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ABSTRACT CONCEPT FORMATION IN ARCHAIC CHINESE SCRIPT FORMS: SOME HUMBOLDTIAN PERSPECTIVES

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Foreword: Humboldt as an Empirically Based “Idealist”

In a paper that I presented in Berlin in 2005, I argued that Wilhelm von Humboldt, widely acclaimed as the father of general linguistics, can also be regarded as a German idealist. This is especially true if we, following in the footsteps of Heidegger and Mahnke, further broaden the concept of German idealism to cover the entire trend of the German humanistic tradition for which the formation and development of the human intellect remained a lasting concern. But as a German idealist, Humboldt’s basic philosophical position is much closer to that of Kant than to that of his immediate contemporary and professional colleague, Hegel. My key observation is that, while subscribing to the basic tenets of idealism or of the Geistesträdition in general, Humboldt avoids the tendency to over-speculate, as exemplified in Hegel. In terms of method, Humboldt closely follows Kant’s matter-form juxtaposition, to the extent that he always considers the more spontaneous or “speculative” part of the human intellect in conjunction with the more receptive and “empirical” part of it. The difference is that what for Kant is sensibility is, for Humboldt, sound, which Humboldt considers to be the most tangible and convenient “matter” that the human mind can work with and work on to find a path for self expression. Therefore, despite Humboldt’s loyalty to the problem of Geist (Mind/Spirit), his approach is empirically based, taking speech sound as a new point of departure and as its material means. Karl-Otto Apel has succinctly indicated that Humboldt is “no longer a speculative system builder,” and that the “emphasis of his program is based on empirical research.” It is with this linguistic turn, or with this “mediation through language,” as Ernst Cassirer has remarked, that “a new way or approach to the human sciences” has been found.

However, this empirical baseline of Humboldt does not prevent him from remaining an idealist, for he also developed in parallel a theory of linguistic form (Sprachform) and of “articulation” (Artikulation) to account for the spontaneous working of the mind on the matter of sound. As the founder of the new science of language, Humboldt adopts a deductive rather than an inductive model. For Humboldt, humankind is equipped with a capacity for language that allows us to “make infinite employment of finite means.” It was indeed this basic insight into the nature of language competence that inspired Noam Chomsky in his formulation of transformational generative grammar, which was emerging to challenge the more behaviorist approaches to language.
In contemporary linguistic theory, it is curious that Humboldt’s doctrine has been compared to both the “universalism” of Chomsky and the “relativism” of the so-called Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. But I think that both comparisons do not do full justice to Humboldt. First, while subscribing to some kind of linguistic universalism, Humboldt cares as much about the idiosyncrasies or diversities of the individual languages; second, instead of representing a simplistic language relativism, as suggested by Whorf’s “language world view” thesis, Humboldt does not consider language’s influence on thought to be a one-way process. Quite the contrary, he sees language and thought to be equiprimordial, coevolving not only ontogenetically in the individual speaker, but also phylogenetically for a nation. In short, Humboldt advocates a kind of universalism that makes allowance for each individual language to find its own pattern of internal growth so that all of its linguistic elements and resources can be optimally mobilized and brought into synergy. For Humboldt, language works and develops like an “internally connected organism” (innerlich zusammenhängenden Organismus).

Humboldt’s Understanding of the Chinese Language and Script

As a well-known polyglot, Humboldt evidences a broad and deep understanding of the Chinese language. Regarding the Chinese script, Humboldt leaves for our reflection many remarks that are sketchy but incisive. One main example is his distinction between a “script of words” (Schrift der Worte) and a “script of thoughts” (Gedankenschrift). While drawing this distinction, Humboldt explicitly ascribes the Chinese script to the latter in contrast to Indo-Germanic writings, which belong to the former. To underline the idiosyncrasy of the Chinese script as a “script of thoughts,” Humboldt suggests that the Chinese script has “in a certain manner embraced philosophical work within itself.” For the Chinese people, especially for those who have a great passion for the Chinese script and for those who work on philosophy, these remarks by Humboldt sound very appealing. But we should not be flattered by these remarks to the extent of losing sight of the inherent relationship of the Chinese script to the spoken language.

Let me explain. Generally, Humboldt’s characterization of the Chinese script as a “script of thoughts” should not be too simplistically understood. We know that in the Chinese script, each character possesses from the outset both a written form and a sound. Insofar as a script is meant to represent what is said, the Chinese script, like all other scripts, must first of all fulfill its role as a “script of words.” But unlike the alphabetical script, which offers a schematic way to represent the sounds, in the Chinese script the sound of a character is not necessarily evident in its written form. In the graph of a character, very often it is solely the thoughts behind the concept that are expressed rather than the supposed sound, which the learner has to acquire separately independent of the graph. More importantly, even with characters where sound tags do exist, there are two things that prevent the sound from fully collaborating with the visual graph. First, there is still no simple and schematic way of representing sound (unlike with the alphabet). Second, although the sound of the character
does have some relation to the latter’s meaning, this meaning or the content of the thoughts expressed in the character very often cannot be fully derived from the sound itself, which is basically monosyllabic and liable to cause confusion because of the abundance of homophones. Rather, the meaning of a character has to be traced through the various components of the respective script forms. Therefore, the Chinese script turns out to be relatively unsuccessful in its role as a script of words. It is in this way that the Chinese script has evolved from a script of words to be also a script of thoughts.

At this point we should note in passing that Humboldt’s distinction between a script of words and a script of thoughts was made a decade before the now much better known distinction between “logography” and “ideography,” a distinction traceable back to Pierre-Etienne Du Ponceau (1760–1844), but subsequently revived by I. J. Gelb and others. This historical note is important because it is the Du Ponceau lineage that has advocated the view that the Chinese script is not ideography but logography through and through, arguing that Chinese characters depict only words but not ideas. In fact, in my reception above of the Humboldtian distinction, I am of the opinion that the Chinese script is both a script of words and a script of thoughts, but that it is in the second role rather than the first that the strengths of the Chinese script are fully manifested. Here, I am fully aware that this view of mine might not be acceptable to mainstream sinology, which long ago adopted the Du Ponceau view. In fact, some more recent followers of Du Ponceau (John DeFrancis being the most outspoken) have pushed the logography position so far that they literally, often using intimidating words, forbid others to use the term “ideograph” (and “pictograph”) to refer to Chinese characters. Their stance in this matter is so strong that Chad Hansen has labeled it pejoratively as a “prohibitionist” claim, one he considers to be based on a “category mistake.” For Hansen, those taking the Du Ponceau position were confusing a supposedly “ersatz ideographic Mentalese” with “a real ideographic language like Chinese.” Whereas the former is objectionable because it is supposedly “private, mental, . . . obscure, mysterious, and redundant,” the latter, Hansen argues, is “a real, public, visible case of ideas operating out in the open.” Summing up his arguments, Hansen offers the following conclusion: “We have good reason, therefore, to reject this prohibitionist analysis of ‘ideographs’ and to continue to call the Chinese language ‘ideographic.’”

In the rest of this essay, I think that I don’t necessarily want to defend the use of the notion of ideography as a characterization of the Chinese script in general, for this would involve detailed and controversial discussion in general linguistics and in philosophy, as well as in semiotics. What I need to defend here is the overall irreplaceable role of the visual-graphical components as an effective and indispensable source of meaning of the Chinese script. But in order to do so, I am more than willing to align with Hansen to ignore Du Ponceauian “prohibitionism” by using the term “ideographic” intermittently, not so much as a generic characterization of the Chinese script, but at least in the translation of specific mechanisms of meaning constitution in the Chinese script, known since antiquity as the Six Ways (六書).
As I have explained above, a script of thoughts (ideography) is also a script of words (logography). It is true that some Chinese characters such as the loan characters are used purely as sound tags, and some other characters such as phonetic compounds do contain phonetic elements. But the outcome has been that the Chinese have collectively chosen not to rely very much on phonetic channels in the formation of their script. As far as semantics is concerned, it is obvious that, as in the case of all other languages, the sound aspect of the Chinese script does contribute to meaning, but Humboldt suggests that it is in the “visual” aspect of the script that meaning becomes more “obvious” (offenbar). He remarks that “the characters are nearly all composite; their parts jump almost straight into the eyes.” He even concludes that it is the script that has the stronger impact on the mind of the user, as it is the elements in the script that are cognitively suggestive and intellectually stimulating. As a result, in addition to some fragmentary sound tags, we find in the Chinese script a whole wealth of semantic information expressed through visual-graphical rather than audio-phonetic means. We witness very often the situation where, starting with a few simple and sensible components, and with the help of some imagination, extremely subtle and even idealistic meaning structures can be constituted. This might be the reason why Humboldt, as an “empirically” based idealist, considers the Chinese script to embody “philosophical work.”

As I have pointed out in an earlier paper, Humboldt’s emphasis on the role of the Chinese script is on a par with his understanding of the Chinese sound system. By comparing Chinese with other languages, Humboldt notes that the Chinese language exhibits a relative lack of phonic complexity. This alleged “phonic poverty” (lautliche Armut) can be seen in such features as monosyllabicity (morphemic-syllabic ratio approaching one), the isolation of sound and the resultant lack of morphological and grammatical markers, relatively few phonemes (excluding tones), and so on. Consequently, given these apparent “deficits,” one main question Humboldt has to answer is how did the Chinese language manage to prosper over the past millennia and to bear such fruits in poetry and philosophy? In the latter half of this essay I will emphasize that to find an answer to this question, Humboldt proposes the idea that the Chinese script exhibits the strong presence of “analogy of script” (Analogie der Schrift), which strongly compensates for its lack of phonic complexity. We will also see that it is precisely through the “analogy of script” that a large part of the task of abstract concept formation is achieved.

Abstract Meaning Constitution in the Chinese Script

Lishu Transformation and its Consequences
To gain better insights into the world of meaning of the Chinese script or to see how “philosophical work” is carried out therein, one has to get behind the barriers of lishu transformation (隸變) and return to older forms of Chinese script such as, for instance, oracle-bone script (hereafter OBS) and bronze script (hereafter BS). Lishu transformation is the developmental process of the Chinese script from its archaic and ancient styles into the classical (and for us today more or less legible) forms of writing, namely lishu 隸書 (= 漢隸, or “clerical script”) and kaishu 楷書 (= 今隸, or
“standard script”). Lishu transformation involves the parallel tendencies of li convergence (隸合) as well as li divergence (隸分). While the former is the tendency for originally disparate components to be stereotyped into one same way of writing, the latter is the opposite tendency for an originally identical component to be written differently when used in building up different characters. One main reason why archaic script forms are considered in this essay instead of modern ones is because, as a result of the lishu transformation, many cognitive components of the original script forms have been severely blurred, distorted, cross-matched, and confused. Thus, what remain in the modern script forms is no longer suggestive enough for any serious attempt to obtain an accurate etymological understanding of the Chinese script and its genealogy. It is only in returning to OBS and BS that we can recover otherwise lost information.

Because of the confusion caused by lishu transformation, it becomes clear to us that in our attempt to recover the cognitive contents of the characters we should no longer rely on the “radicals” (部首), which are precisely the results of lishu transformation. Rather, radicals should be supplemented, from the cognitive standpoint, by “components” (部件), which reflect the true structure of the script before the process of confusion.

The “Six Ways” of Chinese Character Formation

Regarding the formation and genealogy of the Chinese characters, one cannot bypass the doctrine of “Six Ways,” presumably known to Chinese scholars as early as the Eastern Zhou dynasty and systematically treated in the Eastern Han dynasty by Xu Shen. While a comprehensive account of the Six Ways would require a separate treatise, it is at least necessary to enumerate these six ways so that references can be made to them in our subsequent discussions. Since the Six Ways have been terminologically so disparately represented in the West, I will, for the sake of simplicity, list a few major translations (by Joseph-Marie Callery, L. C. Hopkins, Edwin Pulleyblank, Göran Malmqvist, and Steven Roger Fischer) in table 1. In the following pages when referring to the Six Ways I will use either the Chinese terms (in romanized form), or, when there is a need to use a Western expression, the translation of Göran Malmqvist, as the terms that he uses with substantive forms fit mostly into the context of our discussion. Note also Malmqvist’s preference for the term “ideographic,” as we have anticipated in our earlier discussion.

