Character Teaching in TCFL* in the English Context: Dilemma and Breakthrough, a Discussion Based on the Perspective of Semiotics

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I

With the booming economy of China in recent decades, the importance and significance of the study of her language have been gradually realized in the Western world. Historically, in the U.S., Chinese was taught only for students

* The abbreviation TCFL stands for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language.
majoring in, for instance, Asian Studies or Chinese Studies in some academic institutions or universities. However, the interest in learning Chinese has surged nationwide in America over the past ten years. In its latest report, *Enrollment in Languages Other Than English in United States Institutions of Higher Education, Fall 2009*, the Modern Language Association of America (MLA) provides statistics of non-English language enrollment in American higher education institutions. Collection of data in this report started in October 2009, and ended in August 2010. A total of 2,514 postsecondary institutions contributed to the data collection. The 2,514 institutions consist of “AA-, BA-, MA-, and PhD-granting colleges and universities, representing 99.0% of all higher education institutions offering languages in the United States”[2].

Among all the non-English languages taught in American postsecondary institutions, Chinese is ranked as one of the “top seven modern languages”. The figure below in the survey reveals an increasing trend in the enrollment of Chinese between 1960 and 2009[3].

![Increasing Enrollment of Chinese in American Postsecondary Institutions from 1960 to 2009](http://www.)

Even though the gains of the enrollment of Chinese do not increase tremendously, it is clear from the figure above that the gain expands yearly.

However, when compared with the enrollments of other languages, the popularity of Chinese in the U.S. needs to be re-evaluated. Besides Chinese, there are many other languages being taught in American higher education. Due to the geopolitics of the United States with Latin-American countries and the large number of Spanish-speaking immigrants in America, Spanish unsurprisingly takes the first position in the non-English languages enrollment. Following Spanish, three major European languages, French, German and Italian, lead the second, third and fifth position respectively. The ASL—American Sign Language occupies the fourth position. Position Six is held by Japanese, which precedes Chinese by one position from 2002 to 2009. Enrollment details can be found in the table below:[4]
### Fall 2002, 2006, and 2009 Language Course Enrollments

*(Languages in Descending Order of 2009 Totals)*

| Language           | 2002  | 2006  | % Change, 2002–06 | 2009  | % Change, 2006–09 |
|--------------------|-------|-------|-------------------|-------|-------------------|
| Spanish            | 746,267 | 822,985 | 10.3             | 864,986 | 5.1              |
| French             | 201,979 | 206,426 | 2.2              | 216,419 | 4.8              |
| German             | 91,100  | 94,264  | 3.5              | 96,349  | 2.2              |
| ASL                | 60,781  | 78,829  | 29.7             | 91,763  | 16.4             |
| Italian            | 63,899  | 78,368  | 22.6             | 80,752  | 3.0              |
| Japanese           | 52,238  | 66,605  | 27.5             | 73,434  | 10.3             |
| Chinese            | 34,153  | 51,582  | 51.0             | 60,976  | 18.2             |
| Arabic             | 10,584  | 23,974  | 126.5            | 35,083  | 46.3             |
| Latin              | 29,841  | 32,191  | 7.9              | 32,606  | 1.3              |
| Russian            | 23,921  | 24,845  | 3.9              | 26,883  | 8.2              |
| Greek, Ancient*    | 20,376  | 22,849  | 12.1             | 20,695  | -9.4             |
| Hebrew, Biblical   | 14,183  | 14,140  | -0.3             | 13,807  | -2.4             |
| Portuguese         | 8,385   | 10,267  | 22.4             | 11,371  | 10.8             |
| Korean             | 5,211   | 7,145   | 37.1             | 8,511   | 19.1             |
| Hebrew, Modern     | 8,619   | 9,612   | 11.5             | 8,245   | -14.2            |
| Other languages    | 25,716  | 33,728  | 31.2             | 40,747  | 20.8             |
| **Total**          | 1,397,253 | 1,577,810 | 12.9            | 1,682,627 | 6.6              |

*The apparent drop in Ancient Greek may be attributed to changes in reporting; in earlier surveys, languages such as Biblical Greek, Koine Greek, and other premodern Greek language categories may have been reported under the category "Ancient Greek."*

In the enrollment numbers of each language, Chinese lags far behind Spanish and French. In comparing Chinese to another Asian language, a gap can be observed between Chinese and Japanese in recent years as well. Historically speaking, Chinese still has limited acceptance among American higher education students.

But, in the table above, one can also observe another very interesting phenomenon: the percentage changes. From 2002 to 2006, Arabic had the highest percentage changes at 126.5%. Chinese was the second fastest growing language with a percentage change of 51.0%. From 2006 to 2009, Arabic maintained the highest percentage increase. In the third position, Chinese led all the other “minor” languages in the percentage numbers, with the exception of Korean. Despite its higher percentual growth, Arabic has a lower base number of enrollments than Chinese, and it can therefore still not catch up with the increased enrollments of Chinese. In addition, the higher percentage change of all the “other languages” does not show any significance when it is divided among those languages. Thus, through
the analysis of the percentage change, Chinese indeed shows a surging increase of the yearly ratio since 2002.

The survey carried out by the MLA accurately reflects non-English language enrollment in American higher education. Among these languages, Chinese ranks among the “top seven”. But it is difficult for Chinese to surpass the European languages. Assuming a constant rate of growth, Chinese will nevertheless take years to gain more enrollment seats from students. This survey provides a general assessment of the reception of Chinese in American universities. But what are the reasons behind the decisions made by students? Why do they register for or drop Chinese?

