Walter Ong's Paradigm and Chinese Literacy

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Abstract: Oral residues in Chinese written tradition were maintained by the ruling authorities for the facilitation of correct moral education of the masses, and propagated largely through the traditional learning methodology. When an overwhelming web of ideological control was tailored through the production and dissemination of standardized written texts, oral residues and restricted literacy acted as the agents for the maintenance of the established educational system and social order. This article applies and extends Ong's thesis of nine general features of oral mentality to the China example and explores the social impact of oral residues in a literate society. It concludes, through the study of China's case, that the social dynamics of communication technologies are determined not by the functions of the technologies, but by how the technologies are socially organized.

Résumé: Les autorités dominantes maintinrent des vestiges oraux dans la tradition d'écriture chinoise pour faciliter l'éducation morale correcte des masses, et propagèrent ces vestiges en grande partie par la méthode d'apprentissage traditionnelle. Quand les autorités mirent en place un réseau de contrôle idéologique envahissant en produisant et en disséminant des textes écrits standardisés, les vestiges oraux et un alphabétisme restreint aidèrent à maintenir le système éducatif et l'ordre social établis. Cet article se rapporte à la thèse de Walter Ong sur les neuf caractéristiques générales d'une mentalité orale et l'applique à l'exemple chinois, tout en explorant l'impact social de vestiges oraux dans une société alphabète. L'article conclut, en faisant une étude du cas chinois, que les dynamiques sociales des technologies de communication sont déterminées non par les fonctions de ces technologies, mais par comment celles-ci sont organisées socialement.

Walter Ong (1982) has outlined characteristic differences between oral and written cultures and identified nine general features of oral mentality. He points out that these oral features can exist in a society which has enjoyed a high level of writing and literacy. China is one example that he uses to illustrate his points. However, in spite of his achievement in the characterization of the features, he fails to explain why strong oral residues can remain in a literate society and what sociocultural effects they may bring. This article extends Ong's thesis on the basis of the Chinese example and explores the social impact of oral residues in a literate society. It argues that oral residues in Chinese literacy reflect the traditional learning methodology, and that the mentality that is fostered by this kind of learning methodology has exerted impacts on Chinese society. With no attempt to support a technologically determinist point of view, this article proposes the thesis that orality in Chinese literacy is one of the many elements that have had an impact on the static development of Chinese science and technology, especially after the Song dynasty. Finally, it uses Jack Goody's (1987) argument of "restricted literacy" to identify how the oral residues could be ideologically employed by imperial rulers for the consolidation of central control.

MEMORIZATION AS A PREFERRED DISCOURSE OF LEARNING

One root of the oral residues in Chinese literacy is found in written texts, especially those for educational purposes, that are created and designed primarily not for silent reading and pondering, but for memorization and recitation. This is particularly true for imperial China when the classical style was the dominant written discourse. From a historical perspective, the main body of Chinese educational texts was Confucianism, including Confucian canons, commentaries by Confucian scholars, and standard histories that intended to verify Confucian political theories. Such literature was composed in a classical style which, according to Ong (1977, p. 33), was nobody's mother tongue, but rather an artificially created linguistic style for use in officialdom. For students, especially beginners in basic characters, learning the classical style was not very different from learning a foreign language. The classical style, drastically different from oral language, was composed in a way that facilitated chanting and memorization. The rhythm of the textual style was made possible by a characteristic of the Chinese written language that there was only one syllable for each word. The arrangement of the number of words and the combination of intonations in each sentence could be so designed that when it was read aloud the rhythm became highly impressive. Students who did not understand the meaning of the sentences could still memorize and chant the text. Richard Smith argues that this kind of style made the formation of Chinese classical texts basically oral:

> The memorization of Chinese texts was facilitated by the rhythm and balance of the classical script....Indeed, the succinctness, balance, and rhythm of the classical Chinese language made it eminently well suited for popular proverbs, which helped bridge the gap

> between the mental world of the Confucian elite and the Chinese masses. (Smith, 1983, pp. 85-88)

In imperial times, memorization was a required learning technique for both new and advanced students. Children from a young age would learn to recite the primers, such as the *Trimetrical Classic*, the *Hundred Names*, and *Thousand Character Classic (San bai qian)*, by chanting and their understanding of the texts was not required. Fairbank (1962) points out that "the Chinese student traditionally memorized the classics before he understood them. Only after the characters were firmly established in the eye and ear, and in the muscular co-ordination of the hand in writing them, was their meaning studied and discussed" (p. 66). When children grew older, they would memorize the original versions as well as the comments on the canons, which were standardized by the ruling elite. The memorization of classical literature not only made the students "walking encyclopedias" of canons and standard histories, but also made them acquire a sense of rhythm for writing in classical style. In the civil-service examination, an institution for recruiting scholars into officialdom, the candidate was expected to quote as many related texts as possible from memory according to the questions. Their style should be organized in such a way that it would sound like powerful metal clicks when being read aloud--each word carrying all its weight in the rhythmic organization of the essay.