Of the Six Ways, the general opinion is that the first two (pictographs and ideographs) are direct descriptions of empirical objects and states of affairs, the next two (compound ideographs and phonetic compounds) are combinatory formations, and the last two (loan characters and derivative graphs) are ways of using existing characters. I would say that this is only a very rudimentary and contestable account that leaves many complexities unexplained and many theoretical issues unsolved. Again, since we are not making an attempt at a complete treatment of the issue, it is enough to point out that the six ways are in fact not distinctly separated means of character formation, but are intermingled and interrelated in the sense that each Way might comprise many sub-ways in which other Ways might have a role to play. For theoretical reasons, as we will see in the course of the following discussion, we will put
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1.</th>
<th>Six Ways of character formation (with examples)</th>
<th>S. R. Fischer</th>
<th>Pulleyblank</th>
<th>J. M. Callery</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Xiangxing</td>
<td>Xiangxing (imitating shapes)</td>
<td>Pictographic</td>
<td>Pictographic</td>
<td>Pictographic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Zhishi</td>
<td>Zhishi (indicating things)</td>
<td>Compound ideographs</td>
<td>Compound ideographs</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Huiyi</td>
<td>Huiyi (suggestive compound)</td>
<td>Compound ideographs</td>
<td>Compound ideographs</td>
<td>Compound ideographs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Xingsheng</td>
<td>Xingsheng (form and sound)</td>
<td>Compound ideographs</td>
<td>Compound ideographs</td>
<td>Compound ideographs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Jiajie</td>
<td>Jiajie (borrowing)</td>
<td>Compound ideographs</td>
<td>Compound ideographs</td>
<td>Compound ideographs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Zhuanzhu</td>
<td>Zhuanzhu (transfered notation)</td>
<td>Compound ideographs</td>
<td>Compound ideographs</td>
<td>Compound ideographs</td>
</tr>
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special emphasis on *huiyi* (compound ideographs) and *zhuanzhu* (derivative graphs, which we will name differently later).

As a means of representing speech and for constituting meaning, the Chinese script depicts sensible and concrete objects as well as more subtle and abstract concepts. Since this essay handles the problem of abstract concept formation in particular and not concept formation in general, one would be tempted to consider the pictographs, being the most concrete “Way,” to be only of marginal importance for our discussion. But at the very outset we need to point out that this view is seriously mistaken, as it fails to take note of the potential of the pictographs to be used not only “as such” but as components in building up more complex characters, including characters with abstract meanings.

If we look behind the barrier caused by lishi transformation and make a systematic account of the script components of the Chinese script in toto, we discover that despite the great number of characters subsequently developed and the wide spectrum of their meanings, the entire body of the Chinese scripts is made up, cognitively speaking, of only a relatively small set of components, which are themselves mostly sensible, empirical, and mundane in meaning, as in the following:

1. Human Body and Bodily Parts (人體及其部份): 手 (hand), 止 (foot), 人 (man), 女 (woman), 耳 (ear), 目 (eye), 口 (mouth)...
2. Bodily Movements and Physique (肢體活動/生理現象): 大 (big), 立 (stand), 步 (inverted foot), 步 (step), 身 (pregnant), 亼 (inverted mouth)...
3. Natural Phenomena (自然現象): 日 (sun), 月 (moon), 山 (hill), 石 (stone), 水 (water), 火 (fire), 土 (earth), 雨 (rain)...
4. Animals and Plants (動物植物): 牛 (ox), 羊 (goat), 犬 (dog), 馬 (horse), 銀 (bird), 魚 (fish), 竹 (bamboo), 木 (wood), 米 (rice), 米 (wheat), 草 (grass)...
5. Livelihood and Culture (生活文化): 斤 (axe), 戈 (dagger-axe), 門 (door), 宀 (roof), 皿 (utensil), 穹 (plough), 侖 (silk), 衣 (clothes), 豆 (vessel for food), 酒 (bottle)...
6. Indices and Symbols (指事符號): 点 (dot/mark), 一 (stroke), 八 (divided), 彡 (emissions, light/sound), 中 (middle)...
7. Polysemies and Indeterminates (多義或未定): 丐, 乙, 匕, 九...

In this list of script components, we notice that the first five types are mainly pictographs of objects that are mostly empirical and sensible in nature (whereas some components in the remaining two types are also based on sensible phenomena).

In this regard, the late Qing and early Republican Chinese scholar Zhang Binglin (1869–1936) has given us a rough idea how much weight this set of pictographs might carry in the overall constitution of meaning in Chinese. Although he was himself skeptical about the then newly unearthed oracle bone scripts, Zhang proposed in *The Origin of the Chinese Script* (文始) that the entire set of Chinese characters can be derived from what he called proto-scripts (初文) and quasi proto-scripts (準初文), which are together only 510 in number. Zhang then pointed out that
this “core” of the Chinese script is made up nearly exclusively of pictographs, simple ideographs, and their derivatives.30

Regarding componential analysis, besides traditional wisdom handed down from Chinese antiquity (including Xu Shen’s not unproblematic work) and the work of modern Chinese philological scholarship, I am inspired by the cognitive semantic principles advocated by George Lakoff at Berkeley, who, together with Mark Johnson and others, has founded the cognitive linguistic school. Lakoff’s and Johnson’s notions of bodily schemata and embodied mind are of much relevance, as they are in line with our observations that the archaic script components as listed above have much to do with the human body and are mostly sensible/tangible in nature.31

Yet, out of these predominantly sensible, pictorial components, not only physical objects or empirical states of affairs can be expressed, but also the most abstract (or abstruse) concepts. This is what we need to demonstrate, in what follows.

Abstract Concept Formation Exemplified through the Componential Analysis of Archaic Script Forms
To show how the Chinese script has, as Humboldt suggests, “embraced philosophical work within itself,” in what follows we will focus on some exemplary characters that exhibit different degrees of abstraction in meaning: 万, 它, 言, 災, 仁, 義, 思, 思, 念, 法, 律, 善, 考, 莫, 貫(貫), 艀.

Pure phonetic borrowing (rebus): the tale of the scorpion (figure 1). The script 万 (wan) is a frequently used character referring to the number “ten thousand.” Since antiquity, the first few “numbers” have been represented by the corresponding number of horizontal strokes, giving us the characters 一, 二, and 三 (meaning one, two, and three) that are still used today. For larger numbers, however, it would be increasingly inconvenient to have characters composed in the same way, and these greater numbers have to be composed otherwise. In fact, the remaining single-digit decimal numbers, from “four” through “ten,” were composed differently, and their interpretations remain controversial.

In the case of 万 萬, the situation was quite straightforward: despite the fact that the character has already been used since its earliest appearance in OBS to mean the number “ten thousand,” the original shape of the character, both in OBS and in BS, suggests clearly that it was originally a pictograph (象形 xiāngxíng) representing a scorpion. This character was subsequently used to mean “ten thousand,” presumably because in archaic speech the sound of the word “scorpion” was the same as or close to the sound of the numeral “ten thousand.”34 This gives us a typical example of a
“loan character” based on the principle of “phonetic borrowing” (同音假借) or rebus, which amounts to one of the six ways of forming characters for the Chinese script as enumerated by Xu Shen in the Eastern Han dynasty. This whole scenario was summarized by the Qing scholar Duan Yucai 段玉裁: “[Wan] was the name of an insect, but was borrowed (or loaned) as the name for the number ‘ten thousand,’ because ‘ten thousand’ has no proper graph of its own. Since this loan remained for long unreturned, the scholarly world eventually lost track of its original meaning.” In retrospect we know that as compensation for the unreturned loan, the character 蟰 (chai) was subsequently invented, which was nothing more than the “annotation” of the original 萬 with an additive semantic tag 虫, specifying that it is the insect and not the number that is meant. But eventually, this “additive character” (累增字), namely 蟰, became less well known than yet another character, 蝎.

Furthermore, people might not know that the character 万, nowadays used as the simplified form of 萬, was itself also a character of archaic origin, traceable back both to OBS and BS. Besides its other uses as a proper noun, the character 万 referred to musicians who worked in ceremonies: hence the expression 万人 (wanren). But it is precisely because of the supposed homophonic relationship of 万 with 萬 that the former has been used in parallel to the latter since ancient times to signify the equally homophonic notion of “ten thousand.” This seemingly trivial account of 万 shows us precisely that an abstract notion like “ten thousand” could be represented on purely homophonic principles by borrowing the sound arbitrarily from more than one extant character that were otherwise semantically unrelated.

Derivative (semantic) borrowing: from the snake to the “third person” (figure 2). In modern Chinese, the other loan character 它 (ta) is the expression for the “third person” singular pronoun corresponding to “it” in English or “es” in German. But a quick look at some tokens of this character in OBS and BS reveals immediately that the character was originally also a pictograph representing a snake. In a few rare OBS samples, a foot was placed in front of the snake to emphasize the dangerous nature of the animal depicted. In antiquity, 虫 and 它 were one and the same word referring to “snake.” How, then, did the subsequent meaning of 它 as “it” come about? Xu Shen gave us the answer to this question in the Shuowen 說文 some two millennia ago: “它 is a snake. . . . In antiquity, people used to live on grassland and worried about snakes. Therefore they greeted one another by asking the question ‘No snakes?’” After this had continued for some time, the word/character 它 acquired two derivative meanings: (1) It can refer to things related to bad luck. For example, oracle bones have been unearthed with the inscription text: “Has the King no bad
luck?”(2) After being used repeatedly to refer to the first object of discussion when people happened to see and greet each other, 它 eventually became the third-person pronoun in general, hence the meaning of “it.” Unlike the phonetic borrowing as exemplified by the character 萬, the borrowing of 它 as the third-person pronoun was probably not based on a pure rebus principle, but would have involved semantic linkage. We may call this “derivative borrowing” (引申假借), which amounts to another form of abstract concept formation. Finally, it might also be of interest to note that two of the first and second personal pronouns in Chinese are 自 (zi) and 女 (ru), respectively. From an etymological standpoint, such usage can easily be explained: 自 originally meant “nose,” from which the meaning “I” is derived, and 女 means “woman,” whom the speaker “I” would customarily address in the first place.

Language or speech visualized as “expressions” from the tongue (figure 3). In archaic Chinese, the character 言 (yan), which literally means “word” or “to speak,” exhibits a peculiar form of meaning constitution. In the OBS and BS samples of this character, we see clearly that the character is made up of the component 舌 or “tongue” at the bottom with an additional horizontal stroke at the top signifying the “word” supposedly expressed or uttered by a certain speaker’s tongue. Since the crucially important horizontal stroke is symbolic and abstract in nature, the character should be classified as a zhishi character or an ideograph (according to Malmqvist). Yet we should not lose sight of the fact that the component “tongue” (舌) at the bottom is but a typical pictograph, which is itself derived from the even simpler pictograph 口 or “mouth,” with the tongue proper protruding out of it. Therefore, starting from the pictographic component / radical 口, by two installments we get the character 言, which also functions as a radical and has in this way accounted for hundreds of more complicated Chinese characters. In addition to all these, two characters are particularly noteworthy. In BS, by adding still another horizontal stroke or a small circle inside the “mouth” component of the character 言 we get the char-
character 音 or "speech sound," which can be understood as that which is vocally "expressed" from the speech organ. By adding a circle right on the medial axis of the character 言 we get the character 意 or "meaning"/"intention." This suggests that meaning/intention is what is "circumscribed" or conveyed in the speech as such.

Besides the character 言, there are two other characters related to language and speech showing a semantic structure similar to that of 言. In the first place we have the character 日 (yue), which means to "say." Yue 日 is composed of 口 or mouth with an additional stroke visualizing something "said," as we usually see in a cartoon. Then we also have the character 今 (jin), which originally meant to sigh (吟, yin). Typographically, 今 is nothing but 言 (or an "inverted mouth") with an additional stroke, reaching downwards, signifying "exhaling" (sighing), bawling, or uttering something in a somewhat “top-down” manner. From this component 言 or 今, the characters 令 and 命 are derived, both of which mean "order" or "command." These examples show us one important thing: many zhishi characters do rely on pictographic components to yield their relatively abstract meanings.

