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Acknowledgements

Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 8 have drawn upon the ensuing publications:

Gu, Yueguo, 2009. Four-borne discourses: Towards language as a multi-dimensional city of history. In Li Wei and Vivian Cook, *Linguistics in the Real World*. London: Continuum, pp. 98-121.

Gu, Yueguo, 2010. The activity type as interface between langue and parole, and between individual and society: An argument for trichotomy in pragmatics. *Pragmatics and Society* 1: 1, 74-101.

Gu, Yueguo, 2012. Discourse geography. In James Paul Gee and Michael Hanford, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis*. London: Routledge, pp. 541-557.

Gu, Yueguo, 2017. Chinese calligraphy. *Encyclopedia of Chinese Language and Linguistics*, 5-volume set, (associate editor). Leiden: Brill, 2017.

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1.1 An overview

This monograph has been long coming. As part of the “Windows to Chinese Civilization and Culture Series”, the first draft of the manuscript was tried out as an introductory textbook for overseas students who would like to learn Chinese writing in Beijing Institute of Graphic Communication during the academic years 2016—2019. It was not intended to be a workbook for foreigners to practice writing Chinese characters. Rather its primary objective was to provide students a focus tour into Chinese culture through a zoom-in look into the mechanism of Chinese characters, which are regarded as prototypical of what Chinese culture feels like, viz. in the Chinese mind and cognition. This objective was maintained in subsequent revisions of the manuscript and became the theme of Part II of the present work: *The Chinese Character in Cross-Cultural Perspective*. There are 4 chapters covering the ensuing topics:

- Divination, oracle bone inscriptions and mechanisms of inscribing (Chapter 5)
- Chinese orthography: Unification and standardization (Chapter 6)
- The Chinese character: Its myth and power (Chapter 7)
- The art of Chinese calligraphy (Chapter 8)

Each of the topics is elaborated both intra-culturally, viz. within Chinese culture per se, and inter-culturally, viz. the same themes in the world context. The inter-cultural element is somewhat a bit tongue in cheek, since it is touched upon very superficially. It provides at best a cross-cultural perspective in which the Chinese counterpart is reviewed.

Part I of the monograph, *The Chinese Character: Theoretical Explorations*, is derived from four published papers and an invited speech at the University of Zurich concerning Chinese writing system as a whole (see Acknowledgements for details). As the subtitle indicates, it attempts to explore some theoretical issues about Chinese writing. Theoretical issues are by definition general themes concerning all writing systems. In the context of the world’s writing

systems, Chinese characters occupy a unique position. The most distinctive of all is the continued, non-disruptive use of characters for about four millennia, outliving all ancient writing systems in the world, e.g., the Mesopotamian script, the Egyptian hieroglyphs, and the Mayan script. What is significant is the fact that Chinese characters, be it about 4000 years old, are as much alive and energizing as ever before. They have played a vital role in and will continue to do so in constructing a special layer of the Chinese language cityscape in the ancient China, in the Imperial China, in Modern China, and in the present-day digital China.

This is the theme of Chapter 2 bearing the title *Chinese Language as a Multi-Dimensional City*. Building on Wittgenstein's metaphorization of language as an ancient city, the Chinese language cityscape comprises four dimensions or layers: the Land-Borne Situated Discourse (LBSD), a dimension as old as the Peking Man, the Written Word-Borne Discourse (WWBD), a dimension first constructed by oracle bone inscriptions during the Shang Dynasty, the Air-Borne Situated Discourse (ABSD), a dimension first appearing in the late Qing Dynasty, and the Web-Borne Situated Discourse (WBSD) being constructed only recently at the turn of the 21st millennium.

In the dimension of the Land-Borne Situated Discourse, Chinese civilization and culture depend on oral-aural transmission and face-to-face contact dissemination. Cultural knowledge relies on the cross-generation memory capacities for cultural inheritance, which are notoriously unreliable and error-prone. The Written Word-Borne Discourse, adding an extra-dimension to the LBSD, makes cultural knowledge enduring and transmissible, transcending both here-and-now space and time. In view of cultural knowledge transmission and inheritance, the WWBD is indispensable without which Chinese culture would have remained oral-aural only. Furthermore, the other two dimensions, the ABSD and the WBSD, are constructed on the basis of the WWBD.

