

## The Distinction between the 'Abstract West' and the 'Concrete East' from a Linguistic Perspective<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Ferdinand de Saussure is one of the pioneers who argue for the linguistic distinction between the West and the East. He argues that the western words (*yan* 言) (especially Indo-European) are mainly phonetic-based, but that the eastern words (especially Chinese) are not. Nevertheless, Edward Slingerland, in "Metaphor and Meaning in Early China," argues for a better understanding of the role of metaphor in Early Chinese thought (*yi* 意). Metaphorical conceptual structure is not a unique nature of the Chinese, but it is common among all human beings. On the one hand, Slingerland is correct to argue for the common role of metaphor in both western and eastern thought. On the other hand, this paper aims at arguing that his rejection of the distinction between the "Abstract West" and the "Concrete East" is doubtful, as the distinction can be retained linguistically. Saussure and recent neuro-linguistic researchers provide evidences to support the distinction in the sense that the "Abstract West" refers to a phonetic-image (*xiang* 象) linguistic-determination, and the "Concrete East" refers to a visual-image linguistic-determination.

**Keywords:** Slingerland, metaphor, the "abstract West" and the "concrete East," linguistic determination

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for commenting on this paper. He makes two helpful comments. Firstly, he points out that the East is a plurality of traditions. The East might not serve the East well, as this paper focuses on the Chinese rather than the plural Eastern traditions. His observation, however, is correct. The distinction addressed by Edward Slingerland is between the mainstream Western thought and the Chinese thought. This paper aims at arguing against his rejection. Therefore, the "East" follows Slingerland in that it refers to the Chinese. Secondly, he believes that the issue stems from an absolutist interpretation of "Abstract West" and "Concrete East." To a large extent, I agree with it. On the one hand, this paper aims at arguing against Slingerland's reconciliation. The distinction between the "Abstract West" and the "Concrete East" can be retained in accordance with their linguistic characteristics. On the other hand, it aims at arguing for an absolute interpretation of "Abstract West" and "Concrete East." The cultural differences, especially the linguistic, cannot be concealed. Besides, I would like to thank Prof. Kwan Tsz-wan for delivering seminars on Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* and the formation of Chinese characters. His project inspires the main thesis of this paper.

## Introduction

Edward Slingerland, in “Metaphor and Meaning in Early China,” has two claims. The first claim is that the foundational role of metaphor in Early China should not be dismissed. The second claim is that imagistic conceptual structures are fundamental for every human thought, so it cannot express any unique feature of Chinese thought. This paper aims at critically examining Slingerland’s arguments. On the one hand, Slingerland is correct that imagistic conceptual structures are fundamental for every human thought. On the other hand, his rejection of the distinction between the “Abstract West” and the “Concrete East” is doubtful. My argument is threefold: firstly, our thoughts are most likely “shaped” by our language; secondly, the linguistic structure and formation in the West and the East are mainly phonetic-based images and visual-based images respectively. To a large extent, phonetic or sound images are more abstract than visual images. The imagistic conceptual structure in the Chinese linguistic structure expresses a unique feature of Chinese thought, namely visual-image linguistic-determination. Therefore, the distinction between the “Abstract West” and the “Concrete East” is a comparative metaphorical expression of the two linguistic structures.

This paper consists of three sections. This first section explicates Slingerland’s central claims that the metaphorical nature of Chinese philosophy should not be underestimated or overestimated. The second section explains his three arguments. The first argument is to refute the representational model and to support embodied or enactive models; the second argument is to support how embodied or enactive models avoid the transduction problem and grounding problem through empirical support in contemporary cognitive linguistics and neuroscience; and the third argument is to argue against the misleading distinction between the “Abstract West” and the “Concrete East.” The final section critically examines Slingerland’s arguments. I will draw resources from phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty and linguists Jia Yuxin, George Lakoff, and Mark Johnson to develop his argument. We will find that most languages, indeed, are heavily dependent on imagistic metaphorical conceptual structures, which can be justified by embodied or enactive models. Nevertheless, Slingerland has not further explored the essential feature of imagistic conceptual structures in Chinese language. Thus, he fails to understand the distinction between the “Abstract West” and the “Concrete East.” To refute his claim, I will draw resources from Saussure and recent neuroscientific research to argue that imagistic schema in Chinese words is *mainly* dependent upon visual images, whereas imagistic schema in western words (especially Indo-European), is

mainly dependent upon sound/phonetic images. Thus, he fails to prove his rejection with soundness.

