The ‘Neutral’ – the Semiotic Paradigm of Sinogram

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Abstract

Redefining Roland Barthes' term 'The neutral' as 'the neutrality and dissolution of the dualistic opposition', this paper argues that Chinese characters are quasi-characters, quasi-signs, and neuter. The unique paradigm of Chinese characters is revealed by comparing the neuter phenomena of 'centrifugalisation' and 'centripetalisation' between pictures and characters, thus highlighting the significance of such a paradigm to contemporary semiotic studies.

Keywords

the neuter – quasi-signs – quasi-characters – signs of polarity – image-taking texts – semiotics of neuter

1 On the Concept 'Neutral' in the Theory of Ronald Barthes

In this article, I will argue that the concept 'neutral' in French semiotician Roland Barthes's theory is crucial for Chinese semiotics. I believe that the 'neutral' of Chinese characters and its 'semiotic paradigm of the neutral' are the 'archetype' of signs in Chinese culture. In order to support this position, it is necessary to analyse the concept of the 'neutral' of Roland Barthes (1915–1980).

From February to June 1978, Barthes gave a lecture course called '*The Neutral* at the Collège de France'. In his Collège de France lecture 'X', Barthes broke away repeated from Ferdinand de Saussure's (1857–1913) structuralism and shaped in his work a concept of the 'neutral' which was capable of undoing the paradigmatic binary oppositions:

I define the 'neutral' as that which outplays the paradigm ... alongside a third possibility ... the neutral is a thing that outplays, baffles, or dodges the implacable binarism.

BARTHES, 2010: 10–11

Analysed in the following are the three key phrases included in Barthes's definition of the neutral: paradigm, deconstruction of binarism, and the third possibility.

1.1 *'Paradigm' in Barthes' Works*

Saussure's structuralism in linguistics saw paradigm (the relationship of units/ words in an associative field) on the basis of binaries or dyads: for example, it would define a unit in terms of what it is not, which give rise to oppositional pairs in which one is always different or superior to the other. As a result, structural semioticians regarded the paradigmatic binary opposition as the most fundamental rule which governed the cryptography of the world and ought to be applied to analyse all cultural units. Kant (1999: A708/B736–A713/B741) regarded mankind as a rational being who is capable of relating 'plurality' to 'unity'. Plurality are sensual materials, while 'unity' refers to forms and categories of forms. For example, in Chinese the planet Venus is called Phosphorus at dawn and Hesperus at dusk. 'Plurality' appeals to our senses, but when we resort to reasoning, we can easily figure out that the three names refer to the same object. Therefore, thanks to our reasoning, human kind is able to relate 'plurality' to 'unity', meaning that the world can be described in accordance with rules and laws so that it can be used according to telos of human beings. According to structural semiotics, that ability is manifested by the arbitrariness of signs. Similarly, arbitrariness refers to the complex pattern of functional diverged pairs and aims at studying binaries, such as good/evil, subject/object, signifier/signified, material/spiritual, ego/other, which are in quest of assuming functions in various material sources. 'Binarism' obviously serves as the fundamental rule for the concept of semiotic structure.

Therefore, they come to the conclusion that the capability of creating and perceiving binaries functions as the primary, and distinctive, way typical of human beings to shape structures by their minds. 'Binary' then falls into the

category of cultural linguistics and semiotic philosophy, and constitutes the most fundamental means employed by mankind to classify the world.

1.2 *Deconstruction of Binarism*

It literally denotes the thing that undoes binary opposition. According to the analysis of Barthes's concept of the 'Neutral', the deconstruction of binarism entails the following two aspects:

1) *From a Passive Point of View*: 'a thing that outplays' refers to the in-between state or transient stage between the two poles of binary oppositions. For one example, the signified of the two sounds 'n' and 'l' which constitutes paradigmatic binary oppositions in Mandarin differs from one another. But some southern dialects of China show signs of fuzzy distinctions between the two sounds, which can be seen as the in-between state after undoing the binarism. Furthermore, there are plenty of Chinese paradigmatic binaries that have been neutralised by undoing their oppositions: as represented by '户' (household, *hu*) in '窗户' (window, *chuanghu*); the eliminated binary opposition of '深' (deep, *shen*) and '浅' (shallow, *qian*) in '不知深浅' (not knowing the depth of things, *buzhishenqian*). And just as the statement 'as big as a grain of rice' can be expressed in 'as tiny as a grain of rice', the binarism that once existed in the words of 'big' and 'tiny' has been undone. Following this line of thought, I have defined the in-between state or rather the neutralised binarism as 'similar-signs' (Meng, 2014: 16).