One naturally poses this question: What are the factors that make the Chinese characters as a writing script live for so long? In stead of searching for historical explanations, we adopt a strategy of modeling, a research methodology extensively used in natural sciences and increasingly in social sciences and humanities too. An ecological model of Chinese writing system is presented. It comprises three subsystems, viz. the production system, the consumption system and the dissemination system, the three of which operate on one base, and one environment, viz. the Spoken Word base and the social-cultural-political-economic environment respectively. It is argued that it is this

complex system that has enlivened the Chinese characters as a writing system. Chapter 4 spells out the details of this model.

1.2 The Spoken Word: The base of writing

The term Spoken Word in capital case indicates a technical usage. The author has benefited a great deal from Ong's seminal study of the Word as well as orality.

Today we have often to labor to regain the awareness that the word is still always at root the spoken word. Early man had no such problem: he felt the word, even when written, as primarily an event in sound. Today there has grown out of and around the spoken word a vast network of artificially contrived media—writing, print, electronic devices such as sound tapes or computers ... and other complex contrivances. These media are a great but distracting boon. They overwhelm us and give our concept of the word special contours which can interfere with our understanding of what the word in truth is, and thus can distort the relevance of the word to ourselves. (Ong, 1981 [1967]: ix-x)

The “early man” *felt* the word, which is the Spoken Word. What is centrally important is the fact that it is a natural product of human evolution. Human newborn babies, being normal and healthy, will be able to speak it, first a monosyllable word, then a disyllabic word, then a chain of words, without making laborious efforts in the way adults learn a foreign language. The Spoken Word is a natural “gift” (the word borrowed from Laver's book title *The Gift of Speech*), and everyone is endowed to possess it.

The Spoken Word is defined technically as a unit of thought. Interestingly Duan Yucai, in his *Critical Commentary* on Xu Shen (许慎)'s *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* (《说文解字》), alludes to a similar idea.

聲注解：音也。音下曰：聲也。二篆爲轉注。此渾言之也。析言之，則曰：生於心有節于外謂之音。宮商角徵羽，聲也。絲竹金石匏土革木，音也。《樂記》曰：知聲而不知音者，禽獸是也。（段注说文·第十二卷·耳部）

Yin (音) originates from the heart-mind and shows outwards externally through channeled articulation. In our terminology, this yin is equal to the Spoken Word, which is indeed the thought spoken out. Sound without the input from thought or heart-mind is a sheer sound only. Animals hear the thoughtless sound, whereas humans understand the thought-loaded sound.

Many students of writing uphold the position that genuine writing systems, no matter what type, must have the Spoken Word as its base, without which writings would remain visual drawings only. This view is not unanimously adopted, though and remains controversial. Chapter 4 will examine various positions and support the stance of the Spoken Word as the base of writing.

1.3 Basic flow of ideas

The monograph is organized in a non-traditional way. It does not start, as expected, with rock drawings, visual marks, and so on discovered in Paleolithic and Neolithic sites in China — Chinese proto-writings as it were, followed by discussions of oracle bone inscriptions, bronze inscriptions, etc. Rather, Chapter 2 commences with the state of the art of the Chinese language cityscape at the turn of the new millennium. As suggested above, the language cityscape of the present-day China is four-dimensional, covering a very long span of time and space. In Wittgenstein's words (1997 [1958]: 8e), this language cityscape displays “an ancient city”, in which is found “a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses”. In our terminology, the LBSD is the oldest house, while the WBSD is the newest one (see detailed discussion of Wittgenstein's metaphor in Chapter 2).

Our treatment of Chinese characters as Chinese writing system is backwards, i.e., from the present-day to the ancient Shang Dynasty (1600—1046 B.C.). Part I focuses on the state of the art of the present day, while Part II highlights some essential issues of how the Written Word Borne Discourse (WWBD) was first constructed in the Shang, Qin and Han Dynasties. The content flow of the monograph is best visualized as if one looks at the Chinese language cityscape first from the top fourth floor (the WBSD), then down to the third floor (the ABSD), then further down to the second floor (the WWBD), and finally to the ground floor (the LBSD). This is matched up with a time travel, viz. from the present-day China, to the later imperial China, to the Shang Dynasty China, and as far back as the Peking Man China.

1.4 Theoretical probing: The nature of Chinese characters

As suggested above, the ecological model, comprising three subsystems operating on one base in one environment, is an attempt to face the inquiry of what makes the Chinese characters as a writing system live for so long. There

is another theoretical issue the monograph takes and attempts to offer some further clarifications, viz. the perennial puzzle about the nature of Chinese characters.