### **Edward Slingerland's Criticism towards the "Abstract West" and the "Concrete East" Distinction**

Edward Slingerland addresses that there are two problems if we adopt the misleading distinction between the "Abstract West" and the "Concrete East," as we believe Chinese philosophy depends on metaphor, but Western philosophy does not. The first problem is that the Western official philosophical attitude depreciates Chinese philosophy of its metaphorical nature. He argues that,

A deeper problem, however, is involved in the claim that the Chinese were somehow unique, or at least different from the ancient Greeks, in taking their metaphors seriously. To argue in this way is to take the conceit of Western philosophy ... and to underestimate the extent to which, even in the West, meaning and perception are fundamentally shaped by imagistic structures arising from our embodied experience of the world.<sup>2</sup>

Some Western philosophers like J.P. Reding, who are blind to the metaphorical nature of language and take it to be literal, believe that metaphor is a "reflection of a lack of self-awareness."<sup>3</sup> This is the official philosophical attitude toward metaphor. The official philosophical attitude has to be concrete in the sense that a word should not be ambiguous. By contrast, metaphor provides a double sense of a word. It leads to the ambiguity that the official philosophical attitude aims to avoid.

The second problem is that it leads to the trend, "reverse Orientalism."<sup>4</sup> "Reverse Orientalism" is opposite to "classic Orientalism." The word Orientalism was firstly introduced by R. Schwab and was clearly thematized by E. Said's work, *Orientalism*.<sup>5</sup> The term signifies the European

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<sup>2</sup> Edward Slingerland, "Conceptual Blending, Somatic Marking, and Normativity," in *Cognitive Linguistics*, 16:3 (2005), 6.

<sup>3</sup> Slingerland pays attention to Jean-Paul Reding's work *Comparative Essays in Early Greek and Chinese Rational Thinking* and makes such a claim. For further details, please refer to Edward Slingerland, "Metaphor and Meaning in Early China," in *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, 10:1 (2011), 6.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 8, 27.

<sup>5</sup> See Raymond Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance. Europe's Rediscovery of India and the East, 1680-1880*, trans. by Gene Patterson-Black and Victor Reinking (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

“technology of power” authorizing itself to substitute the silent other, in the name or the image of its universalized self. Precisely, Orientalism refers to a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.<sup>6</sup> The idea of classic Orientalism can be found in Hegel’s work, *The Philosophy of History*, where he argued that Asia is the real theatre of the unfolding drama.<sup>7</sup> Slingerland further interprets that Hegelian Chinese “were a childlike, naturally ‘slavish’ people.”<sup>8</sup> Orientalism is a name denoting the negative view of the Eastern (Chinese). On the contrary, reverse Orientalists believe that the holistic Chinese worldview is a positive corrective to flaws that plague the alienated West. Different from the negative Hegelian view of Chinese culture, more recent interpreters have instead regarded the holistic Chinese world-view as a positive corrective to argue against the alienated West. He argues that,

The characterization of Chinese thought as uniquely and distinctly metaphorical—the “strong” view that seems so common in our field—is, I believe, part of a large trend that sets up a caricatured China or “the East” as a monolithic, incommensurable Other, fundamentally different from an equally caricatured “West.” China is said to be characterized by a “holistic” conception of the self and the cosmos—in contrast to Western mind-body, appearance-reality, immanent-transcendent dualisms ...<sup>9</sup>

In Slingerland’s view, reverse Orientalism is a pitfall and we have to avoid the overestimation of the role of metaphor in early China. To have a better understanding of the role of metaphor in embodied human experiences, philosophers can have a better judgment and draw a fair distinction between the Chinese and the West. Both positive and negative are biased attitudes, as they do not make a fair judgment to the Chinese and the West, as they cannot portray a correct “picture of metaphor” in their human experiences. Both attitudes share the same view that the Chinese thought is based upon metaphor and imagistic conceptual structure, but the West is not. Therefore, he introduces some arguments to rectify these problematic prejudices.