2) *From an Active Point of View*: 'a thing that outplays' refers to the intentional act that 'breaks' the boundaries of binary oppositions and re-erects an in-between state. For one example, Western semiotic pathology ascribes all sociopathy behaviours to the binarism of language systems. The current language system imposes a purely binary evaluation system on mankind, as represented by the typical binary statements employed in conventional weather reports which tell people such two contrasting forecasts as 'it is going to rain' or 'it is not going to rain'. If acting accordingly, people choose to take or not to take umbrellas. This cognition leads to a dichotomous interpretation of the world that is supposed to be full of possibilities. Therefore, a probabilistic weather forecast comes into being. It tells people the chance of rain with percentage rates like forty percent. This can be seen as an intentional attempt to outplay the binary opposition and to shed light on all these stages between the two poles of the opposition. A good example is Gu Cheng's poems: "The dark night gives me dark eyes, with which I seek the light" (Gu, 2006: 18), "This night is so frightful and boundless, that my eyes come down with gloomy darkness. But just by them both, I am seeking my rosiness". The words 'night', 'dark', and 'light' that appear in this poem are bestowed with this binary opposition

between their tenors and vehicles. The tenor and vehicle of each word serve the other and mingle together in the end. As a result, this binary opposition has been unshackled by Gu from a creative perspective, which has vested those words with massive ideas and emotions.

1.3 *The 'Third Possibility'*

The translator of *The Neutral* figures that Barthes's concept of the 'Neutral' does not correspond with the third member besides binarism (Barthes, 2010: The translator's foreword). Barthes himself also underlined the property assumed by the 'neutral' to mediate paradigmatic binary oppositions in a natural attempt. But if we are to put together all the definitions of the 'Neutral' given by Barthes, we would see an identical element with those post-modernist notions like the 'thirdspace' or 'thirling'. As Lefebvre points out, the latter aims at dismissing the 'temptation of binaries ... the creative process of restructuring that draws selectively and strategically from these two opposing categories to open new alternatives', which offers a mode of reasoning that he names as 'trialectics' (Soja, 2005: 77). But it should be noted that both Barthes's concept of the 'Neutral' and Lefebvre's strategy of 'thirling' have carried with them the convention of opposing or negating dialectics in Western culture; they underpinned the idea of 'undoing' binarism rather than siding with the concept of the 'Neutral' from an active point of view meaning that there was an in-between stage at the two sides of binaries. However, this paper has classified the concept of the 'Neutral' into passive and active types, and has gone on to subsume these two types under the category of 'third probability' or 'third possibility' which has transcended binary oppositions.

In this way, we could be able to redefine the concept of the 'Neutral', which could be seen as a 'creative misreading' or remoulding of Barthes's original idea. The remoulded definition goes as follows: the 'Neutral' refers to the in-between state of the two sides of binaries and means to undo such opposing binarism, thus the 'neutral', classified into passive and active ones, emerges as the 'third probability' that transcends the binary oppositions. Contrary to Barthes's concept of the 'neutral', this paper has remade its universal semiotic relation into a 'neutralised approach', thus comes into being the 'passive' and 'active' types of the 'neutral'.

If we define the concept of the 'neutral' in Western culture as actively inclined (despite the fact that passive typed 'neutral' is too ubiquitous), then the 'neutral' in traditional Chinese culture is passively inclined (but active typed 'neutral' still can be seen). The following statements will introduce an idea of 'dominant type' which refers to the dominating factor of the intermediate stage between the two sides of binaries. As far as the universal principle is

concerned, a grammar of culture called the 'neutral' is present in both Eastern and Western cultures with two types. Yet as far as cultural difference is concerned, the 'neutral' in Western culture is 'active dominant', which means that it inclines more to the active side if measured on the transitional continuum between the two poles of binaries, while the 'neutral' in Eastern culture is 'passive dominant'. The idea of 'dominant type' is borrowed from structuralism: 'It rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components. It is the dominant which guarantees the integrity of the structure' (Jakobson, 2004: 8). But the concept of 'dominant' also applies to universal dualism and refers to a stratified order in a dualistic structure, as exemplified by spoken language as having a dominant relation with written language, and images as dominant in the Internet era. However, the concept of 'dominant' has overlooked the 'third possibility' which denotes the types and ways of domination. For example, spoken language stands at a dominant position in alphabetic language systems, while Chinese characters are dominant in written language. Therefore, the 'dominant type' differs between the comparative relations of spoken and written languages of the East and West. The universal grammar in the internet world is visual and image dominant, whereas the principle of images in the world of the Internet is often ruled or dominated by the principle of writing (such as absence and presence, as well as various mechanisms for the guidance of public opinion and information filtering) amid the context of Chinese cultures. This paper has reinvented a notion called 'dominant type' based on the concept of 'dominant' put forward by structuralism. In this way, it will further introduce an idea of 'third probability' or 'third possibility' which presents us with lines of options or alternatives between the two sides of binaries. Since there are two sides, say pole A and pole B, an inclination toward a certain pole is a natural phenomenon, and this inclination can be expressed either as 'A dominant' or 'B dominant'. The former introduced 'third probability' or the 'neutral' can be seen as a method that interprets binary relations, and as an already established idea that transcends binarism based on 'trialectics', as such, it can be subsumed under the category of the semiotics of the 'neutral'.