The design of the classical style did not encourage effective reasoning and argumentation. Although the meaning of the text was often obscure, students were not supposed to ask questions for clarification beyond a certain limit. For instance, the first two sentences of the *Trimetrical Classic* read, "when a man starts his life, he is good by nature." Students should not think of and ask questions like "what is the time span for `when a man starts his life,' " "what is the definition of `good,' " and "what is the ethical foundation for a man to start his life with a good nature." They were supposed to take the text as eternal truth, memorize it, and quote it in a rhythmic manner in their own writing. When students wrote their essays, they had to demonstrate how much "eternal truth" they had learned and their major attention was directed to the style and rhythm of their composition. In the civil-service examinations, the candidate was expected to be successful in demonstrating his philosophical charm by using classical examples to further prove the "eternal truth" and by a poetic arrangement of his sentences. Usually, straightforward statements were not regarded as a good style; implicitness through metaphor and simile was encouraged.

Independent study was impossible in this environment. When questions and arguments about the texts were not allowed, instructional explanations of the texts were vital to students' studies. The explanations of the "eternal truth" were provided orally by school teachers who had learned the explanations from their own teachers' oral instructions. Thus, the standardized texts acted as the guideline of education and the context was passed down by word of mouth. In order to gain a correct understanding of the text, students had to listen to and memorize what their teachers said. Any understanding of the text different from what the teachers said would be regarded as a moral deviation. As only those who had passed a certain level of the civil-service examination were qualified to teach, a system was built to guarantee that the oral explanations were consistent with the state ideology. Politically, this learning process facilitated knowledge monopolies by the ruling elite who standardized the texts and their explanations. Culturally, it based the studies of written texts on an oral pattern, that is, memorization and oral explanations.

ORAL RESIDUES IN LITERARY STYLE

The oral residues of classical literature were also reflected in their literary composition. Classics, including the texts by Confucius, were largely based on oral literature in the beginning. Scholars found stories and sayings circulating in oral form, wrote them down, composed them in a particular literary style, and made them philosophies. An example is Confucius's *Book of Odes* (*Shih Ching*), as Eoyang argues:

> It is no coincidence that the first masterworks of literature in the West and in China, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, identified with Homer, and the *Shih Ching*, identified with Confucius, were originally products of oral genius. An appreciation of the oral factor is not only an extension of the bounds of literature beyond the written word: it also enables us to recognize clearly the contributions made by word of mouth to words on paper. (1977, p. 54)

In literary composition as such, a reflection of the original oral tradition could not be totally avoided. The *Lunyu* of Confucius, for example, are conversations involving Confucius, which the translation *Analects* almost totally obscures in English (Eoyang, 1977, pp. 54-55).

The standard histories derived from the same roots. Although standard histories were not composed of "sayings," they were in the tradition of oral narration. Standard histories did not allow generalization on an abstract level, but insisted that individual happenings must be narrated one by one monotonously. The original purpose was to make the standard histories consistent in appearance with the daily records of the court. Balazs (1964) notices in his studies of Chinese historiography that if three peasant rebellions happened at the same time, the historiographer would not summarize them to an abstract level like "three rebellions happened in a certain period of time," but would state them one by one. "He will say: `On the day *d* of the month *m* of the *n*th year of the period *p-r*, Zhang X, son of Zhang Y, captured the subprefect Z,' and then the same thing for Li and for Wang" (Balazs, 1964, p. 131).

Another part of written text was popular literature, such as fiction, romance, and drama, which was designed for reading aloud to an audience. The text was in a colloquial format so that the audience, whether literate or illiterate, could immediately understand it when they heard the words. Popular literature was originally based on oral literature. Shelley Chang describes the process of transition of fiction from oral to written form:

> It was through the influence of oral artists that heroic sagas and folk legends left their imprints on historical novels. In this aspect oral tradition represents the influence of the common people in literature....By the time these sagas and legends were compiled into written literature, all of the myths that were well entrenched in the writers' minds were incorporated into written forms, together with the added acquisitions of classic traditions

> and Confucian values contributed by Confucian-educated writers, poets, and playwrights. In a broad sense, the vernacular novels thus represent both the collective efforts and oral and performing artists on the one hand, and the individual contributions of educated writers, novelists, and playwrights on the other. (1990, p. 16)

When the educated elite learned the stories in oral forms, they wrote them down and produced fiction. Later on, fiction works were translated into oral forms by storytellers at other places and subsequently new written forms would be made by other literati. For example, the Yu Family, which was in the printing business in Fujian from the twelfth to nineteenth centuries, printed fictions based on storytellers' prompt books and their editions spread far and wide for other storytellers to provide public narrations. This process meant that written text served as a bridge between the oral communication in different regions. Gernet has thus described the oral tradition of Chinese written literature:

> The literature of the [Song] period, partly still composed in the oral tradition and, even when written, intended to be heard rather than read, made great use of the spoken language, either that of the people or that of the upper classes. The storytellers, the professional dramatists and the puppeteers for both marionette and shadow plays produced a huge repertoire of fantastic stories, Buddhist tales, short crime stories, or romantic narratives set in the past, either in the period known as the Three Kingdoms, in the third century A.D., or in later periods, such as that of the Five Dynasties (tenth century)....These tales were told in colloquial language (perhaps accompanied by a light musical accompaniment), but they also included some passages in verse, which were sung, at points where poetry seemed better suited to the circumstances, as, for instance, in the description of a pretty woman or of a landscape, or if the action had reached a specially crucial moment. (1962, pp. 231-232)

CONSTITUTION OF AN ORAL MENTALITY

Oral residues have an impact on people's thinking patterns. Ong (1982) identifies nine general features of the oral mentality: it is additive, aggregative, redundant, conservative, close to the human lifeworld, agonistical, empathetic, homeostatic, and situational. Although his generalization is based on societies in which there is no written language at all, he thinks that these features also exist in literate societies and they can be barriers to the societies' attempts to modernize. I will examine the reflections of each feature in China and explore their sociocultural impacts.

ADDITIVE RATHER THAN SUBORDINATIVE

Meanings are built up cumulatively for the convenience of the speaker, often with a series of "and," rather than "when," "thus," "although," and "while" to provide a flow of narration with the analytic and reasoned subordination. Ong argues that frequent use of "and" in linear narration can achieve instant understanding, but it can hardly express the complicated relations inside a process in which many things are happening at the same time.

In Chinese written language, although logically subordinative terms exist, their usage is infrequent. Relations of logical subordination were often implied by the context rather than by explicit words. Literarily, a statement such as "when I was reading, he came in" is not good style. It should be "I read and he came in" because the sequence of the two actions is already clear in the sequence of the statement. As to whether "I" or "he" should bear the emphasis, the differentiation is expressed by the context rather than by the sentence structure. For a classics expert, it was not difficult to see contextually defined subordinate relations between statements. A non-expert could still grasp the main meaning of the text without seeing these subtle relations.

Subordinative terms were also omitted for ease of chanting and memorization, for instance, in the primers *San bai qian*. It was enough for a student to remember the main body of the text; subtle relations between statements could be explained by his master in oral instruction. In popular fiction, linear narration was the main style. The terms for complicated sentence relations, although occasionally used, were avoided as much as possible. The infrequent use of subordinate sentence structure could facilitate memorization and chanting by the masses and as a result their entertainment. Culturally, it created a difference in the way of thinking between elite and non-elite. For instance, in Chinese popular fictions, the principle of "first things first" was obscure to most of the populace. Only the elite had the ability to distinguish the matters of most importance and least importance. For non-elite readers, everything was regarded as bearing equal importance and was connected with an "and."

AGGREGATIVE RATHER THAN ANALYTIC

Because oral society relies on formulas to ease memorization, meanings are often expressed by set phrases--not a soldier, but a brave soldier. Abundant examples can be found in the Chinese language where adjectives are placed before nouns as set phrases, such as *yongshi* (brave soldier), *meiqie* (pretty mistress), *shitafu* (scholar great man, i.e., scholar-official), and *qianqiu daye* (great cause of one thousand years). The set phrases were often composed in a stereotypical way with clear moral and cultural biases, such as *yingxiong* (great outstanding man, referring to a hero), *tazhangfu* (great husband, referring to a man of bravery), *haohan* (plebeian good fellow), *pofu* (shrew woman), *neizi* (inner guy, i.e., wife), and *waizi* (outside guy, i.e., husband).

The set phrases were not just simple combinations of two or more words. They started to bear new meanings beyond the combination. *Yongshi* was not just a description of a brave person on the battlefield; it indicated that the person was properly educated and he knew he was fighting for a noble cause. *Meiqie* was not just referring to a mistress; it indicated the prestigious social status of the family that kept the mistress. Thus, the characteristic of aggregative tendency was convenient for ideological manipulation. *Neizi* and *waizi* indicated power relations between husband and wife in an extended family with the husband responsible for income and public affairs and the wife as a domestic person. The sender of the message, that is, the elite who controlled pen and printing, packaged his meaning in set phrases which were easy for memorization and he controlled the authority for the explanation. The receiver of the set phrases was drawn into the perspective of the

sender.

