Grammatological Deconstruction of Linguistics: From Marx to Derrida

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Abstract: Derrida considered himself Marx's successor in Spectres of Marx, as manifested in his grammatological deconstruction of linguistics. Proceeding from linguistics, Derrida questioned the traditional linguistics represented by Saussure, overturned the metaphysics based on linguistic signs, and thereby deconstructed logocentrism. In Derrida's view, logocentrism is the belief that there is an ultimate reality such as being, essence, truth and ideas, which actually doesn't exist and needs to be negated. In linguistics, logocentrism, or rather phonocentrism, maintains that speech alone conveys ideas smoothly while writing is a simple supplement. Contrary to this idea, Derrida argued that writing could also convey meanings just as speech according to social convention. This deconstruction of traditional linguistics by Derrida shows his adoption of Marxist theory and methodology as well as the significant linguistic influence of Marxist theory with its contemporary perspective.
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MARX'S LEGACY: LANGUAGE IS ARBITRARY AND SOCIAL

Karl Marx left no linguistic works, but in his critiques of capitalist society there were often some insights on linguistic issues. *Capital* boasts a well-known discussion of the relation between a thing and its name, "The name of a thing is something distinct from the qualities of that thing. I know nothing of a man, by knowing that his name is Jacob. In the same way with regard to money, every trace of a value-relation disappears in the names pound, dollar, franc, ducat..." (Marx, 1983: 80-81). This has revealed the basic notion of modern linguistics that the relation between the signifier and the signified in the sign is arbitrary.

In a groundbreaking book on modern linguistics *Course in General Linguistics*, Ferdinand de Saussure explicitly stated, "the bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. Since I mean by sign the whole that results from the associating of the signifier with the signified, I can simply say: the linguistic sign is arbitrary" (Saussure, 1980: 102). Saussure even added "Principle I (the arbitrary nature of the sign) dominates all the linguistics of language" (Saussure, 1980: 103), and that its consequences are numberless.

Certainly, this is not to say that the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign means the use of a sign depends entirely on the speaker's freedom of choice. "In fact, every means of expression used in society is based, in principle, on collective behavior or what amounts to the same thing-on convention" (Saussure, 1980: 103). "The individual does not have the power to change a sign in any way once it has become established in the linguistic community" (Saussure, 1980: 104).

As to the social nature of the sign, Marx had a relevant statement in *Capital*, "… for to stamp an object of utility as a value, is just as much a social product as language" (Marx, 1983: 54). Although Marx focused on the value of objects, a linguistic issue was brought up once again. The social nature of language is used as strong evidence of the social nature of the value of objects, since the social nature of the former is self-evident to Marx. In a footnote, Marx cited some words from "An Essay on the Production of Wealth" by Colonel Torrens to expound on the social origin of the word "capital" and its evolution:

> In the first stone which he [the savage] flings at the wild animal he pursues, in the first stick that he seizes to strike down the fruit which hangs above his reach, we see the appropriation of one article for the purpose of aiding in the acquisition of another, and thus discover the origin of capital. (Marx, 1983: 79)

Perhaps it is due to that first stick (*estoc* in Old French, *stock* in German) that stock becomes a synonym of capital" (Marx, 1983: 172). It's worth mentioning here that despite some historical sources of stock being a synonym of capital, the basic principle of "the arbitrary nature of the sign" won't change therefore. It is absolutely acceptable if people at that time chose stone to mean capital as long as it was widely used in the society. In Marx's own words, stock the name of capital is something distinct from the qualities of capital. We know nothing of capital, by knowing that its name is stock. If not so, Marx wouldn't have to write

Capital for an exposition. In view of this, the arbitrary nature of the sign is consistent with its social nature.