2 The Features of Sinogram as a Neutralised Sign

The paramount significance of analysing semiotics from the perspective of the 'neutral' lies in the outcome of dissolving familiar binary oppositions in semiotics. Such an outcome is called the 'third possibility': 'neutralised sign' (here, referred to as similar-signs) and its theoretical paradigm (which can be referred to as similar-semiotics) is generated by the concept of 'neutral'.

The familiar binary oppositions in semiotics include language symbols and non-language symbols, synchronism and diachronism, form and substance, homogeneous and heterogeneous, language structures and speech acts, written and verbal, arbitrariness and motivation, 'Saussure' and 'Pierce' (namely, the formalistic semiotics and the ontological semiotics), and so on. Shifting our focus to the semiology of Chinese characters, we come to realise that those previously mentioned binary oppositions have all been 'neutralised' into 'similar-sinograms' and 'similar-signs' amid the context of the semiotic system of Chinese characters. One cannot classify Chinese characters into one particular type when putting them under the examination of those binaries. We are unable to define sinograms simply as a language symbol or non-language symbol, pictorial symbol, or text symbol. We can hardly classify the six categories of Chinese characters (which include self-explanatory characters, pictographs, pictophonetic characters, associative compounds, mutually explanatory characters and phonetic loan characters) into synchronic or diachronic categories of coinage, let alone label such coinages as arbitrary or motivation-driven. In the same vein, Chinese characters can neither be classified as oral nor written language. Sinogram is thus neither form nor substance inclined, and professes no homogeneous or heterogeneous deviation. Chinese characters are not cut out for such contrasting binary analysis. No wonder Derrida had referred to Chinese as 'the testimony of a powerful movement of civilization developing outside of all logocentrism' (1999: 134–135). Therefore, the phonetic letters which conform to logocentrism and phonocentrism would obviously assume more opposing binary structural features. The Latin alphabet falls into one side of those binaries, which are 'language symbol, synchronism, form, language structures, and arbitrariness'. And this paper will go on to expose how Chinese characters view such binary relations.

2.1 *The 'Neutralised' Signifying Relation of Chinese Characters*

The work *Flying Birds* (会飞的鸟, *Hui fei de niao*) by Xu Bing (徐冰) constitutes a secondary semiotic system for the bird painted with various Chinese characters, which can be seen as an attempt that breaks the principle of overall iconicity in encoding the symbols of paintings. As such, the painting was bestowed with linguistic characteristics. People often regard pictorial symbols as the whole representation of the prototype with no articulation by means of iconicity, and take that as its fundamental divergence from the segmented linguistic sign.¹ However, this picture has introduced a segmented visual language:

1 'Almost all images bear no articulation, but rather appear as the whole representation.' (Zhao, 2011:97).

the entirety of the bird can be divided into several Chinese characters representing the word bird. Xu has undone the binary opposition of articulation and un-articulation, creating a 'neutral' zone between the segmented language and text on the one hand, and icons and paintings on the other. Thanks to his creation which factored in the concept of 'neutral', Xu has been warmly received by the international community. As a matter of fact, Xu's intentions to undo such binary opposition between image and language represents exactly the built-in feature of Chinese characters.

The articulation of language symbols can be referred to as 'double articulation': the units of the first articulation denote elements carried with meaning, such as morphemes, words, phrases and sentences; the units of the second articulation represent meaningless elements used to distinguish forms, especially the phonetic system of language, such as the ten vowels and twenty-two consonants of Mandarin. Alphabetic scripts as represented by the Latin alphabet are tools to record sounds. Therefore, the Latin alphabet bears the feature of 'double articulation'.

On the contrary, Chinese characters are recordings of phonetic sounds that carry meaning. The same goes with the separate 'determinatives' and 'rebus' inside a character, like the two determinatives in the associative compound that means rest (休, *xiu*), and the determinative and rebus in the pictophonetic character that means marry (娶, *qu*). The rebus of pictophonetic characters is a carrier of meaning itself. Following this line of arguing, Chinese characters do not mirror the 'double articulation' shared by language symbols. The character, comprised by two symbols that serve as a meaning carrier, only constitutes one articulation (the overall image formed by two meaningful symbols). As such, Chinese characters differ from language symbols in their structures. They bear no such traits as 'double articulation', which makes them more like pictorial symbols.

