

The tao and the logos revisited

Zhang Longxi

Almost thirty years ago, in March 1985, my essay “The *tao* and the *logos*: notes on Derrida’s critique of logocentrism” was published in the University of Chicago journal *Critical Inquiry*, based on the Eberhard L. Faber Class of 1915 Memorial Lecture I had delivered at Princeton University one year before. That essay later became the initial idea that developed into my first book in English, *The tao and the logos: literary hermeneutics, East and West*, published by Duke University Press in 1992. The mid-1980s was a time when Jacques Derrida’s name was ringing loud in every comparative literature department in America, and deconstruction and *différance* were major catchwords of the day in literary studies. The emphasis—or rather, as I saw it, an overemphasis—on difference of all kinds predominated in all disciplines in the humanities and social

sciences: gender difference, racial or ethnic difference, difference in sexual orientation, class difference, cultural difference, and of course difference between the East and the West. The last was nothing new, for the poet of the British Empire, Rudyard Kipling, had long been famous for his often-quoted line: “Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.” Surely nineteenth-century imperialism and colonialism, the whole ideological apparatus of racism, national hygiene and eugenics, were all propped up on the theoretical foundation of racial and cultural differences. Not even was the linguistic difference new in any fundamental sense, for Hegel had already argued in his preface to the second edition of *Science of logic* that in Western languages “prepositions and articles denote relationships based on thought,” but the Chinese language is underdeveloped, for it is “supposed not to have developed to this stage or only to an inadequate extent,” whereas German in particular has “many advantages over other modern languages; some of its words even possess the further peculiarity of having not only different but opposite meanings.”¹ For Hegel, German and Western phonetic languages in general are superior means of expression when the self-consciousness of the knowing self tries to find articulation.

According to Hegel, the ideal possession of knowledge is attained when truth or *logos* is consciously grasped as

1 G. W. F. Hegel, *Science of logic*, trans. A. V. Miller, New York, 1976, p. 32.

articulated logical knowledge, as self-presence of self-consciousness. “The force of mind is only as great as its expression,” says Hegel; “its depth only as deep as its power to expand and lose itself when spending and giving out its substance.”² When the mind tries to express itself, however, it necessarily suffers from the process of alienation, for there is a gap between inner thinking as self-consciousness and language as outer expression. Inner thinking always suffers a loss when it gets into the form of an outer expression. Hegel argues:

Language and labour are outer expressions in which the individual no longer retains possession of himself *per se*, but lets the inner get right outside him, and surrenders it to something else. For that reason we might just as truly say that these outer expressions express the inner too much as that they do so too little.³

299

Following Plato and the entire tradition of philosophical idealism, Hegel does not so much denigrate language *per se* as he does its outer form, what he calls the “physiognomy and phrenology” of expression, that is, writing. In contrast, living speech is the form in which the inner self directly speaks and is immediately present. Speech, says Hegel, is

the form in which *qua* language it exists to be its content, and possesses authority, *qua* spoken word. (...) Ego *qua* this particular pure ego is non-existent otherwise; in every other mode of expression it is absorbed in some concrete actuality, and appears in a shape from which it can withdraw; it turns reflectively back into itself, away from

2 Hegel, *The phenomenology of mind*, trans. J. B. Baillie, 2nd rev. ed., London, 1949, p. 74.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 340.

its act, as well as from its physiognomic expression, and leaves such an incomplete existence (in which there is always at once too much as well as too little), lying soulless behind. Speech, however, contains this ego in its purity; it alone expresses I, I itself.⁴

300 Thus speech expresses the self “in its purity,” whereas the written form of language is always inadequate, always expresses “at once too much as well as too little,” an outer form of language that does not contain the self and its living voice. In Hegel’s view, Chinese as a largely non-phonetic language exemplifies this concrete actuality with little or no potential for metaphysical thinking, whereas German and Western alphabetic writing in general are far superior in registering the sound and the living voice. Chinese writing is not fully developed, says Hegel, because it “does not express, as ours does, individual sounds—does not present the spoken words to the eye, but represents (*Vorstellen*) the ideas themselves by signs.”⁵

What Hegel articulates here is of course the metaphysical hierarchy in the Western tradition, the alienation of inner thinking in speech and writing, which Derrida strongly criticizes as “*logocentrism*: the metaphysics of phonetic writing.”⁶ Deconstruction is first and foremost a radical critique of this logocentrism, the metaphysical hierarchy of thinking, speech, and writing, and in carrying out this cri-

4 *Ibid.*, p. 530.