The sources of "calamities" (figure 4). The character 災 (zai), which means calamity, disaster, or misfortune, is a most interesting character as far as its genealogy is concerned. While the contemporary written forms of 災 or 災 are obvious examples of huiyi (or compound ideographs), the character has also been formed at some stage according to the xingsheng 形聲 principle. In the examples listed above, the third to the seventh samples of the character (all from the pre-Qin era) can be interpreted (隸定) variously as 𤆎, 𢦔, 𢦏, 𢦒, or 烮, in all of which 才 (today pronounced cai) functions as a phonetic component. However, the interesting thing is that the use of a phonetic component does not seem to have satisfied the continued urge among the ancient Chinese to specify the true source of "calamity," which is effected by adding various semantic components to accompany the sound tag 才. As revealed in the characters named above, at least three main types of semantic components have been used:

- "water" (巛 + 才 → 𤆎),
- "fire" (火 + 才 → 𢦔),
- "warfare" (戈 + 才 → 𢦒), or
- their mixture (火 + 戈 + 才 → 烮),

—signifying the various sources of the disaster. This tendency was carried on even in the Han dynasty, as has been revealed in the last sample cited above (to be inter-
interpreted as 材, which is made up of the semantic component 示 and the phonetic component 才, specifying that the calamity was “God-sent” or coming from heaven. With all of this going on, it seems that for the notion of calamity the sound tag cai 才 was so marginal in comparison to the semantic components that it was eventually abolished altogether, thus making room for the subsequent huiyi character 灾, which was used for nearly two millennia until its recent replacement by the “simplified” character 災, which is in fact a revival of an OBS character (see second sample cited above) that was also huiyi by nature.50

Figure 5

A depiction of good personal attitudes (figure 5). The character 善 (shan) carries positive meanings, including “good,” “kind,” “virtuous,” “charitable,” and so on. But these virtues are abstract notions, the origin of which requires some explanation. In OBS, 善 is made up of “goat” (羊) and one or two “eyes” (目); in BS, nearly all extant script samples are made up of “goat” (羊) and 言. In the Shuowen, Xu Shen does not include 善 as a head character, but rather the other character 譫 (with two 言 instead of one) that is reminiscent of the BS script form, and his explanation for this is that “譫 means auspiciousness. It is composed of 言 and 羊 (goat) and it shares its meaning with 義 (appropriateness) and 美 (beautiful).”52 But this dictionary entry of Xu Shen needs further explanation in order to make sense for us today. The component 言 (made up of two 言) suggests two persons speaking to each other, thus symbolizing an interpersonal relationship. As for the component “goat,” we must know that besides referring to the animal, it also refers to a totem mask or headgear worn in some ancient ceremonies. It is for this reason that 羊 became a symbol of positive values in general; in fact 羊 has been used systematically in this way as a component in various semantically positive characters. This might be what Xu Shen had in mind when he said that “譫 shares its meaning with ‘appropriateness’ (義) and ‘beautiful’ (美),” as these characters, too, share the component “goat.”

Putting the preceding together, we can readily understand that 善 (the modern version of 譫) means the “good,” “kind,” and “caring” attitude that people show toward each other. For simplicity’s sake, later forms of 善 were written with only one 言; but judging from the predominance of 譫 in the BS,53 and the presence of the same character with even three 言 recorded in the Kangxi zidian,54 we can justifiably argue that, since antiquity, 善 as “goodness” has been understood not as a quality of a person per se, but is always interpersonal in conception. Lin Yiguang, a modern scholar, gave the following explanation: “Two 言 pertains to mutual kindness.”55 As for the character 善 in OBS (comprising the elements “goat” and one or two “eyes”), it is obvious that what is meant is also the good feeling that arises when people meet
and look into each other’s eyes. Here, the interpersonal implication is also unmistakable. Lastly, one might remark that, unlike “eye” and “goat,” the component “speech” (言) is itself already an abstract concept, the meaning of which has been explained in an example above.

“Ren” as a matter of “heart” (figure 6). In the Chinese tradition, ren 仁 and yi 義, conventionally rendered as “benevolence” and “righteousness,” are considered to be two cardinal virtues characteristic of Confucianism. But a closer look into the ancient/archaic components of these two characters will allow us to gain an alternative and much livelier understanding of them than has been suggested by traditional philosophical scholarship. The character 仁 (ren) was found only rarely in OBS and BS, and the written form was similar to the form of the character today, namely comprising the components “man” (人) and “two” (二), which again suggests a good relationship with people or the good attitude that people show toward others.57 However, in the Shuowen, under the entry for 仁, besides the standard explanation given above, Xu Shen also mentions the existence of an alternative archaic script form 忼, which is made up of the components 千 (thousand) and 心 (heart). This “archaic script form” (古文) mentioned by Xu Shen refers in fact to the scripts used during the Warring States period of the Eastern Zhou dynasty. While the meaning of 忼 might invite various conjectures (curiously, Xu’s remark has hitherto been overlooked or neglected), some recently unearthed bamboo tablets from the Warring States Period show that 仁 was indeed written in the Southern Chu State as 忼, with 身 above and 心 (heart-and-mind) below.58

With this new discovery, we can now infer that the supposed archaic script form 忼 mentioned by Xu Shen was probably the result of orthographic misunderstanding, since some scribes might have written 忼 as 忼. This explained, how should the newly found script 忼 be interpreted? One important clue lies in the upper part of the character 身, which, besides the usual meaning of “body,” originally referred to a “pregnant woman” or to “pregnancy.”59 Now by combining the meanings of “pregnant woman” with “heart-and-mind,” we get the clear message of a caring, consoling, and passionate attitude, which in fact is the key meaning that has been attached to 仁 throughout history. The fact that the character was used by Confucius and Mencius to refer to a cardinal virtue is only the highlight of such a usage. Furthermore, even as a cardinal virtue, ren 仁 pertains to “gentleness,” which stands in stark contrast to the other equally important cardinal virtue yi 義, which will be discussed in our next example.
“Righteousness” backed by power (figure 7). The character 義 (yi), conventionally rendered as “righteousness,” is made up of the two characters 羊 (yang, “goat”) and 我 (wo, usually understood as “I/me”). This composition is traceable back to OBS and BS and still applies today. However, these two components should not be understood according to their common meanings as “goat” and “me.” Yang 羊 as a component, as clarified, often refers not to the animal “goat” per se, but symbolizes “positive values” in general. As with the character 我 (wo), we must note that its original meaning was not the first-person pronoun “I” either, as supposed by Xu Shen and as it is so used today. Rather, 我 originally referred to a kind of saw-edged weapon, as has been proven by recent archaeological findings. With this as backdrop, let us reappraise the following explanation of yi provided by Xu Shen: “義 means the awesome demeanor of the self.” Here, as we have noted, the reference to the “self” is in fact etymologically suspect. But the reference of 義 to “awesome demeanor” or weiyi 威儀 is thoroughly in line with the original meaning of 我 as “weapon” and with the extensive use of the character 義 in the word 威義 in bronzes of the Zhou dynasty. In fact, the derivative character 儀 can mean yizhang 儀仗 or “guard of honor” (German: Ehrengarde), as in a state visit, during which military power is often displayed. This explains why the weapon 我 (not the “I”) has been used here as a component. With this clarified, we readily come to the understanding that the subsequent moral virtue 義 or righteousness (made up of 羊 and 我) actually means “action for the sake of the good backed by power.” It is for this reason that in Chinese we have expressions such as yijun 義軍 (righteous troops), yishi 義師 (righteous army), or qiyi 起義 (righteous uprising), and so forth.

Because of the subsequent influence of Confucianism, both ren 仁 and yi 義 have been emphasized as cardinal virtues, but, with the exegeses given above, we see that, while ren suggests gentleness and empathy, yi suggests firmness and stringency. This major difference has recently been documented by the Guodian Chu bamboo tablets of the Warring States period, discovered in 1993. In the text “Wuxing” 五行 (Five modes of proper conduct) from this collection, we find the following remark: “Strength is the way of yi; softness is the way of ren (仁).” Putting all of these together allows us to see how ren and yi act as two different but complementary moral attributes. While ren suggests gentleness rooted in one’s heart, yi pertains to a practical stringency that reaches out into the world of human action. It is therefore not by chance that the sixty-four hexagrams of the Book of Changes begin with the two hexagrams of qian 乾 and kun 坤, with qian representing male stringency and vigor on the one hand, supplemented immediately by the female gentleness and forbearance of kun on the other.
Thinking as reflection (figure 8). The character 思 (si) is of great interest for philosophers, since it means both thinking and thoughts. However, the contemporary script form of the character as composed of 田 (field) and 心 (heart-and-mind) was only a confusion due to lishu transformation. In BS and seal script in the pre-Qin era, 思 was written rather as 思思, made up of 囗 (xin) and 心 (xin). This way of writing can even be found in the Han dynasty in some silk script samples (third and fourth cited above). This component 囗 actually means the fontanel located at the top of the human skull, where in babies the bony tissue has not yet fully grown. In the Shuowen, the character 思 is related to wisdom. Subsequent scholars attested to this understanding, and Xu Kai 徐锴 and Duan Yucai even further considered 思 to mean “profound and penetrating” (深通). But in what way is si or thinking profound and penetrating? Now, with the clarification of the first component to be 囗 (fontanel) rather than 田 (field), we can readily assert that the supposed profundity of thought lies precisely in the connectedness of the head with the heart, as was verbally suggested by scholar Xiong Zhong 熊忠 in the Yuan dynasty. Xiong said, “From the fontanel to the heart, thoughts are inter-penetrating continuously like threads of silk.” Obviously, for the ancient Chinese, whose anatomical and physiological knowledge was still quite limited, the suggestion of the heart as a “thinking organ” is understandable. But philosophically speaking, this idea of the connectedness of the heart with the head (fontanel) suggested that the Chinese were long aware of the fact that the self, in its process of thinking, could divide itself into two roles, so that a “to-ing and fro-ing” within the thinker could take place. In this way, we can claim that behind the character 思, the notion of “reflection” is already implied, which is a key issue in all idealistic thinking. If the case of si is not sufficiently persuasive, then we can take a further step and look at another equally important character, 念 (nian).

Thought and linguisticality: the “inverted mouth” (figure 9). The character 念 (nian) is closely related to si 思, but takes on an even broader range of meaning. The Shuowen gets only part of its richness by defining it as “constantly thinking.”
念 exists both in OBS and BS and is made up of mainly two components: 今 or 心 above and 心 below. This structure remains basically unchanged today. While the role of the component 心 or heart (which also occurs in si 思) is straightforward, the meaning of the component at the top, namely 今 or 今, is quite obscure and therefore controversial. Out of the many interpretations of 今, I consider the subsequent abstract meaning of “now” to be only the result of rebus borrowing, whereas its original meaning should be empirically understood as an “inverted mouth” (今) with a “tongue” sticking out of it (hence, 今). Structurally speaking, the inverted mouth (今) differs from the more generic mouth (口) in its directionality, namely in its facing downward. Functionally, the inverted mouth has two major tasks to perform: (1) eating or drinking, as exemplified in the characters 飲 and 食; and (2) sighing or talking downward, as exemplified in 吟 (cry or moan) and 命/令 (commanding), and so on. This clarified, we immediately see what nian 念 means. It refers to talking to oneself, arousing various ideas. This reminds us of the structure of the character 思 (thinking), which we have just surveyed. The only difference is that here in nian 念, thinking (or thoughts) is further depicted as related to and motivated by language (inverted mouth). So in the archaic character 念, we can anticipate what Plato later tells us when he tries to define what thinking is: “a dialogue which the soul has with itself about the objects under its consideration. . . . It seems to me that the soul when it thinks is simply engaging in dialectic with itself in which it asks itself questions and answers them itself.”

The meaning of this highly abstract character 念, therefore, is traceable to two simple and concrete notions: mouth (inverted) and heart. However, over the subsequent millennia, the usage of nian revealed different degrees of abstraction. A more casual meaning of it is “remembrance,” as in our thinking of deceased loved ones, as exemplified by the verse nian xi xianren 念昔先人 in the Book of Poetry. But besides this casual use, 念 can mean thought in general, which is philosophically much broader and deeper, as used in abstract terms such as xinnian 心念, yinian 意念, or zhuannian 轉念. In fact, the subsequent Chinese translations of the Indo-Germanic words “concept” (Begriff) and “idea” (Idee) are gainian 概念 and guannian 觀念, respectively, in both of which the character 念 is a significant ingredient. Does this not sound literally “idealistic”?