Marx also said,

> The use value of objects is realized without exchange, by means of a direct relation between the objects and man, while, on the other hand, their value is realized only by exchange, that is, by means of a social process. Who fails here to call to mind our good friend, Dogberry, who informs neighbour Seacoal, that, "To be a well-favoured man is the gift of fortune; but reading and writing comes by Nature". (Marx, 1983: 63)

According to Derrida, Marx cited the line from Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing* with the purpose of "making a rather tortuous use of the opposition between fortune (chance or destiny) and nature (law, necessity, history, culture)" (Derrida, 2016: 157). In context, when Marx said "reading and writing comes by Nature" he meant that the value of writing and reading would be realized only by means of a social process in the same way as the exchange value of commodities, and that it was different from the use value of commodities and the natural nature of "to be a well-favoured man". This kind of socialization was called "spectralization" by Derrida – "For the thing, socialization or the becoming-social passes by way of this spectralization." (Derrida, 2016: 156). The so-called spectralization "breathes the spirit into them". Derrida noted that the spirit breathed into them was "a human spirit", "the spirit of a speech" first of all (Derrida, 2016: 156). In a speech at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Derrida explained, "'Ghosts' are neither real nor fictional. They are neither living nor dead. They create images of communication, imprint, and technology" (Xiaozhen and Ning, 2003: 78).

In *Specters of Marx*, the exchange value of objects comes down to a matter of language (speech). Derrida's argument that "To speak, to adopt or borrow speech, and to be exchange-value is here the same thing" derives from the following quote by Marx:

> Could commodities themselves speak, they would say: Our use value may be a thing that interests men. It is no part of us as objects. What, however, does belong to us as objects, is our value. Our natural intercourse as commodities proves it. In the eyes of each other we are nothing but exchange values. (Marx, 1983: 62)

Derrida elaborated on Marx's words, noting:

> But in saying "if commodities could speak", Marx implies that they cannot speak. He makes them speak (like the economist he is accusing) but in order to make them

say, paradoxically, that inasmuch as they are exchange-values, they speak, and that they speak or maintain a commerce among themselves only insofar as they speak. That to them, in any case, one can at least lend speech. To speak, to adopt or borrow speech, and to be exchange-value is here the same thing. (Marx, 1983: 157)

Then Derrida talked about Marx's citation of that Shakespeare quote. It seems that he negated the difference that exists between speech and writing (reading), intentionally or unintentionally. We are under the impression that writing and speech are both the product of socialization and can be equated. But the difference between speech and writing is not an issue that can be skimmed; it is an important issue in the development course of modern linguistics and an ineluctable issue in the contemporary perspective of Marxist theory.

In fact, we may forgive Derrida that negligence if we associate it with his theoretical views as set forth in *Of Grammatology*, because clarifying the difference between writing and speech is the starting point and end-result of the entire book. *Of Grammatology* uses grammatology to attack traditional linguistics, overturn the metaphysics based on linguistic signs, and thereby deconstruct logocentrism.

DERRIDA'S DECONSTRUCTION OF LOGOCENTRISM

Logocentrism is another name for Western metaphysics. It is an ultimate judgment of Western philosophy by Derrida inheriting Heidegger's thought. Martin Heidegger said the basic meaning of logos was "speech", but "all kinds of arbitrary interpretations of later philosophies constantly obscure the true meaning of speech", with the result that the logos was interpreted as "reason, judgment, concept, definition, basis and relation". Heidegger inquired into how the logos was interpreted as a process of reason that had been blinded in the metaphysical philosophies of the past, so that previous Western metaphysics were all about "beings" rather than "being" itself. This was also why Heidegger said he was "uncovering". He explained that as speech the logos was "to bring out what's involved in the 'topic' of speech" and that "when fully concrete, speech (letting something be seen) has the character of speaking or vocalization in words" (Heidegger, 1987: 41). "Only because the function of logos as apophansis lies in letting something be seen by indicating it can logos have the structure of synthesis" (Heidegger, 1987: 43). In this way, Heidegger revealed the process by which the logos was finally

interpreted as "reason" and other metaphysical concepts but not as "speech". By this process, we are also clear that the logos is indeed related to speech, which is also why logocentricism appears as phono-centrism.