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<sup>6</sup> See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 332.

<sup>7</sup> See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. by J. Sibree (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), 99.

<sup>8</sup> Slingerland, “Metaphor and Meaning in Early China,” 8.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-8.

## Slingerland's Arguments

Slingerland introduces three arguments for his claim. The first argument is to refute the representational model and to support embodied or enactive models by drawing a distinction between these models. The representational model leads to two problems, namely "transduction problem" and "grounding problem."<sup>10</sup> The former asks how perceptual signals could get "translated" into amodal symbols; and the latter asks how arbitrary, abstract symbols could ever come to refer to something in the world. He draws resources from L. Barsalou. On the one hand, no philosopher in the camp of the representational model could give a satisfactory explanation. On the other hand, the models are lacking cognitive or neurological evidence.<sup>11</sup> He thus turns away from the representational models towards some embodied or enactive models. Embodied or enactive models argue that perception is not merely a passive absorption of information but also "a kind of doing." According to the models, "the symbols manipulated in human thought are understood, not as a picture, but as records of neural activation that arises during perception."<sup>12</sup> The reason for embodied or enactive models is that the models "enjoy considerable empirical support, and is the basic working model in contemporary cognitive neuroscience."<sup>13</sup>

The second argument is to support how embodied or enactive models avoid the transduction problem and grounding problem through empirical support in contemporary cognitive linguistics and neuroscience. On the one hand, Slingerland argues that grounding concrete concepts is by means of non-propositional, embodied "image" schemas which "are recurring patterns arising from our sensory-motor interaction with the world."<sup>14</sup> Traditional cognitive linguistics and neuroscience assume the division between the external world and the internal symbolic representation. It is necessary for them to explain how the internal symbol represents the external world, on the one hand; and how the internal symbol has arisen from the external world, on the other hand. The first is the transduction problem, and the second is the grounding problem.

On the contrary, embodied models drop the standard division between the external world and the internal symbolic representation. Instead of claiming that the internal symbolic representation arises from the external

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>11</sup> See Lawrence Barsalou, "Perceptual Symbol Systems," in *Behavioural and Brain Sciences*, 22:4 (1999), 580.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 583.

<sup>13</sup> Slingerland, "Metaphor and Meaning in Early China," 11.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*,

world, embodied models state that the world is experienced and determined by mutual interactions between the sensational movement and the environment. In our sensory-motor experience, the bodily speaking subject does not understand perceptual symbols after translating the external perceptual signals to the internal symbolic representation. Rather, the perceptual signals directly present to the bodily speaking subject. For example, when I go inside a classroom and I look around, I immediately grasp some perceptual symbols, When I move my body from the door to the center, I further recognize those perceptual symbols are chairs, a blackboard, and table. In this example, there is no sharp division between the external and the internal as well as the world and the symbolic representation. The image or symbol does not arise *from the external world only*, but *from the interaction between the world and the subject*. It explains away how perceptual signals could get “translated” into amodal symbols, as no translation is needed. The embodied models explain away the transduction problem.

On the other hand, he argues that grounding abstract concepts is by means of conceptual metaphor. Conceptual metaphor “involves the recruitment of structure from a concrete domain to a more abstract domain.”<sup>15</sup> Drawing upon works written by Lakoff and Johnson, Slingerland provides some “representative primary metaphors such as AFFECTION IS WARMTH, IMPORTANCE IS BIG, MORE IS UP, etc.”<sup>16</sup> As a result, embodied models explains the origin of abstract symbols by tracing back to our concrete experiences. The abstract symbol, e.g., affection, is nothing other than the concrete experience of warmth. Abstract symbols could always come to refer to something in the world as all primary metaphors develop gradually through experiential correlation and sensorimotor source domain.

