

Semiotics Turning Cross-Cultural

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Abstract

Semiotics, mostly as a theory of meaning, has a long history both in China and in the West. Although there had been little interaction between these two independent traditions before the 20th century, we can find some interesting similarities and differences in their semiotic thoughts that continue to influence how we conceptualize things today. Contemporary China, for example, is widely seen as being characterized by a Marxist epistemology which was imported from the West, but a close examination shows that this dominant theory of knowledge is as much a product of its own native tradition of ontological realism propounded by Ouyang Jian 17 centuries ago. With the advent of globalization of semiotics in the 20th century, Chinese and Western scholars are now able to take direct advantage of each other's theoretical resources which often result in new insights critical to the advancement of human knowledge. Two examples of such East-West interaction are Peirce's trichotomy of signs being appropriated for the classification of Chinese characters and Qian Zhongshu's "sides-and-handles theory of metaphor" serving as a critique of the bewildered and bewildering cognitive science championed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. It is in this sense that semiotics is becoming increasingly global or cross-cultural on top of its interdisciplinary trademark.

Keywords: *semiotics, cross-cultural studies, ontological realism, Peircean trichotomy, Chinese scripts, vehicular diversity and multivalency, cognitive theory of metaphor*

Since its beginning, semiotics as either "a general, quasi-formal theory" of representation (Innis, 1985, p. 1) or "a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life" (Saussure, 1989, p. 15) has always exhibited a tendency toward interdisciplinarity which is proudly claimed by semioticians as their intellectual trademark. Indeed, by asking such basic existential questions as "What does this mean?" "How?" and "Why?" and equipped with the discursive tradition initiated by Charles Sanders Peirce and Ferdinand

de Saussure at the turn of the 19th and 20th century, semiotic practitioners have moved freely among different fields of human investigation and often come away with valuable insights that would not have been achieved if disciplinary barriers had not been transcended in the first place. For this reason, semiotics is sometimes accused of being imperialistic in the sense that it pokes its nose into almost every kind of human business, but as long as there is a genuine need to offset the negative effect of over-specialization which characterizes much of our modern knowledge structure, semiotics is here to stay and occasionally prosper, be it forever on the margins of academic establishments. We say “occasionally prosper” because there have been in the past and will possibly be in the future brief historical periods when semiotics plays a greater-than-usual role in our efforts to understand the natural as well as social worlds. If the 11th World Congress of the International Association for Semiotic Studies held in Nanjing China in 2012 has any extra significance outside of its plenary speeches, small session presentations, and special topic round tables, it certainly signals a potential expansion of semiotics in the direction of, to quote the subtitle of the congress, “bridging different civilizations”.

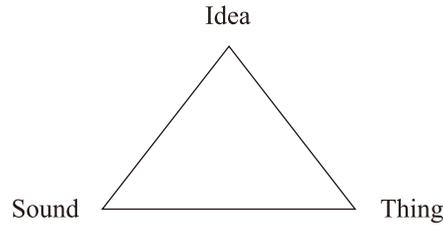
The main title of the congress—Global Semiotics—echoes Thomas Sebeok’s last book of the same name which was published by Indiana University Press in 2001. In that collection of 17 essays, Sebeok tries to show how semiotics has evolved from a language-centered enterprise to a global investigation of all forms of semiosis that take place in our living environment. But the word “global” has taken on a new layer of meaning when applied to an IASS congress which was held outside Europe and the US for the first time in its 43 years of institutional history. Eero Tarasti, president of the IASS at the time, thus explains the current globalization of semiotics in his preface to the congress program:

Never before in the history of mankind have so many people living on the globe had such extensive access to communication. Never before has the air been so full of messages, flying here and there. ... Thanks to the Internet, email, Facebook, blogging, Google, Wikipedia and more, not only does information move from one place to another without obstacles, but also a totally new sense of community has emerged. As the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* recently wrote, we are no longer just world citizens, but ‘netizens’. Bridging civilizations has become technologically an everyday reality. (<http://www.semio2012.com/>)

What we can add to Tarasti’s statement is that bridging different civilizations is not only a reality that contemporary semioticians have to cope with, but also a situation that they can greatly benefit from.