Now comes the question: How can we get over logocentrism to grasp "being" rather than "beings"? Heidegger's answer is that only by means of "Dasein" can we grasp and digest the meaning of being. It is also his belief that we human beings as "Dasein" are unlike the ordinary beings but are special beings that deal with being and find out the meaning of being in general to understand the ontological being of the world. The human being doesn't exist a priori, but exists in the world. Since they are there with the world, people existing in the world of experience can grasp the ontological being. Heidegger said, "Philosophy is universal phenomenological ontology, taking its departure from the hermeneutic of Da-sein, which, as an analysis of existence, has fastened the end of the guideline of all philosophical inquiry at the point from which it arises and to which it returns" (Heidegger, 1987: 38).

Nevertheless, Heidegger's attempt to break the metaphysical tradition of Western philosophy seems to Derrida that "To the extent that such a logocentrism is not totally absent from Heidegger's thought" (Derrida, 1976: 16). Heidegger still retained *Dasein* and failed to sever the original, essential connection between the logos and the phone. His thought still belonged to the presupposed "presence" metaphysics. "Heideggerian thought would reinstate rather than destroy the instance of the logos and of the truth of being as *primum signatum*" (Derrida, 1976: 26); "The formal essence of the signified is presence, and the privilege of its proximity to the logos as phonè is the privilege of presence" (Derrida, 1976: 24). Derrida's deconstructionist philosophy aims to shatter all presence meta-physics and thereby overturn logocentrism.

According to Professor Yao Wenfang's latest conclusions, Derrida attempted to deconstruct a logocentrism that has a threefold meaning: essentialism, binary opposition, and hierarchy (Yao, 2017: 98-99). In Derrida's eyes, philosophical or religious factions in history were so keen to make their own interpretations and definitions of the logos that the Western history of metaphysics can be regarded as one of continuous change of such interpretations and definitions. The name changes all the time, but the essence won't. Derrida pointed out, "It would be possible to show that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to

the center have always designated the constant of a presence." (Derrida, 1993: 541) And the "presence" can be the concept, origin, purpose, power of the soul, vitality, essence, existence, substance, subject, aletheia, transcendentality, consciousness, God, man, and so forth. In previous metaphysical theories, Derrida found a thread leading to the basic principle of logocentrism, namely binary opposition. In spite of it various delusive disguises, this principle enjoys a long history, and there was inspiring deduction thereof in ancient Greek sophistry. In modern theory, binary opposition still maintains its momentum, as exemplified by nature/culture, signifier/signified, speech/writing, consciousness/unconsciousness, beings/being East/West, male/female and so on. The binary opposition grounded in essentialism has never been about equality. In this regard, Derrida said,

> All metaphysicians, from Plato to Rousseau, Descartes to Husserl, have proceeded in this way, conceiving good to be before evil, the positive before the negative, the pure before the impure, the simple before the complex, the essential before the accidental, the imitated before the imitation, etc. And this is not just one metaphysical gesture among others, it is the metaphysical exigency, that which has been the most constant, most profound and most potent. (Derrida, 1998: 79)

Hence, this binary opposition advocated by logocentrism has never been about the good and the bad, or the superior and the inferior.

Derrida believed logocentrism to be a belief that there is an ultimate reality such as being, essence, truth and ideas. And this "center" actually doesn't exist and needs to be negated. In the use of speech and writing, "logocentrism which is also a phonocentrism: absolute proximity of voice and being, of voice and the meaning of being, of voice and the ideality of meaning" (Derrida, 1999: 15). It is also Derrida's belief that voice is the direct expression of the mind and that only voice can convey ideas smoothly while writing serves language, belongs to it and derives from it. The only reason why speech exists is representing language. Saussure agreed with that, "Language and writing are two distinct systems of signs; the second exists for the sole purpose of representing the first" (Saussure, 1980: 47). This also indicates that writing had a low status in the time of logocentrism.

