

Civilization and Barbarism Deconstructing Logocentrism in the Works of Several Communication Scholars

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The world is of the opinion that those who know Chinese characters are wise and worthy, whereas those who do not know characters are simple and stupid. Zheng Qiao (1104-1162)

[O]nly phonetic writing has the power to translate man from the tribal to the civilized sphere, to give him an eye for an ear....The Chinese are a tribal, people of the ear....“Civilization” must now be used technically to mean detribalized man for whom the visual values have priority in the organization of thought and action. Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980)

It is hard today to recapture exactly the context in which Zheng Qiao made the above-quoted statement. Conceivably, it was one of the early moments when cross-cultural communication took place, when the *Middle Kingdom* mentality described the Chinese consciousness, and when anything alien to the Chinese culture or custom would be flatly discredited. The theory of supremacy of the Chinese language has not been very persuasive throughout this century. As a matter of fact, the Chinese modern experience is strangely tied with ambivalent feelings toward the Chinese language. To differ mostly from Zheng, modern Chinese intellectuals believe that the Chinese language, if not to be held responsible for the “stupidity” of the Chinese people, should be held accountable for the backwardness of Chinese society¹. Although under circumstances quite different from those of Zheng’s, Marshall McLuhan, one of the leading figures in communication and media studies, made a similar ethnocentric or logocentric claim that goes unchallenged in the field of communication. Such a statement brings attention to a careful reader that not only McLuhan but also several other important communication scholars, in their

construction of communication theories, have encoded strong ethnocentric biases, which are still shaping our understanding of important issues in human communication.

This article is an exploratory effort to address biases in the field of communication. We will first take a look at the historical formation of logocentrism in general. We will then examine how logocentrism influences and is translated into our understanding of communication. We specifically focus on the studies of Harold Innis, McLuhan, Eric Havelock, Walter Ong, and Edward Hall. And finally, we make suggestions on how we should re-conceptualize issues in intercultural communication.

Logocentrism and the Western Metaphysical Tradition

In his *Of Grammatology* and other writings, Derrida (1976, 1982) made a radical critique of the Western metaphysical tradition. At the core of this tradition, as Derrida traced it back to antiquity, is logocentrism or phonocentrism, stemming from Plato's speculation on the relationship between speech and writing. In *Phaedrus*, Plato, through his persona, Socrates, brings up an issue of writing, of the latter's monstrous impact on the rationality of human beings, an issue that would transform into *the* issue of Western metaphysics. What terribly concerns Plato is that writing, a technique, will facilitate our memory at the sacrifice of our mind, to which speech can only speak. Speech and writing represent two different worlds: speech is something related to the inner world, a place of truth, of the necessary, and of the ideal, while writing is something related to the exterior world, a place of falsity, of the contingent, and of the imperfect.

What makes Western metaphysics work is not just the distinction between speech and writing, but rather the connection drawn from this distinction and its subsequent application to the criticism of different language systems. Even though writing, in Plato's observation, is inferior to speech, the Western alphabetic writing has an unparalleled superiority compared with other non-alphabetic languages. In the alphabetic system, the alphabet denotes sound and has a closer relationship to speech. In non-alphabetic systems, particularly in ideographic ones, writing bears no direct relationship to speech.² To look cross-culturally, logocentrism exists as a clear-cut dichotomy: the alphabetic West and the non-alphabetic East. In other words, logocentrism exists by creating an Eastern other, a culture or tradition that is always incommensurable with a Western one, and is always fantasized with both a solid and fluid nature at the service or convenience of Western theorizing.

Following Plato, with few exceptions, the supremacy of the phonetic alphabetic language is canonized in Western philosophical and academic discourse.³ There arise new formulations or operationalized treatments of this issue in the context of the modern world when cross-cultural contacts become part of East-West historiography. In terms of the Chinese language, because it is ideographic, it consequently fails to develop concepts, categories, logic, scientific thinking, and so

forth, and fails to ascend to the level of abstraction which the Western alphabetic language embraces and which modern society or civilization demands. For example, the Latin version of the observations made by Ricco, one of the first European missionaries in China, tells the European reader that the Chinese have a system of writing "similar to the hieroglyphic signs of the Egyptians" and that they "do not express their concepts by writing, like most of the world, with a few alphabetic signs, but they paint as many symbols as there are words" (quoted from DeFrancis, 1984, p. 134). In terms of influence, Hegel may be the first modern thinker or theorizer to provide a systematic treatment to logocentrism. In his system, the East-Western dichotomy has been placed in a hierarchy of different stages of civilizations, which correspond to different systems of languages. The modern advancement of Western society is the result of its alphabetic system. In his *Philosophy of History*, Hegel expresses a view that the Chinese written language is incapable of conveying scientific thoughts and that it "is at the outset a great hindrance of the development of science" (1900, p. 134). In comparison, Hegel insists that the German and Western alphabetic writing is created for the purpose of registering sound, while the ideographic Chinese writing "does not present the spoken words to the eye, but represents the ideas themselves by signs"(p. 135). Accordingly, the Chinese linguistic experience is categorically different from that of the West. Reading Chinese is directly experiencing and associating with particulars without elevating to a higher level of abstraction.