For example, take the pictograph 𠩺 that means fruit (果, *guo*) which only has one articulation: to begin with, the signifier and signified of pictograph '果' are bound by social conventions, and thus bear a hint of arbitrary and conceptual feelings. Therefore, its signifier and signified are separable and their combination is sort of the product of social norms rather than the complete manipulation of the iconicity principle of images. Secondly, social convention has invested the pictograph with the possibility of repeated use (while artworks like paintings can only happen once in a life time), and with the chance of being employed to coin new characters: '果' is made up of two parts, namely the character that means wood (木, *mu*) in the bottom and the pictograph '果' in the top. Thirdly, the possibility of repeated use and the chance of being employed to coin new characters have contributed to the one articulation of

Chinese characters. It inclines more towards combination, like the painting of Xu who produced a secondary semiotic system which, viewed as a whole, looks like a pictographic symbol of birds, but which could be further segmented into smaller determinatives and rebuses, similar to the pictograph '果' which can be further parted into two symbols. Fourthly, this kind of pictograph with one articulation is not completely assimilated by language, nor does it share the same structure with language. In fact, it has maintained a similarity to images. Thus, it conveys meaning through visibility and motivation. We can see from its development stages that the Chinese characters went on to convey meanings by means of visual perceptions until it evolved into the official script in the Han Dynasty. What has transformed is the mode of visibility which has evolved from a pattern-carried visual perception that is typical of a pictograph to a determinative-loaded one typical of characters.

The foregoing four analyses have shed light on the connection between the sinogram of one articulation and Xu Bing's painting *Flying Birds*. The two both fall into the category of 'neutral' signs sandwiched between images and languages. Pure language symbols, being transparent and abstract, are used to carry meanings; while pure images, being concrete, are the reproduction of some real objects. As a result, the painting *Flying Birds*, or rather the painting created by Chinese characters, has transcended the boundaries of images and language, and created a 'neutral' state somewhere in-between. A pictograph or a neutralised image firstly refers to the 'neutral' zone between conceptual and real objects. Their signifiers have broken away from iconicity and fell into 'free-hand brushworks' that are abstract and concrete. Therefore, they are bestowed with both the features of language that can be read and written, and the traits of an image that can be painted and admired. They belong to the category of 'neutralised' 'similar-signs' which convey meanings in visual perceptions and by means of motivation. In contrast, the binary and discriminated Latin alphabet is against these opposing elements of image, substance, motivation, and reality. By rejecting these antagonistic elements, alphabet languages are subsumed under the category of language symbols, a 'polarity symbol' that reveals its features as a language symbol by posing itself at the opposite side of other symbols. Therefore, symbols that pursue clear boundaries or side markers based on binary oppositions all belong to 'polarity symbols'.

We should try to circumvent the traps set by binarism. The polarity symbol represented by the Latin alphabet and the 'neutral' symbol represented by Chinese characters ostensibly constitute another binary relation, yet we should stay alerted to the 'third possibility' and the concept of the 'neutral', for the two principles tell us that such binary represents merely a dominant rather than opposing relation. Derrida (1999) pointed out that all 'writings'

comprehending alphabetic ones show nonlinear pictorial features alien to that of language,² which can also be interpreted as: all writings are provided with features of 'neutral' symbols which act as a concept of the dominant. Some writings bear more features of 'polarity symbols' (like the Latin alphabet, referred to as 'phonocentrism'), while Chinese characters are dominated by the 'neutral'.

2.2 *The 'Neutralized' Intersign Property of Chinese Characters*

Let us circle back to the analysis of the secondary semiotic structure of the *Flying Birds*. We can resort to that painting to reproduce the 'neutral' property of Chinese characters. Revealed firstly before us is the 'symbol field' which is implied in the upward flying motion in the picture, consisting of language, writing, and images:

1) It is the simplified Chinese, whose visual motivation is close to none, that is positioned in the bottom of the painting. The simplified Chinese character merely relates to the sound 'niǎo'; its pattern has become an abstract and pure language equivalent or marker of the real object. Therefore, it comprehends a marker-like signifying structure: abstract pattern = sound/character = concept.

2) Shifting our eyes upwards, we can see the traditional form of the character for bird '鳥' (鸟, *niao*), and notice a hint of visual motivation derived from the original pictograph, especially the four dot strokes which have carried with the character its path of evolution. The character '鳥' is no typical case, but it would suffice to vindicate this phenomenon: As far as the whole system of complex Chinese characters is concerned, the simplified Chinese is no rival with them in terms of visual motivated meaning creation, but the complex Chinese cannot match with pictographs in this regard for the latter one basically represents pictorial and line representation. As such, complex Chinese falls into the category of 'ideograph' sandwiched between pictograph and simplified Chinese. Compared with simplified Chinese characters, complex ones as 'ideographs' depend more on the image generated by the carrier of visual motivation to establish its bonds with the meaning of Chinese phrases. For instance, '東' (east, 东, *dong*) reflects an image featuring 'the sun

2 "To affirm in this way that the concept of writing exceeds and comprehends that of language, presupposes of course a certain definition of language and of writing ... Now we tend to say "writing" for all that and more: to designate not only the physical gestures of literal pictographic or ideographic inscription, but also the totality of what makes it possible; and also, beyond the signifying face, the signified face itself. And thus we say "writing" for all that gives rise to an inscription in general, whether it is literal or not and even if what it distributes in space is alien to the order of the voice: cinematography, choreography, of course, but also pictorial, musical, sculptural "writing" (Derrida, 1999:10–11).