As a Chinese language instructor teaching for years in China and the United States, I have dealt with various students choosing or abandoning their study of Chinese. In my observation, most students register for Chinese for business purposes. Many of them major in Business or Economics. So a Chinese language background may make them more competitive in the job market. Others who are considering a position in American government as their career goal are interested in the politics and society of China. Only very few focus on the Chinese culture or the language itself.

Those who quit Chinese do so for the most part because of Chinese characters. An analysis of the four language skills of Chinese will demonstrate the pros and cons of learning Chinese by English speakers.

From the perspective of phonetics, Chinese phonemes are not difficult for English speakers to pronounce. In neither Chinese nor English, does the so-called uvular consonant [r]\[^{[3]}\], which can be found for example in French and German, exist. It presents, to a great extent, an obstacle for a large number of language learners. The only difficult consonant in Chinese for English speakers probably is the “voiced retroflex approximant” [z]. However, it is also somewhat similar to the “r” in the English word “reduce”, which makes the pronunciation of it easier. Moreover, among the Chinese vowels, the “close front rounded” [y] might also frustrate students, because it does not exist in English. But once again, it is not difficult to find its parallel phoneme in other European languages, such as the [y] sound in “menu” or “but” in French, or “tschüß” in German. For those who are familiar with these European languages, it is easier to manage the skills to pronounce the Chinese [y]. In all, except the four tones, Chinese pronunciation is generally close to that of English. In some American universities, a language course
meets 4 or 5 times per week. And according to my own teaching experience, a full time student can learn to work with the Chinese Pinyin system through both listening and speaking skills in roughly 2 to 3 weeks. Once the students overcome the difficulties of Chinese pronunciation, they can read Chinese characters with the assistance of Pinyin.

Therefore, the focus of the problem shifts from pronunciation to character writing. During my teaching years, I have frequently observed an interesting phenomenon. Many American students, even if they have been learning Chinese for years, have great abilities in speaking and listening, but have great trouble in writing and reading. Documentation of this problem can be shown through dictation tests. Students with writing difficulties can accurately produce every syllable in Pinyin, but they are unable to write the characters at all. Considering the relation between language and psychology, we can conclude that the linguistic cognitive structure of these students is still based on that of English, namely, a pronunciation-centered or phonetic-centered psychological structure. If these English speakers cannot improve their cognitive logic of characters, they are still not thoroughly good at Chinese.

On the one hand, practical requirements do exist for American students to learn Chinese; on the other hand, it is nearly a overwhelming task to memorize Chinese characters. Teaching Chinese in the context of English now presents this dilemma for both students and teachers. When they feel frustrated writing Chinese characters, many American students prefer not to work harder, but rather to drop the course instead. To make matters worse, in this situation, there are also many Chinese instructors deciding to abandon character teaching to decrease both the course targets and the sense of defeat of students. But this compromise cannot satisfy anyone, nor can it be a reasonable solution for the present quandary of Chinese teaching. Therefore, can we build something both theoretical and practical to resolve the predicament, or even more, to push character teaching for the students whose native language is English? To make it possible, a more cautious and thorough inspection of Chinese characters needs to be carried out. The following sections of this paper will elaborate on this topic under the perspective of semiotics.

II

No matter how complicated Chinese characters seem to be to the English eye, their essence is that of a written icon or more precisely, a linguistic sign. Therefore,
the understanding of Chinese characters always derives from the foundational principles of semiotics.

Undoubtedly, the origin of modern semiotics dates back to Ferdinand de Saussure. Of his theory, the most useful thoughts for this paper are the concepts of the signifier and signified. In Saussure’s sense, he had successfully established the double-order structure, that for any language, or in his term langue, the combination of the signifier and signified exist. The signifier is the sound image, which is the mental reflection in people’s minds. And the signified is the concept of the object. In the process of creation and operation of language, a concrete but also arbitrary relation between certain signifier and signified has been retained, which is then called the sign. Thus, learning language is a process of getting used to this relationship, namely, to manage the entire system of the signs.\(^6\)

Saussure’s theory has inspired a group of followers. This paper will also demonstrate the utility of his theories after first discussing another important critic’s thoughts. Roland Barthes, the French theorist, built upon Saussure’s theories. In his discussion of “modern myths”, Barthes creatively built a second layer on the foundation of Saussure’s system, which he then called the “second-order semiological system”\(^7\). Barthes later used this concept himself to interpret “myths”, the discourses of various and profound significances in modern society. But his thoughts have repeatedly inspired other discussions, for instance, this essay.

Barthes’ “second-order semiological system” consists of two independent but related layers. The first layer refers to the linguistic system, which is made in the sense of Saussure, of a signifier and a signified. Barthes calls the associative total of these two elements “sign”, or “language-object”\(^8\). Moreover, this linguistic sign itself becomes the signifier in the second system, the mythical system. All interesting consequences in this essay originate from the double-function of the signifier.

