
This book is the most recent addition to that genre of Western sinological works which attempt to explain the nature of Chinese philosophical thinking by reference to the structure of the language in which the texts were written.

In the first two chapters, Professor Hansen criticizes various older interpretations, especially Platonistic, of pre-Han philosophies, and presents his own "mass noun hypothesis" and "behavioral nominalism" as an alternative theory. Chapter three, "Background Theories of Language in Ancient China," surveys briefly the major Chinese philosophers of the period: Lao Tzu, Confucius and his school, Mo Tzu, and Chuang Tzu, in that order. Hansen discusses each of these thinkers against the background of four assumptions "that are implicit in classical thought about language" (p. 57): (1) the regulative function of language, that is, "the function of words is to engender and express attitudes with implications for action" (p. 60); (2) division and discrimination, that is, "To have a language is to distinguish or discriminate stuffs in a given way" (p. 61); (3) conventionalism, that is, "not only sounds and symbols are conventional, but so is the associated practice of division" (p. 62); and lastly (4) nominalism, "because the Chinese philosopher is not committed to any entities other than names and objects" (p. 31). In chapters four and five, respectively, Hansen applies his interpretive framework to the analysis of the Neo-Moist Canons and the white-horse dialogue of Kung-sun Lung.

Language and Logic in Ancient China offers us a rich variety of interpretations and arguments, but Chad Hansen's most important claims are two: first, he holds that on the evidence of the grammatical structure of the ancient language, Chinese thought lacks abstract entities such as ideas and concepts. Second, because there are no abstract entities, Chinese philosophy is nominalistic. Therefore, a nominalistic interpretation of that philosophy will more elegant, simpler, and more coherent. In a word, it is better than any interpretation based on the recognition of abstract entities in early Chinese philosophy.

Why does Chinese thought of the period he is considering lack abstract entities? Hansen tells us that the answer can be found in language. Chinese nouns are "mass nouns" which do not reflect for plurality or abstraction. For Hansen this feature of Chinese has more than syntactic significance; it made a crucial contribution to the formulation of philosophical theories. "Mass nouns suggest stuff ontology" and "motivate a part-whole dichotomy" (p. vii). They are "what shape the intuitive picture of the language-world relation in Chinese philosophy" (p. 33). This picture, of course, is nominalistic.

This is prima facie an odd line of reasoning. Since mass nouns refer to mass

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substances, and to know them is to know how to tell parts from wholes, one would therefore expect that mass nouns are less concrete than count nouns which refer to objects or individuals, and if less concrete, then more abstract. But for Hansen, a mass noun syntax (and semantics) leads to "stuff" ontology which is more concrete than an ontology of individuals motivated by Indo-European languages.

Let us examine his argument more closely (p. 41):
1. "[U]usually in the spelling out of such [an abstract] theory, one creates linguistic forms" which express abstractions;
2. There is no such linguistic form in Chinese;
3. Therefore, there are no abstract philosophical theories;
4. Given 2 and 3, it follows that abstract objects are "nonexistent."

Exactly how such weight is carried by the ambiguous word "usually" is not always clear, but in Hansen's argument it must have the force of a universal quantifier, or something very similar to it, otherwise he could not derive 3 from 1 and 2. But that is not all the story. On p. 54, he says:

... but the common motivations from language (grammatical structure [read: lack of plural and abstract inflections] and writing system [read: pictographs]) for such abstract or mental speculation are absent in the case of Chinese. There is no reason for Chinese philosophers to have invented such [abstract] objects.

Here Hansen has succeeded in closing his circle: abstract inflections motivate abstract philosophical theorizing, which creates abstract inflections.

The move from 2 and 3 to 4 in the preceding indicates that Hansen has confused the distinction between objects and theories of them. Repeatedly he emphasizes that the issue he treats is "whether or not there were theories dealing with abstract entities" (p. 39, his italics), but then he blurs the distinction again when he claims that a Chinese character does not mean "the same thing" as an abstractly inflected noun does in Western philosophy (p. 39), which amounts to a denial of the existence of abstract entities in Chinese philosophy.

Hansen's argument is dubious for several reasons. First, English does syntactically supply an abstraction apparatus (like -ness and -ity), but yet some abstract entities are not expressed by abstractly inflected words. One example is the technical use of the word "language" in linguistics which also does not take pluralization and cannot be preceded by indefinite articles—features which exhibit "the logic of mass nouns." Interestingly enough, Hansen himself readily employs this mass-nounlike term in a way which can only be characterized as abstract.

