵 will at once strike the reader’s associative imagination with a bunch of sensory or even sensual experiences, related to the wet element. Even before deciphering semantics, the reader is already intuiting something liquid, due to iconic associations evoked by the water-radical. Prior to linguistic hermeneutics proper, the visual shape of the graph-word will already have *intuitively suggested* the transparency of water, refreshing moist, felt on the skin, the smell of a lake, sensed by the tongue, or the audible splashing of a fountain. When looking at 漂 (*piāo*), we instantaneously perceive something “floating” on water, because of the radical “water” 氵 or 水 (*shuǐ*), while its homophonous variant 飄 (*piāo*) evokes the image of something “floating” in the “wind” 風 (*fēng*).²⁹ Whereas these two *distinct graph-words*, for the linguist,

²⁹ As to these and the other examples, I have consulted the respective items in: Li Fuzhen 李福臻, ed., *Zhongwen da cidian* 中文大辭典. 10 vols. (Taipei: The Press of Chinese Culture University, 1985); Luo Zhufeng 羅竹風, ed., *Hanyu da cidian* 漢語大詞典. 12 vols. (Shanghai: Hanyu da cidian chubanshe, 1993); Xu Shen 許慎, *Shuo wen jie zi* 說文解字 (Taipei: Yiwen, 1998); Wang Li 王力, *Tongyuan zidian* 同源字典 (Beijing: Shangwu, 2002); Ulrich Unger, *Glossar des*

represent the same phonematic elements, as well as the same signification, they actually qualify, by means of *iconic differentiation*, two distinct instances of “floating”. The Chinese language element *piāo* for “to float” reaches sufficient semantic accuracy *only* in its written form.

Semantic differentiation is guided by the *written shape*. Yet before semantic analysis commences, there are already *bodily felt premonitions*, emerging from the reader’s intuitive association. Such “sensations” *perform* language signification, during the reading process. The deciphering of meaning is not only mediated by visual perception; perceptive values directly *orient* and *enhance* textual sense constitution. A significant “surplus of iconicity” constantly infringes on the linguistic ideal of denotation of speech by “signs”, yet by no means being futile or disturbing the orderly functioning of the script, as linguists seem to suppose.³⁰ From this perspective, it is not astonishing that certain semantic intentions, by literary and poetic tradition, favor or even call for the use of certain graphic patterns, instead of other ones. The rule for customary choice most obviously derives from the iconic purport of the graph-word. When “sand” gets written with the water-radical 氵 as 沙 (*shā*), this indicates its location on a riverbank, whereas written with the stone-radical 石 as 砂 (*shā*), it is the material composition of sand which is emphasized. As plenty of examples may illustrate in detail, in a Chinese language environment it is neither phonetics, etymology nor any other practical reason which guide “orthography”, but rather *an accurate understanding of the iconic properties of the written word*, together with the corresponding *pictorial associations*.

Finally, the manner in which the Japanese application of the Chinese script takes advantage of its iconic and associative propensities yields further argument to these observations. In the Japanese writing practice common use is made both of a phonetic syllabic script, viz. *hiragana* (ひらがな, 平仮名) or *katakana* (片仮名, カタカナ), as well as of iconically much richer Chinese graph-words, in a parallel and permeable way, within one and the same text. A “thing” or a “being”, *mono*, may be rendered by the phonetic もの, as well as by the Chinese graph-word 物 (*wù*), pronounced *mono*. Yet when designating “persons” instead of “things”, the Chinese graph-word 者 (*zhě*) usually is preferred to 物 (*wù*), yet pronounced *mono*. The reason is that the graph-word 物 contains the denominative radical 牛 or 牜 for “cattle”, pronounced *niú* in Chinese, *gyū* or *ushi* (うし) in Japanese. This iconic component obviously inhibits the graph-word 物 from being applied to human beings.