In the linguistic system, the sign as the final term of this system is merely a language token, and its phonetic image is attached to the concept of a certain object. During this operation, the meaning of this sign can then be comprehended. Words or Chinese characters are the representations of signs. Their meanings are the abstracted ideas of all sorts of concepts. Take one Chinese character for example. The token 天, is the associative total of the syllable [tiān] and the concept of the sky or heaven.
However, discussion of this layer is not the focus of my topic, Barthes’ second system being more capital and crucial. On this second level, the above global sign of meaning now acts as a signifier, but a signifier in another higher layer. The sign now acts as the “form”, together with another higher signified or concept to give a newly created meaning, which Barthes terms “significance”. Significance should be considered as a more comprehensive meaning existing in the entire two-layer-sign. Its relationship to meaning and its function has been well interpreted. Therefore, Barthes explained:

The signifier of myth presents itself in an ambiguous way: it is at the same time meaning of form, full on one side and empty on the other. As meaning, the signifier already postulates a reading, I grasp it through my eyes, it has a sensory reality (unlike the linguistic signifier, which is purely mental), there is a richness in it: the naming of the lion, the Negro’s salute are credible wholes, they have at their disposal a sufficient rationality. As a total of linguistic signs, the meaning of the myth has its own value, it belongs to a history, that of the lion or that of the Negro: in the meaning, a signification is already built, and could very well be self-sufficient if myth did not take hold of it and did not turn it suddenly into an empty, parasitical form. The meaning is already complete, it postulates a kind of knowledge, a past, a memory, a comparative order of facts, ideas, decisions. [9]

This paragraph highlights the very important relation between meaning and signification. The former thoroughly comes from the projection of the concepts onto the sounds. But the latter has a more particular characteristic, namely, all the historical and cultural connotations attached to the word from the very beginning to the present of human society. Thus, to understand the connotations of the words in one certain language, one needs not only manage the linguistic skills of it, but also acquire the knowledge of the history, culture, philosophy and so on of the people who natively speak and use that language. In other words, learning language naturally implies the study of all its fundamental facets. For Chinese language learning, this conclusion is especially enlightening.

Take the previous character 天 as our example again. Its linguistic signifier [tiān] functions mentally in people’s minds. Moreover, as a visualized token, the character 天 also projects the concept of sky or heaven into people’s minds. But all these interpretations are not enough to explain the formation of this character. How can these simple several strokes express the concept sky? In order to answer this question, we must probe into the history of the creation of Chinese characters, as well as the ancient philosophy of Chinese deism. In this example, simply speaking,
in the formation of Chinese characters, 天 is classified as an associative compound character, which is built from two different words. In this case, 天 is made up of 一 and 大. 一 means “single”, “the first”, and most importantly, “the origin”; while 大 refers to ideas like “big” and “huge”. In Chinese philosophy, the world originates from two basic elements, Yin and Yang. Based on the Taoist canon I-Ching, the Yang element changes as the heaven reaching to the endless horizon. Thus, the character 天 implies and conveys the above idea by combining the unique origin and the “bigness” of the heavens. The interpretation of 天 in the field of Chinese culture and tradition would require a book-sized article. But to the present discussion, in one word, we say that all the cultural interpretations comprise the signification of this token. And they are naturally contained within this character. Thus, if a Chinese language learner wants to master the usage of this character, he or she needs to know at least some basic cultural background information of this character. And more than that, these ideas will also become useful clues for the learner to memorize the shape of this character. Simply put, the learner will manage the writing of it more easily.

III

Through the theories of Saussure and Barthes, we have proved the premise and necessity of introducing cultural background knowledge into Chinese character learning. But this is just the beginning of theoretical preparation. We still need to answer a following question, that is, how can an English speaker acquire and maintain the acquisition of Chinese cultural knowledge that relates to the writing of Chinese characters?

In the history of modern Sino-American cultural communication, Ezra Pound is a very interesting example; he shows his understanding of Chinese characters visually. Frankly speaking, Pound’s elucidation has gone too far from the traditional explanation of Chinese characters. And, it is his random construction that has been criticized. However, no matter how far he conceived of the intimate relation between characters and pictures, he at least displayed a very strong desire to imagine Chinese characters visually. His individual explanation of each character may be somewhat extreme, but the approach he created is supremely meaningful, by which I mean that Pound’s experiment actually touches the essence of the mental activity of reading Chinese characters. One might say it is the imagination, but if we
were able to find a more rational and academic term to describe it, I would prefer metaphor.

It has been tradition of long history for critics doing research on metaphor, which has gradually shifted its connotation from literary rhetoric to philosophy. A brief survey of the history of metaphor can be found in M. H. Abrams’ *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Under the entry “Metaphor, Theories of”, Abrams listed four main views of the understanding of metaphor.\(^{[13]}\)

Among these four views, I. A. Richards, the veteran critic of New Criticism proposed opinions useful for my discussion. Abrams classified Richards’ point-of-view as “interaction view”, which he briefly summarized as:

In place of the similarity view, he proposed that a metaphor works by bringing together the disparate “thoughts” of the vehicle and tenor so as to effect a meaning that “is a resultant of their interaction” and that cannot be duplicated by literal assertions of a similarity between the two elements. He also asserted that metaphor cannot be viewed simply as a rhetorical or poetic departure from ordinary usage, in that it permeates all language and affects the ways we perceive and conceive the world.\(^{[14]}\)

Unlike the similarity view holding the equivalence between the rhetorical usage of metaphor and its literal statement, the interaction view strongly argues the distinction between vehicle and tenor, as well as the uttermost importance of the interaction between them. Richards makes it clear:

Now that is itself a summary account of the principle of metaphor. In the simplest formulation, when we use a metaphor we have two thoughts of different things active together and supported by a single word, or phrase, whose meaning is a resultant of their interaction.\(^{[15]}\)

This “resultant of their interaction” is the target of metaphor. If Richards and Abrams’ elaboration is reasonable, then it is not inappropriate to make a small but profound step forward. By the same token of Richards’ point-of-view, we can also find the same interaction relation between English words and Chinese characters, which resembles the connection between tenor and vehicle in Richards’ terms. Saussure built a projection from concrete object to its corresponding words. Then, Roland Barthes enlarged the dimension of this projection into the field of culture. For Richards, who admitted the disparity between tenor and vehicle, thus has essentially created a possibility to mix different languages together by the logic of metaphor. Therefore, the metaphorization as a crucial mechanism in language learning is ready to be unveiled.
If we carefully inspect the discussions of metaphor, we can roughly classify our understanding of it into two categories. One is in the narrow sense of literal rhetoric, and the other finds its position in a much wider dimension from the linguistic cognition to the representation of existentialism. Metaphors in the first category are always expressed as the foundation of their applied extensions, while in the second category, metaphors have acted as a specific approach to rethinking the entire living condition of human beings. Metaphorization is the pragmatic operation of metaphors in general under both categories.

For anyone who has basic sensibility about literary language, it is not difficult to understand the operation of metaphorization as a rhetorical expression. What I. A. Richards discussed is mostly based on this level. But he also expanded his discussion into the field of linguistics and philosophy, which serves greatly for this essay about Chinese and English languages. Therefore, I believe the following paragraphs of Richards have specific importance:

[...] whereas fundamentally it (metaphor) is a borrowing between and intercourse of thoughts, a transaction between contexts. Thought is metaphorical, and proceeds by comparison, and the metaphors of language derive therefrom.\[16\]

For words cannot, and should not attempt to “hand over sensations bodily”; they have very much more important work to do. So far from verbal language being a “compromise for a language of intuition”—a thin, but better-than-nothing, substitute for real experience,—language, well used, is a completion and does what the intuition of sensation by themselves cannot do. Words are the meeting points at which regions of experience which can never combine in sensation or intuition, come together. They are the occasion and the means of that growth which is the mind’s endless endeavor to order itself. That is why we have language. It is no more signaling system. It is the instrument of all our distinctively human development, of everything in which we go beyond the other animals.\[17\]

If we extend the term “language” from its general and exclusive sense in the above two paragraphs into the field of all sorts of different languages, then the function of metaphor between Chinese and English will also be presented. No matter what language it is, when words go beyond the range of mere verbal language and become the signs of significance, they convey the sensation and intuition of human minds and thoughts, which are “borrowed” and fulfilled by metaphors. The only thing that is crucial here is that people from different cultural backgrounds develop and use different languages to express ideas. And from a general perspective, which excludes the particular elements in one culture, these
ideas are fundamentally indistinguishable. In other words, languages are mutually interchangeable in terms of metaphorization. In this sense, we've found the theoretical support for teaching and learning Chinese through English.

Take a character as an example. In order to show the metaphorical connection between two languages explicitly, I choose a very obvious example here. The Chinese character 坐 has three parts. Two 人 figures stand for people in general, and the shape 正 means the earth or ground. Someone who has the basic idea of these Chinese components or radicals can easily figure out the meaning of this character, two persons on the ground, which refers to the action “to sit”. So, what we can find here is the connection of metaphors from a visual Chinese character to the concept in people's minds, and again to another word in English. In Saussure's terms, it can be shown by a diagram below:

signifier (Chinese, 坐)—signified (the idea of the action, “to sit”)—signifier (English, to sit)

I would like to simplify this diagram to the “exchange of signifiers between languages”.

Another example comes from the book The Discovery of Genesis. Even though this book concentrates its focus on the biblical hermeneutics, and tries to prove the “truth” of Christianity by the analysis of Chinese characters, its analysis can still provide examples of the mechanism of metaphorization, if we ignore its theological background. Here is an example from this book:

The word to create, to begin, from 盥, has forever memorialized that crowning work of shaping the first man, Adam, from the dust of the earth. That word 盥 refers exclusively to the creation of Adam and not to the other plant and animal life will become apparent. One can see the very activity of God as He forms a body from the dust of the earth 正, and breathing with His mouth 口 into the inert "dust man's" nostrils the breath of life 力 (p'ieh), Adam becomes a living soul. He came forth as an adult, able to talk 告, and also able to walk 步.

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linguistic token in one language to the token in another language (or the “exchange of signifiers”) relies on the operation of metaphors in our mind. If we agree on this conclusion, then, a follow-up question is, how do we understand this connection psychologically? Richards again provides a reasonable explanation. He says:

Let us consider more closely what happens in the mind when we put together—in a sudden and striking fashion—two things belonging to very different orders of experience. The most important happenings—in addition to a general confused reverberation and strain—are the mind’s efforts to connect them. The mind is a connecting organ, it works only by connecting and it can connect any two things in an indefinitely large number of different ways. Which of these it chooses is settled by reference to some larger whole or aim, and, though we may not discover its aim, the mind is never aimless. In all interpretation we are filling in connections, and for poetry, of course, our freedom to fill in—the absence of explicitly stated intermediate steps—is a main source of its powers.[19]