rising from behind a tree'; '鬥' (fight, 斗, *dou*) resembles a scene where two men fight with bare hands; '竝' (and, 并, *bing*) looks like two men standing side by side; '齒' (teeth, 齿, *chi*), compared with its simplified pattern, creates a more vivid image featuring an array of teeth; and '愛' (love, 爱, *ai*) carried with itself the image of a heart. It is worth noting that these visual motivations are not pictures themselves. They produce meanings either by a combination of determinatives (such as '東', '愛' and '竝'), or by transforming the pictographs into easier strokes, but keeping with them certain visual associations (such as '齒' and '鬥'). Be it visual association or meaningful representation, it still constitutes a mental imagery, or else conjures an image. Therefore, 'image' is a neutral sign. It is neither a form nor a concept, neither a picture nor a language. It bears the characteristics of both sides. Then an image with neutral interaction between language and pictures represents the most fundamental semiotic rule of traditional Chinese cultural symbols.³ Therefore, complex Chinese comprehends an imagery- or determinative-based signifying structure: complex Chinese = 'meaning-inclined' image = compound of concept and object image dominated concept.

3) Moving upward for one more time, the painting presents before us a pictograph (the pictograph of the Chinese character bird [鳥, *niao*] is derived from the small seal script). The concept of 'pictograph' has transcended that of 'image'; the former resembles a picture more in line with representation, while complex Chinese has adopted the principle of transforming those linear lines into strokes. 'Pictograph' relies directly on visual perceptions or images to produce meaning (the language is derived from pictures), while an 'image' relies on determinatives or phrases (the picture is the product of meaning). As such, both pictographs and ideographs are neutral signs which are examples of thoughts with images, featuring the dynamic relation between language and picture.

Along the continuum of the 'neutralised' integration of meaning and picture, if complex Chinese is drawn more to the 'meaning' side, then a 'pictograph' leans more toward the 'picture' side while retaining its property of 'neutral'. In line with the principle of iconicity, a pure picture cares for the real object and rules out meaning, while a pure marker refers to concept or object in accordance with convention and neglects the picture. The essence of a pictograph comes down to its introduction of meaning for pictorial signs, without which

3 'Meaning is best conveyed by picture, while picture by language. Language, derived from picture, serves as a tool to depict a picture; Picture, the product of meaning, acts as a vehicle to communicate meaning. Therefore, meaning is fully portrayed in picture, and language is the full embodiment of picture' ([Wei Dynasty] Wang, 2006:82).

those signs would remain forever as pictures instead of writing. A pictograph has gained its status as writing while building its connection with language by means of visual motivation. It is a typical neutral sign: neither a picture nor a determinative, but somewhere in-between these two types. Xu has presented a pictograph, a neutral sign and a heritage of thoughts, and applied it creatively in a painting; a practice which has somewhat overthrown the boundaries of the binary opposition between a painting and writing. Therefore, a pictograph comprehends a signifying structure: Pictograph = 'picture' inclined image = a compound of object image and concept dominated by object image.

4) The uppermost part of the painting records the pictorial sign of 'bird'. That sign has broken away from neutral and leans towards the picture side which conforms to the principle of iconicity and depicts such a signifying structure: picture = iconicity = object image.

We have thus come to the conclusion that *Flying Birds* has revealed before us all the secrets of Chinese as a neutral sign and similar-sign: Chinese language 'builds' within itself an 'extension' both synchronically and diachronically. Within this extension, Chinese characters transit and switch among language, writing, and pictures. The two poles of Chinese characters, namely, the picture before the advent of writing and the simplified Chinese in modern times, can be seen as 'polarity symbols' (while compared with the Latin alphabet, the simplified Chinese can be seen as a neutral sign for it has retained its ideographical motivation. Detailed argumentation will not be given). The two types denote 'language' (simplified Chinese is the same as language markers) and a 'picture' respectively, whereas those in the intermediate zone (referring to a topictograph and complex Chinese characters) represent 'writing' – the Chinese character that bears the dual features of visual perception and reading. 'Writing' is attached to 'language' (the simplified Chinese character '鸟') at one side, and to a 'picture' (the pictorial drawings of the bird) at the other. And the painting has brought together the two opposing sides and created a vast neutral zone in-between. If we read and admire *Flying Birds* from a top-down perspective, we can perceive the implied path that presents the transformation of Chinese characters that transcend pictographic images and lean more towards meaning in accordance with the neutral thinking, whilst still clinging onto its cultural gene of visual motivation at the same time – the memes of imagery thinking.⁴ As far as the neutral sign of the Chinese character

4 Memes as carriers of culture survive from replication and communication ... Linguistic meme is the information representation which carries the intention of the host meme and communicates time and again by means of repetition via language structure (He & Chen, 2014:9).

is concerned, there is no category that falls right under 'reading' or 'seeing'. Chung-ying Cheng (2006:50) has pointed out the imagery and neutral features of Chinese characters: 'Chinese is first of all a language that resorts to visual imaginations and comprises mainly of world-related perceptions – the visual representation of feelings'.

