The background of the book cover is a detailed architectural drawing in a light green color on a dark green background. It features various geometric shapes, lines, and patterns, including a large circular structure with a grid of hexagons, a series of concentric circles, and several rectangular buildings with internal details. The drawing is a complex, layered composition that suggests a philosophical or architectural theme.

New Directions in the Philosophy of Education

EDUCATION BETWEEN SPEECH AND WRITING

**CROSSING THE BOUNDARIES OF
DAO AND DECONSTRUCTION**

Ruyu Hung

ROUTLEDGE

Education between Speech and Writing

This unique book explores how graphocentrism affects Chinese education and culture. It moves away from the contemporary educational practices in China of following the Western model of phonocentrism to demonstrate that each perspective interacts and counteracts with each other, creating a dialogue between Eastern and Western thought.

The chapters explore the consonances and dissonances between the two, problematising the educational practices of Chinese tradition and proposing a dialectical thinking of post-graphocentrism, based on the concepts of Dao and deconstruction. The volume creates a unique area in the field of philosophy of education by questioning the writing/speaking relationship in Chinese tradition, complete with educational ideas and practices that consider the uniqueness of Chinese character writing.

A pioneering study of its kind, *Education between Speech and Writing* provides a valuable source for students of philosophy of education, as well as students and academics in the field of Chinese Studies. The book will also appeal to anyone interested in dialogues between Chinese and Western thoughts, especially negotiating between Daoism and deconstruction.

Ruyu Hung is Professor of Education of Philosophy at National Chiayi University, Taiwan.

New Directions in the Philosophy of Education

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Crossing the Boundaries of Dao
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Preface and acknowledgements

In this book, I seek to answer the question of whether there is a particularly Chinese way of thinking, as I have sensed the phenomenon of word obsession (or wordaholism) prevalent among Chinese-speaking societies. Underpinning this wordaholism is a set of beliefs with a history both in literature and in practice. This set of beliefs in Chinese culture and tradition, which pays particular attention to the written language, is what I called ‘graphocentrism’. The awareness of the wordaholic phenomenon is generated from comparing the East and the West on the individually experiential level as well as on the theoretical level. Therefore, the process of this project starts with considering my personal experience and then dwells on the theoretical exploration of literature. The sources of inspiration include Chinese and Western literature, especially those in Daoist philosophy and the philosophy of deconstruction. The concepts of deconstruction and dao lead the train of thought through the writing. Because Jacques Derrida considers writing throughout the Western philosophical tradition in a very new and creative way in *Of Grammatology*, he provides a fulcrum of thought in this book.

This book explores how the graphocentric view is gradually built up on the levels of theory and practice in the history of imperial China. The discussion inevitably involves some special Chinese terms and translation. Conventional translation always creates a huge difficulty in my reading because it does not indicate intonation. Intonation in Chinese is inevitable. There are four tones in Mandarin Chinese. Syllables with different tones create different words and, thus, different meanings. For example, the syllable *shi*: *shi* with first tone can be ‘lose’ (失) or ‘teacher’ (師); *shí* with second tone, ‘eat’ (食) or ‘stone’ (石); *shǐ* with third tone, ‘history’ (史); and *shì* with fourth tone, ‘city’ (市). There are many homonyms, with or without tone marks. To overcome my own reading disorder, I add tone marks on the vowel. To the readers who can make sense of the conventional translation, it is feasible to ignore the tone marks. However, this also causes another problem – that is, the spelling of the translated terms may not be consistent throughout the manuscript. Some Chinese terms are already familiar to the Western world, e.g., *Dao* (道). Yet, 道 is pronounced with

the fourth tone. In my writing, it should be *dào*. Dao with the first tone could be ‘knife’ (刀). Nevertheless, most authors use the conventional translation – without intonation. I must respect their original texts and do not add tone marks when I cite or quote their works. In addition, there are different systems of spelling translation. For example, the word 趙 can be translated as Chao (Chào) or Zhao (Zhào). The references contain different spelling translation systems. Therefore, the consistency of the translated terms is not firmly fastened. I apologise for this new way of spelling and for any inconsistencies of spelling.

Most Chinese classical texts used are based on the online open-access digital library Chinese Text Project. To help readers access the original source easily, I use the number marked on the website Chinese Text Project. For example, the statement ‘Fine words and an insinuating appearance are seldom associated with true virtue’ is cited from the third section of the first chapter (Xúe Ér) of the *Analects*. The source will be specified as follows: (*Analects*, Xúe Ér, 1:3). As for the *Mencius*, the chapters of this text are organised and numbered in a distinctive way: there are 14 chapters in total with seven titles. Two chapters are given a same title with different marks: the former (normally translated as Part One) and the latter (Part Two). For example, the first two chapters are titled ‘Liang Hui Wang I’ and ‘Liang Hui Wang II’. If I cited a quotation from the third section of the chapter ‘Liang Hui Wang I’, the reference is written as ‘Mencius, 1A3’.

Many people and organisations lent their help to this project by kindly providing comments and encouragement. I particularly thank Michael Peters, Gert Biesta, Chung-Ying Cheng, Morimichi Kato, Xu Di, Chia-Ling Wang, Tsao-Ling Fong, Yung-Ming Shu, and Cheng-His Chien for their very considerate and thoughtful comments. The book’s contents served as the basis of public lectures and oral presentations I gave at the University of Luxembourg (2013), the Institute of Education, University of London (2013), the fourth Meeting on Educational Aesthetics in Taiwan (2017), the conferences of the Philosophy of Education Society of Australasia (2014), the Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy (2016), the Philosophy of Education Society (2017), the Taiwan Philosophy of Education Society (2017), and the academic workshops of Asian Link of Philosophy of Education (ALPE) held at Seoul National University (2014) and the University of Zurich (2016). These lectures and presentations helped me to elaborate and reflect on my ideas over time. I owe a special debt to ALPE, created by Duck-Joo kwak, Morimichi Kato, and me in 2012. Since then, more and more scholars and colleagues have joined in, including Roland Reichenbach, Mika Okabe, and Yasushi Moriyama. Through ALPE, we are trying to address our own issues, particularities and identities in terms of Eastern Asia in the global or, indeed, Westernised world. Collaborating with these colleagues helps me to rethink and re-examine the cultural and philosophical

background that I have been immersed in and taken for granted without reflection and criticality and led me to the question that launched the project.

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Prologue: seeing is believing?

孔子曰：「君子有三畏：畏天命，畏大人，畏聖人之言。小人不知天命而不畏也，狎大人，侮聖人之言。」

(論語季氏)¹

If supplementarity is a necessarily indefinite process, writing is the supplement par excellence since it marks the point where the supplement proposes itself as supplement of supplement, sign of sign, taking the place of a speech already significant.

—(Derrida, 1976, p. 281)

The wordaholic society and ocularcentric education

Sometimes, we are unaware of the things or practices that powerfully influence our lives and are deeply embedded in our beliefs until we are away from and maintain distance from them. The distance creates a break from what we are accustomed to so that the absence strikes us suddenly. This is how I felt about my experience with the ‘word’, especially the written word, when I was in foreign countries.

Many international students suggested that watching television was helpful for improving the learning of a foreign language, so I bought a television set soon after I arrived in England. However, when I turned on the television, I was surprised by the absence of subtitles on the screen. After some time, I realised that additional steps were required to set up the subtitles. Subtitles are not an embedded part of the programme. Yet in my home country, Taiwan, it is taken for granted that television programmes are played with subtitles. Almost all television programmes – whether news, dramas, reality shows, or talk shows – are played with captions or subtitles. The captions or subtitles are always displayed on the screen automatically. These words are supposed to be an essential and indispensable part of the programmes.