Richards attributes the establishment of connections between different objects to the natural function of the human brain. Biologists may give us a more precise explanation via neural theories. And critics from the field of psycho-analysis also propose useful interpretation. For instance, Carl Jung used the term “transference” to describe this mental phenomenon. And Richards also adopts this idea:

The psycho-analysts have shown us with their discussions of “transference”—another name for metaphor—how constantly modes of regarding, of loving, of acting, that have developed with one set of things or people are shifted to another. They have shown us chiefly the pathology of these transferences, cases where the vehicle—the borrowed attitude, the parental fixation, say—tyrannizes over the new situation, the tenor, and behavior is inappropriate.[20]

Richards’ juxtaposition of metaphor with transference is very interesting. The former founds its position on linguistic tokens, and the latter tells its story mentally. In terms of language learning, Richards’ conclusion is true. When students can manage paralleling the linguistic sign 坐 with the English word “to sit”, or 造 with “to create”, they thoroughly understand the meaning and usage of both of these two words, and it is the consequence of transference. We believe that the transference from one’s mother language to the foreign language is the process of establishing and maintaining a kind of metaphorical connection between linguistic signs among different languages phonetically and literally.
Now I think it is necessary to elaborate on what I mean by “establishing and maintaining a metaphorical connection” by expanding our discussion to the relation between language and the existence of human beings. Discussion of this field must lead us to a very extensive philosophical dimension, which is far beyond the possible scope of this essay. Therefore I just want to briefly touch on it. To the main topic of Chinese learning and teaching, however, this is an indispensable and final step of it.

What leads us to this part of our discussion is the existence of common human experience, the foundation of inter-communication between different languages. Thus, we can utilize metaphors as the media to fulfill the exchanges of signifiers between languages. Many theorists have proposed the function of metaphors upon the cognition of the world, as well as the existence of ourselves. In a word, the existence of the world and of ourselves needs to or can only be expressed or indicated by words. In the sense of semantics, words replace the “objective reality” in the minds of humans by the approach of metaphorical discourses.

In his influential essay entitled “Metaphor”, the philosopher Max Black inherited I. A. Richards’ opinions and also expanded his own discussion into the connection of existentialism and linguistic cognition. Black created his terms principal subject and subsidiary subject to replace Richards’ tenor and vehicle. And Black believed the combination of the two elements would evoke a “system of associated commonplace”, which was a comprehensive “properties and relations that we commonly attach to the object, person, or event”[21]. And Black continued explaining through the statement “Man is a wolf”, which was expressed as below:

The effect, then, of (metaphorically) calling a man a “wolf” is to evoke the wolf-system of related commonplaces. If the man is a wolf, he preys upon other animals, is fierce, hungry, engaged in constant struggle, a scavenger, and so on. Each of these implied assertions has now been made to fit the principal subject (the man) either in normal or in abnormal senses. If the metaphor is at all appropriate, this can be done-up to a point at least. A suitable hearer will be led by the wolf-system of implications to construct a corresponding system of implications about the principal subject. But these implications will not be those comprised in the commonplaces normally implied by literal uses of the word “wolf”. Any human traits that can without undue strain be talked about in “wolf-language” will be rendered prominent, and any that cannot, will be pushed into the background. The wolf-metaphor suppresses some details, emphasizes others—in short, organizes our view of man.
Suppose I look at the night sky through a piece of heavily smoked glass on which certain lines have been left clear. Then I shall see only the stars that can be made to lie on the lines previously prepared upon the screen, and the stars I do see will be seen as organized by the screen’s structure. We can think of a metaphor as such a screen, and the system of “associated commonplaces” of the focal word as the network of lines upon the screen. We can say that the principal subject is “seen through” the metaphorical expression—or, if we prefer, that the principal subject is “projected upon” the field of the subsidiary subject. (In the latter analogy, the implication-system of the focal expression must be taken to determine the “law of projection”.)

In the paragraphs above, Black pointed out two useful opinions by way of his interesting analogies. We understand man through the “wolf-system of related commonplaces”, or see stars through the well-organized smoked glass, which all explain that our understanding or cognitive ability is organized by or filtered through the metaphorization of language interpretation. In this sense, metaphors function fundamentally in the cognitive structure of humans. Secondly, since metaphors determine, to a great extent, the traits and features of the principal subject, the literal meaning and its connotation of every metaphor seem to be very important and are worthy of careful learning and inspection. This is the principal reason that we discuss the learning of a foreign language through the perspective of metaphorization.

Unlike phonetic alphabets, the Chinese language is created and indicated by pictographic symbols, which are endowed with a more explicit pattern of implications on the mechanism of metaphorization. This is why Jacques Derrida expounded on what he called the “Chinese prejudice” in his book Of Grammatology. By quoting earlier philosophers, Derrida stated that his predecessors “encouraged seeing in the recently discovered Chinese script a model of the philosophical language thus removed from history. Such at any rate is the function of the Chinese model in Leibniz’s projects. For him what liberates Chinese script from the voice is also that which, arbitrarily and by the artifice of invention, wrenches it from history and gives it to philosophy”. Derrida’s discussion focuses more on the rethinking or deconstruction of logocentrism, which is based on phonetic writing. Whereas Chinese, as the example of the “ideographic system”, plays the role of the opposing side to support Derrida’s proposals. As Derrida said, the reasons that make Chinese language mute and ahistorical, are arbitrary and “by the artifice of invention”. And I say, these are obviously the consequences of metaphorization working in the creation of Chinese characters. It is extraordinarily helpful to return to the primary
Chinese texts to investigate evidence of the “artifice of invention” of this language, which means to take a look at its metaphorical essence.