Idioms also belonged to this category. Chinese idioms were usually composed of four characters with a rhythm. Some idioms were based on stories and others were just word combinations, such as *qianqiu daye* which indicated the everlasting rule of an imperial family. Not all of them could be understood by the surface meaning of each word, for they had their own connotations. For instance, *shuxiangmendi* (book fragrant door sequence) carries a positive meaning for scholars' families. *Dajiaguixiu* (big family daughter beauty) and *xiaojiabiyu* (small family blue jade) equally referred to unmarried girls of literati families, but the former indicated good classical education of the family's male members, and the latter meant that the family was not yet entirely within the elite culture. The set phrases were like tags with prescriptive effects on the constitution of general consciousness. Through the wide use of set phrases, the people's perspective was fixed within a particular discourse.

REDUNDANT OR "COPIOUS"

Since there is no written record for reference in an oral society, repetition is necessary for the spread and continuation of knowledge. Ong argues that this feature exists even in a highly literate culture. "Concern with copia remains intense in Western culture so long as the culture sustains massive oral residue--which is roughly until the age of Romanticism or even beyond" (Ong, 1988, p. 35).

Repetition was frequently used in traditional Chinese fiction and drama, so that the storytelling audience could recall what had happened in previous story sessions. In classical writings, repetition was a major style. The traditional Chinese way of argumentation was to repeat and comment without extensive writing of one's own. Although there were numerous writers in Chinese literary history, many of them were remembered for what they had repeated and commented on rather than created--their creation was embedded in their selection for repetition and commenting. Shelley Chang thus comments on Chinese literary history: "Legends and tales were treated again and again in different ages, by different authors, and in different literary media, so that it became an established convention to revise or rewrite an extant plot instead of creating a completely new one" (1990, p. 16).

There might be artistic variations in repetition, but the basic points and plots never changed. When the masses were bombarded with the repetition of the same doctrines through a variety of forms--classical texts, fiction, drama, storytelling, religious books, civil rituals, etc.--and with a variety of styles--classical language, vernacular, dialects, body language, and slang--their mentality was unavoidably influenced by the predetermined discourse and their judgment of right and wrong was likely to be consistent with the expectation of the ruling authorities. Even in the remotest villages, people knew that loyalty to the throne was the highest virtue and book reading signified the highest social pursuit. Through deliberate reinforcement of repetition, the purpose of ideological transformation was systematically attempted.

CONSERVATIVE OR TRADITIONALIST

In oral societies, old people are always knowledgeable and respected and young people have to gain their knowledge from old people's memories. In Ong's opinion, if a person is expected to contribute his brain to the development of new ideas, he must be freed from the burden of huge quantities of memorization. However, the availability of a written language does not mean that the mind can be automatically freed from conservative tasks to conduct creative thinking. On the contrary, the availability of huge quantities of written texts can further increase the mnemonic load of an individual if the culture's educational procedures require it. We may add to Ong's thesis that if a person is not expected to develop independent thinking, a useful way is to drown him in a sea of literature for memorization in order to consume his brain energy and regularly test him for what he has memorized.

This was what happened in China in which memorization was the primary learning methodology. Students from age five had to start memorizing the *Four Books* and *Five Classics* of Confucianist doctrines. In the learning process, the student was not trained for any creative thinking and he was not given any opportunities to express his own opinions inconsistent with the orthodox. In classroom presentation and paper writing, he was required to demonstrate what he had remembered based on his textbooks and the teacher's explanations, but he was not expected to say what he thought of them. This practice was not confined to classrooms. In trade and technology, the same oral tradition was easily visible. For instance, things like manuals of operation and how-to books were rare in China. The arts and crafts were passed down by word of mouth from master to apprentice or from father to son. One example is the way of learning calligraphy and painting. An apprentice followed his master through the practice of direct copy (*mu*), indirect copy (*lin*), and imitation (*fang*), and his achievement was marked by how close his calligraphy or painting was to his master's.

This oral tendency had a negative impact on the development of science and technology in imperial China. Scientific books were few in number and their circulation was limited compared with the huge quantities of printed literature on Confucianism, prose and poetry, Buddhism, and Taoism. Many technical experiments had to re-start from the beginning and the mechanism of technological buildup was never fully systematized until the nineteenth century. For instance, Chinese shipbuilding was advanced in the Song Dynasty and was probably the best in the world in the Ming, but the technique died down when the masters of shipbuilding disappeared with the imperial banning of ocean voyages. Cannon-building appeared in the Song and reached a high level in the Ming. But after the Qing government discontinued it for some time, the whole craft was forgotten. Although in the Song Dynasty Bi Sheng's invention of movable type was recorded in detail by Shen Kuo as part of his literary hobby and Wang Zhen wrote a manual for his rotating typesetting cases, little detailed record of any movable-type production process was made by other printers in later dynasties. This regulated the movable-type technique to the same level of the Song Dynasty for several hundred years.