In addition, I noted that the written (or printed) words on the streets are not as conspicuous as those in my hometown. In Taipei or any other city in Taiwan,

the streets are full of huge, colourful, shining shop signs. During the evening, many dazzling signs are bright enough to blind the eyes. The words on the signs draw the eyes of passersby in a powerful and forceful way.

When I visited public spaces such as schools or governmental offices, I also sensed a big difference between the public spaces in my home country and those in foreign countries. Again, this difference was related to the written word. In Taiwan, it is normal for posters or couplets – which are not only decorative but are also, and more importantly, informative and educative – to be hung or pasted on the walls of public spaces. Placards, posters, or plaques are everywhere in schools, constantly educating about recycling, energy saving, improving moral character, maintaining good hygiene, and the like. A few decades ago, school posters displayed the central Chinese ideologies of nationalist solidarity, respect for national leadership, and traditional morality. To me, the written word plays a mystical and vital role in my home society, my home culture. For example, a shelter community called Dàài, meaning Great Love, was built by an influential religious charity in southern Taiwan after a typhoon destroyed an entire village in 2009. Spread throughout the shelter community are wood and stones engraved with appraisal of and appreciation for the organisation and its leader. The inscriptions educate the residents through the power of words.

Let me think more boldly and imaginatively. That the written word in Chinese culture plays a profound role in daily life could have deep roots in culture, history, and tradition. Since ancient times, during the Chinese New Year Festival, people have pasted a single-character poster on their walls or doors written or printed with blessing words such as Fú (福 blessing, happiness), Shòu (壽 longevity), Lu (祿 prosperity), or Chun (春 spring, joy) and have placed the chunlian (春聯 spring couplet), a pair of lines of poetry, at the entrance of their homes to express auspicious blessing or wishes. Nowadays, posting the words at the entrance or on the walls is simply a cultural conventional practice. In the old times, however, words were believed to be magical – powerful enough to carry out people's wishes and to expel devils. In Chinese Daoist religion, Daoshi (道士), the priest of religious Daoism, has the magical power to tell the future or to change one's fortune by communicating with deities or demons. The Daoshi writes mysterious words on a piece of paper to create a talisman or amulet to cast the spell (McCreery, 1995). Practices of this kind still exist in many folk religion temples in Taiwan. In the Chinese tradition, the written word has magical power. The Chinese heritage cultures, in my observation, have a general inclination to obsess about written words, which is called wordaholism.

Wordaholic symptoms are found in Taiwan as well as in China. The written word was an important means for political leaders to exercise control. In the mid-1960s, Mao and his Red Guard followers employed mini-posters (小字報) and big character posters (大字報) as important weapons to attack political enemies (Barmé, 2012). During the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the written

word played an important role in serving the political purpose in many aspects, 'from the widely distributed "Little Red Book" of Chairman Mao's thoughts and the publicly displayed big character posters proclaiming the latest political slogans, to the privately written "confessions" of political undesirables' (Erickson, 2001, p. 34). The cult of the written word endured the Cultural Revolution and has flourished. In 2012, the Chinese government hosted a month of celebration to mark the seventieth anniversary of Mao Zedong's 'Talks at the Yánnan Forum on Literature and Art'. One product of this observance was the publication of the book *One Hundred Writers' and Artists' Hand-Copied Commemorative Edition of the Yánnan Talks* (Abrahamsen, 2012, June 6). One hundred prestigious writers and artists copied Mao's words in their own handwriting in both collective and individual ways. They embodied Mao through their own hands, their own writing. It is apparent that writing and the written word play a critical role in many aspects of Chinese tradition.

These phenomena make clear that Chinese and Taiwanese cultures depend heavily on both visual and written words. I characterise this dependence as the 'wordaholic symptom' or 'wordaholic obsession'. This, then, raises a question for me: what makes my home culture, my home country, a wordaholic society?

In addition to the wordaholic scenarios mentioned, another word-related phenomenon is worth noting: the absurd bilingual signs in public spaces, such as shops or streets, in Taiwan and China. In recent years, bilingualism seems to be assumed as part of globalisation and internationalisation. Thus, signs in many places are bilingual, whether in officially administered facilities such as border checkpoints or international institutions, business areas such as shops or tourist attractions, or stations, schools, or roads. Yet, ridiculous translations appear frequently in both Taiwan and in mainland China. For example, in many shops in China, the term '干货' (simplified Chinese, '乾貨' in traditional Chinese) on a sign is often (mis-)translated as 'f**k food'. The word '干' or '乾' and the F word in Chinese are homographs. This term, in fact, refers to 'dried food'. Similarly, 'café latte' is usually translated as '拿鐵咖啡' (ná tiě ka fei) because the pronunciation of '拿鐵' is very similar to 'latte' and '咖啡' to 'coffee'. The Chinese term '拿鐵咖啡' has become more popular than 'café latte'. The term '拿鐵咖啡' is reversely translated as 'take iron coffee' (Jiang, 2006) because '拿' in Chinese means 'take', while '鐵' means 'iron'. In another example: the sign 殘疾人專位 in mainland China (殘障專用 in Taiwan), meaning 'Designated Space for the Disabled' or 'Priority Space for the Disabled', has been inappropriately translated as 'Deformed Man End Place'. A tourist attraction 民族園 in China has been mistranslated as 'Racist Park'. The word 民 means 'people'; 族 means 'clan, race, or nationality'. In Chinese, 民 and 族 are usually combined as a two-character term, 民族, which indicates 'race, race group, or ethnicity'. The word 園 means 'a park'. A more appropriate translation of 民族園 would be 'Park of Multi-nationalities'.

Mentioning these lost and ridiculous translations is done neither for fun nor to highlight the difficulties or insurmountable limitations of translation

(Derrida, 2001). What begs notice is that the Chinese way of thinking about ordinary language assumes correspondence between ideas and terms in different languages. This naïve view of language is more prominent in Chinese-speaking cultures. Although different languages may use different ‘names’ (signs) to refer to the same thing, translation as an activity of communication is done to substitute one ‘name’ in one language for the corresponding ‘name’ in another language. This assumption of one-to-one correspondence is what Ong (1982) describes as the ‘chirographic and typographic bias’. As Ong (1982, p. 162) states, the bias assumes a one-to-one correspondence between ‘items in an extramental world and the spoken words, and . . . between spoken words and written words’. On this assumption, ‘the naïve reader presumes the prior presence of the extramental referent which the word presumably captures and passes on through a kind of pipeline to the psyche’ (Ong, 1982, p. 162). To a certain degree, the chirographic and typographic bias manifests in the ridiculous bilingualism in the sense that the Chinese way of translation assumes an equivalent and interchangeable relationship between ‘names’ or ‘signs’ across different languages. The assumption of the Chinese view of translation – of the equivalent and interchangeable relationship – is grounded in the belief that ‘names’ in different languages are able to represent a common idea or object. Does it imply a reified realist perspective? What metaphysics, then, underpins the Chinese view of translation? If the ocularcentric orientation in the Chinese language system is taken into consideration, does the Chinese way of thinking not merely assume a correspondence between words in different languages but also a correspondence between words and images – assumed ideas or reality? Does the Chinese view of language imply a deeper belief that the ‘name’ or the signifier is present ‘in’ and ‘of’ itself, or, borrowing Derrida’s term (1982, p. 11), ‘in a sufficient presence that would refer only to itself’? All in all, these examples and questions reveal that the word – especially the written word – is supposed in Chinese to be self-sufficient and self-contained. Observing the Chinese preference for the written word and my ensuing questions spurred me to conduct an inquiry deep into the origin and the process of this particular way of thinking – graphocentrism, as contrasted with the Western phonocentrism that prioritises speech over writing.