5 Hegel, *The philosophy of history*, trans. J. Sibree, New York, 1900, p. 135.

6 Jacques Derrida, *Of grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Baltimore, 1976, p. 3.

tique, Derrida follows Nietzsche and Heidegger as predecessors in such radical philosophizing. When it comes to the difference between Chinese and Western writing, however, Derrida is in total agreement with Hegel in his understanding of the nature of Chinese as a language fundamentally different from that of the West. If Hegel denigrates Chinese as trapped in the outer form of writing without containing sound or the living voice, Derrida praises Chinese precisely for getting rid of the living voice, for having no *logos* as the phonocentric presence of the thinking self, the Cartesian *cogito*. Derrida's praise of Chinese as a language is diametrically opposed to Hegel's dismissal of Chinese, but both agree that Chinese exemplifies a graphic linguistic system fundamentally different from that of the West, thus both solidifying the East-West dichotomy, which has of course a long tradition in the Western conceptualization of China as its Other.⁷ 301

Relying on Ernest Fenollosa and Ezra Pound and their peculiar understanding of the Chinese written characters as presenting concrete *things* directly rather than representing abstract ideas and sounds, Derrida finds in the non-phonetic Chinese writing “the testimony of a powerful movement of civilization developing outside of all

7 I have discussed this tradition in another *Critical Inquiry* article, see “Myth of the other: China in the eyes of the West,” *Critical Inquiry*, v. 15, n. 1, Autumn 1988, p. 108-31, which is later revised to become Chapter 1 of my book *Mighty opposites: from dichotomies to differences in the comparative study of China*, Stanford, 1998, p. 19-54.

logocentrism.”⁸ In other words, he considers logocentrism to be uniquely Western. Within the Western tradition itself, he admires Pound’s imagism and Mallarmé’s symbolist poetics as something similar to the deconstructive effort to get outside the logocentric and phonocentric biases. Fenollosa took Chinese written characters to be “shorthand pictures of actions and processes,” which are thought to be valuable for their pictorial values.⁹ David Perkins perceptively describes the effect of Fenollosa’s view on Pound and how they understood Chinese written characters as a most appropriate medium for poetry:

302

The Chinese written language, it appeared, was undeviatingly concrete. Every word was an image; the line was a succession of images. Pound must have wondered how he might achieve an equivalent in English. The Chinese poetic line presented images without syntactical directions. Fenollosa’s manuscript “Essay on the Chinese Written Character” pointed out that nature itself is without grammar or syntax, so Chinese poetry may be said to come upon the mind as nature does. However the method might be explained, it was a succession of images without the less active, more abstract parts of language that ordinarily connect and interpret them and it afforded speed, suggestiveness, and economy.¹⁰

In Pound’s imagistic, “graphic poetics” Derrida finds an anti-phonocentric and anti-logocentric breakthrough, so he declares:

8 Derrida, *Of grammatology*, p. 90.

9 Ernest Fenollosa, *The Chinese written character as a medium for poetry*, ed. Ezra Pound, Square Dollar Series, Washington, D.C., 1951, p. 59.

10 David Perkins, *A history of modern poetry: from the 1890s to the high modernist mode*, Cambridge, Mass., 1976, p. 463.