Through “image schema” and “conceptual metaphors,” Input<sub>1</sub> (language or other signals) corresponds to conceptual metaphor’s “source” domain, and Input<sub>2</sub> corresponds to the “target.” Image schema explains transduction problem while conceptual metaphor explains grounding problem. It is what he called simple source-to-target-domain mappings.<sup>17</sup> And it is how “human beings are capable of constructing and processing (mostly) abstract, rational arguments.”<sup>18</sup>

The third argument is to argue against the misleading distinction between the “Abstract West” and the “Concrete East.” Slingerland claims that early Chinese philosophical rhetoricians and Enlightenment philosophers of the modern West are “employing the same linguistic tools (metaphor and

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>16</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

<sup>17</sup> Slingerland, “Metaphor and Meaning in Early China,” 14.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

metaphoric blends) to manipulate the same basic cognitive processes (image thinking and affective reasoning)."<sup>19</sup> In this argument, one of the premises is that "if the model of human cognition emerging from cognitive science that I have presented above is even remotely correct, then the argumentation should be seen as centrally, if not primarily, focused on winning the battle to metaphorically frame the situation, and thus sway the emotions of one's conversational partners."<sup>20</sup> In order to fulfill the antecedent, he must establish that the model of human cognition emerging from cognitive science is correct. The soundness of the first and second arguments is the key to establish the statement, a model of human cognition emerging from cognitive science is correct. But are they sound?

### Critical Assessments of Slingerland's Arguments

Slingerland's first argument is sound. It is true that representational models lack empirical support. More importantly, the models do not capture the full picture of our language or speech phenomena. To further explain this point, we can draw from M. Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*.<sup>21</sup> He criticizes that,

the intellectual analysis, here as everywhere, less false than it is abstract. The 'symbolic function' or 'representation function' certainly underlies our movement, but it is not an ultimate term for the analysis, it in turn rest upon a certain ground. Intellectualism's error is to make it depend upon itself, to separate it from the materials in which it is realized, and to recognize in us, as originary, a direct presence in the world.<sup>22</sup>

Merleau-Ponty's criticism can further develop Slingerland's first argument that lacking empirical support, in fact, refers to a major defect. Representational models separate representation from the materials as originary. Representational model believes that language is a visual representation, which functions as a mediator between thought and words. Nevertheless, this model cannot explain the formation of a new word through the association of the old visual representation with the new unity.

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>21</sup> Slingerland mentions the origin of embodied or enactive models can be traced back to the phenomenology Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. But he does not go into detail.

<sup>22</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. by Donald A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2013), 126.

If the need was felt to introduce this new word, it was in order to express that the spatial and temporal unity, the inter-sensorial unity, or the sensorimotor unity of the body is, so to speak, an in principle unity, to express that this unity is not limited to contents actually and fortuitously associated in the course of our experience, that it somehow precedes them and in fact makes their association possible.<sup>23</sup>

Representation fails to explain how a new word is formed if language is merely a visual representation between what is thought and what is expressed. Take the word “Millennium Bug” as an example, if we follow the representation model, then the meaning of “Millennium Bug” is always according to what we think and what we express. It is a real case that many people believe “Millennium Bug” is really a kind of bug. However, it is not the case. “Millennium Bug” refers to a class of computer problem related to the formatting and storage of calendar data for dates beginning in the year 2000. “Millennium Bug” is a new word without any visual representation. More importantly, “Millennium Bug” is not limited to, contents actually and fortuitously associated with the course of our experience.

If the representation function is not the originary, then what is the originary? Merleau-Ponty finds that the body (*Leib*) is the originary. He uses the word “here” and “there” as examples to explain it.