Overview of the book

Through *Education between Speech and Writing*, I wish to present an innovative and exciting view of human subjects and education based on the interplay of dao and deconstruction. This book questions and repositions the established relationship between speech and writing, ears and eyes. I argue that the speech–writing relationship is crucial for distinguishing Chinese and Western ways of thinking and thus coin the term ‘graphocentrism’ as the underlying principle of Chinese thought.

One goal achieved through the exploration in this book is the meaning that graphocentrism brings to the formation of the human subject through education. The significance of education lies in the formation of the human subject. Traditional education places emphasis on helping students find their own voice. The focus on voice or speech occupies the most prominent place in most educational discourse. Writing is thus viewed as a skill of literacy or a device of capturing voice. In Derrida's terms, writing is the mere supplement to speech. Phonocentrism prioritises speaking over writing. In contrast, Chinese language shows a very different relationship between writing and speech. In Chinese, words have richer and more spontaneous meaning when viewed than when heard. The understanding through written words occurs prior to the understanding through spoken ones. The very opposite view of phonocentrism is what I call graphocentrism. Within the Chinese tradition, codes and rules about writing were imbued with educational practices with deep ethical-political implications. This is due to graphocentrism, which fosters beliefs in close relationships with the present predicament of education, such as beliefs in standards, measurements, and the reified human subject.

While Western thinkers seek inspiration from Chinese thought to counter phonocentric problems, I search for insights from the West to bring graphocentric education out of this impasse. I argue that there is a dialectic between phonocentrism and graphocentrism, one that entails a way of thinking that crosses boundaries of Chinese and Western cultures. I propose that, with inspiration from dao and deconstruction, we can conceive a view that transcends Chinese graphocentrism and implied reified humanism: the post-graphocentric approach.

Chapter 1 examines and investigates wordaholic symptoms to reveal the heavy dependence on visual and written language in Chinese culture and education. Wordaholic symptoms can be seen in many aspects of Chinese social life, including ubiquitous advertising signs and slogans, ridiculous bilingualism, and the mainstream schooling system that translates educational activity as hearing, speaking, reading, and writing (tīn, shuō, dú, xiě, 聽, 說, 讀, 寫). The written or printed word greatly influences the Chinese lifeworld, both implicitly and explicitly. For Chinese, visual words are omnipresent. What can be discovered from the fetishism of written words or the obsession with words is an episteme that is closely related to ocularcentric consciousness and the dominance of the written word. This view is what I call graphocentrism.

Chapter 2 explores the graphocentric episteme by examining and discussing Chinese classics to reveal how graphocentrism is built up in Chinese philosophy and how it influences Chinese educational ideas and practices. The Western vision-centred view is the epistemological privileging of sight that starts from the metaphor of light as truth in Greek philosophy, continues in the Renaissance with the invention of printing, and develops with observing and objective subjects in modern science (Jay, 1988, 1993, 2002). In contrast, Chinese

graphocentrism begins with the legends of invention of writing furnished by the metaphors of imitation of natural phenomena. The investigation reveals that Chinese graphocentrism exists in the characteristics of visibility, inalterability, and verifiability of visual and written words. Intriguingly, the identification of Chinese graphocentrism reveals its congruity and disparity with Western phonocentrism. It reveals that opposite judgements about writing and speech are addressed for similar reasons between these two modalities of episteme. For me, there is a profound connection between Chinese graphocentrism and Western phonocentrism. In order to clarify this relationship, I return to an age-old but contemporarily high-profile debate concerning the nature of Chinese characters. I will pursue this issue in Chapter 3. In addition, these characteristics of visual and written words – visibility, inalterability, and verifiability – contribute substantially to the beliefs in appellation, measurements, and standards that render to a great degree the examination – and credential-orientation – of educational ideas and practice in Chinese culture, from past to present. The relationship between the graphocentric episteme and the educational system under mainstream Chinese political-ethical tradition will be explored in the next chapter.

Chapter 3 offers a new way of thinking about politics and pedagogy with respect to graphocentrism. As some scholars put it, early China is the ‘empire of writing’ (Lewis, 1999). Writing is used to command assent and obedience. The core question in politics and pedagogy is the education of citizens – usually undertaken in the name of humanistic education, or the education for humanism. In terms of graphocentrism, the invention of words, the structure, the writing, and the way of using words (i.e., the regime of writing) have deep implications for politics and pedagogy. The difference between the literate and the illiterate creates social division. In ancient China, the imperial examination system cannily played the role of strengthening and fortifying social division and hierarchy. Overall, four aspects will be discussed in terms of words: the discipline of writing, the taboo of writing, the institutionalisation of writing (meaning the imperial examination system as the means of differentiating the literate from the illiterate), and the fundamental ideas of graphocentrism. This examination displays how Confucian orthodoxy builds on onto-political foundational beliefs and how these ideas fortify the Chinese hierarchy.

Chapter 4 returns to debates about ‘Chinese prejudice’ mentioned in Chapter 1. This debate began in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and has intensified in contemporary times, especially after Derrida’s discussions of the issue in his books. Derrida views phonocentrism as the crux of Western metaphysics. Does this critique, then, suggest that graphocentrism – which seems to be the opposite way of thinking about voice and writing – holds the solution? Unpacking the strains interwoven in this issue is to re-evaluate the limitations and possibilities of dialogues between Eastern and Western boundaries. This chapter shows that Western phonocentrism and Chinese graphocentrism conspire in the sense that they share very similar elements – logocentrism and

ethnocentrism – despite working in different ways. Both ways of thinking may result in injustice and violence in different forms, for they possess biases and prejudices within different cultural and intellectual contexts.

This discovery leads to a dilemma: graphocentrism was initially suggested to counter the tyranny of the trio of logo-phono-ethnocentrism in light of Derrida. It turns out that even graphocentrism cannot escape the snare of Dao as Logos. How can human beings be liberated from the endless desire for binary and hierarchical thinking that are underpinned by centrism? Chapter 5 explores the concept of dao(s) in a comparison with deconstruction. I will argue that, in the West, Derrida aptly identifies the problems of logo-phonocentrism and proposes deconstruction as a breakthrough. In the East, the Daoist philosophers are also aware of the predicament of thought and language and suggest the dao or daos as a solution. The dao implies not only the consonance of the logos but also the dissonance, which shows the paradoxical ambiguity of dao and the possibility of overcoming the problems of graphocentrism or post-graphocentrism. The dialogue between deconstruction and daos contributes to an alternative thinking regarding human subject and education, which is called post-graphocentrism.

The next chapter considers the educational implications in terms of post-graphocentrism. With the intention of breaking the boundary, the thinking experiment of post-graphocentric pedagogy takes inspiration from the Daoist Wú-practices and modern arts. As Richard Rorty (1978) comments, ‘there is no way in which one can isolate philosophy as occupying a distinctive place in culture or concerned with a distinctive subject or proceeding by some distinctive method’ (p. 142). Likewise, education needs incentives and excitements from fields other than education. In art, words, letters, characters, writing, and voices are able to interweave a horizon for thinking and acting alternatively and thus give the world new meaning. The Chinese word has provided rich inspiration for the art of the Western world. For example, the Soviet Russian film director and theorist Sergei Eisenstein (1898–1948) admits that Chinese ideographs influenced his pioneering use of montage in ‘filmic writing’ (Kenner, 1971; Gu, 2000). The visual poetry of American imagist poet Ezra Pound (1885–1972) is well known for incorporating Chinese ideographs (Kenner, 1971; Fenollosa & Pound, 1936; Gu, 2000; Öztürk, 2012). More fascinating are some Chinese contemporary artworks that edge and rebel against the graphocentric tradition from the interior to the limit. The artistic deconstruction and reconstruction of the conventional division between graphic and phonetic language both disturbs and excites our soundscape and our viewscape.