The novelist Natsume Sōseki 夏目漱石, among others, plays with another similar feature: the expression あなた (*anata*) for “you” may be represented by different Chinese graph-words. According to what semantic associations are intended in a given situation of speech, hints are given through iconic patterns. When someone is addressed in the second person, the writer takes advantage of various versions of

klassischen Chinesisch (Wiesbaden: Harassowitz, 1989).

³⁰ Boltz, *The Origin and Early Development of the Chinese Writing System*, pp. 13, 168-172.

writing *anata*, so as to indicate different hierarchical relations between the speaker and the addressee. Due to iconic clarification, not by spelling, the reader intuitively grasps the formal distance in “you over there” (彼方), estimation in “you, the one on the respectable side” (貴方), gender in “you, respectable lady” (貴女), or marital tenderness of a wife in “you, my respectable spouse” (貴夫).

All these examples show how associations evoked by the graph-shape may determine the suitable—disambiguating—writing of this ambivalent semantic unit. By the very common, stupendously creative, use of different Chinese graph-words for the same Japanese idiom, a significant differentiation and an important *gain in semantic succinctness* is attained, on the level of intuition of the written word. As a matter of fact, intuition and pictorial imagination contribute in a decisive way to sense-making within a Japanese language environment. This iconic “depth” of each Chinese graph-word and of the scriptural system as a whole cannot but appear strange to someone who is solely trained in using an *iconically flat and obtuse* alphabet.

V. Gesture, affection, and bodily thinking

The iconic propensities of the Chinese script reach yet beyond an enhancement of the linguistic signifying function by intuitive specification. The graph-word’s iconicity encompasses what Edmund Husserl analyzed under the titles “kinesthetic motivation”³¹ or “affection” (Affektion, Anmutung, affektive Kraft).³² The graph-word *affects* and *moves* the reader; during perception its expressive figure actually exerts an *urge* on the reader, so as to synthesize and establish linguistic sense. Yet this inductive power embraces psychic affectivity and intellectual understanding, as well as impulses related to body motion, due to the complex writing procedures in Chinese. When the visual shapes of graph-words affect imagination, emotion, and bodily behavior, semantic understanding cannot but unfold as sort of a “response” to this affection, to be performed by the reader. In fact, a graph-word resembles much more Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s “operative language” (langage opérant)³³ than the “signs” semiotics is so obsessed with. As human language behavior is rooted in the existential relationship established between the bodily self and the world, language does not consist in a system of rules and patterns of expression, it originates in “gestural signification”

³¹ Edmund Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie. Zweites Buch: Phänomenologische Untersuchungen zur Konstitution*, hg. von Marly Biemel (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1952), S. 220-228; *Analysen zur passiven Synthesis. Aus Vorlesungs- und Forschungsmanuskripten, 1918-1926* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966), S. 13.

³² Husserl, *Analysen zur passiven Synthesis. Aus Vorlesungs- und Forschungsmanuskripten, 1918-1926*, S. 50, 148-149, 170.

³³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l’invisible* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p. 201.

(signification gestuelle).³⁴ According to Merleau-Ponty, a language unit endowed with sense may be understood as a “verbal image” (image verbale), structured by “a certain bodily attitude, a specific mode of dynamic tension” (une certaine attitude corporelle, un mode spécifique de tension dynamique), uniting several sense perceptions, such as hearing and looking, into one integrative whole.³⁵ Using language means constantly creating “images” which are replete with bodily experiences—a point of view which matches fairly well with associative imagination unfolded by the Chinese graph-word. As a consequence, Merleau-Ponty estimates that understanding language utterances is essentially mediated by body movement. Learning an unknown word, for instance, refers primarily to a “modulation of my body as a being in-and-towards the world” (modulation de mon corps comme être au monde).³⁶ In other words, according to Merleau-Ponty, remembering a word does not primarily mean that we remember sound and meaning of a linguistic sign; it rather should be understood as sort of a reactivation of states of our body, as well as of bodily activities, which have been or usually may be engaged in the broader life context the word in question is related to. With respect to Chinese characters, his argument seems to gain further evidence. Amidst the jungle of homophony the Chinese language represents for the listener, we *cannot but* more or less accurately evoke the *written* form of a graph-word we hear, in order to appropriately distinguish its meaning from other words and other meanings. This means that the body-like gestural purport the figure of any graph-word encompasses, obviously yields distinctive hints for the formation of linguistic meaning, in a most general way, in the case of *spoken* Chinese. Thus linguistic signification here clearly is intimately connected to our bodily behavior.