For the purpose of dating back to the origin of the creation mythology of Chinese characters, one will be led to the Huainanzi (《淮南子》). In Chapter 8 of this ancient Chinese monograph, “The Basic Warp” (《本经》), we read the following story:

In ancient times,
When Cang Jue invented writing, Heaven rained corn, and demons wept all night.\footnote{25}

A more detailed description of this story is found in another so-called “lost book”, Chunqiu Yuanmingbao (《春秋元命苞》), which was composed during the Han Dynasty and then re-collected and edited by Huang Shi (黄奭), a scholar thousands of years later in the Qing dynasty. Chunqiu Yuanmingbao is classified and categorized as the book of Chen Wei (谶纬), which indicates that much of the content of this book is fictional. However, since here I would like to highlight the function of metaphor in the creative thinking between languages, the fantastical description of Cang Jie’s life and his invention found in this later book contributes to our topic. Here it states:

Cang, was the Yellow Emperor’s Scribe of History. Cang belonged to the Huang Family, whose given name was Jie, and surname Hougang. His face looked like the dragon; his mouth was also very wide. His four pupils were shining with brilliant color; his manner was honest, he was also of highest wisdom and virtue. Cang was born to write. When he was bestowed the River Atlas, he made records of characters from that. He thoroughly understood the logos of the heaven and the earth. Raising his head, he observed the full and crescent change of the star Kui; dropping his head, he observed the patterns of tortoiseshells, the feathers of birds, mountains and rivers, fingers and palms; thereafter, he created characters. At that moment, rain of corns fell from the sky, demons cried during the night, dragons submerged and hid. Cang lived one hundred and ten years. He made his capital city at Yangwu, and he was buried at the county Lixiang, where the government located. (“The Biography of the Yellow Emperor” in Yi Shi.)\footnote{26}
Like nearly every ancient Chinese myth, the above story has no basis in reality. Not only the description of Cang Jie's profile, but also his talent and process of creating characters, are all distorted in the metaphorical interpretation. In Chinese tradition, four pupils of the eye are the symbol of an emperor or the deities with supernatural abilities. From the perspective of modern medical science, four pupils—apparently two irises in each eyeball, is called *pupula duplex*, which is a medical abnormality. It is not only very rare according to medical statistics, but is also unrelated to one's personality or fortune. Because of its rarity, the *pupula duplex* has been painted and connected with a mysterious and imaginary color in ancient Chinese myths.
The appearance of Cang Jie’s eyes is immaterial to the legend of the miraculous creation of Chinese characters. There are two aspects shown in the above description, which embody the metaphorical essence of Chinese characters.

The first is the reference to the sources of character invention, which, according to the primary text, are believed to be the River Atlas and the logos of the heaven and the earth. Based on the other narratives in ancient Chinese classics, the River Atlas came from the pattern on the back of the “dragon horse”. In his interpretation of Shang Shu, or The Book of Documents (《尚书》), Kong Anguo (孔安国) stated: “the River Atlas is the Eight Trigrams. When Fu Xi was the sovereign of all that under the heaven, there was the Dragon Horse appearing out of the river. So Fu Xi drew the Eight Trigrams based on the pattern of the horse, and called it the River Atlas.” This is another marvelous story about the beginning of artificial symbols, which, according to Kong Anguo, are the Eight Trigrams. It has been the consensus that the Eight Trigrams had already had the basic function of icons. Therefore, the brief sketch of this narrative shows us that the primary characters derive from the pattern of a nonexistent animal through the hands of a divine figure, whose identity of human essence also cannot be verified.

Another reference to character invention is the logos of the heaven and the earth, which in the primary text is said to be “the changes of the heaven and the earth”. In ancient China, worship of the heaven and the earth has supreme importance in primitive religion. During an era without any concrete deities, the change or circulation between the heaven and the earth then occupied the entire imaginary vision of Chinese ancestors, and it became the origin and chief resource in the entire Chinese hermeneutic system during the following ages. Therefore, if the logos of the heaven and the earth is the sole foundation of ancient Chinese philosophical spirit, then, a reasonable assumption here is, the “dragon horse” and the “River Atlas” are all the visual manifestation of the logos. To take one step further, one could say that patterns from the horse, or icons from the atlas, or more precisely, human languages, are all generated from the fundamental logos of the universe. Another excerpt from the I-Ching, or Book of Changes (《易经》) interprets this relation. It says:

The saints observed the logos of all that under the heaven, and then made descriptions to every object based on the logos. (Their) descriptions all conformed the appearance of objects themselves. Thus, these descriptions were called the images. The saints also observed the circulation of all that under the heaven, and comprehended
their mergence and interchange. Then, following the mergence and interchange, they operated the ceremonies and rites of the society. Based on the good or bad consequence of the ceremonies and rites, they then wrote words of explanation to judge the fortune or infelicity of future. These were all the reasons that the basic lines of symbol were named Yao. When the fundamental logos of all that under the heaven was under discussion, one should not scorn or loathe it. When the fundamental circulation of all that under the heaven was under discussion, one should not misunderstand or confuse it. Before discussion, one should consider it carefully. Before taking actions, one should consult with others. With the consideration and consultation, all the possibilities of circulation can be finally fulfilled.\[281

The above paragraph is quoted from “Xi Ci” (系辞), which is one of the “ten wings”, or precisely, ten explanatory articles of I-Ching. It highlights the function of the universal logos as the fountainhead and origin of human activities, among which, the most important one is the creation of “image” (象), or the symbolized lines, Yao (爻). In this sense, the appearance of Chinese characters finds its determination in deism.