The final chapter summarises the overall exploration of the graphocentric philosophy of education and concludes with the post-graphocentric view of connecting daos and deconstruction. This book aims for education to be an invitation to a kaleidoscopic view, a multifaceted horizon, a heteroglossia where one is able to write, speak, express, sign, and be listened to and be read with respect and regard.

Before delving into the exploration of graphocentrism, let me clarify the position and the aim of this book. It is not about making a philosophical argument based on any particular school of Chinese philosophical thought. As a philosopher of education, I am interested in the discussion of how certain cultural elements or beliefs influence our current educational ideas and practices. Generally, influential cultural elements or beliefs are not products of a single school of thought but are achievements of interactions of multiple cultures. In Chinese cultural circles, Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism coexist in a complementary way. These three perspectives are, simultaneously, religions and philosophical thoughts. The religious and the philosophical aspects are not entirely identical but are highly interactive and interdependent. Of course, there are divergences and conflicts between the philosophical doctrines and value systems of these three perspectives. Yet, it is normally the case that ordinary people do not strictly obey teachings of a particular school. The teachings of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism have been valued and have coexisted in Chinese thinking and life. Philosophically, there are differences between these schools of thought, but this could oversimplify and overstate the contrast in between (Hall & Ames, 1998). In daily life, the saints of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism are worshipped and offered incense together in some temples (Ching, 1993; Li, 1999). In Chinese heritage cultural societies (CHCs), ‘a person can be a Taoist, Confucian and Buddhist more or less at the same time’ (Berthrong, 1994, p. 178). People accept and practice teachings of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism simultaneously and in a complementary way. Li Chengyang (1999, pp. 148–152) calls such a phenomenon ‘multiple religious participation’. The ‘multiple religious participation’ is the basic position that I take to launch the exploration of this book. In Chinese history, many scholars claimed to be Daoist–Buddhist–Confucian.²

In normal daily life, in schools in CHCs, people have taken lessons not only from Confucius, Mencius, Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Buddha, but from prestigious Confucian scholars, Daoist practitioners, Buddhist monks, etc. Nowadays, Western religions, thoughts, and cultures have entered CHCs and influenced almost every aspect of life. These global interactions neither simplify nor homogenise, but instead diversify and intensify different modes of life and value systems around the world. There are still distinctions between cultures of the CHCs and the West. Hence, I wish to specify the distinction of CHCs with regard to writing to explore the way Chinese character writing hinges on the deep-seated elements of philosophy in history and to investigate the potential in articulating education in a different way brought about by unique and age-old writing in the postmodern era.

In discussing the ancient classics, I do not intend to refer to the texts with archaeologically proven authorship. Many Chinese classics are compilations of texts over hundreds of years. Every classic, whether the *Daodejing* (or *Laozi*) or

the *Zhuangzi*, represents a tradition that a system of thought is formed by the contributions of many, even though there may be incoherence and inconsistencies under philosophical scrutiny. This is just how the classics become a part of culture and life and receive influence in return.

Notes

- 1 Confucius said, 'There are three things of which the superior man stands in awe. He stands in awe of the ordinances of Heaven. He stands in awe of great men. He stands in awe of the words of sages. The mean man does not know the ordinances of Heaven, and consequently does not stand in awe of them. He is disrespectful to great men. He makes sport of the words of sages' (*Analects*, *Ji Shi*, 16.8; trans. Legge, 1861).
- 2 Chengyang Li has given a number of scholars who self-claimed to be Daoist-Buddhist-Confucian. The famous and admired poet Táo Qían (陶潛 365–427 CE) is typical. See Li (1999), pp. 152–156.

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Thinking education through the spoken and the written word

草木之生，華葉青蔥，皆有曲折，象類文章，謂天為文字，復為華葉乎？宋人或刻木為楮葉者，三年乃成

（論衡，自然篇）。¹

Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man!

– Francis Bacon, *Of Studies, Essays*, 1996

Are there differences in thinking and understanding between different languages? What does this difference mean to education? In real life, I experienced a ‘cultural shock’ related to ‘words’ when I entered the Western world from a Chinese-speaking society. While it is reckless to infer anything general from personal experiences, what intrigues me is that societies that speak different languages have different ways of dealing with spoken and written languages. This divergence is particularly conspicuous between Western societies and the Chinese-speaking world, or between phonetic language societies and the ideographic language world. Hence, I modified my question thus: what is meant by the difference between Chinese and Western ways of thinking in terms of the relationship between spoken and written language?

Before examining the relationship between speaking and writing, let me first clarify the meaning of the terms ‘Western’ and ‘Chinese’. By using the term ‘Western’, we run the risk of considering all Western societies uniform; further, the concept of ‘Chinese’ is even more unclear. Therefore, we can say that these two concepts are rather used in a loose and relative sense. Further, by the term ‘Chinese’, I refer to Chinese societies as having a history of influence from ancient Chinese culture, especially from the history of using the Chinese language – the logographic or ideographic language. In contrast, the Western way of thinking, concerning language, is characterised by alphabets and phonetic languages. It is certain that the Chinese language is different from Western languages, but I am not interested in how they differ from each other in terms of grammar or syntax. What interests me is a deeper difference that lies

in the relationship between speech and writing; in other words, the difference between the spoken word and the written word. This difference ignites the journey of exploration throughout this book.

Voice, logos, and bias

What is the difference between speech and writing? Is writing not a record of speech and speech, in turn, a record of inner thinking expressed aloud? We might answer these questions by considering the views of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1966). Saussure (1966) considers writing subordinate and external to speech, referring to it as ‘unrelated to its inner system’ (p. 23). He also asserts that ‘[l]anguage and writing are two distinct systems of signs; the second exists for the sole purpose of representing the first’ (Ibid., p. 23). As for the differentiation between languages, Western languages are considered to belong to the phonetic language system group, whereas Chinese belongs to the logographic system group. Saussure (1966) claims that the world’s writing systems can be divided into two types: ideographic and phonetic. He states,

- 1) In the ideographic system each word is represented by a single sign that is unrelated to the sounds of word itself. Each written sign stands for a whole word and, consequently, for the idea expressed by the word. The classic example of an ideographic system is Chinese.
- 2) The system commonly known as ‘phonetic’ tries to reproduce the succession of sounds that make up a word. Phonetic systems are sometimes syllabic, sometimes alphabetic, i.e. based on the irreducible elements used in speaking (Saussure, 1966, pp. 25–26).

Saussure also mentions a quantitative difference in a tendency of Chinese language compared with Western languages:

The statement that the written word tends to replace the spoken one in our minds is true of both systems of writing, but the tendency is stronger in the ideographic system. To a Chinese, an ideogram and a spoken word are both symbols of an idea; to him, writing is a second language, and if two words that have the same sound are used in conversation, he may resort to writing in order to express his thought.

(Saussure, 1966, p. 26)

Although Saussure claims that Chinese as an ideographic language has a stronger tendency to use the written word than do Western languages, he still takes the written word as subordinate or secondary to the spoken one. This view, wherein speech or voice is prioritised over writing, is what Derrida calls phonocentrism.