When the word ‘here’ is applied to my body, it does not designate a determinate position in relation to other positions or in relation to external coordinates. It designates the installation of the first coordinates, the anchoring of the active body in an object, and the situation of the body confronted with its tasks.<sup>24</sup>

When we use the word “here,” it does not designate a determinate position in relation to other positions or in relation to external coordinates. Instead, our body is the orientation of spatial situation, so that we could understand both “here” and “there” as “not here.” Merleau-Ponty further elaborates “every movement has a background, and that the movement and its background are ‘moments of a single whole.’”<sup>25</sup> Both perceptual movement and metaphorical reasoning have their background. The background of the

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 102-3.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.



perceptual movement and metaphorical reasoning “is not a representation associated or linked externally to the movement itself; it is immanent in the movement.”<sup>26</sup> Consequently, the solution of “transduction problem” and “grounding problem” is to reestablish the importance of the body. That’s why Barsalou introduces the importance of bodily subject.

Although Slingerland does not provide sufficient evidence to prove that the second argument is sound in Western words, it is sound in Chinese words. A Chinese Professor of Sociolinguistics and Intercultural Communication at the Harbin Institute of Technology, Jia Yuxin, argues that, “the Chinese character system is a matter of conceptual metaphors and the metaphors emerge from bodily experience.”<sup>27</sup> Unlike Slingerland, Jia draws resources from Chinese thought, *Zhou Yi* (周易). Accordingly, “establishing images or the operation of image schemata is an experience of ‘looking at things and seeking images through analogy’ (*Guan wu qu xiang* 觀物取象) and ‘looking at images and contemplating and grasping meaning’ (*Guan xiang qu yi* 觀象取意).”<sup>28</sup> He then gives several examples in Chinese words, like *Wen* (*wen* 文). This word is made up of the elements of 亠, which stands for the symbol or image of the sun, moon, and stars in heaven, and 乂, which stands for the mediating points between the eight trigrams in telling good and bad fortunes. According to *Zhou Yi*, the association of the two elements shows that the ancient Chinese observe the sun, moon, and stars in heaven in order to tell fortunes. He addresses that the Chinese word system has two implications: “the whole Chinese character system is grounded in the human bodily or sensorimotor experience, visual experience in particular” and “in characterizing the world via the Chinese characters our ancestors follow the principle of taking analogy from their body that is closest to them and then taking analogy from what is far away.”<sup>29</sup> It demonstrates that embodied or enactive model could provide a better understanding of Chinese words. Similar to Slingerland, Jia justifies the principles of image schemas, homophonic meaning (*Xing jin yi tong*, *yin jin yi tong* 形近義同, 音近意通). He argues that establishing images or the operation of image schemata is an experience of “looking at things and seeking images through analogy,” and “looking at images and contemplating and grasping meaning.”<sup>30</sup> Johnson points out that an image schema “operates at a level of mental organization that falls between abstract propositional structures... and particular concrete

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Yuxin Jia, “The Body in Chinese Characters and Philosophy—The Experiential Nature of Chinese Philosophy,” in *Intercultural Communication Studies*, 17:2 (2008), 31.

<sup>28</sup> 唐明邦 [Tang Mingbang], ed., *周易評注 [Zhouyi pingzhu]*, (北京 [Beijing]: 中華書局 [Zhonghua Book Company], 1995), 11. Translation mine.

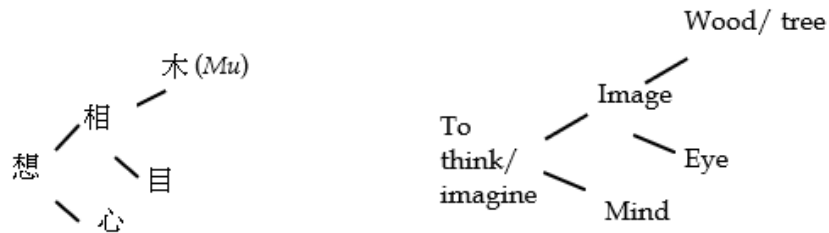
<sup>29</sup> Jia, “The Body in Chinese Characters and Philosophy—The Experiential Nature of Chinese Philosophy,” 36.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

images.”<sup>31</sup> Jia then uses *Xiang* (想) as an example. He indicates a number of complex coherences:

- *Xiang* as seeing (*Jian nai wei zhi xiang* 見乃謂之象)
- *Xiang* as image (*Xiang zhe, xingxiang ye* 象者，形象也)
- *Xiang* as analogy (*Xiang xiang* 相象)
- *Xiang* as phenomenon (*Xiang nai xianxiang* 象乃現象)
- *Xiang* as imagination (*Xiangxiang* 想象)
- *Xiang* as thought (*Sixiang* 思想)<sup>32</sup>

The word *Xiang* (想) is the combination of the components, 相 (*Xiang*) and 心 (*Xin*). Jia interprets it as image in thought or in the mind, which is based on the interaction between human bodily experience and its surroundings. To further understand its part-whole relationship, we can make use of Recognition-by-Components (RBC) model developed by Biederman.<sup>33</sup> He points out that,



Slingerland and Jia called this association synaesthesia.<sup>34</sup> Human bodily and sensorimotor experiences are in human embodied thought and mind. This embodied nature is expressed through Chinese words.

It is correct for Slingerland to argue that the importance of metaphorical conceptual structure should not be neglected as it is never illogical. However, he does not provide any evidence to support the metaphorical conceptual structure in Western words. Therefore, it is doubtful for him to justify that both the Chinese and the West employ the same linguistic tools (metaphor and metaphoric blends) to manipulate the same basic cognitive processes (image thinking and affective reasoning). It seems

<sup>31</sup> Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 29.

<sup>32</sup> Jia, "The Body in Chinese Characters and Philosophy – The Experiential Nature of Chinese Philosophy," 39.

<sup>33</sup> See Irving Biederman, "Recognition-by-component: A Theory of Human Image Understanding," in *Psychological Review*, 94 (1987), 115-147.

<sup>34</sup> See Slingerland, "Metaphor and Meaning in Early China," 12. Cf. Jia, "The Body in Chinese Characters and Philosophy – The Experiential Nature of Chinese Philosophy," 39.

that he believes all language structures (the Chinese and the Western) share the same structure. Once we find out the metaphorical conceptual structures with empirical support, then it can be applied to all language systems. Following cognitive linguists, Slingerland claims that “thought is triggered and communicated by language, but not constituted by it.”<sup>35</sup> In his view, thought and language are ready. The metaphorical conceptual structure is merely a mapping process as he called “simple source-to-target-domain mappings.”<sup>36</sup> If the metaphorical conceptual structure is merely a mapping process, then what is a faithful description of it?

Merleau-Ponty points out that “the word, far from being the simple sign of objects and significations, inhabits things and bears significations. For the speaker, then speech does not translate a ready-made thought; rather, speech accomplishes thought.”<sup>37</sup> In fact, Merleau-Ponty draws an important distinction between *langue* and *parole* from Saussure.

Saussure states four differences between the two. Firstly, language [*langue*] is a self-contained whole and a principle of classification. Speaking [*parole*], however, is only a definite part, though certainly an essential one. Secondly, language, unlike speaking, is something that we can study separately. Thirdly, language is homogeneous, whereas speaking is heterogenous. Fourthly, language is concrete, but speaking is not.<sup>38</sup> Precisely, *langue*, which is independent of and pre-exists any speaker, refers to the abstract, systematic rules and conventions of a signifying system. *Parole*, which is a speech act spoken by a speaker, refers to the concrete instances of the use of *langue*. Thus, *langue* is the necessary condition for *parole*. It shows that conceptualization is not merely mapping what ready-made symbols are. The meaningful utterance may influence the abstract, systematic rules and conventions of a signifying system. Therefore, Slingerland is inappropriate to claim that thought is not constituted by language. The better understanding should be formulated like this: thought is triggered, communicated, and constituted by language. In our daily life, thought is somehow determined by *langue*. It is what I call “linguistic determination.”