This is the meaning of the work of Fenellosa [*sic*] whose influence upon Ezra Pound and his poetics is well-known: this irreducibly graphic poetics was, with that of Mallarmé, the first break in the most entrenched Western tradition. The fascination that the Chinese ideogram exercised on Pound's writing may thus be given all its historical significance.¹¹

The connection here of Fenollosa and Pound with Chinese written characters as the basis of an "irreducibly graphic poetics" is indeed a well-known story in the study of modern Western poetry, but it is well-known among sinologists as a serious misunderstanding and among students of modern poetry as a "creative misunderstanding." The sinologist George Kennedy dismisses Pound's translation of the Confucian *Analects* as "bad translation," even though he acknowledges it as "fine poetry," while the literary scholar Laszlo Géfin praises Pound's use of Chinese in his ideogramic poetics as "the most fruitful misunderstanding in English literature."¹² Both agree, however, that Pound's idea of Chinese as concrete images as a "misunderstanding." Pound is undoubtedly an influential figure in modern poetry, but insofar as the Chinese language is concerned, he would be the last person to rely on for understanding how that language actually works. Relying on Pound and seeing Chinese writing as fundamentally different from the Western phonetic writing, Derrida is thus

11 Derrida, *Of grammatology*, p. 92.

12 George A. Kennedy, "Fenollosa, Pound, and the Chinese character," *Selected works of George A. Kennedy*, ed. Tien-yi Li, New Haven, Conn., 1964, p. 462; Laszlo Géfin, *Ideogram: history of a poetic method*, Austin, Tex., 1982, p. 31.

not so different from Hegel and the traditional view of the East-West divide.

The more fundamental question is, however, whether logocentrism or the metaphysical hierarchy of thinking, speech, and writing is limited to Western concept of language only? Or is logocentrism—the privileging of the *logos* and the debasement of writing—symptomatic only of Western metaphysics? I chose to speak of the *tao* and the *logos* because in these two important terms we find some astounding similarities and unexpected affinities quite revealing of the ways in which thinking and language are conceptualized in the philosophies of the East and the West. *Logos*, as is well-known, is a Greek word that means both thinking (*Denken*) and speaking (*Sprechen*).¹³ Interestingly, the Chinese word *tao*, which is so crucial in traditional Chinese historical and philosophical thinking, also means thinking and speaking, thus signaling the duality of idea and articulation. We may wonder whether the similarities between the *tao* and the *logos* are really a matter of pure coincidence or serendipity.

Taoism is an important philosophical school in Chinese antiquity more than two thousand years ago. When its originator, the great philosopher Laozi, was asked to write a book to expound his ideas, the first thing he did was to point out the futility of writing a book to expound his ideas. Hence the first line in the *Laozi* or *Tao Te Ching*:

13 See Joachim Ritter and Karlfried Gründer (eds.), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, v. 5, Basel and Stuttgart, 1980, s.v., “Logos.”

“The *tao* that can be spoken of is not the constant *tao*.”¹⁴ It is important to realize that the verb translated here as “be spoken of” is also *tao* in the original text, and that the subtle play on the meanings of this word is totally lost in most English translations, which usually render this line as “the way that can be spoken of is not the constant way.” Here the word “way” as a noun and “speak” as a verb are all *tao* in the Chinese original. The same syntactic structure becomes clear when one reads the next parallel line: “The name that can be named is not the constant name.” In order to highlight Laozi’s punning on the word *tao*, I deliberately kept *tao* as a verb in my otherwise strange translation by transliterating the word, rather than rendering it either as “way” as a noun or as “speak” as a verb. My translation thus reads:

305

The *tao* that can be *tao*-ed [“spoken of”]
Is not the constant *tao*;
The name that can be named
Is not the constant name.¹⁵

It would be helpful to know the circumstances under which the book of the *Laozi* or *Tao Te Ching* was written, for the great historian Sima Qian (145?–90? B.C.E.) tells us in his biography of Laozi that the philosopher was rather reluctant to write the book:

14 Wang Bi (226–249), *Laozi zhu* [*Laozi with Annotations*], in v. 3 of *Zhuzi jicheng* [*Collection of Masters’ Writings*], 8 vols., Beijing, 1954, Chapter 1, p. 1. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Chinese are mine.

15 Zhang Longxi, “The *tao* and the *logos*: notes on Derrida’s critique of logocentrism,” *Critical Inquiry*, v. 11, n. 3, March 1985, p. 391.