Due to its associative, affective and even gestural dimension, the Chinese script represents a very particular writing practice, to be best understood from the perspective of writing and reading as modulating the human relation to the world in a rather encompassing manner. Being incorporated in the scriptural nucleus of the Chinese language, the associative, expressive, affective, and gestural, values of the graph-word perform in significant ways on the totality of language behavior, instead of representing a mere fixation of spoken utterances. The main characteristics of this peculiar iconicity may be summarized as follows:

First, a graph-word marks a significant *gap* between phonematics and semantics. It has to actually be looked at, in order to disclose its meaning. Its signifying function entails intuitive “surplus” information which cannot be embraced by oral enunciation, this strong *iconic deflection of sense* most frequently being produced by radicals.

Second, a graph-word is a meaningful visual totality similar to an organic *gestalt*, its perceptual qualities being visibly structured in a complex and regulated way,

³⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), p. 209.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 272-273.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 461.

by the rules of writing.

Third, any graph-word exerts an affective impulse, inducing an emotional response on the part of the reader, yet *before* linguistic meaning as such gets disclosed. Reading Chinese is not solely a matter of hermeneutics and thinking, as perception of a graph-word involves *expressive affectivity* and *dynamic body postures*. It actually does make a difference for *semantic deciphering* how the graph-word “big” 大 (*dà*) is written, whether with thick, heavy strokes, or with thin lines, whether with the legs wide open, closely shut, or lopsided. Whereas a Roman series of letters forming “big” may as well be written in cursive as in bold print, without exerting significant influence on its impressing the reader with a series of sounds replete with meaning, “bigness” itself will appear more or less heavy and substantial, depending on the iconic values of the visible *gestalt* 大. Italicizing graph-words—often to be observed under Western influence—is just aesthetically not convincing.

Fourth, as composition and structure of any graph-word refer to a thoroughly regulated writing process, its shape is pervaded by a concise *temporal order*. For this reason, the written expression arouses all kinds of “kinetic echo” (*écho moteur*),³⁷ inducing the reader to “re-write” the perceived figure through *temporal succession*, while or even prior to disclosure of its sense. The *gestalt* of a graph-word, actually yielding dynamic patterns, is to be adequately understood as “*gestalt of movement*” (*shi* 勢) only. Any fixation of such an intrinsically dynamic icon on the status of a static figure is, by principle, not sufficient for grasping its peculiar perceptual qualities.

Fifth, a millennial practice of writing with the ink brush, combining an unrivaled elasticity with an extremely rich sensitivity in responding to bodily impulses, has left plenty of traces referring to bodily gestures of expression, in the graph shapes. These intuitively comprehended gestural traces directly evoke those writing experiences which have been accumulated in the reader’s own body, during a life-long writing exercise, all the more so as up to recently almost everybody used to methodically practice the so-called “regulation of writing” (*shūfǎ* 書法), i.e. the “art of writing”.³⁸

Due to its intimate relation with an actual writing practice, the “*gestalt of movement*” any graph-word represents, by means of its very visible aspects, indicates an *embodied style of movement*, manifesting manifold “dynamic patterns of the brush” (*bǐshì* 筆勢), such as exertion and release of force, execution of crooks and twists of the brush, as well as writing rhythm and tempo. As these visible qualities intimately rely on *moving patterns of the body*, they *imperatively* engage the reader’s body during reading progression, implying an aesthetic and stylistic commitment, too. Besides, it has to be emphasized that this extreme bodily dynamics is still effective, albeit only to

³⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l’invisible*, p. 190.