Such abstract uses of nian have also found outlets in some of the most subtle and profound philosophical terminologies of Chinese philosophy. Here, let me just give two examples, namely the Confucian maxim 喪念作狂，克念作聖, and the Buddhist expressions 一念三千 and 念念生滅. While a detailed explanation of these maxims or words is beyond the purview of this essay, it might suffice to point out that one central theme of these and related dicta is that the most disparate outcomes of one’s lifeway (such as craziness [狂] versus sageliness [聖]) could be the result of just one idea (nian 念), to the extent that, whatever the outcome, one needs to bear full responsibility for what one has decided upon, or for what one has “told” oneself to do. This is a thoroughly humanistic way of thinking, the idealistic trait of which is unmistakable.
The legendary “zhi” as remnant of natural law (figure 10). In the preceding, we have shown how the componential analysis of some characters could lead to a deeper understanding of the cultural background that could have affected the way these characters were formed. Now we will take the two characters 法 (fa) and 律 (lu/lü) as further examples. In modern Chinese, these two characters are often used together as one word, 法律 falü, to mean law in general. But a closer look at these two graphs shows that they have importantly different connotations.

The modern script 法 is actually a simplified form of the original character 灞, which has as components, besides “water” (水) and “remove” (去), the legendary animal zhi 駃. In the Shuowen, Xu Shen explains the character 灞 as follows: “Fa 灞 means punishment, which is as horizontal as water, hence the component ‘water’; [the legendary animal] zhi 駃 uses its horn to butt the crooked [person] to remove him, hence the component ‘remove’ (去).” Here, 駃 refers to a legendary animal that supposedly could tell right from wrong. This legendary unicorn-like animal zhi 駃, being part of nature and the mysterious source of justice at once, suggested some form of “natural law thinking.”

Signs of legal positivism (figure 11). The character 律 (lu), which exists both in OBS and BS, is made up of the two components 彳 (chi) and 舅 (lu), the latter being also accountable for the pronunciation of the character. Chi 彳 refers to a crossroad, and lu 舅 depicts a hand holding a brush. In the Shuowen, the following explanation is given for the character 律 (lu): “律 means uniform promulgation (均布也).” To elucidate this definition, Duan Yucai added the following annotation: “It is through the use of 律 that what is unequal under heaven can be rendered equal. This is what uniform promulgation means.” In other words, 均布 means announcing the law evenly across the country. It is for this reason that the component for crossroad (彳) is used. But before its promulgation, a law code first has to be drafted. This is why, besides 彳, the character 律 has the other component of 舅 (a hand holding a brush).
Through the analysis above, we see how the two components 门 (crossroad) and 聿 (writing of documents) were conjoined to suggest the propagation far and wide of the written law code. And from this we can in turn argue for the parallel prevalence of a conception of “positive law” in ancient China.

In the Western world, the controversy between natural law and positive law is traceable back to the time of the Sophists (the physis-nomoi controversy). By means of a componential analysis of the two characters 法 and 律, we see that in ancient China such a controversy was at least implicitly possible, a more explicit treatment of which deserves further attention.83

Reappraisal of zhuanzhu as annotative derivation (figure 12). The character 考 (kao) occupies a particularly important position in this essay, because it was the example used by Xu Shen himself in explaining what zhuanzhu 轉注 means as the fifth (in our listing, the six and final) way of character formation of the Chinese script. But, unfortunately, this example was so ambiguous that its meaning remained highly controversial until recently. Both in OBS and BS, the character 考 (kao) is made up of 考 and 老 (or a subtractive form of it, that is, 老省). In the epilogue to the Shuowen, Xu Shen discusses the six ways of Chinese script formation, where he defines zhuanzhu as follows: “Zhuanzhu means establishing a class as a heading, and assigning it to those [characters] with which its meaning fits.”85 Given the prolonged controversy over this statement, I found the interpretation of a contemporary scholar Sun Yongchang the most convincing. Sun maintains that zhuanzhu is in fact a way of deriving a new character by adding a semantic class tag to a formerly ambiguous or polyvalent root-character so that the meaning of the new character is made clear through the annotation of the class tag. Zhuanzhu, so understood, can be called “annotative derivation.”

Applying this theory back to the examples cited by Xu Shen, we can explain the whole scenario as follows. At some point we have the ambiguously used root-character 亠 (pronounced kao), which has, among many usages, the meaning of “deceased father.” For the sake of disambiguation, the semantic class tag 老, meaning “old,” was attached to the root-character 亠 because its meaning of “deceased father” fits with that of the semantic tag “old,” thus producing the new character 考 (kao). In Xu Shen’s examples, therefore, 老 merely plays the role of the annotative class tag. Only the resultant character 考 is a true example of a zhuanzhu character, which can be called an “annotative derivative” from the root-character 亠.86 Sun also points out that zhuanzhu becomes necessary mainly because at some point pho-
netic borrowing or the rebus principle has been used so widely that the basically monosyllabic sound system of Chinese can no longer tolerate the great number of homophones thus generated. It is for this reason that zhuanzhu comes to the rescue as a means of disambiguation. This scenario will be further discussed in the next example of 莫. But Sun is further of the opinion that besides this somewhat passive act of disambiguation, zhuanzhu or annotative derivatives can also be used in a more proactive and thus productive manner, details of which will be shown with further examples. But whatever the use, the basic pattern of zhuanzhu as annotative derivation can be summarized with the following formula:

\[
\text{Root character + class tag(s) for annotation} \rightarrow \text{annotative derivative(s)}
\]

Figure 13

Multiple phonetic borrowing (figure 13). In modern Chinese, the character 莫 (mo) is used most subtly to mean a range of abstract functional notions: “no one,” “nothing,” “not,” even the imperative “do not,” and so on. But this was again a result of rebus only. By looking at the OBS and BS forms of 莫, which both show a “sun” (日) in the midst of a “brushwood” (茻, symbolized usually by four clumps of grass), we know immediately that the original meaning of 莫 is “sunset” or “evening.” After the original character was borrowed as an abstract function word, it was used less and less to denote its original meaning. On the contrary, the borrowed usage gradually became the mainstream usage. In the so-called Thirteen Classics, the functional character 莫 teamed up with other characters to form a series of functional words that were highly abstract, such as 莫不, 莫非, 莫有, 莫敢, 莫得, 莫若, 莫如, and so on. Furthermore, 莫 can be used to form the so-called “hollow function terms” (空心詞), which are word forms that allow variables to fit in to form individual functional words. By browsing through the Thirteen Classics, we can find the following examples:

- 「莫之？」 (not X): e.g., 莫之與, 莫之或, 莫之能, 莫之敢, etc.
- 「莫？於」 (not X-er than): e.g., 莫大於, 莫善於, 莫近於, 莫重於, 莫甚於, etc.
- 「莫？乎」 (nothing X-er than/as): e.g., 莫大乎, 莫見乎, 莫顯乎, 莫重乎, 莫宜乎, etc.
- 「？莫大焉」 (no X is greater/bigger): e.g., 罪莫大焉, 善莫大焉, 禍莫大焉, 德惠莫大焉, 妾莫大焉, 逆莫大焉, 樂莫大焉, 不祥莫大焉, etc.
As a result of 莫 being appropriated as a functional character, the original notion of “sunset” or “evening” needed a replacement, which resulted in the additive character 暮. The latter is made up of the original character 莫, with a second, redundant “sun” (日) appended at the bottom. Furthermore, 莫 can either be used as a phonetic label together with other semantic components to form new characters (形聲), or it can further be borrowed phonetically to refer to other concepts, finally acquiring annotative class tags of various sorts for disambiguation purposes (轉注). We can put such “new” characters together as one group: for example, 墓 (grave), 幕 (curtain), 嘗 (admire), 募 (recruit), 滅 (desert), 寂 (lonesome), 膜 (membrane), 瘋 (hardship), and so on. Nowadays, it is no longer easy to tell which character has followed which of the two ways of character genealogy mentioned above, but these characters have one feature in common, namely that the component 莫 in them is used purely as a phonetic label (and not for the sake of its meaning, neither the original meaning of “sunset” nor the borrowed meaning of “negation”), which tells us nothing about their respective meanings. Therefore, despite the common or similar pronunciation of all of these characters, their meanings are unrelated, and can only be disambiguated by the respective semantic tag they carry. Consequently, no system of cognates can be formed from these characters despite their similarity in outlook and in sound.

Zhuanzhu and the formation of cognates: a tale of the ring (figure 14). When explaining what zhuanzhu means, we have said earlier that besides the more passive use, zhuanzhu can also be employed in a more proactive and productive manner. Now, with the following example, we are going to demonstrate how this can take place. In BS, the character 环 (huan, or “ring”) was originally written as 曳, that is, without the component 玉 or “jade” on the left. In terms of structure, 曳 is made up of the components 衣 (clothing), 目 (eye) and a round-shaped object, which probably refers to an amulet worn by a person (symbolically indicated by the eye and the clothing). In unearthed bronzes, we can find such round-shaped objects with the character 曳 on them. Later on, when jade was used for this kind of amulet, the “jade” component was appended as a semantic tag to the original character 曳 to specify the material nature of the object, and thus the character 环 was created. But in parallel to this, the focus of attention could also be shifted back to the “round” shape of the amulet, and from this on, a whole series of interesting characters were generated, hanging on the notion of “roundedness,” each adopting its own additional semantic tag specifying in what sense the “roundedness” is meant. Witness the following characters:
In the examples above, we see that the resultant characters are derived from the root character 睘. Since it is the core meaning of “roundedness” that all subsequently added tags have to adhere to, the resultant characters are therefore semantically related, thus forming a family of cognates. In the examples cited, some cognates are more empirical, (e.g., 髻, 閞, and 纱), but some others could be quite abstract (e.g., 還, 偃, and 懁).

A most subtle example of huiyi: on guard for two threads of silk (figure 15). The huiyi character 幾 (ji) is a commonly used character, the meaning of which is extremely subtle, even in everyday life, let alone in philosophy. I consider 幾 to be an exemplary character with a high degree of abstraction. In BS, 幾 is made up of 㷜 (you) and 戍 (shu). The component 㷜, for its part, is further analyzed as two threads of silk （幺）placed next to each other. The component 戊 signifies something very small, and thus inconspicuous. The component 戍, on the other hand, represents a man (人) carrying a weapon (戈), and in fact refers to a garrison guard. The question now is: if there is a need to keep guard on something, it should normally be something of importance, like a capital city, a strategic bridge, a copper mine, and so forth. What is the need to keep guard on things as trivial as two threads of silk?

To find the answer, let us again take a quick look at the Shuowen’s relevant explanation: “幾 means small; it means danger. It is made up of 𢀱 (two threads of silk) and 戍 (garrison), which means to keep watch with troops. What is as small as two threads of silk but needs to be guarded, is something dangerous.”99 Here, Xu Shen directly relates the small, the minute, and the inconspicuous to danger. This is be-
cause that which is small and inconspicuous, if left unattended, might grow bigger and become prominent, thus leading to danger. That is why we need to keep an eye on it and guard against it, to prevent it from becoming a danger. Therefore, the meaning of ji 幾 is not small simpliciter, for in Chinese there are more suitable characters, such as 小, 細, 微, and others. Ji 幾 is smallness with a dialectical implication of danger, signified by the component “weapon” (戈).100 In classical Chinese, we have expressions like jihu 幾乎 or shuji 庶幾, which can be translated literally as “almost” or “nearly.” In German, one would say “beinahe” or, figuratively, “um Haaresbreite” (by a hair’s breadth), which, very much like the “two threads of silk,” implies some kind of danger.101

In Chinese philosophy, the importance of the character 幾 is often overlooked. First of all, 幾 occupies a key position in the Book of Changes (Yijing), which defines itself precisely in terms of 幾: “As with the Book of Changes, it is that with which the sages exhaust the deepest and study the signs of the minutest.”102 In this citation, I have translated 幾 as “minutest signs” to insinuate the very notion that small things can be the inchoate omens of good or bad things, and can germinate and develop into bigger and bigger issues.103 Then, in another chapter of the Book of Changes, we again witness the power of the word ji, which occurs four times in one very short passage:

The Master said: “Does not he who knows the minutest signs possess divine wisdom? The exemplary person, in his intercourse with the high, uses no flattery, and, in his intercourse with the low, no coarse freedom: does not this show that he knows the minutest signs? Minutest signs are the slight beginnings of movement, and the earliest indications of good (or bad) fortune. The exemplary person sees the minutest signs, and acts accordingly without waiting for a single day.”104

In this text, the author of the Book of Changes clearly expresses the importance of a knowledge of ji for everyday praxis.