In Derrida's view, voice presupposed by logocentrism can express ideas naturally, primitively and directly, so the belief that voice takes precedence over writing doesn't conform to the truth. Historically, writing has always usurped the main role of voice (speech), which even Saussure

wouldn't deny as he pointed out, "But the spoken word is so intimately bound to its written image that the latter manages to usurp the main role" (Saussure, 1980). Yet, what Saussure wanted was to restore the main role of speech, that is, to restore the logocentric hierarchy of speech over writing. On the contrary, Derrida wanted to deconstruct this hierarchical tradition, though "Deconstructing this tradition will therefore not consist of reversing it" (Saussure, 1980: 50). Derrida argued that "language is first, in a sense I shall gradually reveal, writing" (Saussure, 1980: 50), that "writing thus comprehends language" (Derrida,1976: 8), and that "It is therefore as if what we call language could have been in its origin and in its end only a moment, an essential but determined mode, a phenomenon, an aspect, a species of writing" (Derrida, 1976: 10). These are not to say writing preceding speech becomes the language of human communication but to deny writing first representing speech becomes the language. If not that, the argument would fall into another hierarchy of writing over speech which Derrida opposed precisely. In fact, we can never be sure which one of writing and speech should come after the other. This is a false question. We cannot say speech precedes writing or the other way around. It's more likely that "Writing precedes and follows speech" (Derrida, 1976: 346), or that writing and speech emerge at one time and evolve in parallel.

Generally speaking, we believe Derrida didn't fall into logocentrism and the quagmire between the binary opposition of writing and speech, and nor did he come to another hierarchical conclusion that writing precedes speech. Although he had exaggerations like "Writing is the eve of speech" (Derrida, 1976: 347) to defy phonocentrism, Derrida's deconstruction of phonocentrism was first fulfilled by overcoming the narrowness of writing. What he called "writing" is a richly extensive concept "to designate not only the physical gestures of literal pictographic or ideographic inscription, but also the totality of what makes it possible; and also, beyond the signifying face, the signified face itself" and to cover "cinematography, choreography, of course, but also pictorial, musical, sculptural 'writing'. One might also speak of athletic writing, and with even greater certainty of military or political writing in view of the techniques that govern those domains today" (Derrida, 1976: 11). It is also in this sense that the contemporary biologist speaks of writing and program in relation to the most elementary processes of information within the living cell. All this "has never been absolutely linked with a

phonetic production" (Derrida, 1976: 12). It is hence proved that speech does not take precedence over writing.

According to Derrida, Saussure considered linguistics a study of language and the linguistic sign a combination of a concept and a sound-image, which is precisely in conflict with his own definition of the general principles of linguistic signs – the relation between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary; the means of expression of linguistic signs is conventional. Since every means of expression used in society is based on certain collective behavior or convention, linguistic signs may as well be represented by written signifiers and are not necessarily composed of spoken signifiers.

CHINESE CHARACTERS: PHONOGRAMS *VERSUS* IDEOGRAMS

Chinese characters are strong evidence of Derrida's argument that speech doesn't take precedence over writing. Since ancient times, Chinese and foreign scholars have noticed the existence of Chinese characters as a peculiar type of phonograms. And how should we see this peculiarity ? For example, most writing systems can represent speech, but can the Chinese writing system do that as it adopts ideograms ? If we say that Chinese characters are ideograms, then what exactly are their signifiers ? Is the connection between Chinese characters and their meaning still consistent with the principle of the arbitrary and conventional nature of the sign ? Controversy has been abounding over these questions.