³⁸ Jean François Billeter has paid particular attention to essential correspondences between brush writing and our body: Jean François Billeter, *L’art chinois de l’écriture. Essai sur la calligraphie* (Genève: Skira, 1989).

a minimal extent, even in nowadays printing styles.

As a graph-word embodies temporal order, as well as dynamics of body motion, by its figurative structure, this dynamical propensity cannot but determine, at least to some extent, the enactment of linguistic signification through reading: the reader inevitably gets exposed to a more or less strong *motivational, kinesthetic impulse*. This kind of motivating “affection”, taken in a Husserlian sense, not only inspires associative imagination, it also directly instigates sensitivity and body motility, yet by no means being restricted to just that semantic purport a given graph-word is meant to accomplish in a given context.

Due to its iconic particularities, facing a graph-word resembles an encounter with the living other. It has to be perceived and experienced like the articulation of inner feelings and sense,³⁹ strongly *motivating* perception to endow the iconic figure with sense.⁴⁰ It cannot be denied that there is in fact “a tendency approaching the Ego the counter-effect of which is a responding activity of the Ego”,⁴¹ set free by a graph-word’s iconic shape and suggestively inducing sense bestowal, on the part of the reader. From the perspective of Husserl’s analysis of “associative synthesis” within the Ego,⁴² it is mainly due to its *iconic repleteness* that a graph-word exerts a “conscious stimulus” on vision, a certain “pull” (Zug), leading to attention and relaxation when the endowment with sense responds to it,⁴³ yet before textual hermeneutics proper has commenced. Husserlian “passive synthesis” is first brought about, so to speak, by the perceived *gestalt*, not by linguistic signification deciphered. This kind of associative synthesis, effectuated through perceptual motivation by the visible shape of a graph-word, eventually may even be considered as encompassing the whole world. For Husserl, too, this associative world horizon not the least consists in a shared cultural world⁴⁴—the very world which finds itself embodied by the eloquent articulation of the graph-word’s shape.

Last but not least, this peculiar iconic power of a graph-word implies that there is an intimate correspondence reigning between Chinese-speaking thought and the bodily self of the thinker. This thinking will imperatively get bound much closer to *states and sensations of the body*, as well as to *body motility*, than when using an alphabetic script. Even today, philosophizing in the Chinese language, to some extent, involves bodily layers of human existence, due to the manifold affecting values of a script primarily engendered by expressive gestures, and embedded in pictorial and affective horizons. Much like Friedrich Nietzsche might have wished, due to the

³⁹ Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie. Zweites Buch: Phänomenologische Untersuchungen zur Konstitution*, S. 234-241.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, S. 235.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, S. 50.

⁴² *Ibid.*, S. 76.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, S. 148-149.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, S. 216.

iconic plasticity of its script, already on the level of expression, philosophizing in the Chinese language, from the very beginning and throughout, exposes itself to the bodily existence of the one who philosophizes. Thought itself, more or less, seems to be able to spring off from imagination and emotion, as well as from urges and the temporality of body movement, as soon as it engages in the very structure of Chinese graph-words.⁴⁵

VI. Conclusion: Transcultural philosophizing and the Chinese script

Once more it must be emphasized that a Chinese graph-word, to be sure, is not an adequate pictorial or symbolic representation of things and ideas. However rejecting a theory of pictography in general should not lead us to thorough blindness for the *image-like complexity and motivational power*, implied by the iconic dimension of a Chinese graph-word. Compared with the alphabetic scripts European philosophy is centered on, writing and reading the Chinese script, as a matter of fact, engages thought in a rather different access to culturally “instituted” sense,⁴⁶ to use Merleau-Ponty’s expression, and it opens up a rather different “style of the world” (*style du monde*).⁴⁷