For centuries, this view, presenting itself as a kind of grand narrative, has guided the understanding of the Chinese language for the Western world. It gets a seemingly unquestionable endorsement in Northrop's (1946) influential book, *The Meeting of East and West*. In Northrop's eye, the Easterner:

uses bits of linguistic symbolism, largely denotative, and often purely ideographic in character, to point toward a component in the nature of things which only immediate experience and continued contemplation can convey. This shows itself especially in the symbols of the Chinese language, where each solitary, immediate experienced local particular tends to have its own symbol, this symbol also often having a directly observed form like that of the immediately seen item of direct experience which it denotes....As a consequence, there was no alphabet. This automatically eliminates the logical whole-part relation between one symbol and another that occurs in the linguistic symbolism of the West in which all words are produced by merely putting together in different permutations the small number of symbols constituting the alphabet. (p. 316)

Despite that a few eminent scholars questioned Northrop's position as well as the dominant view on the Chinese language,⁴ the idea that the Chinese language is categorically different from the Western alphabetic one remains a theme many Western theorists still hold. For the purposes of this study, two strands of recent studies warrant mentioning here.

Philosophical studies of the Chinese language

In his comprehensive studies of logical aspect of the Chinese language, Hensen (1983, 1985, 1993) maintained that the ancient Chinese philosophy has no concept of truth. "Ancient Chinese philosophy contrasts with ancient Greek philosophy in lacking a preoccupation with meanings as expressed in definition. Socrates and Plato regarded their attempts at definition as the crucial methods of gaining Knowledge" (1983, p. 58). According to Hensen, in the Chinese language, pragmatics—how language should be used in concrete contexts of social life—is more emphasized at the sacrifice of semantics—how language should relate to and convey truth. He (1993, p. 386) illustrated the point with the following diagram:

Alphabetic Language	Written Word—Spoken Word—Mental Likeness—Things
Chinese Language	Written Word—Spoken Word-----Things

Mental likeness, which, in various contexts, can be understood as the abstract, the concept, the being, the truth, the knowledge, and the like, is missing in the Chinese language.

David Hall (1991) supported this view. Raising an interesting thesis that the world the Chinese language creates is pretty much like the one the postmodernist advocates in the West, Hall differentiated modernity and postmodernity from the perspective of different languages. He made the following observations that, in a logocentric language, one critical consequence is that

[T]here must be real independence of a proposition from the state of affairs it characterizes. This entails dualistic relations of propositions and state of affairs. Without such independence, in the sense of dualism and transcendence, nothing like logical truth may be formulated. (p. 64)

He went on to argue that the presence of transcendent beings and principles in the formation of Western culture is well agreed upon, while "[n]either dualism nor transcendence is present in the original Confucian or Taoist sensibilities" (p. 64). Without an interest in the semantic issues such as propositional truth, Hall argued that even the Confucian "rectification of names" cannot be understood as a concern "for univocity, for getting the definitions of terms straight and proper," but is rather an example of how language should be used concretely, evocatively, allusively, and ultimately morally (p. 65).

Psychological studies of the Chinese language

The philosophical studies of the Chinese language have already pointed to some psychological aspects. In Hensen's diagram, unlike the alphabetic language, the Chinese language doesn't equip the Chinese mind with "the mental likeness." Without this critical feature, the Chinese language is unable to develop concepts, truths, logic, abstraction, and so on. Psycholinguistic studies became an important field of inquiry due to works in modern linguistics and anthropology. In studying linguistic patterns and their relationship to mind among the savage people, Sapir and Whorf, for example, suggested that language functions, not simply as a device for communicating facts and experience, but also, and more significantly, as a way of defining experience for its speakers.

Employing the theoretical framework of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and studying the relationship of the Chinese language to psychological reactions, Alfred Bloom (1981) held that the Chinese language-speaking respondents in general have difficulty in counterfactual schemes, which, on account of their nonexistence, are equivalent to the philosophical concept of being. Bloom suggested that Chinese speakers in general, by contrast to their English-speaking counterparts, do not have at their disposal already prepared cognitive schemas specifically designed for interpreting information in a counterfactual way. Although Bloom was cognizant of the impact on cognitive schemas by cultural proclivities, he became increasingly inclined to associate them with the deterministic power of language. "[A]s one moves into increasingly abstract cognitive realms, such as that of the counterfactual," Bloom observed, "the formative contributions of linguistic structures to both thought and culture become increasingly pronounced" (p. 33).

The counterfactual acts have important consequences in the construction of abstract thoughts, truth, and knowledge. They are not just an added linguistic alternative that the Western mind retrieves information about the world, but are a "linguistic device that leads speakers to develop cognitive schemas specifically designed to enable and encourage them to shift from describing, questioning, or even commanding within their baseline models of reality, to projecting and operating within theoretical extractions from those baseline models." In light of this, Bloom maintained: "[N]ot only does the Chinese language not have any structures equivalent to the counterfactual but neither does it have structures equivalent to the additional members of this special set of English and, more generally, Indo-European elicitors of theoretically extracted thoughts" (p. 34). To look for deeper explanation, Bloom examined a series of linguistic structures and explicated for example how the lack of generic concepts in the Chinese language would contribute to the unique schemas of the Chinese-speaking subjects. He held that the lack of articles such as "the" or "a" in "The horse is an animal" accounts for the lack of schema in the mind of the Chinese that is instrumental in knowledge construction. So the Chinese language has no way to convey truth in an abstract sense as English does.