Phonocentrism, Derrida (1976, 1978, 1982, 2016) argues, has dominated Western intellectual history. The study of language throughout Western intellectual history devalues writing and considers it an appendage to speech, a mere technique, and even a menace (Spivak, 1976). Western intellectual history, from the ancient pre-Socratic Greeks to contemporary times, is a history of giving ‘privilege of sound in idealisation, the production of the concept and the self-presence of the subject’ (Derrida, 2016, p. 12). In his many works, Derrida discusses the meaning of phonocentrism (and logocentrism) by examining some key thinkers. At the beginning of *Of Grammatology* (2016), he provides three statements about phonocentrism and its complicities – logocentrism and ethnocentrism. He writes,

- 1 *the concept of writing* in a world where phoneticisation of writing must dis-simulate its own history as it produces itself;
- 2 *the history of the metaphysics*, which, in spite of all differences, not only from Plato to Hegel (even including Leibniz) but also, beyond their apparent limits, from the pre-Socratics to Heidegger, has always assigned the origin of truth in general to the logos: the history of truth, of the truth of truth, has always been, except for a metaphorical diversion that we shall have to consider, the debasement of writing, and its repression outside ‘full’ speech.
- 3 *the concept of science* or the scientificity of science – what has always been determined as *logic* – a concept that has always been a philosophical concept, even if the practice of science has constantly challenged the imperialism of the logos, by invoking, for example, always and ever increasingly, non-phonetic writing (Derrida, 2016, pp. 3–4).

In other words, Western intellectual history is founded on the logos, which is transmitted and communicated primarily through voice, in terms of phonetic expression. Non-phonetic expression is a derivative of phonetic expression and therefore is secondary, auxiliary, and supplementary to it. Furthermore, the trilogy of phono – logo – ethnocentrism determines the meaning of the signifiers and thereby produces distinction and exclusion, hierarchy and violence.

As Derrida reveals, the voice has been perceived as inseparable from the mind/soul/thought/logos in the Western philosophical tradition. Derrida (2016, p. 13) writes: ‘What is said of sound in general is a fortiori valid for the *phone* by which, by virtue of hearing – (understanding) – oneself-speak – in-dissociable system – the subject affects itself and is related to itself in the element of ideality’. The voice is the inner thought, the presence of the cogito, consciousness, subjectivity. Thus, ‘all signifiers, and first the written signifier, would be derivative. The written signifier would always be technical and representative’ (ibid., p. 12). This line of thought has a history – the tradition of phonocentrism and, simultaneously, logocentrism – that ranges from Plato to Aristotle, Hegel to Husserl, and Rousseau to Saussure. Within this tradition is

an ‘absolute proximity of voice and being, of voice and the meaning of being, of voice and the ideality of meaning’ (ibid., p. 12).

Derrida points out that phono-logocentrism implies an ethnocentrism that prefers a phonetic language system to non-phonetic systems. The non-phonetic system is perceived as a system within which the signs are secondary and backward, immature and inadequate, inaccurate and weak, to express the inner thoughts. Further, non-phonetic signs have the potential to menace and abuse the meaning of the language. In Western intellectual history, Hegel is considered by Derrida as a key contributor to the construction of phono – logo – ethnocentrism. For Hegel, rational thinking and logical thinking are the essence of humanity, distinguishing humankind from beasts. Yet, logical thinking must be communicated through logical language, which is phonetic language:

Into all that becomes something inwards for man, an image or conception as such, into all that he makes his own, language has penetrated and everything that he has transformed into language and expresses in it contains a category – concealed, mixed with other forms or clearly determined as such, so much is Logic his natural element, indeed his own peculiar nature.
(Hegel, 2001, p. 5)

What distinguishes a human being from an animal is the ability of logical speech. As a result, a fully developed language that can express logical thoughts is fundamental to human existence. A language that possesses many logical expressions, such as prepositions and articles, is good for thought because the abundance of logical expressions can adequately express any thought. For Hegel, Chinese is not a fully developed language because ‘the Chinese language is supposed not to have developed to this stage or only to an inadequate extent’ (Hegel, 2001, p. 5). Hegel is not the only scholar who views the Chinese language with disdain. The earliest systematic Chinese studies, or sinology, began in the sixteenth century in the West with the Jesuits gaining entrance into China (Zurndorfer, 1995). The Jesuits’ studies about China covered a wide range of fields, from geography, history, botany, and medicine, to Confucianism and language. For the Westerners, the Chinese characters were strange and nonsensical at first sight. In 1668, John Wilkins (2002), one of the founders of the Royal Society, writes:

These Characters are strangely complicated and difficult as to the *Figures* of them . . . Besides the difficulty and perplexedness, of these Characters, there doth not seem to be any kind of Analogy . . . betwixt the shape of the Characters, and the things represented by them, as to the Affinity or Opposition betwixt them, nor any tolerable provision for necessary derivations.
(pp. 450–451)

Seventeenth-century Western scholars viewed Chinese as a set of characters written as incomprehensibly weird figures. In addition, Chinese phonology

does not make sense due to its vast arbitrariness. Even a century and a half later, Hegel shows similar scorn towards the Chinese language, describing Chinese as ‘imperfection’ and lacking ‘the objective determinacy that is gained in articulation from alphabetic writing’ (Hegel, 1894, p. 243).

As Derrida reveals, the ‘Chinese prejudice’ (p. 86) is paradoxical. On the one hand, it is shown in the contempt of phonocentrists such as Hegel. On the other, it is expressed in the hyperbolic admirations of some, like Leibniz (1981), who is eager to determine a model of universal script from Chinese because it ‘seems to have been “invented by a deaf man” (*New Essays*)’ (Derrida, 2016, pp. 85). Indeed, the seemingly contradictory disdain and admiration are both effects of ethnocentrism.

In addition to the ‘Chinese prejudice’ or the ‘European hallucination’ that demonstrates ethnocentrism in conspiracy with phonocentrism, another example is found in Derrida’s discussion about Lévi-Strauss’s ‘writing lesson’.

In the chapter titled ‘A Writing Lesson’, Lévi-Strauss (1974) describes an interesting story or an ‘extraordinary incident’ about the anthropologist’s meeting and exchange of gifts with natives living in the Amazon – the Nambikwara. As Lévi-Strauss (1974) notes, the Nambikwara neither have a written language nor know to draw signs, aside from ‘making a few dotted lines or zigzags on their gourds’ (p. 296). During his earlier visits, the anthropologist had handed out sheets of paper and pencils to the natives and observed that

[a]t first they did nothing with them, then one day I saw that they were all busy drawing wavy, horizontal lines. I wondered what they were trying to do and then it was suddenly borne upon me that they were writing, or to be more accurate, were trying to use their pencils in the same way as I did mine. (Lévi-Strauss, 1974, p. 296)

What happened next is of great interest. The chief asked Lévi-Strauss for a writing pad. This request and the following performance of the chief showed that, among the Nambikwara people, the chief was ‘the only one who had grasped the purpose of writing’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1974, p. 296). The chief and the anthropologist were working together. This was a very interesting scene in the book. The chief said nothing but presented wavy lines that he drew on the pad and showed to the anthropologist, as if they could read and communicate with each other through ‘writing’.

The chief had a certain experience of ‘writing’ as depicted. Then, in the meeting when the ‘extraordinary incident’ occurred, the chief was described as doing something more ambitious, because, perhaps, he had his fellow men there.

... he took from a basket a piece of paper covered with wavy lines and made a show of reading it, pretending to hesitate as he checked on it the list of objects I was to give in exchange for the presents offered me.

(Lévi-Strauss, 1974, p. 296)

This drama sets Lévi-Strauss (1974) thinking deeply about the chief's intention: was the chief deluding himself or trying to astonish his companions regarding his role as an intermediary agent or in alliance with the white men and sharing their secrets? After the meeting and the exchange of gifts, Lévi-Strauss gained a clearer perspective on writing. Nevertheless, as Derrida deliberates on the Nambikwara episode in 'A Writing Lesson', he argues that Lévi-Strauss' view implies a deep-seated phono-logo-ethnocentrism.