At present, within the Chinese-speaking scientific community, philosophical thinking does not merely rely on the ancient Chinese script as a medium of expression and fixation of the spoken word. There is a wealth of *associative* pictorial or rather iconic values brought into the center of philosophical thinking, by the peculiar *iconicity* making up the Chinese graph-words. Written Chinese thoroughly permeates the spoken word with its peculiar iconic structure, affecting pictorial association, emotion, and body motion, through the resonances its figures set forth in direct intuition. Thus any Chinese-speaking philosophizing will more or less get engaged in imagination, for the reason of the manifold iconic values involved by the script it uses. Also, thought will be *stimulated* and *prompted* by strong and meaningful *resonances*, arising from the layers of bodily behavior within the thinker’s being-towards-the-world, just by the bias of his moving around amidst, and taking advantage of, Chinese graph-words. For by their very structure, these graph-words are not only replete of figurative sense and aesthetic values, but, having incorporated a millenary tradition of ink brush writing, they are thoroughly constituted by patterns of movement, force and body impulses. This “kinetic-motivational” urge exerted by scriptural iconicity becomes effective as soon as philosophizing engages in a Chinese linguistic environment.

From a transcultural stance, it clearly comes to light through Chinese writing

⁴⁵ This transcultural perspective of an investigation into the peculiarities of the Chinese script from the stance of a phenomenology of the body is more thoroughly discussed in: Song Hao 宋灝 (Mathias Obert), “Huayu siwei yu wenzi dongshi 華語思維與文字動勢,” *Chinese Studies* 33.2 (2015): 103-132.

⁴⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l’invisible*, p. 199; *La prose du monde*, p. 170.

⁴⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p. 378; *La prose du monde*, pp. 82-86.

and reading experience, to what extent and with what consequences Eurocentric philosophy, up to the present day, has been neglecting the essential diversity of languages and scripts. The multiple iconic values of the Chinese graph-word appear as an occasion for substantially criticizing and overcoming Eurocentric limitations and blind spots. When contemporary Chinese-speaking thought contributes important textual evidence from more than two millennia of Chinese philosophy, this contribution does not merely regard philosophical contents; it also implies the profound experience of a fundamentally different writing practice. As soon as contemporary thinking happens to rely on the Chinese graph-word, this transcultural conditioning of philosophy alone may actually turn into instigation to revising ways and dimensions of thinking. The *transcultural place* whence Chinese-speaking thought actually reflects and speaks, may possibly help in transforming philosophy into a kind of “thinking through embodied existence”, just *for the reason of its particular script*. However, hasn’t such a transformation been sort of a serious goal for more than just one modern European philosopher, beginning with Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche, up to phenomenologists such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Bernhard Waldenfels, Hermann Schmitz, and others as well?

The script which is replete with associative, affective, motivational and bodily dimensions, manifesting themselves in its complex iconicity, undoubtedly represents the most striking feature of contemporary philosophizing in the Chinese language. The peculiar depth and intensity of this script cannot fail exerting a profound influence even on those philosophical orientations that nowadays are not primarily concerned with so-called ancient Chinese philosophy. Yet as far as transcultural hybridity and transcultural dynamics make up for the most important properties of current philosophy, all around the world, such a peculiar phenomenon as *script visibly embodying human existence and directly inducing bodily thinking through mere perception*, should be acknowledged as a major occasion for critically renewing philosophy.

This assumption may be founded on two major aspects. First, due to its fundamental continuity with the whole of ancient Chinese texts and experiences, Chinese-speaking thought today reveals an unequalled depth, diversity and wealth in history and philosophical elaboration. At the same time, however, it obviously holds itself at a considerable distance from the dominant Euro-American sphere of contemporary philosophizing, just by continuing to use the Chinese language. Thus its critical strength is rooted in a unique variety of philosophical vantage points, reflections, as well as concise linguistic work having been executed on this material of contemporary thought, from antiquity up to the present time. Second, due to the continuous use of the Chinese script with all its iconic peculiarities, as well as its amazing permeability for embodied experiences or references to our embodied existence, Chinese-speaking philosophy appears in a crucial way to be different from the intellectualistic main stream of early modern and contemporary philosophizing in European and American contexts.