But the conservative tradition was effective for moral education, especially when it was combined with the "aggregative" and the "redundant" features. Through an aggregative approach, meanings were simplified and condensed into set phrases and the correct understanding of the meanings depended on the explanations of experts. Masters would explain their understanding of the phrases to the

students, the elite would explain to the populace, and so forth. The explanations were largely repetitions. Only experienced and older people were qualified for the explanation, because their understanding was based on what their masters had told them and the earliest masters were the sages, such as Confucius. Young persons could only listen to and remember what they were told. In such a strictly hierarchical educational structure, students were allowed no room for the development of their own ideas and their reasoning was regarded as invalid if they held an opinion different from their masters. Young people were completely excluded from the realm of knowledge production and their imaginations were suppressed by the old memories. When the young people grew old, they would do the same to the younger generations. They would repeat the same phrases with the purpose of forming the next generation in the way they had been formed with the expectation that they would educate their children in the same manner. These features formed a sociocultural mechanism which allowed a conservative mentality to perpetuate itself generation after generation.

CLOSE TO THE HUMAN LIFEWORLD

As oral societies have no writing technology to categorize and structure knowledge at a distance from lived experience, "oral cultures must conceptualize and verbalize all their knowledge with more or less close reference to the human lifeworld, assimilating the alien, objective world to the more immediate, familiar interaction of human beings" (Ong, 1988, p. 36). Incapable of abstract argumentation, generalization, and speculation, this kind of mentality is a barrier for the development of science and philosophy. But Ong tells only part of the story. This tradition has an advantage when it is used the other way around: by using connections to the human world, it can make abstract concepts understandable to the populace, convince them of the validity of the concepts, and make them voluntarily follow them.

This was an educational strategy of Chinese ruling authorities. Chinese philosophy never used terms like "epistemology," for such terms would lead students into endless philosophical reasoning and neglect the political mission of philosophy, which was aimed at the cultivation of correct moral values. Chinese philosophy chose to use terms like "heaven" and "earth" to symbolize the body of knowledge, something that could be seen directly. For ease of understanding, philosophical books were full of metaphors. Zhuangzi used the story of a bird to explain his philosophy. *Analects* was largely a collection of Confucius's stories and his philosophy was expressed through his comments on daily affairs. This feature was also widely used in political discourse. A minister would start his proposal to the emperor with a story which conveyed a moral and built his point on the basis of the story. A usual start of a proposal was: "I, a minister, have heard such a story that...(*chen wen...*)." Popular fiction was, in essence, a means of mass education by using stories to bring abstract moral philosophies into the mind of the populace. They made philosophy more accessible to the masses so that the masses would have little difficulty in understanding the imposed ideology.

According to Ong, this oral discourse has a negative impact on the development of the ability to think and reason logically. However, for Chinese rulers, this apparent negative was a positive, for it helped maintain their monopoly in knowledge production. When the mentality of the masses was confined only to the concrete level, they would not be able to produce any ideologies opposed to the court. This practice proved to be a historically successful strategy. For example, in all peasant rebellions, Confucianist rituals and doctrines were equally employed and practised in their camps. The peasants were not satisfied with a particular ruler, but it never occurred to them that the political system and social structure on an abstract level had problems. They could establish new dynasties, but they did not bring any new concepts to history.

AGONISTICAL TONES

Whatever a person says, it represents his personality. Knowledge cannot be impersonalized and disengaged from the arena of interpersonal struggles. This feature was distinct in imperial Chinese culture. If a suggestion was not favoured by the emperor, it meant the suggester's loyalty should be questioned. In Hanfeizi's words, it was not important what a person knew, but what, when, and how he said or refused to say it.

Such a culture made hypocrisy a political virtue and made the Chinese language probably the richest among all languages in the world for its words of flattery. Emperors were described as *Yao*, *Shun*, *Yu*, and *Tang*, four sagely kings in legendary history. Officials were "parents" of their people (*fumuguan*). As many emperors, especially the founding ones, won their empires by their bravery on horseback, the description of violence was always welcomed in both classical and popular literature as a celebration of their heroic qualities.

On the other hand, persons whose opinions were not appreciated by the authorities would be condemned. We should recognize that this practice was not entirely based on the policy of "one will." Confucianist philosophy has many passages claiming that opposing opinions often bear valuable insights and should be listened to. Many emperors also held a policy that the court was open to public criticism for its governance. But meanwhile, the continuation of this oral residue was deliberately maintained as a coercive means in the hegemonic policy. Publicly, the imperial policy was that people had "freedom of speech." But through classical and popular literature, negative lessons were taught to the masses that because their words represented their moral standing, they should ensure that sincere loyalty to the authorities was visibly embodied in their criticisms. The logic behind this was straightforward: evil opinions could prompt evil behaviour so that the source of the evil opinions, that is, the individual, should be treated as an enemy of the public. This feature and the next one were often employed in literary inquisition.