Take for example the Chinese and Western traditions of semiotic thoughts that had been independent of each other before the 20th century. Even though there were limited direct interactions between the two, we can still ascertain some important similarities in semiotic thinking that continue to influence what we do today. A good point of departure is Plato’s famous triadic model of the sign which can be visually represented as follows:

Figure 1



There are of course many other theorists in the history of Western thought who advocate the same semiotic triad, but Plato is unique in that he assumes the preexistence of pure and transcendental “Ideas” that cast their shadows on the shifting world of sensation in which we live. According to this ancient Greek philosopher, whatever object or thing we try to represent through sound or image is only an approximation to an Idea that exists by itself. Nevertheless, he does envision a possibility where a few educated (enlightened philosophers like himself perhaps) could free themselves from their underground, cave-like prison and come outside to see the sun, “not images of it in water or some alien place, but the sun itself, in its own place” (Cooper, 1997, p. 1134).

Weird as this conception of transcendental origin of meaning may sound to the modern ear, it has exerted a huge influence on most if not all subsequent Western theories of the sign. Alfred North Whitehead, a 20th century British philosopher, went so far as to say that “[t]he safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato” (1978, p. 39). For a modern version of Plato’s theory of meaning, we can turn to an extract from *Logical Investigations* written by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl, who was a contemporary of Whitehead:

As numbers—in the ideal sense that arithmetic presupposes—neither spring forth nor vanish with the act of enumeration, and as the endless number-series thus represents an objectively fixed set of objects, sharply delimited by an ideal law, which no one can either add to or take away from, so it is with the ideal unities of pure logic, with its concepts, propositions, truth, or in other words, with its meanings. They are an ideally closed set of general objects, to which being thought or being expressed are like contingent. There are therefore countless meanings which, in the common relational sense, are merely possible ones, since they are never expressed, and since they can, owing to the limits of man’s cognitive powers, never be expressed. (1982, p. 233)

For Husserl as for Plato, concepts or meanings are like the endless number series that exist by themselves in a transcendental realm; they are realized in material signs only when there is a need for communication with one another. Thus viewed, the signs we use in daily life corrupt rather than construct the meanings that are carried within them.

When we come to the Chinese side of the story, we find the same dominance of a similar if not identical ontological realism. Although classical theorizations of meaning

in China were not as systematic as their counterparts in the West, the basic framework of such a theory was already in place as early as Wei and Jin Dynasties (220-589), a historical period known for its penchant for metaphysical speculation. Ouyang Jian, a young theorist of the time, has the following to say on the issue of meaning:

Heaven says nothing yet the four seasons run their course. Sages say nothing yet their distinguishing wisdom exists. The difference between square and round has been evident before the concepts of shapes arise; and the antithesis of black versus white has been obvious before the names of color are given. Therefore names add nothing to realities and speech contributes nothing to [objective] principles. (Shi, 1996, p. 317)

In this brief extract, Ouyang Jian states in no uncertain terms that objective principles exist prior to material signs that are used to express them. For instance, the shapes of “square” and “circle” are already evident before they are named by sign users; the colors of “black” and “white” can be differentiated without the assistance of relevant terminology. Since signs add nothing to external realities, it can be said that they are mere instruments used for communication purposes. Like Plato, Ouyang Jian also allows for attaining truths as they are, but this can be achieved not because of the power of language but because of the wisdom of sages, thus leaving the door open for a super-subject who is capable of knowing the world-in-itself.

For most scholars, the mainstream Marxist theory of meaning in contemporary China is an import from the West via a detour through the former Soviet Union, but a careful comparison of the prevalent materialist epistemology with Ouyang Jian’s theory of meaning reveals that the former is as much a product of the native tradition of ontological realism that has dominated the Chinese mind throughout its history. Much like Ouyang Jian of 17 centuries ago, the great majority of contemporary Chinese theorists believe that there is an objective reality that lies outside of our sign systems and that such a reality can be known or grasped by humans through their scientific efforts. It should be noted that these theorists no longer simplistically resort to the omnipotence of a super-subject a la Plato or Ouyag Jian and, in trying to establish the correspondence between human knowledge and the objective reality, they either introduce a temporal factor into the act of cognition claiming that truth-knowing is a cumulative process of approximation or insert between subjective knowledge and the external reality a third category called “praxis” which supposedly is capable of checking the former against the latter. However, both remedial moves have turned out to be a mere postponement of rather than a final solution to the original problem, for at the end of the day one still needs a genius or a sage to decide whether or not he/she is moving closer to the ultimate truth or which practice result should be used as a measurement of success. It must be said that our purpose here in questioning the dominance of ontological realism in both China and the West is not to justify the usual swing back in the direction of agnosticism; what we wish to achieve instead is to draw attention to the historical and communal nature of truth that is attainable

only through language and other human sign systems.