First, Lévi-Strauss claims that no writing is involved in the Nambikwara language. As a matter of fact, it is. Derrida (2016, p. 133) cites a passage from Lévi-Strauss: 'In that they imitated the only use that they had seen us make use of our notebooks, namely writing, but without understanding its end or scope. They called the act of writing *iekariukedjutu*, namely: "making stripes"'. Since the Nambikwara have a name for writing, it means they understand and perceive what writing means. It is an evasion, due to the ethnocentrism, to translate it as 'making stripes' or 'making lines'. Derrida argues that whatever term we use to translate *iekariukedjutu*, e.g., 'to scratch', 'to engrave', 'to claw', 'to scrape', 'to incise', 'to trace', 'to imprint', etc., cannot deny its implication of the signification of writing in Nambikwara language (Derrida, 2016, pp. 133–134).

Derrida then returns to the anecdote regarding the chief and the writing pad. He reiterates and elaborates upon Lévi-Strauss's afterthoughts about the 'extraordinary incident' with the comments that each element, each *seman-teme* of the story, 'refers to a recognised function of writing: hierarchisation, the economic function of mediation and of capitalisation, participation in a quasi-religious secret' (Derrida, 2016, pp. 136–137). All these elements are evidence of writing. More important are two significances drawn from the afterthoughts, which verify the *arche-writing* – the 'very thing that cannot be reduced to the form of *presence*' (p. 61), a language working 'in the form and substance of graphic but also in those of nongraphic expression' (p. 65), 'the movement of the *sign-function* linking a content to an expression, whether it be graphic or not' (p. 65), 'the play of difference' (p. 118), and 'that opens speech itself' (p. 138). First, '[t]he appearance of writing is *instantaneous*. It is not prepared for. Such a leap would prove the possibility of writing does not inhabit speech, but the outside of speech' (p. 137).

Second, Lévi-Strauss makes a distinction between the sociological and the intellectual ends of writing. For Derrida (2016), an ultimately profound sense of writing drawn out of this distinction is that 'writing cannot be thought outside of the horizon of intersubjective violence', and therefore nothing, even science, can radically escape it. Yet, as Derrida criticises, Lévi-Strauss did not do justice to the Nambikwara act of writing. Nor does he do justice to the writing itself. This is due to the implied ethnocentrism presumed by Lévi-Strauss.

Derrida's discussion on the Chinese prejudice and the writing lesson demonstrate the conspiracy of phonocentrism, logocentrism, and ethnocentrism that has dominated Western metaphysics. For non-phonetic language users,

what can we learn from or respond to the critique? Returning to the original question, if thinking in different languages – phonetic and non-phonetic, or phonetic and ideographic languages – makes a difference, what does the difference mean? Following Derrida's critique that phonocentrism, logocentrism, and ethnocentrism inseparably conspire, and that phono–logo–ethnocentrism is typically Western, what can we find in a different field, where the language used is not phonetic and the language is more ocularcentric than phonocentric (e.g., Chinese-speaking societies)? Can we find a way out of this trap set by the trilogy: phono–logo–ethnocentrism? Or, what profundity is revealed in terms of the tradition and culture from the perspective of non-phonetic language as contrasted with phonetic language?

Writing/word matters

Can we find a way out of the trap deployed by the collusion of phonocentrism, logocentrism, and ethnocentrism by means of thinking in non-phonetic language? Before seeking the answer, let me clarify something specific and interesting about the word *word* in Chinese and its implications for education.

The preceding discussion focuses on speaking and writing, or the related objects: the spoken word and the written word. The word *word* in English indicates both the spoken word and the written word. In Chinese, the spoken word is 言 (yán) or 話 (hà), whereas the written word is 字 (zì) or 文字 (wénzì). As we look more closely, we understand that in ancient Chinese, the spoken word is 言 (yán), and the written word is 文 (wén). In modern times, 話 (hà) is more often used for the spoken word, while 字 (zì) is used for the written word. According to the first Chinese character dictionary, *Shuowén Jiězì*, 話 (hà) means 'to be good at speaking' (善言) (Xǔ, n.d.). As for the two-character word 文字 (wénzì), its origin etymologically implies a rich visual sense. As written in the *Shuowén Jiězì*,

Tsang Chieh at the beginning of the invention of *writing* depicts according to the natural figures and so the 'vein' or 'venation' (wén) is grasped. Then forms and sounds are added to the figures to make 'words' (字 zì). The vein is the basis of realistic depiction; the word (字 zì) is named as it is generated (孳 zī) [from proliferating veins or venation]. Writing on bamboos or silk is named 'script' (shu). 'Script' (shu) means [to script] whatever as it is.

(*Shuowén jiězì*, preface 1:2; my translation)²

The original written word is 文, meaning stripes, lines, patterns, or threads, which can be found in the natural environment. With the progression of time, the number of written words is increasing. At a certain point in the past, the written word 字 (zì) was formed by borrowing the word 'increase' (孳 zī). The etymology of the written word 文字 interestingly displays the close relationship

between Chinese character and vision. Derrida is also aware of this point. He cites from the French sinologist Jacques Gernet:

The word *wén* signifies a conglomeration of marks, the simple character of writing. It applies to the veins in stones and wood, to constellations, represented by the strokes connecting to the stars, to the tracks of birds and quadrupeds on the ground (Chinese tradition would have it that the observation of these tracks suggested the invention of writing), to tattoo and even, for example, to the designs that decorates the turtle's shell.

(cited from Derrida, 2016, p. 134)

Drawing on Gernet, Derrida casts doubt on the phonocentric assumption that speaking precedes writing. Furthermore, writing is the mediator not of voice but of sight. This might provide us with a clue towards thinking of writing and speaking in terms of education.

Unlike speaking, writing as a state of being literate is highly educational. To recognise, read, and write the word, one must go through a process of institutionalisation. 'The process of putting spoken language into writing is governed by consciously contrived, articulable rules' (Ong, 1982, p. 81). Learning to write takes effort. It is an intentional, conscious, and strenuous task. In contrast, learning to speak, the mother tongue in particular, is natural and spontaneous. 'Oral speech is fully natural to human beings in the sense that every human being in every culture who is not physiologically or psychologically impaired learns to talk' (Ong, 1982, p. 81). The situation of being illiterate means that one is able to speak a language but is unable to read and write it. Sometimes, the opposite situation occurs: one is able to read and write a language but is unable to speak it. In the former case, one can speak but not read or write a language for a particular reason – for example, where immigrants or the underclass have not received proper formal education and are illiterate. They learn the spoken language in a natural and spontaneous way but can neither read nor write. In the latter case, people who can read and write one language but not speak it must have learnt the language on purpose, through a designed and planned process, i.e., education. This situation can be found in second-language learners who are not confident about their ability to pronounce correctly or address in sound grammatical constructions; thus, they avoid speaking in this second language. It is noted that writing is an epoch-making technology (Coulmas, 1996, 2003; McLuhan, 1962; Ong, 1967, 1982). The so-called literate and non-literate cultures are distinguished by the presence (or lack thereof) of visual linguistic signs, i.e., written scripts. Therefore, the issue of writing as well as the written word are fundamental to education. Learning to write and recognise written words can be viewed as the core focus of education in any civilisation. For literate cultures, the process of mastering writing is a cardinal part of the education process. Moreover, what distinguishes writing educationally from speaking is its relationship with study (Ong, 1982). For a study to be conducted, there must be

something that can be cultivated, analysed, examined, and investigated in detail, i.e., written words or written texts. The spoken word alone cannot sustain study because 'after the speech was delivered, nothing of it remained to work over' (Ong, 1982, p. 9). Overall, the concept of writing is essentially educational. The ability to write is central to the whole task of education. The cultivation of a writing subject – one who is able to write – is the goal of educational task.