Secondly, Hansen's claim that Chinese philosophy of the period has no abstract entities receives no empirical support. When Lao Tzu discusses tao or the Way, he does not have a muddy country road or a concrete mereological country road in mind. Quite simply, he means an abstract entity:
There is a thing confusedly formed,
Born before heaven and earth
Silent and void
It stands alone and does not change,
It is capable of being the mother of the world,
I know not its name
So I style it “the way.”

Even if it is also a mereological concrete, Lao Tzu’s use of the term *tao* is a striking case of abstraction. Abstract objects not only abound in Lao Tzu’s philosophy but other thinkers’ philosophies as well, as Professor Cheng Chung-ying has recently argued in the pages of this journal. In Confucius’ *Analects*, Cheng says, he finds many passages which are parallel to Quine’s examples illustrating abstract terms. If *te*<sup>a</sup>, *hsiao*<sup>a</sup>, *ti*<sup>a</sup>, and so forth are not abstract, what makes them concrete?

Throughout the book, one can sense a strong flavor of linguistic relativity à la Sapir and Whorf. This hypothesis comes in two versions. The first, strong version has language *determine* people’s thought. This was the view of Whorf himself when he first formulated it. According to him, “we dissect nature along the lines laid down by our native languages.” This strong form of the hypothesis has now been discredited (better: set aside), even on a priori grounds. The second, weaker version holds that language strongly *influences* one’s thought. Reportedly this form has empirical support.

Hansen’s stand on this issue is ambiguous. In numerous places he admits that the Chinese language *could* have expressed abstractions had there existed a proper motivation. But the lack of “proper” grammatical motivation has led him to construct a nominalistic interpretive framework and to blur the distinction between (abstract) entities and theories of them. And his nominalism is a strict nominalism indeed: it welcomes anything that bears the label “concrete,” counterfeit or not. (Most likely, his concrete mereological set will receive a persona non grata status in Goodman’s world of individuals. Offense: being nonindividual. Meanwhile, things like *tao*, *te*, and so forth will take happy residence there.) In the Goodmanian spirit, a nominalistic interpretation is still possible without denying the existence of abstract entities, such as those just listed and much more.

But Hansen’s linguistic relativism does not stop here at the grammatical structures of the Chinese language. In the formulation of Chinese thought, he not only sees grammatical influences, but also the influence of the writing system of Chinese. “The pictographs or ideographs reduce the motivation for abstract or mentalistic theorizing” (p. 53). Perhaps Chad Hansen bestows a greater honor on the pictograph than it deserves. In his terms, the pictograph is the “equivalent of Plato’s ‘ideal name’” (p. 50). Further, its function, like a concept or mental image in a Westerner’s mind, is to “mediate between sounds and objects” (p. 49). The pictograph “is not a representation of the sound but of the thing” (p. 49).
And he continues:

When we write phonetically, we naturally tend to think of a word as what is represented in both forms—the sound. When we reflect on the meaning of words, we are immediately confronted by the arbitrariness of the association of words (sounds) and the things they denote. It seems necessary to invent a mechanism to bridge the gap between words and object, ... The mechanism characteristic of British and American Empiricism (the abiding "common sense" view) is a mental representation. (p. 47)

These sentences read like definitive statements, and statements consonant with the strong version of linguistic determinism. An ancient Chinese and an American think differently because of the difference in the writing systems of their native languages: the Chinese "thinks" with his pictographs whereas his American interlocutor thinks with his mental images. But what about a person whose native tongue has never had a written form? How does he or she think?

In the passage just quoted, Hansen observes that "the association of words (sounds) and the things they denote" is arbitrary. He does not add that it is also conventional. Such is the view of most linguists, pre- or post-Saussure. In fact, *la langue*, Saussure's fundamental concept, finds its real self only in social "collectivité."* But to say that English, or any other phonetically written language, is also conventional is to trivialize one of his four basic background assumptions noted earlier: conventionalism. It loses its motivating forces.

The controversy over sound-meaning pairing in language, that between the naturalist and the conventionalist, has a long history in the West from Plato on. Professor Hansen's view on this issue is, again, ambiguous. He does seem to believe in conventionalism; he does not claim that a language, English for example, is iconic. He finds word-meaning pairing arbitrary. Yet when it comes to the written form of Chinese, he joins the naturalist camp. We are told that the pictograph is nothing but a representation of the thing. Here we see complete, or near complete, iconicity in the case of the pictographs. There is a direct, causal relation holding between the thing and the character which "means" it. It is not clear which Chinese historical period Hansen is talking about. He cannot be seriously talking about post-Han pictographs, since it would be irrelevant to his main contention, namely, that the pictographs motivate nominalistic philosophies of the pre-Han period. But the pre-Han pictographs do not represent "the thing" which Hansen thinks they do. The simple pictograph *tzu* will defeat his claim: what thing does it represent?