If detecting parallels between Chinese and Western semiotic traditions can be enlightening, no less so are direct interactions between them made possible by the current trend of globalization. In the latter situation, scholars from both sides can take advantage of “foreign” theoretical resources which may occasionally provide a fresh perspective on problems besetting the native structure of knowledge for a long time. A good example of this is the Peircean trichotomy of signs which, when applied properly, can shed some new light on the classification of Chinese characters. From as early as the 2nd century AD, scholars have mostly been following Xu Shen’s *Explaining Graphs and Analyzing Characters* where Chinese characters are grouped into the following six categories:

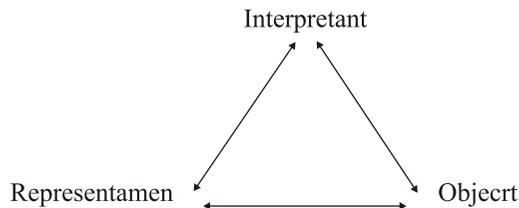
1. The first category of characters are 象形字 (pictographs), which physically resemble the objects they denote. The examples given by Xu himself are “日” (sun) and “月” (moon).
2. The second category of characters are 指事字 (ideographs), whose referents are not concrete objects that look similar to their corresponding graphs but abstract relations, which the characters hint at. Xu’s examples for this category include “上” (upper) and “下” (lower).
3. The third category of characters are 会意字 (associative compounds) and their meanings are derived from not one but two or more graphs, which combine to form a character. Two examples of this category are “明” (bright) and “採” (pick).
4. Characters of the fourth category are 形声字 (picto-phonetic complexes). Each consists of at least one semantic element and one phonetic element, the former being a rough indicator of meaning and the latter an approximation of pronunciation. We can see this division of labor in characters such as “江” (river) and “河” (stream).
5. By the fifth category of 转注字 (synonymous characters), Xu Shen meant those which are similar in meaning and therefore can be used to explain one another. One pair of such characters given by him is “老” (old) and “考” (advanced in age).
6. The final category consists of what Xu Shen called 转注字 (phonetic loans). These originally had no written forms and therefore had to be graphically realized by virtue of another character that sounded similar. The character for “phoenix”, for example, has been borrowed to graphically represent “wind”, which sounds more or less the same. Likewise, the character for “ax” has been borrowed to visualize “father”, which otherwise would have no written form.

Despite its sustained and wide spread application, Xu Shen’s method of categorization actually contains a number of moot points and, for that reason, has encountered several major challenges in recent times. Tang Lan (1981), for example, started using a “three-fold division” of Chinese characters in his *Introduction to the Study of Ancient Scripts* written in 1934-1935, thus reducing Xu’s categories by half: pictographs, associative compounds, and picto-phonetic complexes. What happened is that Tang eliminated Xu’s last two categories on the ground that they have nothing to do with the composition of Chinese characters and Xu’s second category (ideographs) was merged into that of pictographs

as one of the latter's subcategory. Several decades later, Qiu Xigui (1988) proposed a "new three-fold division" of Chinese characters in his *An Overview of Philology* where Tang's first and second categories were merged under the general category of "ideographs" and Xu's sixth category (phonetic loans) was uncannily restored. There have also been other lesser known attempts at classifying Chinese characters and some even propose a "new six-category approach". All these point to the fact that the state of Chinese character classification is fairly confusing and leaves much room for further improvement, hence the potential relevance of the Peircean theory of signs.

Like Plato (except for the assumed preexistence of Idea) and unlike Saussure who dismisses as minor the iconic elements in language, Peirce adopts a triadic model of the sign which lends itself particularly well to the study of Chinese characters. Here is how Peirce conceptualizes the composition of a sign:

Figure 2

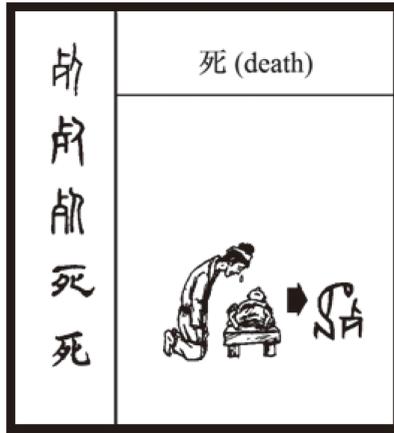


By "representamen" Peirce means the form or vehicle of a sign; by "interpretant" he means the meaning of a sign which is more or less equivalent to Saussure's "signified"; the third element "object" is left out of Saussure's dyadic model, but for Peirce, it connects the sign vehicle to the real world in which it operates. According to the American semiotician, there are three different relationships between the representamen and the object of a sign, thus giving rise to the following different types of signs:

the first is the diagrammatic sign or *icon*, which exhibits a similarity or analogy to the subject of discourse; the second is the *index*, which like a pronoun demonstrative or relative, forces the attention to the particular object intended without describing it; the third is the general name or description which signifies its object by means of an association of ideas or habitual connection between the name and the character signified. (Hoopes, 1991, p. 181)