The written word as the human artefact varies across cultures and incorporates large parts of cultural particularities from each civilisation, from the invention and formation of the word, to the institutionalisation and the code of writing, to the style and formality of writing, etc. Writing enables and, in turn, is enabled by education. Communication and translation between different language systems generate new meanings because words, phrases, and terms that have never appeared in one culture must be presented in another. Among the languages with written systems, Chinese characters could be some of the most difficult to learn to write. In comparison with Western languages, the Chinese language system requires visual orientation for using ideographic signs. In this view, it is fascinating to explore the relationship between the visually oriented Chinese writing and the Chinese way of thinking, as doing so will surely illuminate our understanding of education in Chinese-speaking societies.

As mentioned, writing is the cultural artefact and is incorporated as part of education. The Chinese language is very different from most of the world's phonetic language systems with respect to the features of written words and empirical phenomena within the lifeworld. First, the Chinese spoken system uses monosyllabic words, and the written sign is the character. In the case of Western languages, the spoken systems are mainly phonetic, and the writing systems are alphabetic. The recognition of a word consists of pronouncing it according to the corresponding alphabet. It is possible for one to pronounce a word without knowing its meaning. People who have learned phonics can pronounce words without knowing what the words refer to. Having phonic knowledge about the relationship between the sounds and the spelling patterns representing the sounds enables one to read, but not to understand, an unfamiliar word. In contrast, the use of Chinese characters heavily relies on visual ability since characters originating from pictograms are ideograms. It is barely possible to pronounce an unknown Chinese word, let alone perceive its meaning. The Chinese written system imports much more visual dependence than Western systems. We may conclude that vocalicity is to phonetic languages as visuality is to Chinese. Thus, similarly, phonocentrism is to Western thinking as ocularcentrism is to Chinese.

In a debate on the Chinese visual written word in eighteenth-century Europe, Hegel debases Chinese language and philosophy. Hegel scorns the Chinese language and describes Chinese as 'imperfection' and as lacking 'the objective determinancy that is gained in articulation from alphabetic writing' (Hegel, 1894, p. 243). For Hegel, a language that possesses many logical expressions, such as prepositions and articles, is good for thought because the abundance of

logical expressions can express thought adequately. Compared with the German language, 'the Chinese language is supposed not to have developed to this stage or only to an inadequate extent' (Hegel, 2001, p. 5). In contrast, Leibniz (1981, p. 290) highly praises Chinese characters simply because they are capable of 'speaking to the eyes', a powerful description that shows the value of vision-dependence.

The signification of the word 'word' in Chinese has nuances not present in Western languages. The term 'word' in ordinary linguistic usage – both in Chinese and in English – is a single unit of language that has meaning and can be used to refer to either a spoken or a written word. The perplexing distinction is that in English the 'word' lays stress on the 'spoken word', whereas Chinese emphasises the 'written word'. For example, in his discussion on the signification of words, John Locke (1975) makes the point that thoughts and ideas are in the human mind, 'invisible, and hidden from others' (p. 405). Internal ideas are made external and apparent to others by sounds as words. A human being is, by nature, able to use his or her mouth to frame articulate sounds – 'which we call Words' (Ibid., p. 402). Locke (1975, p. 405) says that '[t]he use . . . of Words, is to be sensible Marks of *Ideas*; and the *Ideas* they stand for, are their proper and immediate Signification'. Locke continues to say,

Words in their primary or immediate Signification, stand for nothing, but the Ideas in the Mind of him that uses them, however imperfectly soever, or carelessly those Ideas are collected from the Things which they are supposed to represent.

(1975, p. 405)

One articulates words to express one's ideas and thoughts to another – the hearer – by sounds. The word is the auditory and audible mark – the spoken word. What differentiates the word from the noise lies in the 'constant connexion between the Sound and the *Idea*' (Locke, 1975, p. 408). A meaningful sound is a word, whereas a meaningless sound is simply a noise. Locke does not mention writing at all. We may assume this is because writing, in Locke's view, is nothing but the visual mark, the secondary sign of recording of the sound. Locke discusses imperfection and abuse of words. However, he focuses on the relationship between sounds and ideas rather than on that between speech and writing. It is obvious that the word as a signifier stands more for the spoken word than for the written word. Western intellectual history places obvious importance on the spoken word over the written word.

The Western mentality of the word as the spoken word is also manifest in many other philosophers' thoughts. The French philosopher and sociologist Jacques Ellul, in his *The Humiliation of the Words* (1985), shows his angst about visual reality superseding words (which are verbal) with the aid of modern technology. Ellul agrees that the human experience includes the universe of the word (hearing) and the universe of the image (seeing), both of which are related. The relationship between seeing and hearing should not be severed because

these two senses are parts of the human existence. Nevertheless, he insists to 'side with the entire current thought that makes *spoken* language the basis of human specificity' (Ellul, 1985, p. 3). In his view, human spoken language transcends the written language: 'Human spoken language is characterised precisely by these elements we have mentioned: overflowing of limits, going beyond, and destructuring what can be conveyed in tactile and visual language' (Ibid., p. 3). There is one decisive reason for Ellul to assert the superiority of spoken language over written language: written language is a set of collections of visible signs that stabilise meanings, whereas human spoken language cannot be reduced to the coherent collection of signs. The meaning of spoken language is ambiguous and shifting. Hungarian critic Aron Kibédi Varga's (1989) assertion may be taken as a provisional conclusion: the word was assumed to belong to the mere domain of being heard. Since writing was invented, the word has been assigned to the additional domain of being seen. Overall, the term 'word' in Western language indicates both the spoken word and the written word. More often, though, 'word' stands for the spoken word.

In contrast, in Chinese, 'word' gives a direct hint of the written word. 'Word' is generally translated as 字 (zì). In Chinese, a literate – a person able to read and write – is translated as '識字者' (shì zì zhě), meaning one who recognises words. Yet, an illiterate person can speak well, using a lot of words in one's speech without knowing how to write. The 'word' (字) in the Chinese context is closely related with visual recognition.³ But those who cannot read and write do speak. In Chinese, the ability to speak is not to have words but to address utterance (說話, shuō huà). In English, the 'word' indicates both spoken and written words, whereas in Chinese, 字 (zì, word) indicates the written word and 話 (huà, utterance or speech) the spoken word. Thus, the term 'word' (zì) in Chinese connotes the visual aspect rather than the aural. This is a subtle difference in the use of 'word' between Chinese and Western ways of thinking. Again, it vindicates the trend of ocularcentrism in the Chinese language system.

In addition to being found in Chinese culture and social life, the ocular-centric tendency is gaining support in brain research. Abundant research in neurolinguistics strongly supports the idea that Chinese characters are processed as graphics and are thereby vision dependent (Gu, 2000; Hansen, 1993; Koyama, Hansen & Stein, 2008; Sasanuma, 1974, 1975; Sasanuma & Fujimura, 1971, 1972). Japanese language has two different types of characters: kanji (ideograms) and kanas (phonograms). Neurologists discovered that one Japanese aphasic patient shows different abilities in writing or reading kanji and kanas. This difference indicates that ideographic words and phonographic words are processed in different areas of the human brain.⁴ I do not mean to propose that biological determinism further fortifies cultural determinism. Neurological studies have shown that the human brain is not a physiologically static organ but is the centre of the nerve system with neuroplasticity. The neurolinguistic research reveals that different language systems may represent different modes of operation of linguistic behaviours that are activated and controlled by different parts of the brain.