Nevertheless, the greatest impact exerted by the character 幾 on Chinese philosophy seems to lie in the so-called “sixteen character transmission of the mind” (十六字心傳) from the Book of Documents. In this maxim, “人心惟危, 道心惟微, 惟精惟一, 允執厥中,”105 we do not find the character 幾 itself; rather, the two dialectical moments of 幾, namely “danger” (危) and “smallness” (微), were contrasted to constitute a practical maxim. This maxim urges one to be mindful of the fact that in our heart-and-mind there are human (mundane) elements as well as rational (cosmic) elements, both of which can occur in our mind (heart) as the minutest signs. They can become a source of danger or just the contrary, and it is a matter of the utmost importance to discriminate between them and hold to the Golden Mean, and so on. Although the authenticity of this maxim has been challenged by some Qing scholars, its word and spirit can be traced back as early as to the text of the Xunzi 荀子. In the chapter “Jiebi” 解蔽, Xunzi maintains: “Therefore, the Learned Book said, the danger of the human mind, the minuteness of the rational mind, and the signs of such danger and minuteness, all these can only be known by the enlightened superior man.”106 Here, we witness how Xunzi has in the notion “signs of danger and minuteness” (危
微之幾) performed two things at once. In the first place he makes an analytical expli-
cation of 橫 with the two moments of danger and minuteness, but at the same time
he is also suggesting a dialectical integration of the two moments back into the highly
abstract notion of 橫 so that its most subtle meaning is unveiled.

Obviously, these insights are only possible and can only make sense if the internal
structure of the character 橫 is taken into consideration. The mere sound “ji” or
even the character itself as a “lump sum” would be semantically too impoverished to
convey any wisdom of this sort. In Xunzi’s dictum, we witness how the highly struc-
tured script form 橫 has guided him to gain insight into this cardinal issue in Chi-
nese philosophy. To further convince ourselves that this is an issue of true importance,
we only need to note that the “sixteen character transmission of the mind” and re-
lated discussions have since become a perennial topic. In fact, nearly all major phi-
losophers since the Song dynasty have in some way embarked upon it. Humboldt
tells us that the Chinese script has “in [a] certain manner embraced philosophical
work within itself.” Judging from all of the examples above, and the example of 橫 in
particular, Humboldt’s observation is not an exaggeration.

“Analogy of Script” in Chinese according to Humboldt

As we have noted earlier, among the many incisive remarks Humboldt made on the
Chinese language, the notion of an “analogy of script” deserves special attention. In
fact, I consider this to be Humboldt’s most profound insight on the Chinese language
in general and on Chinese script in particular. Having enumerated the representative
examples above, it is time to return to this cardinal issue.

Regarding linguistic productivity, both Humboldt himself and Ferdinand de
Saussure a century after him, having in mind the linguistic mechanism of the Indo-
European languages, considered the crucial factor to lie in the “analogical” use of
sound, which is nothing other than the arbitrary, flexible, and efficient employment
of sound matter in the discrimination of meaning, through which the various inten-
tions and nuances of the human mind are revealed. For Humboldt, the analogy of
sound represents the pinnacle of the effective and fruitful use of speech sounds.107
Saussure, on his part, was so fascinated by sound analogy that he even ventured to
conjecture that, if we erase from a French dictionary all of those words that have at
least something to do with analogy, the remainder of the dictionary might fit into just
one page.108 Now given its insufficiency in phonic complexities, the Chinese lan-
guage was unable to exploit the analogy of sound to any extent comparable to that
of the Indo-Germanic languages.109 It is along this line of thought that Humboldt ar-
rived at the following laconic but incisive statement concerning the role of an “anal-
ogy of script” in Chinese:

A deficiency of sound-change impedes recognition, from the sounds, of the concepts
designated, a difficulty that would be still more palpable in Chinese, if sound-analogy
(Laut-Analogie) were not very often replaced there, in deriving and compounding, by
analogy from the written character (Analogie der Schrift).110
Here, Humboldt has suggested that, as compensation for weakness in their “analogy of sound,” the Chinese have developed the alternative measure of an “analogy of script.” Under the general notion of the analogy of script he further differentiates two basic types: deriving (Ableitung) and compounding (Zusammensetzung). Despite the obvious importance of this statement, Humboldt has provided us with few details to show what he actually means. But with the examples cited above, we are now in a much better position to explain what these two types of analogy of script could be.

Analogy of Script, Type 1: Deriving
It seems to me that the view on “deriving” as the first type of analogy of script has to do mainly with the ability of the Chinese script to multiply in its number of characters, just as the analogy of sound has contributed to the multiplication of words in Indo-Germanic languages. In traditional Chinese scholarship, it is widely held that out of the “six ways,” it is xingsheng 形聲 or “graphic phonetic compounds” that account for the formation of about 80 percent of Chinese characters. But this view has been contested by the recent research of Sun Yongchang, who maintains that, having clarified what zhuanzhu 內部 actually is, many characters traditionally ascribed to xingsheng can be reassigned to zhuanzhu, so that it is zhuanzhu rather than xingsheng that should be regarded as a major key for the multiplication of the Chinese script.111 Among the many reasons Sun gives to support his preference for zhuanzhu, I think the following are particularly noteworthy.

1. The traditional judgment about the great abundance of xingsheng is based on a static, structural standpoint, which includes all characters that possess a graphical component and a sound component. But from a dynamic and developmental standpoint, characters that satisfy such structural criteria can have very different “ways” of genealogy, which Sun differentiates into four main types, namely (1) proto-xingsheng, (2) xingsheng, (3) zhuanzhu, and (4) a combination of xingsheng and zhuanzhu. Of these four types, zhuanzhu is the most decisive, according to Sun.112

2. Regarding xingsheng and zhuanzhu as two competing ways of character formation, the “name tag” (名符) of xingsheng is rigid and inflexible in application, whereas the “class tag” (類首) of zhuanzhu is vaguer but more flexible and adaptable. Thus, the same pattern can be copied and multiplied to form clusters of related characters, with or without a semantic/phonetic relationship, depending on the initial conditions of the derivation, as exemplified in our discussion of 考, 莫, and 資. In other words, while the application of xingsheng is discrete, occasional, and often one-off, it is only in zhuanzhu that derivation in the true sense can be found. It is for this reason that we have translated the mechanism or “way” of zhuanzhu as “annotative derivation.”

While explaining this nature of zhuanzhu, and arguing that zhuanzhu, thus understood, amounts to what Humboldt calls “deriving” (Ableitung), we should not lose sight of the fact that for Humboldt “deriving” is only one of the two main types of analogy, the other being “compounding.” So, between deriving and compounding there must be something in common, and where does this commonality lie? Following this line of thought, and taking note of how the mechanism of analogy works in
the domain of language in general, it is not difficult for us to suggest that it is also the feature of “continuous reshufflings”\textsuperscript{113} of linguistic-graphical elements that constitutes the key issue for an “analogy of script” in general. Therefore, \textit{zhuanzhu} or “de-riding,” being capable of the formation of cognates, is the more systematic way of reshuffling such graphical/phonetic elements. When explaining what analogy means, Saussure once remarked: “Language is a garment covered with patches cut from its own cloth.”\textsuperscript{114} With this metaphor Saussure is actually saying that the analogical reshuffling of linguistic elements takes place on the basis of preexisting elements, and this principle now also applies to the formation of the Chinese script. This explained, we can readily argue that, despite their seeming greatness in number, Chinese characters were formed and developed on the basis of a much smaller number of “components,”\textsuperscript{115} exhibiting some degree of economy of effort and rendering the learning of them much less difficult than most people would imagine.

But for character derivation or reshuffling to work at all, relevant components have to be aligned, compared, and cross-referenced, actions that are barely possible without the use of imagination. In this way, it seems that “compounding” in a fundamental and underlying sense should have an indispensable part to play. This brings us to the second type of analogy of script, which we might reconstruct as follows:

\textbf{Analogy of Script, Type 2: Compounding}

“Compounding” (\textit{Zusammensetzung}) as the second type of analogy of script can be understood as a combinatorial principle that governs the meaning constitution of Chinese on two utterly different levels, namely, \\textit{huiyi} and word formations, which we can call analogy of script type 2a and 2b, respectively.\textsuperscript{116}

Type 2a: \\textit{Huiyi} in the broad sense, or the compounding of script components into characters. First, “compounding” can refer to the general tendency of the Chinese, by the free use of imagination, to combine or conjoin the meanings of various script components so that simpler and more concrete meaning structures can interact and multiply to yield meaning structures that are more complex, more subtle, or more removed from immediate sensation, that is, more abstract. Looking at the table of the “Six Ways,” we can precisely identify the third way, that is, \\textit{huiyi} 會意, as a model of “compounding” in this first sense.\textsuperscript{117} With the help of examples such as 言, 災, 善, 仁, 義, 思, 念, 法, 律, 幾, and others, it is no longer difficult for us to see that, as a way of script formation based on the principle of imagination, \\textit{huiyi} is crucial for the formation of abstract concepts. But given more examples, we will eventually discover that Humboldt’s general principle of “compounding,” rather than being confined to just one of the six “ways,” should have played a role in other “ways” of character formation as well. In this regard, we can even speak of \\textit{huiyi} in a more generic sense, which covers not only \\textit{huiyi} in the narrower sense, but also the formation of Chinese characters in general, arguably by all of the other five “ways,”\textsuperscript{118} including even the most primitive ways such as \textit{xiangxing} 象形 and \textit{zhishi} 指事. In his \textit{Compendium for the Learning of the Chinese Script} (文字蒙求), the eminent Qing scholar Wang Yun 王筠 (1784–1834) suggested precisely such a broadened conception of \\textit{huiyi}.\textsuperscript{119} In fact, it is \\textit{huiyi} in this broader sense, as we have shown above, that
should have played a part in the formation of ideographs, of derivative borrowing, and of phonetic compounds, as well as in kicking off the more advanced process of character genealogy under the banner of *zhuanzhu*.

In the inflection languages, analogy of sound is achieved by the reshuffling of phonemes. Through such a combinatorial principle, the most abstract or abstruse intentions can be systematically and conventionally expressed. Latin prefixes such as “contra-” and “inter-,” English suffixes such as “-ness” and “-ism,” or their German counterparts, such as “er-,” “über-,” “-schaft,” “-keit,” and so forth, are all abstractions of this kind. Yet given the weaker sound system of the Chinese language, this way of combining phonemes is out of the question. But as an alternative, the Chinese script has developed another combinatorial principle, so that abstraction in meaning is achieved through the internal structuring of the very characters themselves, or, more accurately, through the imaginative relations of the script components, which are themselves mostly sensible or empirical. This is exactly what Xu Shen means, when he defines *huiyi* as “比類合誼，以見指撝,” which I render as “putting together components that appropriately match with each other so that intentions can be shown.” The very term 會意, so understood, amounts to an imaginative “confluence (會) of meanings (意),” which constitutes the most basic model of analogy of script in Chinese.

Note that in Xu Shen’s definition of *huiyi*, the crucial expression “指撝(揮)” literally means “what is pointed at,” which I render as “intentions.” In passing we can go one step further to interpret this expression as “intentionality,” which is a key issue in phenomenology. In fact, Husserl’s definition of intentionality as “directedness at” (*Gerichtet-sein auf*) concurs exactly with the notion of 指撝. Therefore, it is tempting for us to see whether a phenomenological analysis would, in this way or another, help clarify the true mechanism of *huiyi*.