Elsewhere, Peirce designates the third category of signs as "symbols" which of course should not be confused with our usual understanding of the term. For people who know Chinese well, its characters are actually symbols in the Peircean sense because the association of a written form with a particular meaning is the result of language habit rather than iconic reasoning. Take for example the character "死":

Figure 3



When educated Chinese (with the exception of etymologists) see this character today, it automatically brings up the concept of “death”, but when the character was first created, its readers had to go through a process of iconic reasoning which led them from “𣦵” (a person weeping over a corpse on a slat of wood) to the meaning of “termination of life”. Only in that situation can the character be called an “icon”. Over repeated use of the icon, however, the association between the form and the meaning gradually becomes habitual, thus turning it into a symbol.

Peirce’s concept of index is seldom mentioned by Chinese scholars in their discussions of character classification, but the use of indexical signs actually appeared quite frequently as an indispensable step in the understanding of Chinese scripts as is the case with the following two examples:

Figure 4

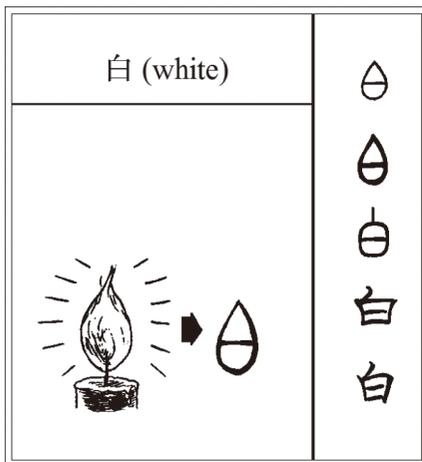
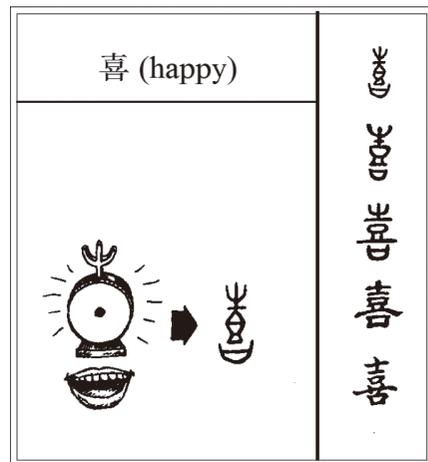


Figure 5



“Whiteness”, obviously, is very difficult to imitate graphically, but ancient Chinese knew that it was the kind of hue that immediately followed the lighting of a candle. Here

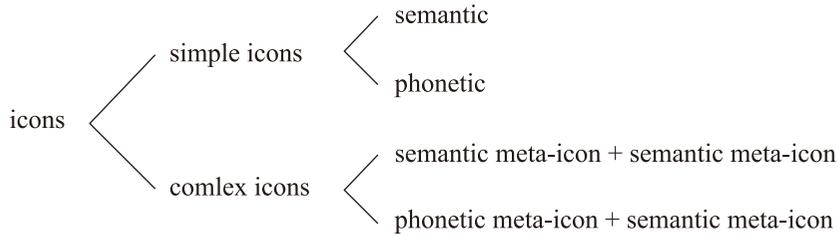
the latter is used as an indexical sign of the former on the basis of temporal contiguity between the two. In constructing the character as it is, the inventor of the character wanted his/her readers to perform two interpretive tasks. First, they have to identify a lighted candle through the presented icon; second, they make an indexical inference that will lead them from the lighting of a candle to the hue that it emits. Similarly, ancient Chinese had to go through two interpretive steps to arrive at the abstract meaning of “happiness”. They knew that people generally felt happy when they were celebrating a harvest or a marriage and drums and laughter were an important part of the festival. So by drawing an iconic sign of a sound-making drum and a laughing mouth, the sign maker was expecting his/her readers to deduce the presence of real people beating drums and laughing which then metonymically led to the entire atmosphere called “happiness”.