Hansen offers no empirical evidence for his claim for the simple reason that the available evidence does not lend very much support to it. True, there is a certain degree of iconicity in the pictographs, especially in the *wen*, or simple characters. In the *tzu*, which are complex, the degree of iconicity is vastly reduced. Even in the *wen*, the iconicity is not complete, or anywhere near it. There is always an element of arbitrariness in the pictograph-meaning pairing, or, to follow Hansen, pictograph-thing pairing. (I use "pictograph" and "character" interchangeably.) For instance, the pictograph for man, a *wen*, is modeled on the profile image of a
human being. The pictograph for big, 亁, is modeled on the frontal image of a human being, which means, originally, an adult. Gradually, abstracting away from a human adult, the pictograph comes to mean “big.” Here we see an unmistakable case of abstraction. The pictograph can be used to mean the abstract property of bigness. Hansen cannot rationally maintain that there is such a thing as bigness in the universe for 亁 to represent. That arbitrariness is at work in the pictograph-thing pairing is evident in the two examples just mentioned. There is no intrinsic reason why a side image of a man is a man but the front image is not. In fact, according to common sense, the contrary is true: we see a man better when we look at him in the face. To take one more example, the pictograph for dusk is 月, which “pictures” the sun in jungles of shrubs. Presumably, that is what we see at dusk. But that is what we see at dawn too. And what about 朙, east: is the sun coming up through the trees, or setting? Hence the arbitrariness.

In addition, Hansen fails to notice the existence of 金 金朋, or phonographs, even before the philosophical period he is considering. The Shang dynasty saw the emergence of this form of writing circa 1300 B.C. According to T'ang Lian, 丁, rendered as 丁 in the oracle bones, 介入 is 介入, is a phonograph. Phonographs record sounds, not “the thing.”

Thus Hansen’s claim that pictographs represent things is highly questionable. Pictographs are not pictures, but written symbols that record speech. If indeed they do represent “the thing,” we would have no difficulty reading the vast oracle bone literature that has been unearthed. The fact that it takes a great deal of concentrated scholarship to determine, and always with an element of indeterminacy, just what is “the thing” a certain archaic pictograph represents is evidence enough that the pictographs are highly stylized graphs which are more or less arbitrarily and conventionally associated with things they mean. Hansen fails to note yet another point. If his claim were true, the assertion marker 然 and the negation marker 問 would be impossible: they have nothing to represent. Perhaps Hansen is misled by language into thinking that a pictograph is a picturing graph. The pictographs do not do picturing: human beings using these graphs do, and in their minds. In footnote 25, p. 179, Hansen finds that the use of “pictograph,” “ideograph,” or “logograph” is unimportant when characterizing Chinese. Well, it is important in at least one respect: the term “logograph” can dispel the confusion from which Hansen appears to suffer. Further, he says in that footnote that “Chinese themselves view their own written language as conventional representations of the semantic content.” Unfortunately he does not name or cite anyone—Chinese or otherwise—who supposedly has this view. Let me, then, offer the following from Yuen Ren Chao, the late eminent Chinese linguist. Chao wrote,

It’s making a false dichotomy to say the Chinese writing represents meaning and that syllabic and alphabetic writing represents sound... The important difference is that of size and variety of the units.11
Elsewhere, he wrote,

Writing is a symbol, something we arbitrarily associate with the word, ... 12

A written word is in principle a frozen instance of the spoken word in much the same way as a word on a phonograph record. 13

The view that Chinese pictographs represent meaning results from an inadequate understanding of the role of writing. It is true that writing tends to develop along its own lines, diverging slightly from speech. But that does not warrant Hansen’s claim about the Chinese writing system being “representations of the semantic content.” Things which D. Bolinger labeled “visual morphemes” can be found in every writing system. In English, a ghost will lose much of its terror without the “h.” 14 Yet it is not likely that Hansen would conclude that the English letter “h” represents the meaning “terror.”