Compared with Western alphabets, Chinese characters are indeed much alienated from sounds. In the 2nd century BC, Emperor Qin Shi Huang successfully implemented the "Towards One Chinese Character" policy throughout China mainly because Chinese characters don't stand for sounds, otherwise it would be very difficult to pursue the same characters in different dialects of the various states. In this regard, English philosopher Francis Bacon of the 17th century remarked:

> And we understand further, that it is the use of China and the kingdoms of the High Levant to write in characters real, which express neither letters nor words in gross, but things or notions; insomuch as countries and provinces which understand not one another's language can nevertheless read one another's writings, because the characters are accepted more generally than the languages do extend; and, therefore, they have a vast multitude of characters, as many, I suppose, as radical words. (Bacon, 1605: 136ff)

How should we understand Bacon's remarks ? Can we say that Chinese characters are independent of sounds and can directly express ideas so as to deny the arbitrariness of linguistic signs ?

Saussure actually understood Bacon's remarks that way. He regarded Chinese characters as a representative of ideograms: "In an ideographic system each word is represented by a single sign that is unrelated to the sounds of the word itself. Each written sign stands for a whole word and, consequently, for the idea expressed by the word." (Saussure, 1980: 50-51) This seems to suggest that Chinese characters can express ideas when they are unrelated to sounds. But this logic shouldn't make any sense to Saussure in consideration of his general definition of writing – "the second (writing) exists for the sole purpose of representing the first (language)" and "I call the combination of a concept and a sound-image a sign", to which Chinese characters are apparently an exception. To avoid this paradox, Saussure excluded Chinese, a self-contradictory, stained ideographic system, from the study of languages to ensure the purity of the study.

Then, is it true that each Chinese character is represented by a single sign that is unrelated to the sound of the character itself ? According to *Liu Shu* ("Six Writings"), Chinese characters are divided into six types based on the manner in which they are formed or derived: pictographs (xiang xing), ideographic (zhi shi), compound ideographs (hui yi), phono-semantic compounds (xing sheng), rebus or phonetic loan characters (zhuan zhu), and derivative cognates (jia jie). The first four belong to structural composition, while the last two refer to usage (Xu Shen's *Shuowen Jiezi*). All these six principles of character formation have nothing to do with sounds, except for phono-semantic compounds. Yet still, we cannot conclude that Chinese characters are independent of sounds, especially when there are an increasing number of phono-semantic compounds in the development of Chinese characters. Of course, people would defend Saussure by saying "Chinese characters are unrelated to sounds" means that Chinese characters are unrelated to "sounds of which the word is composed" rather than to the sound in general. This would give rise to another paradox, nevertheless. For the sounds of which a word is composed, does it mean that there is an inevitable connection between the sounds (the signifying sound-image) and the word (the signified concept), so that it no longer conforms to the principle of arbitrariness of the sign ? After all, we cannot be self-contradictory and say that in Western phonograms the signifier and the

signifier are necessarily connected with one another while admitting linguistic signs are arbitrary. In fact, the writing system varies from nation to nation in Western phonograms; even within one nation, "language is constantly evolving, whereas writing tends to remain stable. The result is that a point is reached where writing no longer corresponds to what it is supposed to record" (Saussure, 1980: 52), and there is also "the multiplicity of symbols that stand for the same sound" (Saussure, 1980: 53), resulting in a myriad of inconsistencies between writing and pronunciation. This proves that the connection between the sound and the concept is still conventional in phonograms.

In terms of the word-sound relation, both Chinese ideograms and Western phonograms comply with the conventional nature of language and the written sign, and there are only quantitative differences rather than qualitative differences. We can say the connection between writing and speech in Chinese is not as close as that in Western phonograms, but we should never deny the connection.

To be more precise, there are indeed some Chinese characters, especially pictographs, which can express ideas. But we cannot say that all Chinese characters have this function. And note that even in the case of pictographs, the expression of ideas is also conventional.