Logocentrism or Linguistic Determinism

Forms of ethnocentrism have been under scrutiny. Edward Said's *Orientalism*, for example, provides us with an understanding of how the Oriental other was created based upon "an ontological and epistemological distinction" made by the colonial West (1979, p. 2). In his deconstructing work, Derrida has argued that the presence is illusionary, and that all the apparatuses and traditions of Western philosophy, from the reliance on authority to the privileging of systems, contribute to its power and dominance as a way of thinking. To be in some way consistent with Derrida, the works of Foucault and other postmodernists reject the notion of absence by disenchanting the myth of objective knowledge and grand narrative of Western modernity. Feminist scholars from their unique perspectives have interrogated the validity of Western cultural traditions both methodologically and in substantive areas. In his excellent studies of comparative experiences of literary hermeneutics, Zhang Longxi (1992) argues with scholarly profundity and clarity that the Chinese concept of Tao captures the very concept of logos, pointing out that even Derrida's revolt against logocentrism is from the premise that logocentrism is a Western phenomenon (p. 17).

In the area of communication, there has been uniformity in conceptualizing the characteristics of the Chinese language by scholars, even though they have held different views on Chinese communication patterns. Even in his pioneering study of communication and culture in ancient China and India, and his powerful defense for a rhetorical tradition in these ancient countries, Robert Oliver (1971) also held a similar view: "[T]he ancient East has not been much interested in logic, which necessarily correlated unlike elements, nor has it favored either definition or classification as aids to clear thought" (p. 10). Recently, scholars well versed in both Chinese and English have started challenging this deep-seated view by offering their new readings. Lu and Frank (1993) argued that instead of using Western names or frameworks one needs first to understand the meaning of those Chinese terms before making any meaningful comparison and fair judgment. More recently, Lu (1998) tellingly deconstructed the myths in the conceptualization of the Chinese language, rhetoric, and communication, challenging the status-quo of the field of communication: "To this day, anthropologists and communication scholars continue to superimpose dualistic and polarized categories of analysis upon Chinese cultural patterns and communication behaviors. Chinese culture as a whole is classified as 'collectivistic' and 'high-context,' while Western culture is viewed as 'individualistic' and low-context" (p. 37).

Unfortunately, efforts like these are rarely seen in the field of communication. "For many scholars," as Zhang indicates, "whether they accept or reject the Hegelian view, incommensurability or fundamental difference between cultural systems is still very much the accepted working assumption" (1989, p. 22). In their theorizing of Western communication theories, scholars would take these

assumptions for granted and create a biased picture about the Eastern language, communication, and culture. In what follows, I will take a brief survey of how communication scholars have conceptualized issues perpetuating this dominant logocentric view. My selection of these scholars is not exhaustive, but exemplary.

Havelock and Ong: rhetorical construction of logocentrism

Havelock's (1963) *Preface to Plato* is one of the most important books that investigate historical, cultural, and psychological impacts of writing. Recapturing the crisis that occurred in the history of human communication when Greek orality transformed itself into Greek literacy, Havelock observed that writing made possible the separation of the knower and the known, the substitution of knowledge-by-analysis for knowledge-by-empathy. According to Havelock, the written word added a sense of sight to the sense of hearing as a means of preserving and repeating communication. Since the written word could be recalled by the use of the eye, and did not have to be carried around in the living memory, a great deal of psychological energy was saved. More importantly, when the written word was used, it could recreate a situation that no longer existed. The act of recreation required a higher level of abstraction inconceivable and impossible in the oral world; it "drastically reduced the need of framing discourse so as to be visualized, and the degree of this visualization consequently drops." Havelock specifically attributed this abstracting faculty to alphabetization. "It may indeed be suggested that it was increasing alphabetization which opened the way to experiments in abstraction. Once rid of the need to preserve experience vividly, the composer was freer to reorganize it reflectively" (p. 188).

The emergence of writing was a new-world-making event. The world of Greece underwent a revolutionary change. The intimate and concrete world was transformed into an objectifying and abstract world. The holistic view about nature and the human being was replaced by a new conception that nature and the human being were isolated, and even fragmented in some psychological sense. "Greece was now committed to a dangerous and fascinating game, in which the combats of Homeric heroes found themselves being translated into battles between concepts, categories, and principles" (p. 304). However, writings of other cultures don't deserve such credits. Havelock provided an explanation with reference to the Near Eastern scripts of all shapes and sizes sharing two common limitations: (a) they employed a large number of signs, and; (b) the signs used left a wide range of ambiguity in interpretation (p.117).

What kind of culture does not have the ability to develop categories and abstract concepts, even though it has a writing system? There is no explicit answer to this question. One can nevertheless infer from Havelock's analysis. Reflecting on the new scholarship of the study of orality and literacy, Havelock, like a few others who we shall deal with later, draws anthropological studies to stretch his imagination. He availed himself to the study of the people when literacy had not

penetrated their society, and sought anthropological evidence. He quoted from Ong's work:

His [Alexander Luria] nonliterate, who one gathers were the majority, identified geometrical figures by giving them the names of concrete objects with associated shapes: a circle would be called a plate, sieve, bucket, or watch; school students (on the other hand), moderately literate, identified geometrical figures by their proper categories. (1986, p. 38)

Underlying Havelock's statements is the logocentric bias. In his case, logocentrism evolves around two themes resulting from simplistic and dichotomous thinking. One theme suggests that if a culture develops its own ingenuous system of writing, but if this system is not alphabetic, it is nothing but images and pictures, and fails to transform the mind toward abstraction. The second theme, building on the first one, implies that the mind under the impact of the non-phonetic writing shares a similar feature with the uncultivated mind of illiterates. To translate these into increasingly questionable anthropological terms, the phonetic writing elevates the "Western man" to the stage of civilization, and non-phonetic writing traps the "non-Western man" in the world of barbarism. We will see that this connection is expressly drawn in the works of McLuhan while creatively adapting it to media studies.