Moreover, Hansen’s claim is not borne out in the philosophies he treats in the book. The pictographs, however picturesque they may turn out to be, do not appear at all to concern the Neo-Moists or Kung-sun Lung, philosophers to whom Hansen attends in some detail, and so shall we. In analyzing language, there is little allusion to the pictograph in either the Neo-Moist Canons or the Kung-sun Lung Tzu. 15 The Neo-Moists are very explicit about this. For them, all ming are associated with sounds:

Examination 1: 78
Whenever sounds issue from the mouth there are names (ming†). Like the pairing of [a lady’s] surname and her tzu*. 16

Because of this concern, the Neo-Moists take wei*, “to refer, to say,” as fundamental. Indeed, wei is a primitive in their definitions of ming and shih‡:

Examination 1: 80
That through which [something] is referred to is ming.
That which is referred to is shih. 17

Ming is associated with sheng*, “sound.” But shih, objects in the world, are not. Therefore we can only talk about the world, shih, through sheng and covey ming. This trichotomy is reminiscent of Ogden and Richards’ semantic triangle, and perhaps Frege’s distinction between sense and nominatum. 19 If we consider sheng as a linguistic sign, it is possible to interpret ming as a Fregean sense and shih as nominatum. Hence, sheng expresses ming and designates shih. The Neo-Moists are not grammarians, they are not intersted in what makes it possible for sheng to have ming. This is simply presupposed and there is little discussion of the topic. Instead, they discuss how you wei, that is, refer. Canons I: 31, I: 32, II: 41, II: 53, II: 66, II: 72, and so on; Explanations 1: 31, II: 4, II: 41, II: 53, II: 66, II: 72, and so on give formulas for wei in general and chî’, “to denote,” in particular as well as remedies for avoiding errors.

For the sake of comparison, I present the following two diagrams. The one on
the right is Ogden and Richards' basic triangle, first discussed in their book, The Meaning of Meaning.\textsuperscript{20}

\begin{center}
\begin{tikzpicture}
\begin{scope}[every node/.style={align=center}]
\node (ming) at (0,0) {ming};
\node (sheng) at (0,-2) {sheng};
\node (wei) at (0,-4) {wei};
\node (symbol) at (1.5,0) {symbol};
\node (referent) at (1.5,-2) {referent};
\node (chih) at (0,-3) {chih};
\end{scope}
\end{tikzpicture}
\end{center}

The above brief analysis of the Neo-Moists' semantic program, which is far from final and conclusive, is only meant to show that they are interested in ming as it is associated with the phonic substance of the language, sheng, and that a Fregean interpretation of ming and shih is consistent with the text. The pictographs \emph{per se} did not occupy their attention. (Although they did present a certain degree of fascination among the learned.)\textsuperscript{21} Hansen's claim that the pictographs are "representations of things" which motivate nominalism thus has no supportive evidence in the Canons.

Chapters four and five contain Hansen's application of his nominalistic interpretive framework, which is confined to the Neo-Moists' Canons and the Kung-sun Lung Tzu. His interpretation and translation are not "radical," as he acknowledges in the preface. Yet they reflect his nominalistic stance. \emph{Lei} is rendered as "similarity-based," "similar," and "similarity classes." Why not translate it as "class"? His explanation: "Classes and sets, like abstract properties and ideas, are designed to explain the one-many relation of a count noun and its multiple denotation" (p. 112). "Class" would be a mistranslation because of mass nouns, part-whole relation, and stuff ontology.

His treatment of Kung-sun Lung is limited to \textit{pai-ma-lun"}, the white horse dialogue only. Not a single word is said of the other chapters. He discards the chapters on "name and things" and "hard-white" as authentic Kung-sun Lung writings. But that still leaves three chapters unaccounted for. Although the first chapter, "ch'i-fu," is philosophically less interesting, at least some mention should be made of the other two, especially "chih-wu-lun"\textsuperscript{22}, of which, according to Professor Cheng, "the realistic or abstract interpretation is more compellingly called for." The opening sentence of that chapter is "\textit{wu ma fei chih, erh chih fei chih}". All \textit{wu} is \textit{chih}\textsuperscript{ab}, but \textit{chih} is not \textit{chih}.\textsuperscript{23} However one interprets \textit{wu} and \textit{chih}, one has to assign different ontological status to them. This may prove to be a "hard nut for Hansen to crack. He chose to ignore it.

In the book there is a puzzling anecdote about "learning strategy" (p. 52). He begins the story by the learning strategy of Baby Susie. When she sees a dog and learns to utter "doggie," so goes the story, "she has abstracted from all the particular dogs she had encountered the features common to all dogs." But Baby Mei-ling does not do abstracting when she learns to say "\textit{kou}ae." "Rather one
says she has acquired the ability to distinguish dog-stuff from non-dog-stuff." Hansen does not hint at the real identity of "one," the informant. Surely he is not a psychologist emerging from his laboratory with his findings. If the story is true, this will be a strong case for linguistic determinism in its strongest possible form: language shapes babies' thought or way of thinking even before they have acquired very much of it! That is indeed a novel scientific finding. But this anecdote is puzzling in yet another respect. Baby Mei-ling presumably is not a baby born in the U.S. to a Chinese emigrant family. The burden of learning is too great on her; she has to learn both to distinguish and to abstract. She can not be born in modern China either, because modern Chinese expresses abstractions easily. One may conclude, jokingly, that she must be over two thousand years old. Perhaps she is, or rather was, the youngest and most spoilt daughter of one of the Neo-Moists. Or perhaps her full name is Kung-sun Mei-ling. The point of all this is: anecdotes are only anecdotes; "one" need not take them seriously.