Lao Tzu cultivated the *tao* and virtue, and his teachings aimed at self-effacement. He lived in Chou for a long time, but seeing its decline he departed; when he reached the Pass, the Keeper there was pleased and said to him, "As you are about to leave the world behind, could you write a book for my sake?" As a result, Lao Tzu wrote a work in two books, setting out the meaning of the *tao* and virtue in some five thousand characters, and then departed. None knew where he went to in the end.¹⁶

From this we realize that Laozi wrote the *Tao Te Ching* for the sake of laymen who were little equipped to have intuitive understanding, and the first thing he reminded his readers is that language is inadequate to express what the concept of *tao* really means. As an important commentator, Wei Yuan (1794–1856), explains,

306

The *tao* cannot be manifested through language, nor be found by following its trace in name. At the coercive request of the Pass Keeper, he was obliged to write the book, so he earnestly emphasized, at the very moment he began to speak, the extreme difficulty of speaking of the *tao*. For if it could be defined and given a name, it would then have a specific meaning, but not the omnipresent true constancy.¹⁷

The most illuminating commentary to date comes from the great modern scholar Qian Zhongshu (1910–1998), who not only points out the significant punning on the word *tao* (or *dao* in the pinyin transliteration) that highlights the difficulty of speaking of that which cannot be spoken, but also relates this to the Greek word *logos* with a similar duality of meaning:

16 Sima Qian, quoted in D. C. Lau (trans.), *Tao Te Ching*, Harmondsworth, 1963, p. 9.

17 Wei Yuan, *Laozi ben yi* [*The original meaning of the Laozi*], Shanghai, 1955, p. 1.

“The *dao* that can be spoken of (*dao*) is not the constant *dao*”; here the first and the third character *dao* is the *dao* as in *dao-li* [reason], and the second *dao* is the *dao* as in *dao-bai* [speech], or as in the line “*buke dao ye* [cannot be told]” in the poem “There is Thistle on the Wall” in the *Book of Poetry*, that is, words and speech. We may compare this with the ancient Greek word *logos*, which means both “reason” (*ratio*) and “speech” (*oratio*); in more recent times, some have argued that the proverbial statement that “man is the animal of reason” originally meant that “man is the animal that speaks.”¹⁸

It is interesting that as most important philosophical terms in classical Chinese and in ancient Greek, the *tao* and the *logos* contain the duality of thinking and speaking, the idea and its articulation, in one and the same word; and that in both traditions, thinking or the idea is thought to be beyond speaking or articulation. Laozi tells us that *tao* is really ineffable; that even the word *tao* is not its real name: “I do not know its name, so I arbitrarily call it *tao*”; thus “*tao* always remains nameless.”¹⁹ Moreover, in both traditions, we find a similar tendency to denigrate language as outer expression, particularly writing. Language is considered inadequate in expressing the inner concept, and *tao* as speech is inadequate to speak of *tao* as the ineffable idea. That is the point Laozi made at the beginning of his book, namely that it is impossible and futile to present the philosophical idea of *tao* in a book, even though he was, paradoxically, about

307

18 Qian Zhongshu, *Guan zhui bian* [*Pipe-Awl Chapters*], Beijing, 1979, 5 vols, v. 2, p. 408. Qian gives references in this passage to S. Ullmann, *Semantics*, 173. Cf. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Routledge, p. 18. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 1^e Hälfte, 3. Aufl., 165 (*der Mensch als Seiendes, das redet*).