If we examine ancient Chinese texts, we will discover that the ancients regarded the written word and writing with great respect. According to the oldest Chinese dictionary, *Shuowén Jīezì* (說文解字, by Xǔ Shèn, 許慎 58–147 CE), the word plays a tremendously significant role in politics, ethics, education, and metaphysics:

The overall written language (wén zì, word) is the foundation of classics and arts and the initiation of sovereignty of kingdom. It is what the former generations relied on to transmit culture to later ages. Men of later times will rely on it to understand antiquity. Therefore, it is said, ‘The upholding of the foundation generates the foremost principle’.

(*Shuowén Jīezì*, preface 1:13; trans. Connery, 1998, p. 39; my modification)⁵

According to Xǔ Shèn, writing is highly regarded, both as the source of principal truth and as the basis for developing and passing canons and doctrines to later generations. The canons and doctrines have been connected with the justification of political authority. In addition, the statement ‘The upholding of the foundation generates the foremost principle’ means that the establishment of script is necessary for bringing forth the truth. The script is taken as the most fundamental to worldly affairs. The practices are executed within the limits of script, or word. This is an apparent truth that has been confirmed by the wordaholic phenomenon. As the way of acting and doing is de facto regulated by the script, will the way of thinking, the way of philosophising, be bound to the script? To what extent, and in what sense, is the way of thinking bound to the word? The written word is a reservoir that holds the legacy and unique characteristics of culture. As the Chinese written word may be one of the most unique and original signs,⁶ the inquiry into written characters could reveal some of the particularities that indicate the ‘Chinese’ way of thinking.

Two characteristics that can be derived from the wordaholic scenarios mentioned previously are visual primacy and written words (characters) orientation. These characteristics distinguish Chinese ocularcentrism from Western visual cultures in that the visible written words dominate the Chinese eye, while linguistic or conceptual metaphors – such as ‘the light of truth’, ‘darkness as innocence’, or ‘the enlightenment’ – are likely to be the focus of Western visual culture.⁷ It seems that Chinese ocularcentrism aims at concrete objects, whereas Western ocularcentrism targets abstract concepts. In Western and Chinese cultures are different versions of ocularcentrism with different preferences. I do not mean that there is no metaphor related to vision in Chinese language or philosophy. Nor do I assert that Western visual culture is all about metaphors, as some critics (Ellul, 1985; Ong, 1982) have asserted. Modern technologies do play an important role in visual culture. What I argue is that Chinese ocularcentrism has a relatively stronger inclination to emphasise concrete objects, especially the written word, than does Western ocularcentrism. There are visual metaphors and rhetoric in Chinese language. The epistemic view of ocularcentrism and orientation with the written word is coined ‘the Chinese graphocentrism’.

Notes

- 1 'When plants and trees grow, their flowers and leaves are onion green and have crooked and broken veins like ornaments. If Heaven is credited with having written the above mentioned characters, does it make these flowers and leaves also? In the State of Song a man carved a mulberry-leaf of wood, and it took him three years to complete it' (*Lùnhéng*, 54; trans. Forke, 1907).
- 2 倉頡之初作書，蓋依類象形，故謂之文。其後形聲相益，即謂之字。文者，物象之本；字者，言孳乳而寢多也。著於竹帛謂之書。書者，如也。(《說文解字卷一序》1:2)
- 3 The 'word' here is understood in the current context of ordinary language usage, not in the etymological context. In ordinary language, the one-character word *zi* (字) and the two-character word *wén zì* (文字) are interchangeable, both referring to 'word'. Yet from the perspectives of etymology and lexicography, *wen* and *zi* may indicate two slightly different scripts. *Wen* means the form of writing without the mediation of sound; *zi* may indicate the form of writing with consideration of sound. See Bottéro, F. (2002). Revisiting the *Wén* 文 and the *Zì* 字: The great Chinese character hoax. *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities*, 74, 14–33. Nowadays, the word *wén* is more often used to refer to a piece of literary composition, e.g., an essay or a treatise. Moreover, the Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279 CE) scholar Dài Tóng (戴侗) makes a comparison between *míng* (名) and *zì* (字) in terms of the aural/visual contrast in his *Liushugu* (六書故), which shows the visual orientation of *zi*. See Jane Geaney (2010) Grounding 'language' in the senses: What the eyes and ears reveal about *míng* 名 (names) in early Chinese texts. *Philosophy East & West*, 60(2), 251–293.
- 4 In a case report, Sasanuma (1974) describes that a patient who exhibited the syndrome of alexia with transient agraphia caused by a cerebrovascular accident showed different strategies in reading and writing Japanese kana (syllabic symbols) and kanji (ideographic symbols). In the case of the kanji system, the patient used the strategy of a direct graphic-meaning association. In the case of the kana system, he used an indirect graph-meaning association. The finding indicates that 'the process of *kana* and *kanji* represents distinctively different modes of operations of linguistic behaviour' (p. 96).
- 5 蓋文字者，經藝之本，王政之始。前人所以垂後，後人所以識古。故曰：「本立而道生。」(《說文解字卷一序》:13).
- 6 As William G. Boltz (2001, p. 1) points out, in human history, writing was invented *ex nihilo* four times, and only four times: in Egypt, in Mesopotamia, in Mesoamerica, and in China. See Boltz, W. G. (2001). The invention of writing in China. *Oriens Extremis*, 42, 1–17.
- 7 In Western intellectual history, there has been a long-term dispute between discourse privileging sight and discourse in favour of voice. From this perspective (when the reference is a language other than Chinese), Western thought can be seen as visually oriented. According to scholars such as Dewey (1960), Jay (1988, 1993, 2002) and Kavanagh (2004), European philosophy since Plato has been strongly dominated by the visual paradigm – or in Dewey's words, 'the spectator theory of knowledge'. Plato's well-known cave allegory imports the value of the ideas of light, sight, and vision (Irigaray, 1985; Nye, 1993). The sun, the light, is described as the absolute truth and intellect although it can only be seen by reason – the eyes of the soul or the eyes of the mind – but not by eyes as organs – the eyes on the head (Kavanagh, 2004). After centuries, Descartes and the Enlightenment thinkers use a lot of models and precepts based on vision such as 'objectivism, reflection, critical rationality and subjectivism' (Kavanagh, 2004, p. 448). According to Kavanagh (2004), the philosophy of this group is underpinned by a certain 'spectatorial epistemology'. Yet, since the time of Bergson, there has been an intellectual trend against privilege of sight and for vocal primacy, which can be seen as the 'linguistic turn'. A number of philosophers, linguists, and theorists in many different fields, such as hermeneutics, critical theory, literary criticism, postmodernism, structuralism, etc., who have turned against Cartesianism and Enlightenment thought, take the position of safeguarding the primacy of orality (Jay, 1988; Kavanagh, 2004). The notion of privileging sight has been criticised

as ‘fetish or idol Western culture’ (Jay, 2002; Mitchell, 1987). As Arendt (1978, p. 122) states, ‘Since Bergson, the use of the sight metaphor in philosophy has kept dwindling, not surprisingly, as emphasis and interest have shifted entirely from contemplation to speech, from nouns to logos’. An echo of the vocal primacy in the field of educational research can be found from a lot of works pleading for ‘voice’ and ‘discourse’. Many works of educational research have been published with voice-derivative words in their titles, such as discourse, dialogue, conversation, narrative, communication, and so on in recent decades. Nevertheless, the appeal for speaking and the using of sound metaphors is a reaction to the visual paradigm, which can be seen as an association with phonocentrism. I am not aiming to solve the debate between visual and voice orientations with this book. The point in the contrast between phonocentrism and ocularcentrism in the Western intellectual world is that the opposition between vision priority and voice primacy is in relation to the contrast between writing and speaking, because ‘writing is largely a visual exercise, in contrast to speaking, which is centered on the sense of hearing’ (Kavanagh, 2004, p. 449).

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