The phonetic and non-phonetic dichotomy has pointed to a certain linguistic determinism. Rather than looking into cultural factors that might be more instrumental in influencing logic and abstract thinking, linguistic determinism tends to look the other way: it is the linguistic structure at the bottom that accounts for the social, political, economic, or in that loosely defined "cultural" difference. Havelock takes this path. He concluded:

The major specific differentiation that has occurred lies in our capacity for linguistic communication, which in turn brings into existence that kind of society enjoyed specifically by man. With society comes culture in all its manifestations. Though many of these are material (art and architecture, for example) the act of communication which they indirectly express depends in turn upon the activity of linguistic communication. Human language is the foundation; the material achievement is the superstructure. (1986, p. 98)

Similar to Havelock, Ong has been influential in shaping our understanding of issues involving orality and literacy. In accord with Havelock's observation, Ong held that the migration from orality to literacy is a migration to a level of abstraction that could not be achieved in oral culture. With the invention and application of

writing, modern subjects such as science and philosophy become possible. Ong, too, offered a special tribute to the Greek language. He stated:

If writing initially helped thought to separate itself from the human lifeworld so as to help establish and manipulate abstract constructs, Learned Latin would seemingly have helped at a crucial period with special efficiency, for its commitment to writing is in a way total, as has been seen: it does not merely use writing but is controlled by writing. (1982, pp. 36-37)

Like Havelock, Ong believed in the phonetic advantage of Western society. “Havelock (1976) believes that this crucial, more nearly total transformation of the word from sound to sight gave ancient Greek culture its intellectual ascendancy over other ancient cultures” (1977, p. 90). Ong used modern studies on the human brain to buttress his argument, as he stated: “Kerckhove (1981) has suggested that, more than other writing systems, the completely phonetic alphabet favors left-hemisphere activities in the brain, and thus neurophysiological ground fosters abstract, analytic thought” (1977, p.91). Thinking that the Western language is technologically advanced, and from a technological point of view, Ong charted a course for the Chinese writing system, predicting: “Sad though it may be, it is difficult to see how in any way Chinese character writing could long continue to survive” (1977, p. 34).

Another interesting and related issue is rhetoric. Until very recently, mainstream scholars believe that rhetoric is a Western phenomenon. Rhetoric has been defined as “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion” (Aristotle). As opposed to *episteme*, rhetoric is *doxa*, which shapes public opinion through communication and forms social action. As rhetoric was hard pressed by philosophy, and was suspected of its role in promoting sophistry and departure from truth, rhetorical scholars aligned rhetoric with “scientific probability.” In light of this, the logical aspect of the Western language prompted Ong to say that rhetoric has been an important fellow with logic.

Other cultures, too, once they had writing, at least in many cases gave systematic attention to oral performance. But there was a difference. What was distinctive about the organization of rhetoric among the Greeks was the close alliance of the art with another subject which, if we expect a considerably later and much less developed discipline in India, was an exclusively Western invention: formal logic. Logic and rhetoric have always been uneasy bedfellows, but in the West they have been bedfellows nevertheless pretty well from the beginning. (1971, p. 3)

Edward Hall: Cross-cultural construction of logocentrism

Linguistic determinism is also reflected in the works of Edward Hall. In the area of cross-cultural communication, Hall is widely read for his sensitivity to and in-depth analysis of cultural issues such as space, time, gesture, silence, and so on. In his seminal study of different cultural patterns and behaviors, Hall (1976) informed us with a dichotomy of high-context and low-context cultures. From this theoretic framework, Hall made sweeping generalizations that the Western culture is low-context with meaning encoded in clear, logical, and even redundant verbal references; on the other hand, the Eastern culture is high-context, dependent much upon its situational elements, often resorting to nonverbal cues. Hall went on to argue that in this dichotomy the low-context culture is also technologically based. "Another interesting sidelight on the Chinese orthography is that it is also an art form. To my knowledge, no low-context communication system has ever been an art form" (p. 92). Hall proceeded to associate law and social order with the conceptualization of high and low contexts. Hall seemed to follow such reasoning: since Chinese orthography is an art form, which is ambiguous in nature, so the Chinese culture and society should experience a kind of irregularity or instability similar to the artistic patterns. "Therefore, as things become more complex, as they inevitably must with fast-evolving, low-context systems, it eventually becomes necessary to turn life and institutions around and move toward the greater stability of the high-context part of the scale as a way of dealing with information overload" (p. 102). As he speculated:

The core of the problem may be that Western philosophies and beliefs are pictures in men's minds as to the nature of what is. Because of extension transference, the pictures are taken for reality when all they are is an idea or explanation. Such pictures and explanations are real in one sense, because they are constructions of the human mind and they tell us a lot about how that mind works as a product of a given culture.
(p. 214)

It is not hard to see that in Hall's mind the cultural difference (manifested in day-to-day encounters) at the upper level reflects the philosophical/linguistic difference at the deeper level. The "pictures in men's mind" are like what David Hall refers to as "mental likeness," and they have very clear linguistic connections and logocentric overtones.