Then, following this point of view, we may discuss the second aspect of Cang Jie’s significant contribution, which is shown in the process of character invention, the imitation of nature.

The biography of Cang Jie explicitly underscores the imitation of nature in the character invention. Cang Jie learned from the movement of stars (does it remind us of the universal origin logos?) animals, natural objects and humans before he invented Chinese characters. In other words, the image and structure of Chinese characters are the imitation or mimesis of nature. In a previous part of this essay, we have considered one example “造”, analyzed in the book The Discovery of Genesis. This example represents the essence of imitation in character invention. Other, more direct, examples can also be found and listed.

The Chinese character 文 (wén) in modern Chinese means “written language”. And it is usually used with 字 (zi), which together refer to the concept of “character”. However, the primary meaning of 文 is different. The ancient lexicon Shuowen Jiezi (《说文解字》) defines it as “the interlaced strokes”\[29]. The explanatory notes of this dictionary agree with this statement and also further interpret it as, “at first when Cang Jie invented the characters, he followed each category of objects and also imitated the images of these objects. This is why characters are called Wen”\[30]. This quotation conveys a very important idea about the category of Chinese characters, the pictographs or Xiangxing (象形). Simply

http://www.
speaking, pictographs reflect the most direct and primary approach of character invention—to draw strokes which resemble the object. More evidence to support this idea comes from the earlier paragraph I quoted from the article “Xi Ci” of I-Ching. From that statement, we already know that the logos generates image, which is represented by Yao. What is the primary meaning of Yao? Both Shuowen Jiezi and the “Xi Ci” refer to it as “imitation” ( 형태로 ). Doesn’t the structure of Yao (彫) also resemble “the interlaced strokes”? Briefly, the interlaced strokes of Wen (文) is used to represent all Chinese characters, while Yao is the most typical example of them. And both furthermore reflect explicitly the image imitation of nature in the process of Chinese character invention. The pictographic characters are the apparent evidence.

The pictographic characters can be the gateway for beginners of Chinese to start learning characters. From this point on, following the knowledge of the other five categories of Chinese character formation, and together with the radicals, students can establish an entire symbolic net of characters. As we know, for the formation of Chinese characters, there are in total six categories called Liu Shu (六書) or the Six Scripts, four of which function as the approaches of character invention, and the other two are considered as the approaches of character application. Basically all Chinese characters can be classified into these six categories. And in my opinion, all of these six scripts represent the mechanism of metaphorization. It would be complicated and vast to expound all the six, so I will use the picto-phonetic characters (形声) as an example. The picto-phonetic script as an approach to creating characters has specific significance to assist students in memorizing characters by groups, due to the existence and usage of radicals. The picto-phonetic characters are composed of two components, a radical and a phonetic element. The phonetic element suggests the original pronunciation of this character, which may not fully match the modern pronunciation of it, but is very close to it anyway. The radical element is always pictographic, which allows it to be easily recognized and remembered. For instance, as a character, 口(kǒu) means the mouth, and it can be used as a radical indicating the same meaning. Then, on the one hand, the most helpful feature of the usage of radicals is that they help to classify characters, namely, in most cases, characters having the relation with the same idea or concept employing the same radical, which indicates that idea or concept. On the other hand, characters with one same radical natively belong to the same field. The radical works as the foundation of the classification of characters. Back to the 口 example,
we can find many characters whose radical relates to the mouth (e.g. 吐, tǔ, to spit) or chewing (e.g. 嚼, jiáo, to chew, 吃, chī, to eat) or speaking (e.g. 叫, jiào, to shout or to howl). The combination of the radical (particularly with its meaning) with the meaning of the character derives from the application of metaphorization. The previous part of this essay has proved it theoretically. And with the understanding of the formation and radical, students can better themselves in memorizing characters.

In all, Chinese characters are mostly diagram-based or pictograms. No matter what terms one uses, psychologically, the application and understanding of the image imitation is based on the metaphorical connection between the concrete object and the abstract written icons. To prove the mechanism of its operation is the chief target of this essay. A brief but reasonable conclusion we reach now is that the establishment and utilization of metaphorization in pedagogical practice is the key to improving Chinese character study and writing among English-speaking students.

V. Appendix: A Pedagogical Case

The author of this essay has been teaching the Chinese language to English-speaking students in both China and America for nearly five years. Based on the understanding of the importance of metaphorization in Chinese character study, the author pays special attention to helping those students who encounter difficulties reading and writing characters. A successful case of my effort was in the fall semester of 2012 at Oklahoma State University, in Stillwater, State of Oklahoma, in the United States.

During this semester, there were 23 students registered in the elementary Chinese course. Three of these withdrew by the end of the semester. Among the remaining students, two had learned Chinese in high school before enrolling in this college. All the rest commenced in that semester learning Chinese from scratch. Memorizing and writing Chinese characters are difficult for everyone. The two students who had learned Chinese before performed better than the others, but they still made many mistakes in writing.

In order to encourage students to overcome the writing predicament, the instructor of this course employed the following methods to help the class.