EMPATHETIC AND PARTICIPATORY RATHER THAN OBJECTIVELY DISTANCED

If the previous feature means a person is condemned when his knowledge is defied, this feature represents the reverse case: when a person is condemned, his knowledge is equally condemned; or when a person is honoured, whatever he holds becomes right. The residue of this characteristic in a written culture can help establish a monopoly of knowledge on an overwhelming scale.

In imperial China, literati, the controllers of pen and printing, were regarded by the general public as

the sole producers of knowledge and they also thought themselves the symbol of philosophy, science, art, and social morals. They should be privileged, for they were the personification of civilization. They could hardly tolerate any challenge to their knowledge or opinions, because any such challenge would be regarded as directed at their social status and their personality. Similarly, the master of a craft, such as calligraphy or pottery, would claim that he was the symbol of the craft and any challenge to him would mean contempt to the craft. Conversely, "evil" persons' books could not be allowed to circulate, whether the content of the book was related to their political standing or not, because the spread of their names meant a recognition of their personalities.

This feature and the previous one were maintained and developed in China long after writing and printing technologies were established. While many gifted men were jailed or killed for what they wrote and many literary works were lost because of the political persecution of their authors, these two features were substantially used for ideological control by the state in two ways. First, they were used as a strategy to eliminate political enemies and consolidate the centralized control of thought. Second, by propagating this mentality, the state mobilized the masses in its political campaigns against unorthodox views and the persons who held such views. When either the views or the persons were labelled "evil," the masses would take their own initiative in resisting the "evil" influence by supervising and reporting the persons' actions or by refusing to print, sell, and read their literature.

HOMEOSTATIC

In an oral society, only words and happenings that bear meaning in the present context can be remembered. Other things have to be forgotten in order to reduce the mnemonic load, including the original context for the words and happenings. Through the mix of the past and the present, the past is reified and what has happened in the past is regarded as the established guidance for the future. When the masses believe that past experience is always valid, they will naturally accept anything that is cloaked with an aura of history.

This feature is distinct in the Chinese mentality and it is embedded in the language structure. The Chinese language does not have a verbal tense structure similar to that of Western languages. It has a number of adverbial words to indicate a difference in time, but they all indicate a relationship with the present time similar to the present perfect tense in English, as in, for example, "he has walked." The lack of the past tense supports a strong continuum from past happenings to present situations. Yu-lan Feng (1962) attributes this characteristic to the farmers' culture. Farmers have to rely on the weather for their harvest and the weather is often predictable through reference to the past. Consequently the past, present, and future are mixed in a cyclical manner.

This mentality is reflected in the traditional political philosophy. From the political and philosophical perspective, the past is always the model for the future. Confucius wanted to restore the social rituals of the Zhou Dynasty and believed they were the best model for state administration. In later dynasties, the restoration of the Zhou's rituals became a political mandate and social disorders were regarded as failures in ritual practice. The use of past rituals was a strategy to maintain the status quo. Confucius, in his editing of histories, deleted what he thought was unnecessary and elaborated what he felt was important. Then he moved the "edited" past into the present and used it for the legitimization of his political ideals and practice. This tradition was inherited by the political discourse of later dynasties. Imperial politicians frequently used past happenings and old sayings for the legitimization of their arguments.

Such an approach was used not only for convincing the emperor and their fellow politicians, but also for convincing the masses about the state policies. For instance, through the mix of past, present, and future, the masses were taught that good and tough times happened alternately and regularly, so that they should accept their present living conditions and regard them as a necessary part of the cyclical change. The mix of the past, present, and future limited the people's imagination within a desirable range. The constitution of the past was decided by the ruling elite through their standardization of histories, selection of canons, and title decisions for printing. The limitation of the "past" was like a political and moral fetter that made the "freedom of thinking and speech" an uncashable cheque. There were numerous occasions at which emperors advocated free speech for the general public, but as the speech had to be supported by the predetermined "past," no anti-traditional ideals or policies could be imagined and designed.

SITUATIONAL RATHER THAN ABSTRACT

This feature is related to the fifth feature, "close to the human lifeworld." People in an oral society tend to rely on real situations for the understanding of abstract things. Conversely, oral people tend to draw conceptual analogies from real situations and use them in other situations as standards. In Ong's opinion, this kind of mentality makes rational thinking difficult to develop. But on the contrary, if people were not expected to develop rational thinking, a situational use of language would be an effective enough mode of thought.