In association with this kind of dichotomous approach, Hall, in another work, investigated different attitudes and applications of time across different cultures. He coined two terms respectively, polychronic time (P-time) and monochronic time (M-time). The P-time represents a cultural attitude that time is not linear, and members in that culture take a holistic view on what is going on, which often results

in trying to accomplish many things at the same time. The M-time represents a linear approach. “By scheduling, we compartmentalize; this makes it possible to concentrate on one thing at a time, but it also reduces the context” (1983, p. 44). He saw the connection between Western civilization and the M-time. He speculated that without schedules or something similar to the M-time system the Western industrial civilization could not have developed as it has been. The P-time stresses involvement of people and completion of transactions rather than adherence to preset schedules.

If we take a closer look, these two concepts betray a traditional view derived from logocentrism, that is, the Western mind is sequential, logical, and linear, while the Eastern mind is holistic, irrational, and nonlinear.

Innis and McLuhan: Media construction of logocentrism

Today, we can say that the influence of the works of Havelock and Ong are mainly exerted in the area of rhetoric, and that Hall finds his readers in the realm of intercultural communication. In the study of modern media, Innis and McLuhan have also created a logocentric bias that is closely linked with linguistic determinism.⁶

While related to the issues mentioned above, Innis (1964) has been an instrumental figure in shaping another dimension of the study on medium, communication, and the development of social institution and knowledge. McLuhan, whose media theory is a product of his excellent re-engineering of Innis’s thesis, will rework this dimension.

Departing from the conventional way of dealing with the issue of civilization, Innis regards various forms of human civilization as manifestations of media:

[T]hat civilization has been dominated at different stages by various media of communication such as clay, papyrus, parchment, and paper produced first from rags and then from wood. Each medium has its significance for the type of monopoly of knowledge which will be built and which will destroy the conditions suited to creative thought and be displaced by a new medium with its peculiar type of monopoly of knowledge. (1949, p. 5)

The creation of social institutions, including economic ones, the transmitting and monopolizing of knowledge, and the changing of historical periods are all related directly to the medium of communication.

This notion is applicable to the comparative study of languages—media of communication. Thus, as a medium of communication, the Chinese language, or the Chinese writing system, to be exact, not only indicates a specific object, but also represents a kind of method and social organization. As Innis stated later in his *The Bias of Communication*:

It has been argued by Marcel Granet that the Chinese are not equipped to note concepts or to present doctrines discursively. The word does not fix a notion with a definite degree of abstraction or generality but evokes an indefinite complex of particular images. It is completely unsuited to formal precision. Neither time nor space is abstractly conceived; time proceeds by cycles and is round; space is square. (1951, p. 62)

The logocentric bias culminated in the works of McLuhan. His writings on extensions of media ranging from writing to electronic technologies display a remarkable consistency despite his eclectic approaches. Situating himself in a position similar to what Havelock, Ong, and Innis hold, McLuhan explored the transformative power of writing. Holding the technological view of phonocentrism, McLuhan opened up his *Gutenberg Galaxy*: “[T]he abstracting or opening of closed societies is the work of the phonetic alphabet, and not of any other form of writing or technologies” (1962, p. 8). Comparing different writing systems, McLuhan adopted the historical view of Hegel, though in different terms. He argued that no pictographic or ideogrammic or hieroglyphic mode of writing has the detribalizing power of the phonetic alphabet. No other kind of writing save the phonetic has ever translated the human being out of the possessive world of total interdependence and interrelation that is the auditory network. From that magical resonating world of simultaneous relations that is the oral and acoustic space there is only one route to freedom and independence of detribalized man. McLuhan then defined civilization as “to mean detribalized man for whom the visual values have priority in the organization of thought and action” (pp. 22-27).

The alphabetic writing and the subsequent technology of literacy created the scientific, objective, and detached “Western man,” who had “the power to act without reacting,” and who acquired “the art of carrying out the most dangerous social operations with complete detachment” (1965, p. 4).

The left hemisphere vs. right hemisphere theory developed in the 1950s spellbound McLuhan almost for the rest of his academic career. According to this theory, the function of the left hemisphere is responsible for linear, rational, sequential, analytic activities, while the right hemisphere nonlinear, irrational, holistic, synthetic activities. The logocentrism took a “medium turn” in McLuhan’s theorizing. In one letter to a congressman, he made the following stunning generalization:

What the brain surgeons have discovered about the two hemispheres of the brain tells us that the First World is left hemisphere, and the Third World is right hemisphere. For decades I have been trying to expound this difference in

terms of the eye via the phonetic alphabet and the invention of Euclidean space. With the alphabet, the lineal and connected character of space became apparent to literate man alone. The “*barbarians*” went on living in acoustic space, in a world dominated by oral culture. Logic belongs to the left hemisphere alone, but the simultaneous world of the right hemisphere is given new dominance by the electric-information environment” (1988, p. 527. Italics added).

If the Chinese characters are just pictures or images, it follows “logically” that the Eastern culture with the Chinese language as its most representative form will account for heavy use of the right hemisphere. McLuhan exactly takes this direction. In one letter to Innis, McLuhan made explicitly this connection: The *montage* of images in modern film “was basically a return via technology to age-old picture language.” And he invoked the reference to an authoritative figure in film studies: “S. Eisenstein’s *Film Form* and *Film Technique* explore the relations between modern developments in the arts and Chinese ideogram, pointing to the common basis of ideogram in modern art, science and technology” (1987, p. 221). In *Laws of Media*, he also stated:

The Chinese use the intervals between things as the primary means of getting “in touch” with situation. Nothing could be more expressive than this statement of the properties of the right hemisphere in contrast to the left. For, to the left hemisphere, the interval is a space that must be logically connected and filled and bridged. Such is the dictate of linearity and visual order in contrast to the resonating interval or gap of the simultaneous world of the right hemisphere. (1988, p. 42)