3 Similar-Sinogram – the Signifying Practice of the Neutral Grammar of Chinese Characters

Analysed in the following is the application and prospect of the neutral grammar of Chinese from the perspective of signifying practice. The neutral (imagery) grammar implied in Chinese has generated a new category that entertains a universal value of signifying practice – called similar-signs. In this paper the feature of Chinese is referred to as a neutral sign, similar-sign, or similar-sinogram. All neutral signs involved in undoing binary oppositions could be subsumed under the category of a similar-sign, the opposite of which is a 'polarity symbol' (i.e. signs derived from binary oppositions, such as the Latin alphabet). One of the most important aspects of a similar-sign is a similar-sinogram: Writing or painting symbols that switch among language, writing, and a picture, or that are 'neutral' all belong to a similar-sinogram.

This paper will go on to discuss the similar-sinogram and similar-writing that emerged from the picture-writing relation: all writings and paintings bestowed with the features of both a picture and writing belong to a neutral similar-sinogram and similar-writing. This paper analyses these two phenomena by taking writing as the centre. And it comes out with the following finding: similar-sinograms and similar-writing mainly move in two directions: say 'toward-center' (pictorial signs are assimilated by and transform into language and writing symbols) and 'off-center' (language and writing symbols are assimilated by and transform into pictorial signs).

3.1 *Similar-Sinogram That Moves 'Toward-Centre': Picture Functions as Statement, Narrative, and Writing*

3.1.1 Picture Functions as Statement

This phenomenon is commonly seen in all kinds of public signs which are not the reproduction of the real objects but concepts established through common practice. For example, the pictorial drawing of umbrella means: to keep the object away from damp, and that of a basketball represents a basketball match. Those signs are intentionally-designed 'similar-pictographs' which have one thing in common with ancient pictographs: that they both convey

a certain notion or statement by means of visual perception. Yuen Ren Chao even takes them as writings (Zhao, 1980: 140–141).⁵

Traditional Chinese paintings are fully equipped with statements, such as the works related to a plum, an orchid, a bamboo, and chrysanthemum, which refer respectively to the four noble characters of a *junzi* (the plum equates to a proud and unsullied personality; the orchid equates to dreamy elegance; bamboo describes a humble and courteous character; chrysanthemum relates to an aloof talent with an upright and chaste disposition). Most of the Spring Festival Paintings circulated among the masses can be associated with 'auspiciousness, joy, longevity, blessing, and wealth'. Those pictures filled with language statements can all be categorised as 'similar-sinograms'. In his *Characters of the Earth* (地书 *Di Shu*), Xu even took the picture as a grammar unit and formed a 'text' with it to present a love story.

Illustrations also carry the traits of a similar-sinogram that moves towards the centre. Most illustrations are paintings produced for the purpose of reading. Illustrations (including those inserted in a piece of news) could not stand on their own. Their connotations are hidden behind and dependent on relevant texts and statements. In other words, illustrations can only sustain and fulfil themselves with the help of texts. Therefore, an illustration is bestowed with dual references: it refers not only to the real object but also to its related text and statements. Moreover, it leans more towards 'statement dominant' – the distribution of the illustration is subject to the coherence and syntax of language – during the process of undoing the binary opposition of dual references.

3.1.2 Picture Functions as Narrative

From the perspective of a 'polarity symbol', a pictorial sign dictated by the principle of iconicity conforms to non-linear space grammar. However, when the wholeness of space grammar is broken up appropriately into segmented narrative units, these units come with a sequence of time, and pictures are thus bestowed with narrative features, which means that they have been neutralised and turned into 'similar-sinograms'. Narrative originally served as one of the essential features of writing texts, whereas it now associates with the non-linear space grammar of pictures. *Pilgrimage to Cythera* by Antoine

5 Zhao Yuanren gave a broad definition for writing. He regarded some pictorial signs as writings and deemed that 'visual signs used to represent language are by all means writings.' He take the traffic sign as an example, added with \, it means 'no left turn', which contributes to its capacity as writing. He also pointed out that the pictorial drawing of a skeleton and two bones is qualified as a 'writing' if it refers specially to 'poisonous' objects (Zhao, 1980: 140–141).

FIGURE 1 *Pilgrimage to Cythera*, so-called *The Embarkation for Cythera* (1717) by Antoine Watteau

SOURCE: LOUVRE MUSEUM

Watteau depicts three scenes: the first scene in which the man is on his knee to court the woman; the second scene in which the woman accepted the man's courtship; the third scene in which the couple are having a walk with the man holding the woman by her waist. The three scenes juxtaposed together reveal a narrative based on time: courtship, acceptance, and stroll.