Furthermore, Saussure addresses different linguistic determination in the West (especially Indo-European) and the East (especially Chinese). Firstly, the Chinese writing system is ideographic or visual-image based. This system differs from the system commonly known as “phonetic,” in which it tries to reproduce the succession of sounds that make up a word. Phonetic systems are sometimes syllabic, sometimes alphabetic, i.e., based on the

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<sup>35</sup> Slingerland, “Metaphor and Meaning in Early China,” 26.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>37</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 183.

<sup>38</sup> See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. by Wade Baskin, ed. by Perry Meisel and Haun Saussy (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 14-5.

irreducible elements used in speaking.<sup>39</sup> Secondly, he gives an example for further explanation.

To a Chinese, if two words that have the same sound are used in conversation, he may resort to writing in order to express his thought. But in Chinese the mental substitution of the written word for the spoken word does not have the annoying consequences that it has in a phonetic system, for the substitution is absolute; the same graphic symbol can stand for words from different Chinese dialects.<sup>40</sup>

As a result, it is possible to draw a linguistic distinction between the West (especially Indo-European) and the East (especially Chinese) that the former is mainly a phonetic-image system whereas the latter is mainly a visual-image system.

In addition, a recent neuro-linguistic research may shed light towards the distinction between the “Abstract West” and the “Concrete East.” In Hoosain’s paper, “Speed of Getting at the Phonology and Meaning of Chinese Words,” he discovers that assessing the meaning of Chinese words is faster than assessing the meaning of English words. On the other hand, assessing phonology of Chinese words is slower than assessing phonology of English words because the core lexical representation of English words is phonological, but that of Chinese words is ideographic.<sup>41</sup> Besides, the phonological access of Chinese words is not always needed for getting the meaning.<sup>42</sup> It seems that the Chinese words emphasize visual association, but the Western words (especially English) emphasize the phonetic association. Therefore, the “Abstract West” refers to a phonetic-image linguistic-determination, while the “Concrete East” refers to a visual-image linguistic-determination. And the distinction is not misled and can be retained. If Slingerland is willing to argue against the misleading distinction between the “Abstract West” and the “Concrete East,” it is necessary to provide further evidence and reason.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> See Slingerland, “Metaphor and Meaning in Early China,” 26.

<sup>40</sup> De Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 26.

<sup>41</sup> Rumjahn Hoosain, “Speed of Getting at the Phonology and Meaning of Chinese Words,” in *Cognitive Neuroscience Studies of the Chinese Language*, ed. by Henry S.R. Kao, Che-Kan Leong, and Ding-Guo Gao (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2002), 132.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>43</sup> Although it is possible to argue both visual-image and phonetic-image are both imagistic, Slingerland does not offer his argument with this claim. So, it would be unreasonable to add this doubtful claim in this paper.

## Conclusion

Slingerland offers arguments and empirical support to prove that the foundational role of metaphor in Early China should not be dismissed. Scholars like Merleau-Ponty, Lakoff, and Jia directly or indirectly provide evidence for this claim. Therefore, we could conclude this claim is sound. But it is inappropriate for him to argue that imagistic conceptual structures are fundamental for every human thought as he fails to offer sufficient empirical support and sound arguments. As a result, he also fails to justify his rejection of the distinction between the “Abstract West” and the “Concrete East.”

I conclude this paper by emphasizing that the distinction I argue for is a linguistic one. Like what Slingerland states, the distinction between the “Abstract West” and the “Concrete East” is not about Hegelian classical Orientalism. Unlike what Slingerland states, the distinction is not also about “reverse Orientalism.” Since the distinction is a description of different linguistic structures between the West and the East, there is no value judgment at all. This linguistic distinction is not claiming that the “Abstract West” is merely phonetic-image determined, while the “Concrete East” is merely visual-image determined. The distinction is very minimal that the “Abstract West” and the “Concrete East” can capture some special but not unique features between the western language and the eastern language.

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