In textbooks, web pages, even in some serious academic works, the Chinese character is taken as an archetype of picturesque writing. It is even suggested that the reader gets meaning straight by looking at characters, just like one gets meaning by looking at picture drawings found in children's picture books. This cannot be further away from scientific truth. It is based on exaggerations and hearsays.

Regarding Chinese characters assumed to be picturesque, with the shape of strokes rendering its meaning transparent, Coulmas remarks thus:

One of the reasons why Western intellectuals have long been intrigued by Chinese writing is that it has been conceived, mistakenly, as many would argue today, as a system that speaks almost directly to the mind by means of visual images without mediation by the sound shapes of linguistic units; a system of ideograms similar to Arabic numbers or the ampersand “&”. Inaccurate reports by Christian missionaries have fostered this belief. ... did much to establish the common view that Chinese characters are ideographs, each one of which “represents an idea” (Coulmas, 1991: 104-105)

Not just missionaries, but also sinologists hold fast to the belief that Chinese characters are “pictographic, symbolic and ideographic”. Creel is cited as a prominent representative.

The most prominent defender of the notion that Chinese writing is ideographic in modern times is Creel who, in the 1930s and 1940s, engaged in a famous controversy with his colleague Boodberg. He was convinced that in the development of writing the Chinese preferred “to continue along the pictographic, symbolic and ideographic path rather than to specialize on phonetics” ... (Coulmas, 1991: 105)

Historical studies of the world's writing systems indicate a general pattern of development, that is, from sheer picture drawings, to language-related visual graphs, to abstract linguistic symbols. Clodd, for a convenient and conceptual grasp, draws “four well-marked stages”:

- (a) The MNEMONIC, or memory-aiding, when some tangible object is used as a message, or for record, between people at a distance,

and also for the purpose of accrediting the messenger. ...

- (b) The PICTORIAL, in which a picture of the thing is given, whereby at a glance it tells its own story.
- (c) The IDEOGRAPHIC, in which the picture becomes representative, i.e. is converted into a *symbol*.
- (d) The PHONETIC, in which the picture becomes a phonogram, or sound-representing sign. The phonogram may be—(1) *verbal*, i.e. a sound-sign for a whole word; (2) *syllabic*, i.e. a sound sign for syllables; or (3) *alphabetic*, a sound-sign for each letter. (Clodd, 1912: 35-36; italics original)

As Clodd points out, “it is in the passage from (c) to (d), whereby constant signs are chosen to stand for constant sounds, that the progress of the human race was assured, because only thereby was the preservation of all that is of abiding value made possible” (Clodd, 1912: 36). The “constant signs”, ideographic or phonetic, for “constant sounds” constitute a crucial condition for becoming a writing system. This condition is recaptured in our ecological model in terms of *the Spoken Word as the base of writing*.

Here at this point one may probe further by asking: What exactly does it mean by the Spoken Word as the base of writing? Bloomfield, in his now classic work *Language*, reflecting upon the relation between language and writing, makes this famous remark: “Writing is not language, but merely a way of recording language by visible marks” (2001 [1933]: 20). It is crucial to appreciate Bloomfield’s remark in its context, both narrative and historical. Chapter 1 of *Language*, entitled “The Study of Language”, presents a literature survey of studies of language prior to his monograph, covering a wide historical spectrum from the ancient Greek studies, Latin grammars, Indian grammar, to comparative philology, as well as his contemporary studies. All these studies, at the risk of overgeneralization, rely on written texts in one way or another. To Bloomfield, to quote,

Again and again, scholarship has approached the study of language *without actually entering upon it*. Linguistic science arose from relatively practical preoccupations, such as the use of writing, the study of literature and especially of older records, and the prescription of elegant speech, but people can spend any amount of time on these things without actually entering upon linguistic study. (italics added)

What makes Bloomfield claim that those studies have been carried out

without actually entering upon language? Because they were dependent upon writing, which is NOT language, but merely a way of recording it!

Then what is language?