In his *The Tribute Money*, Masaccio describes a scene from the *New Testament* of the Bible: Jesus was out to give a sermon with his disciple Peter. When they arrived in Capernaum, they that received tribute money came to Peter (see the middle scene). Therefore, Jesus directed Peter to find a coin in the mouth of a fish in order to pay the temple tax. Peter did what he asked and took the money out of the mouth of the fish (see the left side of the fresco). Finally, Peter paid the tax collector (see the right side). Masaccio employed linear perspective to create the pictorial space in the fresco and brought about some interesting changes: sequentially speaking, these scenes should be arranged as 'Jesus stopped by the tax collector' → 'Peter removing money from a fish's mouth' → 'Peter paying the tax collector'. However, Masaccio placed Jesus in the central scene, which represents one of the grammars of pictorial space distribution: the placing of the main figure in the middle and those supporting figures at the margins. We could extract from *The Tribute Money* the conflict

FIGURE 2 *The Tribute Money* (1425) by Masaccio
SOURCE: SANTA MARIA DEL CARMINE

and combination of the two grammars (placing the prominent figure in the central space or arranging in line with timeline). Such is the representation of the similar-sinogram.

3.1.3 Picture Functions as Writing

It mainly refers to the transformation of the artists' brushwork and structure arrangement. Three phenomena are discussed in the following section: shifting towards ink-brush, stroke, and smaller components.

3.1.3.1 *Shifting towards Ink-Brush*

As Kuang Jingpeng (匡景鹏) (2016) points out, in *A Painting of Bamboos and Stones in Xiaoxiang*, every stroke and dot is in accordance with principles of Chinese calligraphy. Su paints stones with lines that are often used in Chinese cursive scripts (草书 *caoshu*), and when painting bamboos, he uses his brush as if he is writing Chinese regular scripts (楷书 *kaishu*). Lines in this painting are "moving towards" lines in written Chinese characters, through which the art of images and the art of Chinese calligraphy are being fused together. (Kuang's Letter to the Author).

3.1.3.2 *Shifting towards Stroke*

As writings and paintings all involve the use of a brush or pen, a 'line' comes into being in both situations as a result. Judging from the perspective of 'polarity symbols' (binary opposition), the two are highly differentiated: in a painting, it is called 'line', while in writing, it is called 'stroke'. A line with its

FIGURE 3 *A Painting of Bamboos and Stones in Xiaoxiang* 潇湘竹石图 Xiao xiang zhu shi tu by 苏轼 SU Shi 1080–1085

own character constitutes a liberalized modelling language, while a stroke represents a stiff form established by conventions. Therefore, lines and strokes are related to each other. The pattern of Chinese written with an ink brush is 'neutral' and carries the features of a similar-sinogram: It can be regarded as both strokes and lines. As a stroke, it can be used to produce a written character; as a line, it is the constituent of Chinese calligraphy and contributes to the formation of artistic calligraphy or drawing of Chinese characters. This neutral inclination of a similar-sinogram can be summarised as follows:

The liberalised form of a stroke produces a line; the normalised, mechanised and standardised form of a line is a stroke.

The similar-writing principle of the 'shift towards stroke' can be seen in all visual signs. For example, when the flexible lines of a painting were stiffened and mechanised, such lines were 'shifting towards strokes'. This inclination of moving towards the centre of the similar-sinogram merits much attention. It represents a transformation of the non-linear and flexible mouldings of paintings towards the linear and replicable rules of writing. As can be seen in the radial lines in Xu Bing's *Characters of the Earth*, they have already been transformed into mechanised strokes used in the design of an emblem.

3.1.3.3 *Shifting toward Smaller Components*

The act of disassembling a sign into smaller parts which still carry the features of a sign, or, rather, the gesture of decomposing a sign into several smaller ideographical units, constitutes the shift towards smaller components. Figure 5 is called *Vertumnus*, one of the imaginative portrait heads of the sixteenth-century Italian painter Arcimboldo. This portrait is created out of

FIGURE 4

The Order of Liberation (解放勋章, *Jie fang xun zhang*) (1955), designed by People's Liberation Army

various plants, with each plant acting as an independent expression like every single word that appears in a book or article.

Barthes pointed out in his discussion of Arcimboldo's painting that it is as if, like a baroque poet, Arcimboldo exploits the 'curiosities' of language, and plays on synonymy and homonymy. His painting has a linguistic basis, his imagination is, strictly speaking, poetic: it does not create signs, it combines them, permutes them, deflects them – precisely what the practitioner of language does (Barthes, 1985: 131–133, as cited in Geng 2009: 116).