For the purpose of brainstorming, let me mention a few possible directions. (1) In phenomenology, intentionality is a correlative issue that embraces the subjective and the objective all at once, or, in phenomenological jargon, *noesis* and *noema*, or *intentio* and *intentum*. This allows us to do justice to both the subjective intention of the user of the script and the objective meaning context of that intention. (2) The Husserlian theory of intentional acts covers not only simple, sensible acts but also more complex, categorial acts, which correlative make allowance for the grasping of complex and, very often, ideal meaning structures. For Husserl and Heidegger alike, these categorial acts and the related categorial intuitions are not so much products of language as they are the foundation of language. Mapping this to the problem of script, we see immediately how such a theory can make sense of a generic notion of *huiyi*, which serves nothing less than a categorial “synthesis” or “ideation” of complex meaning structures from out of seemingly discrete, sensible semantic/phonetic components. These phenomenological issues are so intriguing because the chance of their fruitful application to the theory of the Chinese script is promising. Moreover, such a phenomenological analysis might enable us to counter the “prohibitionism” of the Du Ponceauian lineage and give us sound justification to continue to ascribe
Chinese writing to ideography, or, as Humboldt suggested, to “script of thoughts.” In any case, a detailed treatment of these issues would require a separate treatise.\textsuperscript{124}

Type 2b: Word-formation, or the compounding of characters into words. Second, “compounding” could also refer to the tendency in Chinese to build up words by conjoining two or more characters. This second level of “compounding” became increasingly important after the multiplication of Chinese characters reached a stage of saturation such that the further coinage of characters was no longer encouraged. This level of “compounding” is known as “word formation,” \textit{Wortbildung}, or \textit{gouci fa} 構詞法 in modern linguistics. The mechanism for word formation in Chinese is basically as follows. In the normal use of language, we for the most part are using existing words handed down from the tradition. But when there is a need to make new words, what we implicitly do is conceptually dissociate relevant and potentially related words into constituent characters that might then be reshuffled and reassociated into new words that fit our intention (or intentionality).

Just as characters with abstract meaning can be composed of components with concrete meaning, we see that in the stage of word formation, abstract words can also be constructed by putting together characters with concrete meanings, so that through their interaction in our imagination, a new word can be formed. With a sense of experimentation, I can work out the following list of exemplary abstract words, each of which is composed of either two body parts, or two natural objects/phenomena, or a combination:

\begin{itemize}
  \item 心胸, 心血, 血汗, 耳目, 眉目, 心肝, 心腸, 肺腑, 肝膽, 喉舌, 脣舌, 身手, 手足, 骨肉, \ldots
  \item 或
  \item 山河, 江山, 春秋, 歲月, 風骨, 骨氣, 龍鳳, 犬馬, 風雲, 風水, 風霜, 雲雨, \ldots
\end{itemize}

Going briefly through such a list, any grown-up and literate person whose native language is Chinese should be easily convinced that the words listed are all very subtle and abstract in meaning. In fact, many of these words contain rhetorical, political, aesthetical, poetic, or moral intentions, the mere thinking of which could result in intellectual awe and emotional satisfaction. However, we can also imagine that these celebrated words, if presented to children or to non-Chinese who are novices in the Chinese language, the emotional and semantic subtleties would not be as readily felt or understood. The reason for this is very simple: for the linguistic subtleties above to make sense, besides imagination we also need exposure to the historical precipitation of the language’s use through the entire tradition. In other words, it is the weight of the historical use of these words that accounts for their legitimacy and for appeals for their further use. For example, Li Po’s \textit{李白} verse “長相思, 摧心肝”, Li Hua’s \textit{李華} prose “誰無兄弟, 如手如足,” Wen Tienxiang’s \textit{文天祥} poem “山河破碎風雲”，or Song Yu’s \textit{宋玉} classic text “Gaotang fu” 高唐賦 seem to have sanctified the words 心肝, 手足, 山河, and 雲雨, respectively, so that they have virtually become models for imitation by the Chinese-speaking posterity when they have a
need to express similar subtleties. Every time such words are successfully used, the historical force behind them will become ever stronger.\textsuperscript{125}

Of course, compounding in the sense of word formation is not confined to the formation of words with the pattern above, but could involve character combinations of other types (such as 紅利, 濫職, 割愛, 鍾情, etc.) and result in three, four, or even more characters (such as 鮮果酪, 胺基酸, 知識論, 資本主義, 後現代社會, and so on).

If we conceive the two types of compounding (i.e., analogy of script types 2a and 2b) in their relation to each other, then we might even argue that some kind of “duality of patterning” or double articulation of script is already in place, which might further account for the efficient use of the Chinese script.\textsuperscript{126}

We have thus shown that the traditional understanding of the Six Ways of Chinese character genealogy together with the subsequent trend of Chinese word formation are largely compatible with the Humboldtian notion of analogy of script, which in Chinese can be differentiated into the two main patterns of “deriving” and “compounding.” In this way, we have also shown that, without detriment to the role played by the speech sounds, a full genealogy of the Chinese script can only be brought about by taking into account the use of visual-graphical script components, the semantic complexities of which cannot be accounted for by the sounds alone. We have also shown that it is through the formation and genealogy of the Chinese script from such components that the Chinese language managed to develop its world of meaning, with abstract concept formation being the hallmark of its semantic richness.

Conclusion: Chinese Script as an Inherent Constituent of Chinese Language

From the examples discussed, we have demonstrated that the Chinese script is made up of predominantly sensible components, but with certain derivative or compounding strategies the most subtle and abstract meanings can be derived. However, as we have noted from the outset, despite the outstanding role of the Chinese script as a script of thoughts and despite the importance of the visual aspect of script components in the constitution of meaning, the Chinese script has still to perform its basic role as a script of words. Theoretically speaking, the Chinese people could have chosen, as most other peoples did, to adopt some kind of alphabetic script. But history has proven that the Chinese have collectively decided upon a script that relies less on the aspect of sound and more on the aspect of vision, from which a world of literacy rich in meaning has been constituted. Notwithstanding the vigor of such a tradition, this collective decision of the Chinese on their script did not come without a price. As noted earlier, the Chinese script, unlike an alphabetic script, provides its users with no simple, schematic, and automatic linkage to speech, but needs to establish this linkage indirectly through, say, extended instruction from generation to generation, syllabary records, or, in the context of script formation, through phonetic tags (音符, 聲譬) that unfortunately are themselves not automatically convertible into speech. As a result of this, generations of language learners have been forced to de-
vote more time and effort to learning the Chinese language than would be required of Western learners in their own learning environments. With this as backdrop, we cannot help but ask whether this is not too high a price to pay! Indeed, over the past century, there has been a continuous debate, sometimes raised by Chinese intellectuals themselves, and sometimes by Western scholars, over whether it would be more beneficial to retain the Chinese script or convert fully over into an alphabetic script. In other words, the demise of the Chinese script is always a real danger.

In this regard, let us see if Humboldt has anything relevant to say. As the father of general linguistics, Humboldt cares not only about “language universals,” but also about the “diversities” or “differences” (Verschiedenheiten) of individual languages, which are for him “internally connected organism[s].” In the case of Chinese, Humboldt’s position is that the path taken by the Chinese script is an organic result of the nature of the Chinese language itself, which is characterized by its relative poverty in sounds. The general outcome of this phonic poverty is that in Chinese there exist a great number of homomorphemes (including a great abundance of homophones, and some homophonic words), which bring about the great need for semantic disambiguation. In speech environments, this need appears less pressing because of the role played by gestures, intonations, phrasing, social contexts, pragmatic situations, and so on; but in nonverbal environments, especially in reading and learning, this need for disambiguation would become so overwhelming that it would be barely imaginable if the visual-graphical aspect of the Chinese script were not in place. In this regard, we see why the subsequent development of Chinese script was for Humboldt a natural and organic outcome that served the true and specific needs of the language.

For Humboldt, the full involvement of visual script elements in Chinese has also a very important function, namely that they stimulate the mind and vivify thoughts. For Humboldt, the most remarkable thing about the Chinese language and script is that it consistently “gives up the strengths possessed by other languages, in order to develop strengths that others do not have but only it possesses.” He thus concludes that, “the Chinese language turns a shortcoming into an advantage,” paving, so to speak, “a new way” (einen neuen Pfad) of its own. Following this line of thought, Humboldt even goes so far as to maintain that “In this way, across the whole areas of language known to us, Chinese and Sanskrit represent two fixed extremes, unequal to each other in their aptness for mental development, but alike in internal consistency and complete execution of their systems.”

While debates over whether or not the Chinese script should be replaced by an alphabetical script might be rekindled from time to time, Humboldt long ago gave this advice: “I indeed have shown that the Chinese script has become an inherent constituent (einem inhärenten Bestandteil) of the Chinese language itself.” Also: “the Chinese script has become a real part of the language. . . . In my opinion it is nearly impossible that a conversion of the Chinese script to alphabetic script should ever take place.”

What would happen if the Chinese were to abolish their script in favor of an alphabet? My answer to this hypothetical question is: given that the Chinese over mil-
lennia have become accustomed to a script that does not rely so much on the sound system as on visual-semantic elements, the abolishing of the latter would mean that the meaning-discriminating work, which so far has been heavily ascribed to the visual script, would have to fall back on a relatively weak sound system, the complexity of which is in question. Of course, with an alphabetical script alone, the Chinese would probably get by in the more casual and stereotyped kinds of work, such as commercial correspondence or postcard writing, but in more serious contexts that require a higher degree of cognitive distinction and reflective thinking, the situation would become seriously problematic, if not downright disastrous.

In a few papers written over the past few years on language policies, I have maintained that, given the “over-dominance” of English in a globalized world, there are many factors that determine whether a national language other than English has the chance to remain academically and intellectually competitive. Among such factors, I put much emphasis on the cultural-historical heritage of the respective languages. In a certain sense, abstract concept formation represents the upper end of this linguistic heritage, and in Chinese this happens to be particularly indicative in the very components of archaic script forms. In this connection, any attempt at a systematic treatment of these script components would benefit not only the Chinese script itself, but would provide humankind in general with more intellectual resources that might contribute to a more diverse understanding of human experience.

Notes

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5 – See Karl-Otto Apel, *Die Idee der Sprache in der Tradition des Humanismus von Dante bis Vico*, 3. Auflage (1963; Bonn: Bouvier, 1980), p. 378. This aspect of the Humboldtian legacy has also left a mark on contemporary Chinese linguistics. In the preface to his 《漢語音韻學》, Wang Li 王力 makes the
following remark: “The doctrine of phonology has to do with the mouth and the ear. It deals with friction between the tongue and the palate, and turbulence of sounds and breaths. It has the form of things to depict and matters to indicate, and is for this reason different from what is metaphysical” (音韵之學，繫乎口耳。舌腭之摩擦，聲氣之動蕩，有形可象，有事可指，固與形而上者殊科也).


7 – Humboldt, Kawi-Schrift, p. 477: “Sie muss daher von endlichen Mitteln einen unendlichen Gebrauch machen.”


9 – Humboldt, Kawi-Schrift, p. 384.


15 – Ibid., p. 396.

16 – Ibid.
17 – Ibid., p. 397.

18 – Ibid., p. 375.

19 – Humboldt, Brief an Abel-Rémusat, p. 80; italics mine. The German translation of Harbsmeier is: “springen gerade in die Augen.”

20 – Regarding the thesis of the phonie poverty of Chinese, Humboldt’s position was subsequently adopted by Bernhard Karlgren. See Karlgren, The Chinese Language: An Essay on Its Nature and History (New York: Ronald Press Company, 1949), pp. 7–8. In this book, Karlgren makes the following observation: “Now when we look at the sounds of the language we find that modern Mandarin Chinese is extraordinarily simple and that it is poor in its resources.” But elsewhere he adds: “This meager and poor stock of sounds, however, is enriched by every word’s having its so-called musical accent. . . . In Pekinese there are four such tones.”

21 – Humboldt, Brief an Abel-Rémusat, p. 84; see also Kawi-Schrift, p. 460, E–78.

22 – See Zhao Ping’an 趙平安, Li Bian yanjiu 隸變研究 (Baoding: Hebei University Press, 1993); see also Qiu Xigui 裘錫圭, 〈從馬王堆一號漢墓 “遺冊” 談關於古隸的一些問題〉, in Kaogu 考古, no. 1 (1974).

23 – The term liushu 六書, usually rendered as “Six Ways” or “Six Scripts,” was first mentioned in The Rites of Zhou (周禮), which is datable to the Warring States period of the Eastern Zhou dynasty.

24 – Joseph-Marie Callery, Systema phoneticum scripturae sinicae (Macao, 1841), Microfiche at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, cited also in Hopkins; see next note.