Saussure also noticed the peculiarity of Chinese characters. He decided there were two systems of writing: the ideographic and phonetic systems, and took Chinese as a typical representative of the ideographic system. But these two systems of writing seemed inappropriate to Derrida who emphasized the uncertainty of the frontiers between so-called pictographic and phonetic scripts (Derria, 1976: 44). That is to say, we cannot prove Chinese characters only represent ideas and won't stand for sounds. Similarly, we cannot say those standing for sounds won't represent ideas. In Derrida's eyes, when Saussure defined writing as "a system of signs", it was impossible to admit the existence of ideograms at the same time as it would be contradictory. In fact, Saussure himself was also aware of this contradiction. As Derrida noted, "Writing being defined as 'a system of signs,' there is no 'symbolic' writing (in the Saussurian sense), no figurative writing; there is no writing as long as graphism keeps a relationship of natural figuration and of some resemblance to what is then not signified but represented, drawn, etc. The concept of pictographic or natural writing would therefore be contradictory for Saussure." (Derria, 1976: 44) Therefore, Saussure had to "limit discussion to the phonetic system, and especially to the one used today,

the system that stems from the Greek alphabet" (Saussure, 1980: 48). Derrida was in favor of Saussure's assertion of the arbitrary nature of the sign. But when it comes to his definition of writing as "image" of language, Derrida took it as unacceptable because it goes against the arbitrariness of the sign, declaring,

> One must therefore challenge, in the very name of the arbitrariness of the sign, the Saussurian. Not to mention the fact that the phoneme is the unimaginable itself, and no visibility can resemble it, it suffices to take into account what Saussure says about the difference between the symbol and the sign in order to be completely baffled as to how he can at the same time say of writing that it is an "image" or "figuration" of language and define language and writing elsewhere as "two distinct systems of signs". For the property of the sign is not to be an image. (Derrida, 1976: 63)

As Chinese characters are not simply recording speech, they prove the fact that speech does not take precedence over writing. Yet, we cannot say all Chinese characters are an "image" or that they have a natural connection with the concepts they express. We understand what a Chinese character means through its written form rather than its spoken form. This is true for some Chinese characters, but not for all of them. In other words, the fact that some Chinese characters don't stand for the sounds they pronounce cannot help us come to the conclusion that they only stand for the ideas they express. Thus, we cannot deny the conventional nature of Chinese characters. There were relevant theories in ancient China in this regard, such as "shu bu jin yan, yan bu jin yi" (*Great Commentary I, Book of Changes*), which means writing cannot fully express speech, and speech cannot fully express ideas. The bond between writing, speech and ideas is arbitrary and conventional as well. Instead of asserting the connection between speech and concept is arbitrary and conventional, we may say the connection between writing and speech is not arbitrary or conventional. Derrida said, "The very idea of institution – hence of the arbitrariness of the sign – is unthinkable before the possibility of writing and outside of its horizon" (Derrida, 1976: 61). Simply put, the idea of institution (convention) or arbitrariness exists in the field of writing; writing is conventional and therefore arbitrary.

In history, there have been two conflicting evaluations on the peculiarity of Chinese characters differing from Western phonograms. Of them the representatives are respectively Hegel's negation and Leibniz's affirmation. What's surprising is that these two views are diametrically opposed to each other but are both based on the theory of the peculiarity of Chinese. Hegel stated in his works *Theorie Werkausgabe*:

The development of spoken language is very closely connected with the habit of alphabetical writing, which is the only way in which spoken language acquires the determinacy and purity of its articulation. The imperfection of the Chinese spoken language is well-known; a mass of its words have several utterly different meanings, as many as ten, or even twenty, so that, in speaking, the distinction is made noticeable merely by stress and intensity, by speaking more softly or crying out. Europeans beginning to speak Chinese stumble into the most ridiculous misunderstandings before they have mastered these absurd refinements of accentuation. Perfection here consists in the opposite of that parler sans accent which in Europe is rightly required for cultivated speech. Owing to hieroglyphic written language, the Chinese spoken language lacks the objective determinacy that is gained in articulation from alphabetic writing. (Hegel, 1970: 274)