With the advent of the new communication technologies such as television and the computer taking away the Western logical world created by alphabetic printing culture, McLuhan dramatizes the historical transition: The cultural war between printing and electronic media simulates a quasi-linguistic war between the alphabetic and the non-alphabetic. The “global village”, the fancy term coined by McLuhan, essentially projects a new-world condition in which the electronic media becomes dominant over printing media. This change of dominance amounts to the change from the Western culture or civilization to the Eastern culture, from the left-hemisphere culture to the right-hemisphere culture, which “has no place for the private individual, just as the left-hemisphere society regards tribal groups as sinister and threatening (remember the ‘Yellow Peril’)” (1987, p. 77). To

McLuhan's disappointment, the retreat from the Western culture to the Eastern culture is a retreat from civilization to barbarism⁷.

The Myth of Logocentrism

The preceding investigation tells us that logocentrism is ultimately a form of linguistic determinism. How much validity is there in the historical claim that the Chinese writing is ideographic and that the lack of scientific spirit is due to the Chinese language?

The ideographical writing and the truth claim

One of the perpetuated misconceptions about the Chinese language, as we labored on this issue earlier, is that the Chinese ideographic writing or the Chinese language as a system on the whole is not effective in scientific construction and discourse. From a linguistic point of view, as David Hall maintains, the Western language excels itself at the semantics level, which addresses the language and its relation to the world. In contrast, the Chinese language bounces at the pragmatics level, that is, it accentuates the relationship between the language user and the application in society. Accordingly, the Chinese language is ill equipped to construct concepts and truth claims and ultimately fails to develop modern science. If one isolates the Chinese language without taking into account the influence of other social and cultural factors, one might be right in making such a simplistic claim historically. That is to say, the expressive nature of Chinese writing remained a technical difficulty for scientific development. In a certain sense, Hegel is right in claiming that the Chinese characters provide more experience. However, such claim will be greatly weakened if the Chinese language reform throughout the 20th century is appreciated. In classical Chinese writing, it is true that ambiguities resulting from monosyllabic words were pervasive. But it is no longer the case. As a result of the century-long language reform and the transformation of culture, the Chinese language today enjoys much more precision.⁸ The Europeanized form of language, i.e., using suffixes to modify concepts, such as “—tion”, “—age,” “—ness,” theorized to be the linguistic manifestation of how concepts exist in a given language, is well captured in the Chinese language and has become standardized today. For example, from modern to modernity and to modernization, the Chinese equivalents are “xiandai” and “xiandaixing” or “xiandaihua,” and here both “xing” and “hua” register at the level of abstraction. In the case of white and whiteness, there are other terms that can well explain their meanings. One obvious example of the Chinese language in its ability to be used not only pragmatically but also semantically is that almost all of the Western classics have been translated into the Chinese language, and that the translation from alphabetic languages to so-called ideographic Chinese characters doesn't seem to present unique problems.⁹

If we look further into a provocative thesis raised by Richard Rorty, we might find the Chinese language's alleged lack of truth claim and philosophical tradition

would be a good thing for the future of the ideal society and democracy. Examining the roles played by theorists and novelists in recent human history, Rorty (1991) expresses his concern about philosophers engaging themselves in “theory, simplicity, structure, abstraction, and essence,” and insensitive to “narrative, detail, diversity, and accident.” Due to philosophers’ interests in the “quest of greatness,” Rorty concludes, “it is among the philosophers of the West that contemporary Western self-hatred is most prevalent” (p. 18).

The ideographical myth and the structure of mind

There is no indication that the Chinese language has a problem in counterfactuality. In this aspect, culture plays a more important role. As an influential system, Confucianism has a strong practical and moral emphasis. It warns against exerting one’s imagination without paying due attention to practical matters. Confucius’s refusal to explain what death is attests to such a cultural influence. When asked to “theorize” death, Confucius answers: I don’t even know life; how should I care to know death? In the Chinese language, there are idioms such as *xiang ru fei fei* with a strong derogative sense to indicate someone who thinks more than does. Aside from cultural constraints, social and political concerns may well be a factor, too. In China, the “counterfactuality” as a form of expression understood as ideas, thoughts, or beliefs doesn’t achieve a legal status as it does in the United States. On the contrary, one could be punished or persecuted in Chinese society for his/her counterfactual thinking.¹⁰

In a brilliant study about “facts and fantasies” of Chinese language, DeFrancis (1984) made the case that to single out the Chinese written language as ideographic and incommensurable with the alphabetic language is a myth. He argued that not only have the Chinese characters, in their historical evolution, been moved toward a phonographic system, that is, to denote sound, but also on a global scale “a full system of nonphonetic writing has never existed.” (p. 143)

Throughout our study, we find a logic consistency, though it is based on a false premise. The alphabetic writing and ideographic writing indeed present striking differences, which are the main cause for people to draw conclusions from an ethnocentric point of view. When the Chinese character is perceived of solely as an art form, two general observations naturally present themselves to the Western theorizer. First, Chinese characters are concrete pictures, with the help of which the Chinese recall moments of aesthetic experience. Second, whereas the alphabetic system is sequential with one letter following another, Chinese characters are written in an order that proceeds either from top to bottom or from left to right. This aspect, consistent with several empirical studies on the function of two hemispheres, adds to the belief that the Chinese mind, submerged in Chinese characters, is insensitive to logic and rationality.