Since all readers had to go through the first interpretive step described above, early Chinese characters (that is, when they were first invented) were iconic signs in that sense. That is why Tang Lan could merge Xu Shen’s “ideographs” into a more general category of “pictographs” because they perform the same function of iconically reminding their readers of certain extra-linguistic objects or life situations which can be real as well as imaginary as long as they are recognized by the language community. Qiu Xigui went one step further by merging Tang’s “pictographs” and “associative compounds” into what he called “ideographs”, including in this general category everything that can lead from an iconic graph to an idea that is expressed wherewith. This is also fine because all the first three categories in Xu Shen’s system share the same feature of readers inducing meaning from graphs. What is problematic with his merging is that “associative compounds” and “picto-phonetic compounds” are structurally parallel to each other but this fact is not reflected in the new classification.

Structurally speaking, Chinese characters can be grouped into “simple icons” like “日” (sun) and “月” (moon) which are not further reducible and “complex icons” which consist of smaller recurrent components as in “仁” and “任”. The radical “亻” can be interpreted as standing for “人” which was used to represent “a person” in ancient China and is written as “人” in modern Chinese. As a “person-related” semantic component, it can be combined with another semantic component to form a complex character such as “仁” where “二” stands for “two” and the entire character means “two people”. Also worthy of notice is the fact that “亻” can be used as a phonetic icon of “人” when it is combined with a semantic component as in “任”. In this particular picto-phonetic complex, “壬” conveys the semantic meaning of “carrying loads on the two ends of a pole” and metaphorically “responsibility” while “亻” drops its semantic meaning, merely performing a duty of indicating that the character is pronounced like “人” (ren). In both cases, “亻” serves as an icon of an icon, so we call it “meta-icon”.

To reflect all these nuances of character formation, we could try a “two-fold” classification that is not only comprehensive but also straightforward:

Figure 6



As is clear in the above diagram, all Chinese characters were icons in origin, but structurally they can be divided into two major kinds, that is, simple icons and complex icons. Simple icons can be further divided into two subcategories: simple semantic icons and simple phonetic icons, thus including Xu Shen’s “synonymous characters” (allographs) and “phonetic loans” which were left out of many later accounts. As explained earlier, complex icons also consist of two subcategories: the first kind is made up by two or more semantic meta-icons while the second kind comprises one phonetic meta-icon and one semantic meta-icon.

What we have seen above is an example of appropriating Western semiotic resources to help solve Chinese intellectual problems. The same can be done the other way round, that is, to apply Chinese semiotic resources to the intellectual problems that have been troubling Western scholars in the past. A good example of the latter would be Qian Zhongshu’s theory of rhetoric which seems to possess greater explanatory power than the currently popular cognitive theory of metaphor in the West championed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson.

These two Americans have been credited for making metaphor study once again the center of humanistic scholarship. As early as 1977, a team of US scholars led by Howard Pollio conducted a research which revealed that an English speaker uses an average of 3000 creative metaphors per week (Danesi, 2004, p. 118). Lakoff and Johnson later highlighted this fact by claiming that metaphorical thinking is what we live by. However, as can be seen from the plural form of the word used in the title of their hugely influential book *Metaphors We Live By*, there is another dimension of meaning to their claim which on close examination turns out to be very problematic.

According to Lakoff and Johnson, the choices of metaphorical expression we make everyday are not random; rather, they are determined by a set of fundamental metaphors or “conceptual metaphors” that lie deep in our collective unconscious. For example, Americans often speak of “ARGUMENT” in relation to “WAR” as is shown below:

Your claims are *indefensible*.
 He *attacked every weak point* in my argument.
 His criticisms were *right on target*.
 I *demolished* his argument.
 I’ve never *won* an argument with him.

You disagree? Okay, *shoot!*

If you use that *strategy*, he will *wipe you out*.

He *shot down* all of my arguments. (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 4)

This is so because ARGUMENTS IS WAR is a conceptual metaphor that people live by in the Western culture. For a contrary example, Lakoff and Johnson advise their readers to imagine a culture where ARGUMENT is viewed as DANCE, the participants are seen as performers, and the goal is to perform in a balanced and aesthetically pleasing way. In such a culture, they contend, people would view ARGUMENT differently, experience it differently, carry it out differently, and talk about it differently.