We may see Hegel's depreciation of the Chinese language a typical manifestation of logocentrism, namely phonocentrism. On the contrary, Leibniz's appreciation seems really touching to Chinese people. Indeed, at first sight, Leibniz seems to have come out of the prejudice of Hegelian ethnocentrism, but in fact his attempt to establish a world language shows that he failed to get rid of his European Christian position, which is still logocentric. Just as he said that

Those who know the Chinese characters are right to believe that it will become a universal character, whose written form would be understood by all the world. If all peoples in the world could agree on the designation of a thing by a character, one people could pronounce it differently from the other. And we could introduce a Universal Symbolism. [...] if in place of words we used little diagrams which represented visible things pictorially and invisible things by means of the visible ones which go with them, also bringing in certain additional marks suitable for conveying inflections and particles. This would at once enable us to communicate easily with remote peoples. (Leibniz 1981: 290)

As Derrida put it, "the Leibnizian project of a universal characteristic that is not essentially phonetic does not interrupt logocentrism in any way. On the contrary, universal logic confirms logocentrism." (Derrida, 1976: 114)

HOW CAN WE GET OUT OF PHONOCENTRISM ?

In his deconstruction of logocentrism, Derrida didn't set a clear frontier between phonograms and ideograms and then use ideograms to deconstruct phonocentrism. He insisted, "'Phonetic' and 'nonphonetic' are therefore never pure qualities of certain systems of writing", and that

"The cuneiform, for example, is at the same time ideogrammatic and phonetic" (Derria, 1976: 132). On this point, we may draw some inspiration from the works of two artists from China and America.

"l(a", a poem by E. E. Cummings, proves that phonetic writing can be non-phonetic in expressing ideas, while *A Book from the Sky*, an installation by Chinese artist Xu Bing, shows that Chinese characters can be non-ideogrammatic as well. Let's first look at Cummings's "l (a":

l(a
le
af
fa
ll
s)
one
l
iness

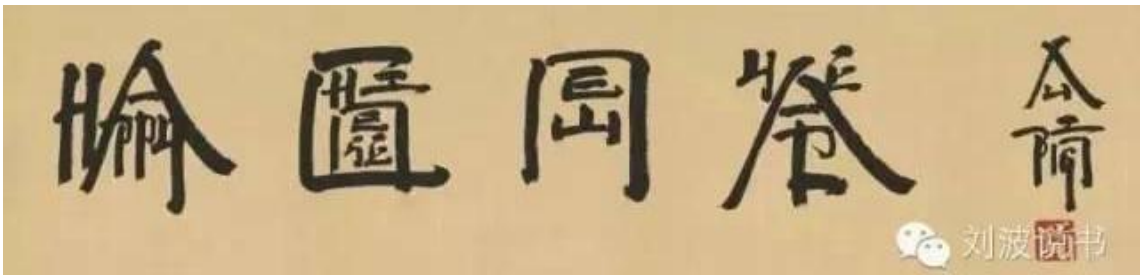
The poem displays a word broken by brackets: "l one liness – loneliness". In the brackets is a phrase: "a leaf falls". The fusion of the concrete and the abstract conveys the image of a leaf falling and the theme of being lonely. But how come the poet realized this fusion ? First of all, pay attention to those techniques used to express or denote "one", a common symbol for "loneliness". The poem begins with the letter "l", which looks like the number "1" in print. Even the left bracket separating "l" from "a" also highlights the isolation of the letter "l". And there is "le", the definite article for the singular in French. The idea "one" is repeated again in the shape "ll". Then, Cummings added the word "one", followed by "l", and "iness" in the end. As we read the poem, we will find the sounds of the word are broken, and what unfolds before us is a vertical image that resembles a leaf falling. This is why this poem is in a slim "shape" (Martin and Jacobus, 2011: 15).