For all these reasons contemporary Chinese-speaking thought should not

be considered as just another place of transcultural reflection. As long as there is a philosophical community consciously practicing the Chinese language in all its historical depth, *within* contemporary philosophy, this “other” modernity should particularly arouse philosophers’ interest in material imagination. It could even strengthen our awareness of bodily dimensions of human existence, to be comprehended by any serious effort at philosophical thinking.

The Transcultural Situation of Contemporary Chinese-speaking Thought and Its Relation to the Chinese Script

Mathias OBERT

The main purpose of this paper is to clarify the present situation of transcultural thinking, such as it presents itself from the stance of contemporary Chinese-speaking philosophizing. Common approaches to “interculturality” or “transculturality” tend to largely underestimate the primary role which has to be attributed to the diversity of languages and hermeneutic problems, and they all the more totally neglect the problem of writing. For this reason, this paper first analyzes the main streams, such cross-cultural philosophical endeavors have been pursuing so far, in a critical perspective. Then it tries to elucidate the particular iconicity of the Chinese script, the latter representing one major peculiarity of contemporary transcultural thinking in the Chinese language. In order to emphasize the philosophical potential inherent in the rich and complex iconic features of the Chinese writing system, this paper focuses on how linguistic sense is constituted by the bias of associative impulses directly set forth by the shapes of the written characters, during visual intuition. Furthermore, it analyzes how the very iconic shape of a written character encompasses certain impressive, suggestive and motivating values, making its deciphering result in sort of a living response, on the part of the reader, which is deeply rooted in bodily conditions and body movement. All these observations finally lead to the conclusion that contemporary Chinese-speaking thinking in all its transcultural hybridity and transcultural dynamics has got one very important philosophical resource to be taken advantage of: by use of the iconic Chinese script, this thinking actually relies on an intimate embodiment of thought by its written form, and this complex relation between philosophical discourse and philosophical writing is unequalled by any other transcultural philosophical disposition in the present.

Keywords: transcultural thought Chinese-speaking philosophy Chinese Script
iconicity body

當代華語思維的跨文化處境及其與中文文字體系的關係

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本文主要目標在於以當代華語思維為出發點，釐清當今跨文化思維所身處的情況。在「文化間性」、「跨文化性」等名義下被進行的反思通常大程度上忽略諸種語境之間的差異性及其所連帶的詮釋學問題，而且也完全忽視文字書寫這個課題。鑒此，在對現有的幾種跨文化思維的支流進行分析和批判之後，本文企圖解晰中文字獨有的「視像性」，進而從此觀察思考目前以華語被進行的跨文化思維的特殊處境。為了凸顯華語文字體系就其豐富且複雜的視像性特質而言固有的哲學潛力，本文聚焦在文字型態是如何藉由諸種聯想直接激發觀者對語意的掌握這個問題。於是，隱藏於文字視像中的身體、運動、觸發等因素獲得專注，以便讓我們將閱讀中文的過程理解為一種貫穿、牽連讀者一整個身體自我的「回應」。基於這些現象學分析，便可推出這樣的結論：應用華語及中文字的當代思維的大特點在於，哲學論述和哲學書寫這兩個層面之間有一種錯綜複雜的糾纏關係在發揮作用，使得當代華語思維在跨文化的領域上擁有其他當代思維所全無的思考資源，亦即思維深入滲透書寫，書寫又復深入貫穿思考這種獨一無二的特質。

關鍵詞：跨文化思維 華語思維 華語文字體系 視像性 身體

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