29 – Abstraction is a Western concept used to contrast with concreteness. In Western philosophy, the distinction between abstract and concrete can be understood and applied very differently. For John Locke, concrete and abstract involves both epistemological and semantic issues. In Hegel, however, the distinction between the abstract and the concrete is conceived on an epistemological-metaphysical level, a full understanding of which involves even a “speculative” dimension, which is the dimension of absolute knowledge typical only of Hegel. But in this essay, we are using the notion “con-
crete” to refer simply to that which is accessible or describable in physical, sensible, and empirical terms, and the notion “abstract” to mean that which cannot be so accessed or described.


32 – All OBS and BS script tokens, unless otherwise stated, are excerpted from the CHANT database kept at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, with the generous permission of Professor Ho Che Wah 何志華, director of the CHANT project. For easy reference, the serial numbers of the OBS tokens can also be found in Shen Jianhua 沈建華 and Cao Jinyan 曹錦炎, 《新編甲骨文字形總表》(Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2001). For the character 萬, from left to right, OBS: see “CHANT-1861”; BS: see CHANT “史墻盤 · 10175,” “舟鼎 · 2484,” “大克鼎 · 2836,” “樂子簠 · 4618.”

33 – The character 三, meaning “four” was also in place but has long been supplanted by 四. In the oracle bone scripts, a character with five horizontal strokes referring to “five” has also been discovered.

34 – According to Bernhard Karlgren, the archaic sound of 萬 was “miwan,” and that of 蝸 was “xiat,” which shared only the main vowel; but the additive character 蠆 “thad,” and that of 蝸 “xiat” share the entire final. This, of course, is not strong enough evidence for the rebus relationship between the characters 萬 and 蝸. To account for this discrepancy, we should first bear in mind that a scorpion in antiquity might have a different name than 蝸. Furthermore, given the clear visual form of the character 萬 as a scorpion, and the subsequent definition of its additive derivative 蠆 as scorpion (see endnote 36), together with the fact that no other alternative explanation is available, we should be allowed to presume that the original sound of a scorpion-like insect should be close to the sound for the word “ten thousand.”

35 – Duan Yucai 段玉裁, Shuowen jiezi zhu 《說文解字注》: “萬，謂蟲名也。假借為十千數名，而十千無正字。遂久假不歸，學者昧其本義矣.”

36 – The original meaning of 萬 has left a trace in the character 蟹, which is an example of an additive character (累增字). This character 蟹 was defined in the Shuowen as “蟹，毒蟲也,” and in the Guangya 廣雅 as “蟹，蠍也.” A search through The Twenty-five Histories (二十五史) shows that the character 蟹 has been used there about fifty times, an example of which is in 《三國志 · 卷二十九 · 魏書 · 方技傳 · 華佗傳》: “彭城夫人夜之廁，蟹螫其手.”

37 – See Qu Wanli 屈萬里, 《殷墟文字甲編考釋》(Taipei: Linking Press, 1984). See also Qiu Xigui 裘錫圭, 《甲骨文中的幾種樂器名稱－釋「庸」、「豊」、
38 – For the character 它, OBS: the first example is from “CHANT-1841A” and the second from Dong Zuobin 董作賓,《殷虛文字甲編》· 359. The third example is BS from “犠白歸苑簠(羌白簋)· 4331,” and the fourth example is a seal script from Xu Shen’s Shuowen jiezi 說文解字 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2004), p. 285a.

39 – After the borrowing of the character 它 to represent the third-person pronoun “it,” the additive character 蛇 was subsequently formed.


41 – The inscription 王亡(無)它 or its variants appears forty-three times in the CHANT database. The expression “bu yu you ta” 不虞有它, which means “not being alert for other complications,” is still being used to this day.

42 – For the character 舌 (tongue), examples are taken from OBS: CHANT 072b; BS: “舌方鼎· 1220.”

43 – For the character 言 (speech/word), examples are taken from (from left to right) OBS: CHANT 0722a, 0722; BS: “中山王方壺· 9735,” “白豎鼎· 2456”; seal script: Shuowen, p. 51a; bamboo script: “睡虎地秦簡· 語書· 11.”

44 – For the character 音 (speech sound), examples are taken from (from left to right) (1) BS: “秦公鐘· 263”; (2) BS: “徐王子鐘· 182”; (3) BS: “曾侯乙鐘· 326”; (4) seal script: Shuowen, p. 58a; (5) silk script: “馬王堆· 帛書老子甲本· 112.”

45 – For the character 意 (meaning, intention), examples are taken from (from left to right) (1) BS: “九年衛鼎· 2831”; (2) BS: “史牆盤· 10175”; (3) BS: “令狐君壺· 9720.”

46 – In the most comprehensive Chinese dictionary, the Kangxi zidian 康熙字典 from the Qing dynasty, we find under the radical 言 some (plus or minus) 880 head characters. In the contemporary BIG 5 character set, we still keep some (plus or minus) 300 head characters under the radical 言.

47 – For the character 災 (calamity), examples are taken from OBS: CHANT 1330, 1239 1316, 1316a, 2417; Luo Zhenyu 羅振玉, 《殷虛書契後編· 8.18”; BS: “瘡鐘· 251,” “史牆盤· 10175”; seal script: Shuowen, p. 209a; silk script: “馬王堆· 帛書老子乙本卷前古佚書· 75.”

48 – The complex form of the character 災 suggests floods and fire as sources of calamities; the simplified character 災 suggests the outbreak of a fire in the house. Noteworthy is the fact that 災 was already in use in OBS 《甲骨文合集· 1239》 as well as in scripts in the Han dynasty.

49 – While the character 裁 is very rare and can seldom be found in real life, I recently managed to locate one instance of its use on a couplet hanging outside
Regarding the semantic genealogy of the character 災, I have benefited much from discussions with Professor Cheung Kwong Yue 張光裕 of the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

For the character 善, examples are, from left to right, OBS: Shang Chengzuo 商承祚, 《殷契佚存. 276》 and 《甲骨文合集. 21021》; BS: CHANT “善夫吉父噩. 704,” “善夫吉父簠. 4530”; seal script: Shuowen, p. 102a; and Ding Fubao 丁福保, 《說文解字詁林》 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1988), p. 1101.

Xu Shen, Shuowen; original text: 「善，吉也，從訕從羊，此與義美同意」.

In the CHANT database at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, seventy-five out of seventy-six recognizable tokens of the character 善 appear with two 言 instead of one.

Besides the Kangxi zidian, we can also find, in Duan Yucai's Shuowen jiezi gulin 説文解字詁林, in a quotation from the Xizhuan tonglun 繫傳通論, the equivalent character of 善 with three 言; see Shuowen jiezi gulin, p. 1102a.

See Lin Yiguang 林義光, 《文源. 卷十》: 「二言者，相善之意」.

For examples of the character 仁, from left to right, OBS: Luo Zhenyu 羅振玉, 《殷虛書契前編. 20.19.1》; BS: CHANT “中山王鼎. 2840”; ancient script form: Shuowen, under 仁, p. 161b; bamboo script:《郭店楚簡. 五行》31, 41, and 《郭店楚簡. 老子丙》3.

Some typical uses of 仁 in the Confucian tradition are Analects 1:6, 「汎愛眾，而親仁」; Spring and Autumn (Chunqiu zuozhuan):《左傳. 隱公六年》: 「親仁善鄰」.

The script 息 occurs both in the Guodian Chu bamboo tablets unearthed in 1993, and in the Chu tablets that surfaced in Hong Kong in the spring of 1994. I learned from Wang Xiaohong that the character 仁 was written during the Warring States period as 息 (see Wang’s article 《從郭店竹書看早期儒家的德目問題》). I am also indebted to Wang Qingjie for reminding me that in the Kangxi zidian some other archaic script forms of 仁 can be found under the head character 仁.

OBS/BS evidence can be found; note also the verse “大任有身，生此文王” in The Book of Poetry, where “大任有身” refers to the incident of the Zhou emperor Wen-Wang’s mother getting pregnant. In the entire corpus of the Twenty-Five Histories (二十五史), the word “有身” occurs ninety-five times, fifty-two instances of which referring to pregnancy.

For examples of 義, in OBS: 《甲骨文合集. 17620》; BS: “瘝鐘. 250,” “仲姞義母匜. 10238.”

Xu Shen’s interpretation of 我 as 己 can be found in the Shuowen: “我，施身自謂也；或說我頑顚也。從戈從扌。扌或說古垂字，一曰古殺字.” However,
this interpretation of Xu Shen was hardly regarded as convincing. Major Qing scholars such as Duan Yucai 段玉裁, Wang Yun 王筠, and Zhu Junsheng 朱骏声 unanimously maintained that the interpretation of 我 as “self” is simply not tenable. It was not until the discovery of the oracle bone scripts and related bronze scripts that the true meaning of 我 as a toothed weapon became obvious. Accordingly, the meaning of 我 as 己 or “self” was shown to be clearly a result of phonetic borrowing.


63 – Shuowen: 「義，己之威儀也。從我羊」.

64 – Furthermore, in the “Doctrine of the Mean” (中庸) of the Book of Rites (禮記), lǐyì 礼仪 is mentioned together with weiyì 威儀, which suggests that the latter shares with the former the intent of “goodness.”

65 – See Jingmen City Museum (荊門市博物館), ed., Guodian chumu zhujian 郭店楚墓竹簡. See particularly the chapter on Wuxing 五行, bamboo tablets nos. 40 and 41 (Beijing: Wenwu Chubanshe, 1998), p. 151. The original text was: 「義（貞），義之方。予（衰），義（仁）之方也」. Please note here the use of the archaic script form 至 rather than 仁.

66 – There are views that suggest 義 to mean the sacrificial slaughter of sheep. I have not adopted such views for the following reasons: (1) In the OBS, there were of course many records of sacrificial offerings using sheep, cattle, or pigs. But in all relevant records, we see only the use of specific verbs referring to various methods of sacrifice, for instance 卯 (卯, slicing), 彥 (彥, offering with incense wine), 沈 (沈, drowning), 籁 (冊, chopping), 燎 (燎, burning), et cetera—but no generic expression for “sacrifice” in the sense of xi 犧 has so far been found in OBS. (2) While 義 has occurred more than one hundred times in bronzes since the early Zhou dynasty and has been used in various ways, including the expression of abstract meanings, 義 appeared just once in OBS and a few times in BS, and in both cases it was used only as a proper name. In the Shuowen, Xu defined it thus: “義，氣也，從兮義聲”—where “breath/aspiration” (兮) is the core meaning and the 義 part functions supposedly only as a sound tag. (3) The earliest and single instance of the character 義 being used in antiquity in the sense of sacrifice (圭玉義牲) was found as late as in the Zu-Chu-wen 訴楚文 (Cursing-the-Chu-inscription) of the late Warring States period, around 300 B.C.E.—so late and rare that it can hardly account for the semantic source of the much older character 義. (4) The character 犧 for sacrifice is obviously a still later coinage than 義. Even Xu Shen remarked, specifically quoting the opinion of his contemporary, that the character 犧 was “not of archaic origin” (此非古字). (5) With the interpretation of yi 義 as sacrifice, the symbolic and generic connotation of the component 羊 as referring to positive values in general would then have to shrink back upon the empirical animal, and the semantic coherence of 義 with 美，善，et cetera, as suggested in the Shuowen, would become less accountable.
For related issues concerning sacrificial rites in ancient China, see 吳土法, “先秦天子大祀犧牲考,” 《浙江大學學報》人文社會科學版 34 (3) (2004.5): 62–70.

67 – For examples of 思, in BS: CHANT “五年龏令思戈：11348”; seal script (second example): Shuowen, p. 216b; silk script (third and fourth examples): “馬王堆．老子甲本卷後古佚書．177, 178.”

68 – Shuowen: 「思, 容也。從心囟聲」. Here, 容 is considered by many scholars including Xu Kai 徐鍇 and Duan Yucai to be actually 宀 or 睿, which means “wisdom.”

69 – See Huang Gongshao 黃公紹 and Xiong Zhong 熊忠,《古今韻會舉要．卷二》, ed. 畲忌浮 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2000 據明刊本影印), p. 52. Xiong’s text was: “自囟至心，如絲相貫不絕也.”