All languages were spoken through nearly all of their history by people who did not read or write; the languages of such peoples are just as stable, regular, and rich as the languages of literate nations. A language is the same no matter what system of writing may be used to record it, just as a person is the same no matter how you take his picture. (Bloomfield, 2001 [1933]: 20; italics added)

The LBSD, viz. Land-Borne Situated Discourse, is close, but not equivalent, to Bloomfield's view of language as spoken by all speakers of a speech community. The Spoken Word, the back bone of the LBSD, is primary and oracy is independent from literacy.

A challenge may be raised here: Does this monograph merely reinvent the wheel that was made almost a century ago by Bloomfield? Does this monograph offer any thing new? The answer is a big YES. The four-borne discourses, modeling on Wittgenstein's language as an ancient city, presupposes a notion of language much deeper, broader than that held by Bloomfield. It is evolutionary, biological, psychological and social — all in one. Speech is not equivalent to language, as it is implicitly assumed by Bloomfield, but it is one modality of language. Sign is another modality of language.

In the model of four-borne discourses, writing plays an active role, not just a representing role, in constructing a language cityscape. In other words, the Written Word Borne Discourse is given a relatively independent mode of existence. It is relative because it depends on the dynamic feeding of the Spoken Word for active living. It is relative also in another sense in that, once its connection with the Spoken Word is cut off, for example, all the speakers die out, the WWBD becomes dead too, that is, it is frozen in a state of a dead body of documents and texts.

DeFrancis (1989: 48-49) observes:

... the degree of writing's independence from speech is thus a matter of great disagreement. At one extreme is the complete dependence of writing drawn from Bloomfield's pronouncement on the subject. At the other is the complete independence claimed by proponents of pictographic and ideographic writing. In between are all sorts of gradations based on differing evaluations of actual systems of writing.

In a sense Chapters 2, 3 and 4 of the monograph are all attempts to elaborate the interactions between the Spoken Word and the Written Word. It is hoped that they may throw some fresh light on the controversy.

1.5 Limitations of the monograph

This monograph was composed with overseas readership in mind, hence its subtitle “A Window to Chinese Civilization and Culture”. As mentioned above, the manuscript of Part II was actually first tried out with overseas students in China. Students of Chinese native scholarship on Chinese writing may feel disappointed. For instance, there is a no survey of the Chinese literature on writing, nor is there discussion about the native conception of 文字学. The reason for this neglect is that we wanted to have a narrow focus, viz. on the character-based Written Word as a mode of discourse, and its relation to the Spoken Word, i.e. the primary mode of discourse. This constrained focus also disallows us to examine properties of belles letters such as poetry, novels, prose, and so on.

文字学, as defined in Tang Lan (2005) is partially covered in Chapter 6. It is addressed under the concept of orthography. Since this chapter is meant to be pedagogical rather than theoretical, the orthographical treatment avoids in-depth theoretical discussions. It remains informative, but superficial.

Finally, Chinese characters as a writing system receive complaints about being cumbersome, imperfect, even primitive, and the biggest complaint of all is its learnability: It is viewed as the hardest of all writing systems to learn. Closely connected with learnability is the fate of Chinese characters as a writing system. Will the Chinese character-based writing system eventually become alphabetized? In theories of the world’s writings there is a fundamental hypothesis that Coulmas names the *Alphabetic Hypothesis* (Coulmas, 1991: 159). Gelb (1963) was implicated to be the originator of it. The wording Gelb actually adopts is “tendencies toward alphabetization” (Gelb, 1963: 203). Coulmas phrases it as “a natural development that leads from logograms through syllabic signs to the decomposition of syllables into signs for consonants and vowels” (Coulmas, p.159). Chinese characters are often classified as representing logograms, and according to this hypothesis, they will eventually be alphabetized. The invention of the Pinyin system seems to testify the hypothesis.

According to our ecological model, it takes three subsystems—the production system, the consumption system, and the dissemination system—as

well as one base, the Spoken Word, and the social-political-economic-cultural environment for any alphabetization to be effected. Challenges and complexities involved are so formidable that the project of this kind is inconceivable.

1.6 How to use the book

All the chapters were designed for self-contained reading. Having said this, there is a predominant theme underlying them all, namely an ecological approach to writing epitomized in our ecological model. So there are cross-chapter references popping up from time to time. Chapters 2, 3, 4 of Part I are ideally read together to achieve a more coherent overall picture.

All efforts are made to spare linguistic terminologies. In places where they are unavoidable, glosses are provided. However, some basic knowledge of modern linguistics is assumed. As a reading aid, a glossary of terms is provided in appendix.