Firstly, the instructor chose the textbook which focuses on the instruction of the Chinese writing system. *Integrated Chinese* (《中文听说读写》) is a series of a Chinese textbook enjoying good reputation and popularity in American universities
and higher education institutions. There are two levels in this series, each level consisting of two parts. For every part, there is one textbook, accompanied by one workbook and one character book. In the introductory chapter of the textbook of Level 1, Part 1, there is a whole section entitled “The Chinese Writing System”, which explains the six formations of Chinese characters, and lists the basic Chinese strokes and radicals. This section has proved especially helpful to students when the instructor provided explanations and example characters to elaborate on it. Basically, by learning this section, students have established the idea of character formation and also gained the ability to generally classify or understand a character from its radical.

Integrated Chinese, Level 1, Part 1, the 3rd Edition, with a Page of the Instruction of Chinese Radicals

Secondly, the instructor constantly emphasized the formation and radical in words and character teaching and during review. Whenever the studies concerning characters, the instructor always explained them from the perspective of formation and radical. Particularly, this explanation focused on making the metaphorical connection between the formation and radical with the meanings of their signified. This essay has provided theoretical proof to support the feasibility of this. But, practically, operation of this target requires sufficient knowledge and well-prepared class instruction from instructors. Instructors must systematically study Chinese language and the developmental history of Chinese character. Ideal instructors of
TCFL come from those majoring in Chinese language and literature. While teaching, the author of this essay carried out this method throughout the fall semester of 2012. By repeating the explanation of characters they learned in this semester, most students intensified their memories of them.

Third, students were required to do writing assignments and take character tests. Transcription assignments are very useful to practice writing characters. Through repeating one character many times, it will be easier to remember it than just reading it. A very useful tool for doing transcription work is the "lattice square". It can help students to keep in mind the position of strokes and also place them into correct formation.

The Lattice Square

Dictation is another good method to test whether or how much students can manage writing characters. When the score of dictation is connected to the assessment of the final grade, pressure of passing or having an excellent grade in the course will act as a motivation for students to work hard.

who have very sensitive perception of pronunciation, this student demonstrated excellent listening and speaking skills in Chinese. The interesting phenomenon that I mentioned in the first part of this essay was exhibited by him. At the beginning of that semester, he could barely write any character during the dictations. However, in lieu of characters, he could manage writing the Pinyin form for every word in the dictation correctly! Below is a copy of his dictation taken on October 8th, 2012.
This student studies very hard and had a strong desire to overcome this weakness. I noticed that he paid much more attention in class than other students to my instructions about the formation and radical of characters. In his replies to my related questions he also showed an incredible memory of these instructions. So, besides study and practice in class, I required him to show me his transcription practices once every week in person in my office. I corrected his mistakes and gave him new characters to write for the following week. He kept practicing and never gave up. Then, in the final examination of the semester, he greatly surprised me with his incredible character writing. He not only gave the answers correctly on grammar, but also wrote the characters correctly and perfectly. His hand-writing is even better than that of many Chinese people. He successfully defeated the hardest part of Chinese study. And his achievement also proved the correctness of my theory and pedagogical practice. Below are the pages of his fabulous final:

* The left page is the dictation of words. Characters are needed. This student only wrote 6 of 20 words. The right page is the dictation of Pinyin. All of 17 were correctly written by this student. 166
Notes:

[1] [2] [3] Nelly Furman, David Goldberg, and Natalia Lusin, *Enrollments in Languages Other Than English in United States Institutions of Higher Education, Fall 2009*, (Web publication). The Modern Language Association of America, 2010, p. 1, p. 15, p. 19.

[4] A more precise description of this consonant, according to the IPA consonant chart, is the “voiced alveolar trill”. See more related information on the website of The International Phonetic Association, http://www.langsci.ucl.ac.uk/ipa/index.html. The International Phonetic Association devised the IPA representation. In this essay, I use IPA system to describe individual phonemes. And for syllables of Chinese character, I prefer the more common Pinyin system.

[5] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed., Charles Bally, Albert Sechehaye, in collaboration with Albert Reidlinger, translated from the French by Wade Baskin. New York: the Philosophical Library, Inc. 1959, pp. 65-70.

[6] [7] [8] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*. Selected and translated from the French by Annette Lavers, New York: the Noonday Press, 1972, p. 113, p. 114, p. 116.

[9] [汉]许慎撰，[清]段玉裁注：《说文解字注》，上海古籍出版社，1981 年。 “一” 见第 1 页； “大” 见第 492 页。

[10] [魏]王弼注，[唐]孔颖达疏，卢光明、李申整理，吕绍刚审定：《周易正义》，北京大学出版社，2000 年。

[11] Ernest Fenollosa, Ezra Pound, *The Chinese Written Characters as a Medium for Poetry*, San Francisco: City Lights Publishers, 2001. Pound even has his followers for the approaches to de-construct Chinese characters into graphic components. But this time, Chinese characters are used to prove the power of God. In the book, *The Discovery of Genesis: How the Truths of Genesis Were Found Hidden in the Chinese Language*, C. H. Kang and Ethel R. Nelson analyzes numerous Chinese characters to scrutinize how the Christian belief roots in ancient Chinese tradition. See also C. H. Kang, Ethel R. Nelson, *The Discovery of Genesis: How the Truths of Genesis Were Found Hidden in the Chinese Language*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1979.