However, this hypothesis of conceptual metaphors structuring how we speak is not borne out by the real situations of language use either in the West or elsewhere. In fact, the notion of DANCE is a complex entity that consists of a large number of semantic components and any one of them or any combination of them could be selected as relevant to a particular situation of verbal communication. Even within the Western culture, there are many people who view DANCE as a corrupt form of entertainment or at least an unproductive way of spending one's time. It is hard to imagine these people linking DANCE to the urgent and forceful manner in which an argument should be conducted. Technically speaking, DANCE can also be subdivided into many types, each with its own unique qualities and oftentimes contrary to those in another category. Take Chinese court dance for example, which tends to be slow, soft, and graceful, not everybody can see the logical connection between this form of art and the generally heated nature of arguing.

Also unsatisfactory is Lakoff and Johnson's narrow interpretation of the notion of ARGUMENT, which is the topic of their conceptual metaphor above. Likewise, some people may see arguing as a futile activity, thus possibly comparing it to punching the air with one's fist. Others may see arguing as performing on stage, thus possibly comparing the parties involved to performers putting on a show. Still others may see arguing as playing basketball where one side attacks better and the other side defends better. This list of potential metaphorical vehicles could expand almost indefinitely because any feature relating to our activity of arguing can be highlighted for discussion in a particular situation.

For a different perspective on this issue, we can turn to the Chinese scholar Qian Zhongshu who among other things offers great insights into the polysemic nature of both the topic and vehicle of metaphor. Unlike Lakoff and Johnson, Qian does not stop at the general formula of "x IS y"; instead, he describes metaphor as "something that has "handles" and "sides". Here is what he has to say:

Metaphors may have two handles, but they also have several sides. Now, a certain thing may be one, but its qualities and capabilities are likely to be many. Consequently, the one thing is not restricted to one use or one effect. Those who employ a figure of speech may do so with different aspects in mind or with a different feature in view, so that even when the denotatum

is the same the significatum will vary. That is why a single image may fulfill several different purposes or meanings even while it remains the same. (Egan, 1998, p. 125)

By “handles of metaphor”, Qian Zhongshu means different political and aesthetic inclinations of the metaphor user which allows a particular thing or situation to be illuminated through multiple metaphorical vehicles. For example, marriage can be described as restricting an individual’s freedom by our connecting it with a prison-house; or it could be described as giving one a sense of protection by our linking it with a harbor. There are of course many other ways of metaphorizing marriage, resulting in what is technically known in metaphor studies as vehicular diversity. By “sides of metaphor” Qian Zhongshu means the multiple use of the same lexical item to refer to different topics, resulting in what is technically called vehicular multivalency. Qian’s own examples regarding vehicular multivalency are related to the image of the moon which has multiple qualities alongside each other within the same entity. /Moon-eyes/ (月眼) and /moon-face/ (月面) are two common Chinese expressions used to describe a person’s appearance, and each appropriates one “side” or aspect of the moon: the former is based on the brightness of the celestial being and the latter on its round shape. But there are other attributes which can be and have been attributed to the moon. For instance, it can be interpreted (at least in Chinese culture) as containing the element of *yin* which is related to the female sex. Thus we have two poetic lines from Chen Ziyou’s (661-702) series: “A new moon emerges from the western sea / Replacing the *yang* force at it rises” which is said to be a veiled reference to Empress Wu Zetian. Here, Qian Zhongshu argues, the poet cannot be thinking about roundness or brightness because it would be absurd to imagine the ruthless Wu Zetian as having a beaming face which shines on her subjects. These examples reveal that “a single thing may be viewed from different perspectives and will appear differently in each. When a writer uses a metaphor, he takes what he wants from it” (Egan, 1998, p. 127).

This and two other cases discussed earlier clearly demonstrate that we can reap great benefits from cross-cultural semiotic studies made possible by the globalization of semiotics. By comparing and contrasting different traditions of semiotic thought, we can learn more not only about each other and but also about our physical and intellectual inclinations as species beings. On the other hand, as the world shrinks, as the number of bilingual people grows, and as cultural exchanges between various countries become more frequent, direct interactions between scholars of different backgrounds also become possible so that we now confront each other’s problems. In the latter situation, a “foreign” perspective often turns out to be an eye-opener, a breath of fresh air, a difference maker—something that can free the hitherto intellectual slaves from their dark prison so that they can come out of their own system and see the real sun outside as was envisioned by Plato over two thousand years ago. Thus, on top of its traditional trademark of being an interdisciplinary enterprise, semiotics is becoming increasingly intercultural or cross-cultural both in its vision and mission.

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