It is exactly the 'individual word' produced by each plant that has endowed the portrait *Vertumnus* with one articulation like that of Chinese characters (see part 1 of Chapter 2). But contrary to the painting, the components (radicals) of Chinese characters do not come from the sparkling creations of artists; they are rather derived from the existing pictographs (also called root characters in philology) which are few in number and can be used repetitively. Then, similar yet contrasting associative and pictographic characters are created after undergoing multiple changes. Ledderose, a German professor of the History of Art of Eastern Asia, referred to 'organizing a limited number of elements into components' as "modules". '50,000 Chinese characters are invented by picking and combining a limited number of modules, which are derived from a relatively less jumbled group of two hundred radicals' (Ledderose, 2012: 4–5). He then further remarked that Xu Beihong was an artist who used to practice 'modulization' in drawing 'horses' (Ledderose, 2012: 271). The admirers could not help being amazed at the vividly portrayed vigour of these animals. One could be able to notice similar horse legs, manes, horsetails among herds of horses, as well as the almost same lines for drawing their heads, necks and chests (Ledderose, 2012: 271).

The shift of the picture towards 'smaller components' boils down to similar-sinograms that 'move toward the centre' as expressed by the transformation of the picture into words and segmentations. But it consists of two ways: one resembles the approach of 'componentisation', a creative way of organising components, as used in *Vertumnus*; the other features the approach of

FIGURE 5 *Vertumnus*, portrait of Roman Emperor Rudolf II by Giuseppe Arcimboldo (1590)
SOURCE: SKOKLOSTER CASTLE

'modulisation' as can be seen in the radicals of Chinese characters or the horse paintings of Xu Beihong, both of which employed existing components to produce characters or artworks by means of imitation and creation. Modulisation represents one of the most important structural modes of all kinds of Chinese cultural symbols. Nothing else has ever been so close to the essence of 'similar-sinograms'.

3.2 *Similar-Sinogram That Moves 'Off-Centre': Characters and Writings Functions as Pictures*

The paper is to analyse this topic from three aspects, namely the shifts of characters and writings towards line representation, diverse spatial arrangements, and visual perception.

3.2.1 The Shift of Character towards Line Representation

Strokes of character taking in the symbolic or descriptive feature of lines is referred to as the shift of characters towards line representation. For example, in Shao Yan's (邵岩) work on the character for sea (海, *hai*), the strokes of which have turned into the lines that hold within the roaring waves. It is a representation of the tension and integration between strokes and lines.

3.2.2 The Shift of Writing towards Diverse Spatial Arrangements

The notion of a 'pictorial poem' denotes an arrangement of verses that mirrors the traits of a picture. It has unshackled the restriction of the linear writing principle and adopted the rules of spatial distribution. The poem 'Wind' by Eugen Gomringer serves as a good example here. It is composed with one single word 'wind' but with diverse spatial distributions, building an image which projects the erratic feature of wind.

3.2.3 Image-Loaded Texts: the Shift of Writing towards Visual Perception

It refers to the writing that appeals to visual senses and contributes to the formation of an image-loaded text: the text written for the purpose of watching instead of reading. It can be further categorised into pre-loaded texts and post-loaded texts.

Pre-loaded texts represent such occasions when the written texts are produced in advance, and pictures or images are generated accordingly in later times, such as copy-writings, proposals, designs, and the scripts of movies, animations or exhibitions. Others, including menus and prescriptions, can be subsumed under the category of image-loaded texts: they are made to 'hold' something rather than to satisfy one's appetite for reading.

Post-loaded texts correspond to the situation where the visually appealing artworks or items on display are put in place beforehand, and text interpretations are given afterwards. Commentaries, minutes, and text interpretations concerning pictures, videos and real objects can all be clarified as post-loaded texts, other examples including descriptions of exhibits, tourist handbooks, tags of cultural relics, subtitles of films and records of court trials.

Pre- and post-loaded texts fall into the category of similar-sinograms that are created in the linear writing process and conform to the grammar of spatial distribution and object arrangements.

The concept of the image-loaded text merits much attention. It represents one of the ways that sustains cultural beings. Back to the ancient times where bone and bronze inscriptions were used for recording, no linear written texts had ever come into being. Scattered oracle-like inscriptions which served the purpose of ritual observations stood in the dominant position. Ideas were organised together by similar-sinograms and similar-writings back then. The classical era and modern time when the technique of printing became popular were characterised by 'polarity symbols'. Thoughts and ideas were constructed and conveyed by linear writings, while in the Internet era, the carriers of ideas are being 'neutralised', and thus being constructed and conveyed by similar-signs, similar-sinograms, and similar-writings. Taking the departments of Chinese language and literature in universities as an example, their structures of knowledge and educational objectives is about to undergo some changes: diverting from writing to creation, and from reading to sight reading, in order to establish a new relation by integrating visual perception with reading. They have invested the 'semiotics of the neutral' represented by Chinese characters or the research into similar-semiology with profound historical significances, and have offered a bridge that allows Chinese semiology to enter into the global academic world.

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