In the foregoing we have seen that Hansen's contention that there is no abstraction or abstract object in pre-Han philosophy because of the language is based on dubious grounds. And the so-called mass noun hypothesis is suspect. Quite possibly one can argue for nominalistic philosophical theories without denying the existence of abstract objects. That requires a sharp distinction between the objects and the theory of them. A theory may postulate abstract entities to explain certain ranges of things, which can be abstract or concrete themselves. But the postulated abstract entities are independent of the things they help to explain. Hence we have two levels of (abstract) entities: the theoretical, postulated entities and the entities, possibly abstract, being explained. To deny the former is not to deny the latter. Hansen does deny abstract entities as having theoretical, explanatory roles in pre-Han Chinese philosophy. Unfortunately, however, he also slips into an overall denial of abstract entities in Chinese philosophy and Chinese thought. And to that denial he adds a linguistic deterministic twist.

Nominalistic interpretations are not an impossible task. With one philosophical text so vaguely versed as the Canons, many interpretations are possible. But when one links grammatical structure with philosophy, one has to move with caution so as to avoid legislating "how abstractions can be expressed." Hansen does seem to play the role of a legislator. His mass noun and his pictograph arguments, as we have attempted to show, are not at all persuasive. As a result, his interpretive framework becomes suspect methodologically. As for his interpretation being more elegant than other (abstract) interpretations with which I am familiar—mainly Chinese commentators commenting in Chinese to Chinese audiences—I remain unconvinced.

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NOTES

6. Saussure wrote in his Cours de linguistique générale (Paris: Payot, 1949), “Mais qu’est-ce que la langue? . . . C’est alors un produit social de la faculté du langage et un ensemble de conventions nécessaires” (p. 25, my italics), and on p. 38, he continued, “La langue existe dans la collectivité sous la forme d’une somme d’empreintes déposées dans chaque cerveau, à peu pres comme un dictionnaire dont tous les exemplaires, identiques, seraient répartis entre les individus.”
8. Ibid., p. 77.
9. Ibid., p. 64.
10. There appear to be phonological and morphological motivations for the development of the character. See T’ang Lan, Chung-k’uo wen-tzu-hsietch, pp. 111–112.
13. Ibid., p. 7.
15. In T’an Chieh-fu’s text, Mo ching fen lei i chu” (Peking: Ch’ung huo shu chu, 1981), p. 1 (hereafter cited as T’an Chieh-fu, Mo ching fen lei i chu), Explanation 1. 70 contains wen tzu”. Wen means characters, according to him. But Hansen has amended these two characters into chih ming”. (p. 110).
16. T’an Chieh-fu, Mo ching fen lei i chu, p. 1. The first line is Hansen’s translation. He omits the second line in his textual analysis. T’an Chieh-fu takes this line as an analogy of the ming-shih relation. Citing Kung-yang” and Tsao-chuan” T’an explains that the ming-shih pairing is analogous to a married woman’s han-tzu”, or surname-tzu pairing. They are coexistent. See his Mo ching fu wen” (Peking: Ch’ung huo shu chu, 1964), p. 164. Sun I-jang” holds basically the same view. See his Mo Tzu chia” (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1963), p. 218.
17. A. C. Graham puts the second line in parentheses—“a suspected gloss”—and translates tzu” as “style-name.” His translation of the quoted passage: “The sounds which issue from the mouth all have the name. (For example, surname and style-name).” He concludes that, for the Neo-Moists, “an object is a particular, and the function of common nouns is to be explained on purely nominalist principles.” See his Later Mohist Logic, and Science (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1978), p. 327. What I am suggesting here is that ming should not be taken as mere linguistic signs, or as a grammarians classificatory device.
18. T’an chieh-fu, Mo ching fen lei i chu, p. 3.
20. Ogden and Richards, Meaning, p. 11. I have simplified their triangle, but not substantially.
21. According to T’ang Lan, casual studies of wen tzu” began in the Chou dynasty. Systematic study was not to be undertaken until the Han dynasty, culminating in the monumental work of Hsü Shén”. Shuo-wen ch’üeh-tzu” See T’ang Lan, Chung-k’uo wen-tzu-hsietch, p. 12.