However, the empirical study about the lateralization of perception of Chinese characters and that of alphabetic symbols is not final. That Chinese characters are

holistic symbols and alphabetical words are stimuli with sequences of letters only works at a limited level. In a study conducted in 1979, Tzeng, Hung, Cotton and Wang found that the right hemisphere advantage for Chinese applied only to single characters. When two-character “words” were shown to subjects, there was a left hemisphere advantage, just as with alphabetical languages. Ho and Hoosain (1984) also found a left hemisphere advantage when subjects were asked to decide if pairs of characters were opposites or not. Unlike individual characters, pairs of characters require sequential and analytical processing (see Hoosain, 1995).

Findings of these empirical studies should be self-explanatory. A single character is written without the sequential and linear order in the Western sense of the word, but when characters are “patched” together, the function of each character, structurally, will serve similarly as an alphabet, thus engaging the Chinese mind in a sequential and analytical pattern. It is also evident that in reading a Chinese text, an average Chinese reader doesn’t realize “the juxtaposition of individual pictures,” but engages him/herself in seeking information just as an average English reader does.

Needham, arguably the most eminent scholar in the history of Chinese science and technology, argued that the idea of accumulative, disinterested, cooperative enterprise in amassing scientific information was customary in China, and that the dominant mode of thinking in Chinese civilization is linearity. The historical-mindedness as revealed in the abundance of historical literature is strong enough to show this to be the case. The lack of scientific and technological development might be fruitfully explained by other ideological factors together with “the concrete geographical, social, and economic conditions and structures” (1981, p. 131).

Concluding Remarks

Despite their conscious or unconscious obsession with logocentrism, these communication scholars under discussion have provided insights into the impacts of writing and printing on individual and social life. That the advancement of modern society is intertwined with and made possible by writing technology is a fact that many social theorists no longer doubt. In his illuminating study of modernity, Habermas (1987) acknowledges the role played by writing and printing in shaping our modern world. Addressing the issue of modernity in the condition of postmodernity and globalization, Giddens (1990) resituates writing both at the center and as a starting point for modern experience, including knowledge construction, social organization, and economic expansion. According to Giddens, writing makes it possible for us to break away from the constraints of localities, for it “expands the level of time-space distancing and creates a perspective of past, present, and future in which the reflexive appropriation of knowledge can be set off from designated tradition” (p. 37).

To universalize this claim about writing technology, regardless whether it is based on alphabets or on characters, and to deconstruct the myth of logocentrism has practical implications. As we mentioned in passing at the beginning of this essay, the issue of the Chinese language has excited, frustrated, and confused generations of intellectuals. Whether the Chinese language should remain in its classic form, be modified to adapt to the demands of the modern world, or completely abandoned in favor of a phonetic system has been debated throughout the 20th century.¹¹

The biases reflect the dominant trend in the first half of last century. Advances in modern linguistics, especially structural linguistics, have exerted direct and indirect influences. In the pre-1950s, the notion that language is a tool of communication remained unchallenged. Even in the philosophical realm, Western language's supremacy was assumed without sophisticated theorization and formulation. With the influence of the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis, the works of Noam Chomsky, the research of Levi-Strauss and a few others, the relationship between language and mind, and its impact on cultural artifacts, have been explored and have stimulated many research areas.¹² The traditional logocentric view with philosophical overtones has seemed to receive empirical support.

Challenging the logocentric bias doesn't mean that one has to take a yes or no position on whether there is a relationship between language and mind. The question is bigger and lies deeper than that. For the convenience of our argument, let us revisit the thrust of the Whorf-Sapir thesis.

In one of his first works frequently cited, Sapir (1931) says:

Language is not merely a more or less systematic inventory of the various items of experience which seem relevant to the individual, as is so often natively assumed, but is also a self-contained, creative symbolic organization, which not only refers to experience largely acquired without its help but actually defines experience for us by reason of its formal completeness and because of our unconscious projection of its implicit expectations into the field of experience. (p. 578)

Whorf (1952) develops the same thesis when he says:

...the linguistic system (in other words, the grammar) of each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual's mental activity, for his analysis of impressions, for his synthesis of his mental stock in trade....We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the

world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds. (p. 5)

This seems intuitive that even when we conceive of language solely as a communicative tool, it has its imprints on our psychology—at least interpreted as our habits, expectations, and frameworks in orientation to the state of affairs, be it our understanding or our action. This is what McLuhan (1967) calls “media extensions,” what Kenneth Burke (1966) refers to as a “terministic screen,” and what Neil Postman (1988) means by saying that a man with a hammer in hand will see everything as a nail. For instance, the very term communication can illustrate the point. The Chinese have difficulty in conceptualizing different areas that are associated with the word communication such as mass communication, interpersonal communication, and telecommunication. For these terms are rendered differently and seem to have nothing in common (Chang, 1998). But the question doesn’t stay at this level. Does language act on and structure the mind, leaving permanent imprints that will not be washed away but existing as a default that comes up to haunt us whenever we are not vigilant? Or, is there, out of this deterministic model, an alternative way that the transformation of language and culture will restructure our psychological layout and help us adapt to new requirements attendant with our technological advances?