19 Wang Bi, *Laozi zhu* [*Laozi with Annotations*], Chapters 25, 32, p. 14, 18.

to write that book. In other words, the debasement of writing is an idea very much imbedded in the non-phonetic Chinese tradition as well. This is also the point made by another great Taoist philosopher Zhuangzi in a famous story about the wheelwright Pian, who tells Duke Huan, when he finds the Duke reading in a hall, that the book he is reading contains “nothing but the dregs of the ancients!”²⁰ The Duke is not pleased and demands an explanation. The wheelwright then remarks that he found it impossible to teach even the art of wheel-making, presumably a much simpler matter than extracting wisdom from ancient books. “I can’t even teach it to my son, and my son can’t learn it from me,” says the wheelwright. “The ancients and what they could not pass on
308 to posterity are all gone, so what you are reading, my lord, is nothing but the dregs of the ancients.”²¹ For Zhuangzi, written words are harmful to intuitive understanding and memory. He says in another famous passage often alluded to in classical Chinese poetry and philosophy:

It is for the fish that the trap exists; once you’ve got the fish, you forget the trap. It is for the hare that the snare exists; once you’ve got the hare, you forget the snare. It is for the meaning that the word exists; once you’ve got the meaning, you forget the word. Where can I find the man who will forget words so that I can have a word with him?²²

The point of Zhuangzi’s question is of course that most people tend to *remember the word* but forget the meaning.

20 Guo Qingfan (1844–95?), *Zhuangzi jishi* [Variorum edition of the *Zhuangzi*], in v. 3 of *Zhuzi jicheng* [Collection of Masters’ Writings], p. 217.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 218.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 407.

So he is searching for a man who will *forget his words* so as to remember his meaning. Isn't that also the point Plato makes in *Phaedrus* when Socrates tells the story about the invention of writing? The Egyptian god Theuth presented his invention of writing to king Thamus, and the king commented on the invention, saying:

If men learn this, it will implant forgetfulness in their souls; they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks. What you have discovered is a recipe not for memory, but for reminder.²³

In the seventh philosophical letter, Plato puts it very clearly that “no intelligent man will ever be so bold as to put into language those things which his reason has contemplated, especially not into a form that is unalterable—which must be the case with what is expressed in written symbols.”²⁴ The idea expressed here is indeed very close to what Taoist thinkers thought of language, particularly writing. “This passage,” as Qian Zhongshu says after quoting it, “may almost be translated to annotate the *Laozi*.”²⁵

From the numerous quotations of philosophers of the East and the West we may conclude that the debasement of writing, the metaphysical hierarchy of thinking, speech, and written symbols, the critique of the inadequacy of lan-

23 Plato *Phaedrus* 275a, trans. R. Hackforth, in *Plato: the collected dialogues, including the letters*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1961, p. 520.

24 Plato, *Letter vii* 343a, *ibid.*, p. 1590.

25 Qian Zhongshu, *Guan zhui bian* [*Pipe-Awl Chapters*], n. 2, p. 410.

guage, particularly of writing, are indeed common to both the East and the West, and that Derrida is therefore *not* correct in regarding logocentrism as a uniquely Western phenomenon and in seeing Chinese as the opposite of Western alphabetic writing and exemplifying a sort of fundamental *différance* from the West. Derrida, of course, did not think so. In fact, I had a chance to meet Derrida and talk about my article before its publication in *Critical Inquiry*. He was lecturing in Yale at the time, and I gave him the manuscript of my essay. We met in his office at Yale and had a long talk in one afternoon. Derrida admitted that he did not know Chinese, but when he was writing *Of gram-*
310 *matology*, he said, he happened to be interested in the work of Fenollosa and Pound. I explained to him that Pound was definitely an important poet, but his understanding of Chinese was unreliable. On that point, he could not have much of an argument with me, but eventually Derrida asked me a loaded question: “Are you saying that Taoism and logocentrism are the same?” “No,” I said, and I tried to contextualize the question. “You are the *maitre de différence*,” I said. “When we say A and B, the two of course cannot be the same, but because you are saying that logocentrism is exclusively Western, I have to point out that the metaphysical hierarchy of thinking, speech, and writing exists in China as well. Suppose you or somebody with your influence were saying that logocentrism is exactly the same as Taoism, I would probably take a different stance and say, hey, wait a minute, there are significant differences between the two.” So it all depends on the context or situation of our

argument, and the situation I saw in American academic world at the time was an overemphasis on difference, particularly between China and the West. That explains why I wanted to point out some of the similarities between Taoist and Western ideas about language, speech, and writing. In China, as I also argued in my article, the importance of writing and of calligraphy as an art sort of deconstructed the metaphysical hierarchy long before deconstruction became hot and popular in American universities.