70 – For examples of 念, in OBS: “CHANT-1936”; BS: “戒方鼎・2824,” “段簋・4208.”

71 – The Shuowen’s definition of nian is: 「常思也。從今心聲」.

72 – Plato Theaetetus 189e–190a; Sophist 263e.

73 – See the Book of Poetry《詩經．小雅．節南山之什．小宛》: 「我心憂傷，念昔先人」. See also Xu Shen’s definition of 念 as “constantly thinking.”

74 – The dictum “罔念作狂, 克念作聖, 非危乎!” is from Lu Jiuyuan’s (1139–1192) opus,《陸九淵集．卷三十四》, but the central idea is traceable back to the Book of Documents. See《尚書．周書．多方》: 「惟聖罔念, 作狂; 惟狂克念, 作聖」.

75 – For examples of 遠 (法), in BS: CHANT “逆鏡・63,” “大盂鼎・2837,” “師酉簋・4288”; seal script: Shuowen, p. 202b.

76 – Shuowen: 「遠, 刑也, 平之如水, 從水; 鳴所以觸不直者去之, 從水」.

77 – In the Shuowen, there is also a separate entry for the character 鷙 (zhi), which goes as follows: 「瘟，獸也，似山牛，一角， 古者決訟，令觸不直」.

78 – In the modern way of writing, with the component zhi 鷯 taken away, the remaining components can no longer convey such a message. Although this archaic element 鷯 is no longer a component in 法, the older character 遠 can still occasionally be seen today in old-style calligraphy, especially on couplets hung in historic sites such as temples or monasteries.

79 – For examples of 律, in OBS: “CHANT-2353”; BS: CHANT “戍鈴方彝・9894”; seal script: Shuowen, p. 43b.

80 – Shuowen: 「律，均布也，從斗，聿聲」.

81 – Duan Yucai 段玉裁,《說文解字注》: 「律者，所以範天下之不一而歸於一，故曰均布」.
82 – It might be worthwhile to note in passing that it was during the Qin dynasty that it was for the first time both that an established law code was promulgated throughout China and that the width of roads across the Chinese imperium was made uniform.

83 – Despite the predominance of the theological interpretation of “natural law” in the West, there are also non-theological conceptions of natural law in the West. This makes a comparison of natural-law theory between East and West possible and meaningful. For debates in the Western tradition, see Tze-wan Kwan, “Kant’s Possible Contribution to Natural Law Debates,” Responsibility and Commitment: Eighteen Essays in Honor of Gerhold K. Becker, ed. Tze-wan Kwan (Waldkirch: Edition-Gorz, 2008), pp. 197–224.

84 – For examples of see, from left to right, in OBS: 金祖同, 《殷契遺珠》; OBS: 羅振玉, 《殷虛書契後編》; BS: “沈子它簋蓋·4330,” “史牆盤·10175,” “師艅尊·5995.”

85 – In the Shuowen, the definition of *zhuanzhu* is: “轉注者，建類一首，同意相受，考老是也。”

86 – This explained, we will from now on follow Sun Yongchang to use the expression “annotative derivative” to replace what Malmqvist has called “derivative graph.” Sun’s theory of *zhuanzhu* can be found in Sun Yongchang 孫雍長, Zhuanzhu lun 轉注論 (Changsha: Yuelu Shushe 岳麓書社, 1991).


88 – For examples of 莫 in OBS: “CHANT-1393E”; BS: CHANT “散氏盤·10176”; seal script: Shuowen, p. 27b.

89 – Shuowen: 「莫, 日且冥也。從日在茻中, 茻亦聲」.

90 – Out of some three hundred occurrences of 莫 in the Thirteen Classics, only fewer than ten were used in the original meaning of “evening,” namely the following: 「內外朝莫哭者」(周禮·春官宗伯·外宗); 「視日蚤莫」(禮記·曲禮上); 又「夫柩不蚤出，不莫宿」(禮記·曾子問); 「問日之蚤莫」(禮記·少儀); 「朝不廢朝，莫不廢夕」(禮記·禮記); 「日莫人倦」(禮記·聘義); 「其莫，晉荀皙至于西郊」(春秋左傳·襄公十一年); 「莫春者，春服既成」(論語·先進), and so on. By contrast, the use of 莫 as a functional word covered almost all other instances.

91 – The expression “hollow function term” is borrowed from Professor Ho Hsiuhwang’s 何秀煌 article 〈「空心詞」的引介意義—論構詞函數與構詞規律〉; see http://humanum.arts.cuhk.edu.hk/~hhho/termabstract.htm.

92 – For examples of 睘 or 璐, in BS: from left to right, “乍冊瞼卣·5407,” “瞼簋·3677,” “番生簋蓋·4326,” “毛公鼎·2841”; seal script: Shuowen, p. 11a.
93 – See bronzes such as 龍氏甗, 方城甗, 辛柌甗, and so on.

94 – In the inscriptions of the bronze utensil “番生簋蓋·4326,” we find the characters 玉簋 and 玉甗, which were exemplifications of this kind of usage.

95 – See the character 環 in the bronze utensil “Mao Gong Ding” 毛公鼎·2841.

96 – The use of 環 for 還 can be proven by the inscription on the late Western Zhou bronze utensil 駒父盨蓋: “四月睘至于蔡.” See Archaeological Institute, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, ed.,《殷周金文集成釋文》, No. 4464; see also CHANT for a further explanation.

97 – Xu Kai, in 《說文繫傳》, explains the meaning of 傑 as: “臣鍇曰: 謂輕薄察慧小才也,...”

98 – For examples of 幾, in BS: from left to right, “奠鑄友父鬲·684,” “幾父壺·9721,” “白幾父簋·3766”; seal script: Shuowen, p. 84a.

99 – Shuowen: 「幾，微也，殆也。從幺從戊。戊，兵守也；幺而兵守者危也」.

100 – Erya 《爾雅·釋詁》: 「幾，危也」.

101 – In Chinese, there is also a similar expression, “間不容髮,” which literally means “a gap not enough for a hair to fit in.”

102 – Book of Changes (周易·繫辭上): 「夫易，聖人所以極深而研幾也」; English translation mine.

103 – This subtle character 幾 has been translated by James Legge as “minutest springs (of things)” (Legge, trans., Book of Changes [New York: Bantam Books, 1969]). In Richard Wilhelm’s German translation, 幾 was translated simply as Keime, which means germs, buds, seeds, and sprouts (see Richard Wilhelm, I Ging: Das Buch der Wandlungen [1924; München, 2005], pp. 292, 315). The major pitfall of such translations is that they rendered the highly abstract notion of 幾 as a sensible object (spring, germs). Although both translations are etymologically inaccurate, they are philosophically not pointless. In fact they rendered the text easier to understand, even though the semantic depth of the character 幾 was then inadvertently compromised. In my own translation of 幾 as “minutest signs,” I was inspired first by Legge’s use of the expression “minutest,” and second by Yang Liang’s 楊倞 (Tang dynasty) definition “幾，萌兆也,” which appeared in his annotation of Xunzi’s famous statement concerning 危微之幾.

104 – Book of Changes (周易·繫辭下): 「子曰: “知幾其神乎？君子上交不諂，下交不賤，其知幾乎，幾者動之微，吉之先見者也，君子見幾而作，不俟終日.” This translation is based on Legge’s translation, with my own amendments.

105 – Book of Documents, chapter titled “Counsels of the great Yu” (大禹謨), trans. Legge: “The mind of man is restless, prone (to err); its affinity to what is right is small. Be discriminating, be uniform (in the pursuit of what is right), that you may sincerely hold fast the Mean.” Legge’s translation.
106 – See Xunzi’s original text 《荀子・解蔽篇》：「故《道經》曰：“人心之危，道心之微”，危微之幾，惟明君子而後能知之」.


109 – In an earlier paper, I cited the work of a Chinese linguist Hu Pu’an 胡樸安 and showed that the Chinese language does exhibit features of the analogy of sound, although its application is only a limited one. See Tze-wan Kwan, 〈從洪堡特語言哲學看漢語和漢字的意義建構〉 (Meaning constitution in the Chinese language: A Humboldtian perspective), in *From a Philosophical Point of View* (Taipei: Sanmin Publishing Company, 1994), pp. 269–340.


111 – See Sun Yongchang’s 《轉注論》; see also Sun’s important paper “形聲”不是最能産的造字法 (“Xingsheng” is not the most productive way of character formation”), in Sun, 《管窺蠡測集》 (Changsha: Yuelu Shushe, 1994), pp. 87–102.

112 – See Sun, “‘Xingsheng’ is not the Most Productive Way of Character Formation,” p. 101.


115 – Refer to the largely empirical components listed in the third section of this essay, as well as to Zhang Binglin’s observation on “proto-scripts.”

116 – In my earlier paper “Wilhelm von Humboldt on the Chinese Language: Interpretation and Reconstruction,” I identified the more advanced stage of word formation (2b), but left the more fundamental aspect of *huiyi* (2a, or confluence of meanings) out of sight.

117 – As indicated in our appended table, *huiyi* can be translated as “sensum aggregantes,” “suggestive compound,” “combined meanings,” “compound ideographs,” or “compound analytic,” depending on what appeals to us. I myself will add the translation “confluence (hui) of meaning (yi),” to follow as much as possible the original expression of *huiyi* in Chinese.

119 – See Wang Yun 王筠, Wenzi mengqiu 文字蒙求 (Compendium for the learning of the Chinese script). In his Compendium, besides “pure pictographs,” Wang named other types of pictographs that involve huiyi to different extents, including “其形不能顯白因加同類字以定之是謂以會意定象形” and “以會意定象形而別加一形,” listing sixty-two examples including 巢 and 眉. When discussing zhishi or ideographs, he also named four types of characters involving different degrees of huiyi, namely (1) 以會意定指事, (2) 即意即事, (3) 兼意兼聲兼形, and (4) 即所從之意而少增之以指事. In his overall discussion of zhishi, Wang also underlined the important role played by huiyi: “有形者物也, 無形者事也。物有形, 故可象; 事無形, 則聖人創意以指之而已。夫既創意, 不幾近於會意乎?” See Wang, Compendium, pp. 7, 37 ff.

120 – This is what has been emphasized by Humboldt, Saussure, and Jakobson. For details, see my paper, 闕子尹著, 〈洪堡特《人類語言結構》中的意義理論—語音與意義建構〉,《從哲學的觀點看》, pp. 219–267.

121 – Among many of Edmund Husserl’s basic works, see Cartesianische Meditationsen, HUA, Band 1 (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1991), p. 72.


123 – To embark upon such a task the author has written a paper titled “Phenomenological Interpretation of the ‘Six Ways’ of Chinese Script Formation,” which has been presented in September 2010 at the Free University of Berlin and Free University of Berlin and in December 2010 at the National Sun Yat Sen University in Kaoshiung.

124 – Interestingly, in his refutation of Du Ponceau’s “prohibitionism,” Chad Hansen also mentions the notions of “intent” and “intention.” See Hansen, “Chinese Ideographs and Western Ideas,” p. 393.

125 – In this regard Apel, relying on Johannes Lohmann’s idea of the “unfolding of consciousness as language” (Entfaltung des Bewußtseins als Sprache), has described the consciousness of the human subject as the “product of the mutual dialogue that perpetuates through millenia provoking mankind to reflection.”

126 – I am of course not unaware of the fact that between the “double articulation of sound” (Hockett, Jakobson, Martinet, Hjelmslev) and the supposed “double articulation of script” in Chinese script there are significant differences, particularly the supposed meaninglessness of the submorphemic structures in comparison to the meaningfulness of the sub-character level, that is, componential structures. But a more detailed discussion would exceed the scope and purview of this article.


131 – Humboldt, *Brief an Abel-Rémusat*, p. 81.


133 – Ibid., p. 676.

135 – Humboldt, \textit{Brief an M. Abel-Rémusat}, p. 81.


137 – In January 2007, I started a project titled “Cognitive Analysis of Ancient Chinese Script Components” under the auspices of the Research Centre for Humanities Computing. The project was supported by the Research Committee Group Research Scheme of the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Recently, a related project titled “Multi-function Chinese Character Database: An Infrastructure for Future Chinese Education” received a major grant from the Quality Education Fund of the Hong Kong SAR Government.