It is such an alternative model that orients us toward a more promising path in our efforts in understanding communicative issues in cross-cultural settings. Without taking account of the transformative power of language and culture, generalizations of cross-cultural communication will, rather than creating understanding, help perpetuate stereotypes. To understand different cultures, it is serviceable to create dichotomies and to use these dichotomies as a frame of reference to speculate on different cultural issues. In doing this, however, one needs to be on guard constantly that it is a logical fallacy to treat these dichotomies as absolute categories and forget that they are human constructions subject to constant modifications. The problem becomes even worse when one forces a new area under investigation into these categories and jumps into a conclusion that denies a true understanding of the issues involved. For instance, significant cultural changes have taken place in many of the Asian countries, which are theorized to share the Eastern culture. The cultural differences between some Asian countries are probably as significant as the differences between these Asian countries and some Western countries, and vice versa. Japan is a case in point. The context of the concepts of Hall’s high-context and low-context culture was set in Japan. Hall used Japan as the example for high-context culture. According to his theorizing, high-context culture is more artistically oriented and technologically under-developed. But this generalization is not true. By any standards, the Japanese society is

considered a technologically advanced one with its state-of-the-art products from automobiles to electronics. The Chinese language has also developed and been remodeled: with the emergence of vernacular movement in this century, it is no longer one-dimensional. It has equipped itself with different modes of communication. While people with little education still retain in some way the patterns of traditional communication applicable to what Hall observes, the younger generation today uses Chinese in a way that is not very different from the Westerner in terms of contexts. From the Western perspective one may find numerous instances where the stress of contexts reaches a certain redundancy in many of Chinese expressions. In constructing sentences with the subjective mood, the Chinese like to spell out all conditions or contexts very clearly. In persuading somebody, instead of using the sentence “I would like to go to the conference,” the Chinese would say: “If I were you, I would like to go to the conference.”

There is no doubt that the establishment of communication studies remains one of great academic achievements in this century. There is equally no doubt that the conceptualization and theorizing of communication is mainly a Western construct, and like other cultural artifacts, it is subject to carrying a Western bias. At a time when international communication was at the periphery, such bias didn't seem to be a serious issue. As the world moves toward globalization and integration between different cultures happens on a daily basis, it requires us to rethink the bias embedded in the construction of our understanding of communication issues.

Notes

¹ Most studies on the modern Chinese experience have devoted some attention to the Chinese language reform, particularly in conjunction with the May Fourth Movement and the New Cultural Movement. For general reference, see Chow, 1960; Schwarcz, 1986. For specific reference, see DeFrancis, 1950, 1984; Sybolt & Chiang, 1978.

² In Western scholarship, different terms such as “ideographic”, “logographic”, or even “pictographic” have been used to refer to the Chinese writing. For the purpose of this paper, I use ideographic writing to refer to the Chinese writing as opposed to the Western alphabetic writing.

³ German philosopher Leibniz and enlightenment thinker Voltaire both have high regards for Chinese culture and civilization. Leibniz regards the Chinese language as the most ideal, human, and philosophical language (see Leibniz, 1977).

⁴ For example, Chung-ying Cheng argues, “there is nothing in Chinese language which prevents the Chinese mind from developing logical thinking or formulating logical principles” (see Cheng, 1969, p. 336). Hu Shi, who as early as 1919 explored the logical method of the Chinese language and culture, argued in a convincing manner that the lack of scientific tradition and destitution of logical

reasoning in China may be caused by other broader factors, social, political, and cultural (see Hu, 1959, p. 201).

⁵ It is interesting to note that these scholars have a tendency: (1) to cite each other, and (2) to cite from the same sources.

⁶ Communication scholars often regard McLuhan as a technological determinist. At one level of generalization, this is true. But my study will show that, in the depth of McLuhan's mind, lies an unwavering linguistic determinism.

⁷ We credit McLuhan for his the prophetic coining of the term *global village*, which describes the Western society transformed by electronic media. Ironically, the rosy picture with which we associate the term is nowhere in McLuhan's writing. On the contrary, the term *global village* indicates a sense of pessimism on McLuhan's part.

⁸ The single most important event in the modern Chinese history is perhaps the continuing debates on and efforts in Chinese language reform. Although still using an "ideographic" writing system, the Chinese language has undergone at least three changes that are relevant to this study: (1) it has changed from monosyllabic to multisyllabic, and ambiguities in linguistic transaction are becoming minimized; (2) it has standardized characters and phrases to differentiate different linguistic realms, and; (3) it has clearly developed modes of communication that serves the function of the scientific, the artistic, and the ordinary use of the language. One problem with the logocentric bias lies not only in its false premise, but also in its treating of other language and cultural systems as a fossilized entity that resists transformation.

⁹ In making such a statement, I am aware of the argument about the impossibility of perfect translation. A word from one language carries with it not only denotations but also connotations, which are interwoven with its own culture, history, myth, etc., but I am not convinced that the Chinese language will present a particular problem in this respect.

¹⁰ I remember in the early 1970s, stricken by hunger and poverty, one of my classmates made a "counterfactual statement": "I wish the department store on fire, and I would get food and good toys." As a result, the student was severely criticized, punished, and expelled from school.

¹¹ In recent months, the online journal, *Hua Xia Wen Zai* (China New Digest), has published a few articles debating the pros and cons of the possibility of switching over to a phonetic or alphabetic system. See <http://www.cnd.org>. In Mainland China and many Chinese communities around the world, whether a *pinyin* system will replace written characters in the near future when most Chinese can understand and communicate with *putonghua* (Mandarin or common speech) remains a heated and emotional topic among language experts, policy makers, and the general public.

¹² It should be noted that Chomsky, contrary to logocentric view, holds that every language has a similar deeper structure and there is no basis to assume the existence of different minds due to different linguistic acquisition.

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