For Derrida, how the Chinese language actually operates was not the concern, for he was more interested in seeing Chinese writing as an alternative to the Western tradition of logocentrism. The desire to find a cultural Other was so strong that the reality of the Other hardly mattered, and when the reality contradicted the imaginary Other, the real Other was to be discarded. A Chinese tradition without the irksome logocentric-phonocentric baggage was just such a desideratum, in Derrida's view, to be cherished and admired, even though that was precisely the reason why Hegel thought Chinese was inadequate, underdeveloped, and unfit for philosophizing. It is interesting to note that in September 2001, Derrida visited China and had a lunch meeting with professor Wang Yuanhua, a distinguished senior scholar, arranged by Nicolas Chapius, the French consul-general in Shanghai at the time. As we read in an interview with professor Wang, the meeting was not that successful, because "in their conversation that lasted more than two hours, the focus was around a remark professor Derrida

made at the lunch table that ‘there is thought in China, but no philosophy.’”²⁶ That remark was meant to be a compliment, of course, but Wang Yuanhua was not particularly pleased. He understood Derrida’s point, but he disagreed nonetheless, for he later wrote:

Derrida’s remark that China had no philosophy, only thought, has caused some to have misunderstood him as denigrating Chinese culture. In fact, what he called philosophy was that which resembles Western philosophy in nature. He regarded Western philosophy as originating in Greece and centered on logos, which was precisely what he tried to deconstruct. Having said this, however, I believe that he made such a remark probably because few in the West had studied the metaphysical school of the Wei and Jin period, and therefore had overlooked it.²⁷

312 As an expert on the famous critical work, *Literary mind or the carving of dragons*, Professor Wang paid special attention to the ideas of the Wei-Jin period in Chinese history, roughly of the third and the fourth centuries, because that was a period of relatively free thinking when the Confucian orthodoxy set up in the Han dynasty collapsed, and Taoist metaphysics rather than Confucian ethics and politics became intellectually predominant and stimulating, reviving to some extent the lively philosophical debates from the pre-Qin antiquity. “The debates about the essence and the minutiae, about being and nothingness, and about language and meaning all concern ontological issues,” says

26 Wang Yuanhua, *Qingyuan jinzuo ji* [*Collection of Recent Works*], Shanghai, Wenhui, 2004, p. 26.

27 Wang Yuanhua, *Si bian lu* [*Dialectical Reflections*], Shanghai, Shanghai guji, 2004), p. 244.

professor Wang.²⁸ One of the most important philosophical debates of that period made inquiries into the nature of language and its adequacy, an important issue much discussed in contemporary philosophy. So for professor Wang Yuanhua as for many other Chinese scholars, to say that there is no philosophy in China is wrong, no matter whether this is meant as a dismissal, as by Hegel, or meant as a compliment, as by Derrida.

We are today entering a new century with lots of important changes taking place globally that put many of the old concepts and ideas in question, of which the East-West divide, the fundamental cultural differences between China and Europe, should certainly be reexamined and rethought. The *tao* and the *logos* are certainly different and have played important roles in the formation of very different cultures and traditions, but as I have always argued, differences are a matter of degree, not a matter of kind, and we can find all sorts of differences in focus and emphasis, but beyond all the differences there is always the possibility of cross-cultural understanding, the possibility of translation and communication, and there is always a larger context of comparison within which differences can be recognized and identified. There is no question that *tao* has important implications not just for Taoism, but for other Chinese philosophical schools as well, and *logos* energized the entire Western tradition not only as the philosophical notion in ancient Greece, but as the Word of God

313

28 *Ibid.*, p. 243.

Zhang Longxi

in its New Testament embodiment in Christian theological tradition. The differences between the two are of course not to be overlooked, but the shared or common philosophical issue dealt with differently in both traditions is what makes the hidden affinities discernible and significant. In our effort to reach out for others for understanding and peaceful coexistence, the comparability of the *tao* and the *logos* should guide us to a better future for the whole humanity.