To use situational cases as symbols of eternal truth has a long tradition in China. Imperial educators believed that to parlay or develop individual cases into general truth made examples easy for students to understand. But their practice was somewhat different from that in an oral culture. In an oral culture, general rules are unknown and situational cases are treated as general rules. In other words, oral people tend to mistakenly use individual cases to invoke general rules because they cannot start their perspectives from an abstract level. For imperial Chinese educators, the explanation of the veracity of general rules was suppressed in favour of a limited explanation in terms of situational cases which were taken to be prototypical examples of the correct general rules.

When teaching youngsters the *Trimetrical Classic* and the *Twenty-four Ways of Filial Piety* (*Ershisi xiao*), Chinese educators would not explain in an abstract way why the precepts like "honour your father and mother" were fundamental for the constitution of a decent man. Instead, they let the youngsters read of Huang Xiang who knew how to warm the bed of his parents at the age of nine, Kong Rong who chose to have a small pear and give big pears to his elder brothers, and King Wen who, as a young crown prince, was loyal to his parents. These men later became important persons in history and brought magnificent symbolic glorification to their families. Thus, they personified the

general rules for climbing the social ladder. Students were not allowed to ask why parental respect and respect of elders were necessarily a precondition for an established man, nor were they allowed to question other rules. What they were expected to do was to practise the abstract concept of filial piety. This feature was also found in popular fiction. The masses were introduced to the general rules of the world by means of popular stories which they took as moral guidance for their actions. Innis has a passage describing how this oral feature was reflected in China:

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

The use of situational cases discouraged questioning the validity of the general rules and encouraged people to regard the political principle behind the rules as the absolute truth. When asked why they should think in a particular way, they would provide numerous examples from various classical and popular literature as their support. The notion of ideological manipulation through the selection and propagation of the situational cases never occurred to them.

POLITICAL NECESSITY FOR ORAL RESIDUES

When Ong proposes the thesis of orality, he is describing specific features of oral societies. But when we apply his paradigm to Chinese culture, we find that the nature and balance of oral and written discourse in this literate society were largely based on political design. Although strong oral residues caused science and technology to develop slowly, they generated political benefits in other respects. Taking imperial Chinese culture as an example, we see that although oral and written discourses (as different technologies) may indeed bring different social outcomes, the use of such technologies is not inevitable but is subject to human agency.

In imperial China oral features had a sociocultural foundation. For example, nearly 90% of the population were farmers and the many idiocratic written characters were difficult to master; hence, the low level of literacy. But we should also recognize that there was no ideological interest in reducing, and thus no mechanism to reduce, oral residues. It is reasonable to assume that the ruling elite could not see at that time the issue of oral and written traditions as two options which could lead to different social outcomes. However, as the use of oral residues was so effective for their rule, there was no social foreground for them to acquire the awareness of an alternative. Instead, they repeatedly reinforced these residues through the use to which writing and printing technologies were put and the manner in which writing (copying and commentary on ancient writings) and printing (woodblock) were organized. Through the reinforcement of oral residues in the education of the masses, they downgraded original thought and maintained their own leading positions in politics and culture by defining the mental process as a facility in applying a set of ideas to all manner of situations. The masses could rise in an armed resistance, but their oral-level thinking would not lead them to any new conceptualization of the social. They might win an empire on horseback, but they would continue to be ruled by those who laboured with their minds.

ENFORCEMENT OF RESTRICTED LITERACY

The maintenance of oral thinking was dependent upon the limited spread of literacy. Books were useful for uniform moral education, but an excessive use of books could possibly arouse scepticism and deviant imaginations. Chinese political philosophers had noticed this long ago. Confucius, for instance, made a doctrine that illiteracy was a virtue for women. Thus, the reinforcement of the oral mentality was accompanied by what Jack Goody (1987) calls "restricted literacy," meaning that the ability to read certain texts was restricted technically and culturally to only a fraction of the population.

In traditional Chinese society, it was believed that written words were the language of heaven and the knowledge of words meant a privileged position of personal communication with heaven. The birth of Chinese written language has it that Huangdi, a legendary saint king, ordered Cang Jie to create written words. When he did so, heaven cried because it could no longer keep any secret from human beings. Thus, the "mandate of heaven" passed to people who could read heavenly meanings. Smith describes the effect of written words on the illiterate:

> Chinese characters had a magical, mystical quality, presumably deriving from their ancient use as inscriptions on oracle bones or on bronze sacrificial vessels.. . . So venerated was the written word that anything with writing on it could not simply be thrown away but had to be ritually burned. (1983, p. 82)

As written language signified a special relationship with supernatural powers, people worshipped written words and subsequently the persons who knew the words. The idiocratic characters looked like mystic charms. They embodied profound meanings, but only experts could interpret them in the same way that only religious practitioners could interpret charms proper to their beliefs. For instance, the word "one" (*i*), with only one horizontal stroke, carried a variety of meanings: a number, a sequence, the thoroughness, the uniformity, the original air when the world was first created, the concept of dialectics, the other, a musical note, etc. Consequently, to learn a character was more than knowing which oral pronunciation it represented. It meant a whole body of semantic meanings embedded in the written character. As each word had different meanings defined by different sociocultural contexts, the acquisition of characters was a socialization process. The expert of characters had an understanding of all the semantic meanings associated with the words and thus he was culturally superior to those who could not read them.