On the other hand, Chinese artist Xu Bing has overturned the ideogrammatic nature of Chinese characters from another point of view. *A Book from the Sky* is an impressive mixed media installation that consists of thousands of "Chinese" characters (that look Chinese but are completely meaningless according to standard Mandarin) that are finely carved into woodblocks of moveable type and designed to scroll laying on the floor and hanging from the ceiling for display. It seems that Xu

Bing wants to create a radicalizing experience for people to understand Chinese characters. Although at first glance those characters look quite Chinese and possess characteristics unique to Chinese, they are completely unreadable to both Chinese readers and non-Chinese readers.

Lévi-Strauss described in *Tristes Tropiques (Sad Tropics)* a weird experience he had during a field survey in an Indian tribe called Nambikwara. The chief of the tribe wrote things that were simply beyond recognition, but "his scribblings had a meaning that I pretended to decipher" (Derrida, 1976: 182). For the word "scribblings" Lévi-Strauss used, Derrida explained, "Since they learned without understanding, since the Chief used writing effectively without knowing either the way it functioned or the content signified by it, the end of writing is political and not theoretical, 'sociological, rather than…intellectual'." (Derrida, 1976: 184) As for Xu Bing's *A Book from the Sky*, we may also explain it this way: The work itself is not for understanding but conveys other social, political attempts; the author seems to be challenging the essentialist ideology of the ideogrammatic function of Chinese.

Another series *Square Word Calligraphy* by Xu Bing shows the uncertainty of the frontier between Chinese characters and Western phonograms. It can be regarded as a continuation of his challenge as mentioned above. It also seems that Xu Bing has followed what Cummings did – using phonetic scripts like English letters to present an image – since *Square Word Calligraphy* features words made of English letters bent to the shape of Chinese characters. In the 2016 work *Happy Chinese New Year*, for instance, the first word is made of letters H-A-P-P-Y from left to right, from top to bottom, denoting "happy" in English, the second one is made of letters C-H-I-N-E-S-E from outside to inside, from top to bottom, representing "Chinese" in English, and so forth. The signature is also made of letters XU BING, from top to bottom, indicating the name of the author.



Both Cummings and Xu Bing have deconstructed the essentialist view of language from their own cultural perspectives. Their deconstruction is of great philosophical significance. They have proved that there isn't an insurmountable gap between Chinese and Western culture and that the peculiarity of the former (language and writing) won't prevent it from communicating with the latter.

We may look back at the Shakespeare quote used in Marx's *Capital*, "To be a well-favoured man is the gift of fortune; but reading and writing comes by Nature." Normally, "well-favored" should "come by Nature", while "reading and writing" should be "the gift of fortune" since they are acquired through learning. In *Spectres of Marx*, Derrida drew attention to this quote in order to emphasize what he had repeatedly said in *Of Grammatology* – Writing is not a derivative form of language, but has superiority as well. In *Of Grammatology*, he insisted on "implying an original rigor in Marxist criticism" (Derrida, 1976: 174), that is, adhering to Marx's externality and sociality of linguistic signs, including of written signs, without doubt.

Marx's "The name of a thing is something distinct from the qualities of that thing" includes the name of a thing in the spoken language and that in the written language, both of which are distinct from the qualities of that thing, as well as arbitrary and conventional. What Derrida referred to as "original rigor" means that we shouldn't follow Saussure, applauding the principle of the arbitrary relation between the signifying sound-image and the signified concept, while abandoning this principle when it comes to the relation between writing and language and advocating that writing can represent language. In the same way, we cannot oppose phonocentrism on the one hand while insisting that writing is superior to speech on the other hand, creating an insurmountable gap between phonograms and ideograms and between the Chinese language and Western languages, and establishing hierarchies of essentialism and binary opposition. To negate and deconstruct phonocentrism, we must first of all abandon the centrist mode of thinking because using one centrism to oppose another would turn out a vain effort.

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