The mystic power of characters made the concept of literacy vastly different from our understanding today. Functional literacy, for example, the ability to do bookkeeping or to read a letter, was not regarded as real literacy. Literacy meant being able to read and write in classical style. A literate person should be able to compose literary works with a philosophical use of words, elegant style, and with the purpose of the enrichment of elite culture. The two leading styles that a scholar must be very skillful at were regulated verse poetry and literary prose. Other styles, such as informal

narratives, miscellaneous notes, recorded tales, songs, folk lyrics, and informal letters, were much less important and minor accomplishments of a scholar. In order to be literate, a person had to start by learning a new language, an artificial and official dialect if you like, and subsequently acquire the associated meanings embodied in this language. A candidate aspiring for a civil position needed to be educated in this particular discourse. He was required to memorize all the texts of classics, all of which were in classical style, and use them to write out his own essays in the same style. Wakeman gives a timetable for the endeavour of passing the examinations from 5 to 36:

> A better-than-average apprenticeship for the examinations meant beginning to learn to write characters at the age of 5, memorizing the Four Books and the Five Classics by the age of 11, mastering poetry composition at age 12, and studying *bagu* essay style thereafter. If a student could maintain this rigorous schedule without flagging, he would make a first experimental try at passing the prefectural exams when he reached 15. These he almost invariably failed at the first sitting, but by dint of repetition, he might be able to bring honour to himself and his family by acquiring the *shengyuan* degree at the relatively tender age of 21. Most people actually did not pass the prefectural level until the age of 24, while the average *juren* was 31, and the average *jinshi* 36. (1975, p. 23)

Education in this discourse was not an attempt to promote the general ability to read; on the contrary, it was intended to draw a clear line between the elite and the populace and to increase the social distance between the ruling and the ruled. It excluded the participation of the majority and allowed the usage of an educated discourse only to the cultural elite. Thus, the concept of literacy consolidated the monopoly of knowledge.

CONCLUSION

With such a political and cultural orientation, writing and printing technologies created social limitations. They were not intended for communications in a general sense, but for restricted communications through particular social channels. They were not designed to promote the thinking ability of people in general, but to widen the sociocultural difference between people in dominant positions and those in subordinate positions. Innis points out the bias of Chinese printing:

> With a limited number of words, about 1,500, it was used with extraordinary skill to serve as a medium for a great diversity of spoken languages. But its complexity emphasized the importance of a learned class, the limited influence of public opinion, and the persistence of political and religious institutions. The importance of Confucianism and the classics and worship of the written word led to the invention of devices for accurate reproduction. (1964, p. 18)

If we add the impact of the oral features as discourse into Innis's paradigm, we see a complete political and cultural design controlled by the imperial ruling class for their domination of knowledge production. The majority of the people would never achieve literacy; this was an ideal situation for the promotion of an oral mentality. At the same time, an oral mentality further widened the cultural and political distance between the ruling and the ruled. Without any mastery of literate discourse, the subordinate were deprived of the privilege of using writing and printing technologies for their own political and cultural purposes. They operated within an oral discourse imposed by the elite, and hence their ability to generate new ideas was constrained. They worshipped words, worshipped books, and attained their Chinese dreams from storytelling, popular literature, and classical stories. But they never thought that they should take charge of their own consciousness, to construct their own meanings, and to achieve their own voices. Written text contributed to this lack: if people were imprisoned, the text generated by writing and printing technologies was one of the walls. Through the control over text, the emperor and the ruling elite monopolized knowledge production for the maintenance of social stability.

The impact of oral residues on society has to be examined in a broader political, cultural, and social context and in a specific time span. This is beyond the scope of a single paper. In my PhD dissertation (Ze, 1995), I outline from the perspective of book production in the Song dynasty the structure of the imperial educational system, the state book production system, the growth of literati culture, and the spread of popular culture. These areas provide an arena for a detailed examination of the role of orality in Chinese society. This article is not suggesting that orality was a single causal factor for China's static technological development. The whole social setting determined the existence of strong oral residues in Chinese literacy and, again, it was the same social setting that made China's technological development static in the imperial era. Nonetheless, the thesis of orality in the Chinese context can be a useful approach in understanding that culture and its patterns of communication. Further research is needed to explore the determining factors for the existence of oral residues and what impacts they may have on various aspects of Chinese society.

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