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The Historic Mission of Chinese Semiotic Scholars

Abstract: Semiotics as a science of signs originated from Europe and America where France, the USA and Russia are acknowledged as the three epicenters for semiotics studies. Comparatively, in China, the conscious study of semiotics as an independent discipline started much later; yet, the traditional Chinese culture is imbued with bountiful semiotic resources. In response to the prospects of semiotics studies around the globe, how should China, with its deep-rooted traditional culture and unique semiotic resources, integrate itself with the world as a powerhouse in semiotics studies? How can it gain its access to the academic discourse of semiotics? What should it do to establish a school of semiotics studies featuring Chinese characteristics and to contribute to the world's semiotics studies? These questions, which still remain to be answered, concern not only the process and progress of semiotics studies in China but the historic mission of Chinese semiotics as well. The paper highlights 12 semiotic spheres unique to China and six aspects of the academic philosophy of Chinese semiotics, hereby calling for long-term and sustained efforts to advance the progress of semiotics studies in China. And it is the authors' belief that China's bountiful semiotic resources and relevant research achievements will be a contribution to the world's semiotics studies.

Keywords: academic philosophy; Chinese semiotics; semiotic resources; semiotic spheres

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1 Introduction

Semiotics, while commonly known as the “science of signs,” is academically recognized as a science of signs and their signification, in which signs and meaning-making are the two major objects of study.

Whereas the Chinese onomatology and *I Ching* ('Book of changes') have embraced semiotic elements since the prehistoric period, semiotics is acknowledged, from a disciplinary perspective, as a branch of learning in European and American scholarship. In his seminal book, *Course in general linguistics* (1916), Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure put forward the concept of semiology, and almost at the same time, Charles Sanders Peirce, American pragmatist philosopher, initiated his studies of semiotics with his research on Kant's *Critique of pure reason*. In 1964, *Elements of semiology* by French literary critic Roland Barthes was published, marking the birth of semiotics as a science.

2 An overview of semiotics studies in China

The world's semiotics community has long acknowledged France, the USA, and Russia as the three epicenters for semiotics studies. France is known as the cradle of semiotics studies, where the École de Paris represented by Roland Barthes and A. J. Greimas contributed significantly to the origin and development of semiotics, and its approaches to semiotics feature a clear-cut linguistic orientation, a strong literary inclination, as well as an interdisciplinary and pragmatic tendency. American semiotics originated from C. S. Peirce's studies of signs and C. W. Morris's behaviorist and classical linguistic studies, and its representative approaches include, among others, R. Carnap's logical empiricism, G. H. Mead's sociology, and J. B. Watson's behaviorist psychology, E. Cassirer's symbolism, R. Jakobson's linguistic semiotics-oriented poetics, as well as T. A. Sebeok's biological semiotics-oriented global semiotics. Semiotics studies in Russia focuses on an in-depth investigation of the complex phenomenon of sign/text in the semiosphere of language, literature, architecture, painting, music, film, drama, culture, history, etc., while combining historic studies and actual studies, and general theoretical studies and specific applied studies, bringing forth different branches of semiotics studies including formalism, functionalism, and the Tartu-Moscow school; Russian semiotics theorists have identified numerous rules that involve the production, interpretation, and function of a sign/text with regard to social ideology, national culture, humanistic spirit, etc.

Semiotics studies in China started with an article, "An outline of semiotics" by Yuanren Zhao, which was published in 1926 in *Science*, a Shanghai-based journal dedicated to sciences, and thus drawing little attention from the liberal arts community at the time. 1963 saw a paper, "About semiotics" by Kemu Jin, published in *Reading*, a Beijing-based journal dedicated to book reviews on

culture and ideology, and in 1988, the “Beijing-Tianjin Region Symposium on Semiotics” was held in Beijing – two milestones marking China’s endeavors in semiotics studies as an independent discipline. Along with the country’s hyper-growth in the past three decades, China has witnessed fruitful achievements in semiotics studies:

1980–1989, if taken as the first decade of China’s semiotics studies, saw some 2,000 papers on semiotics published, and 1990–1999, the second decade, some 6,000, with a year-on-year increase; the year 2010, which marked the end of the third decade (2000–2010), saw some 1,000 papers on semiotics and some 10,000 which had such words as “semiotics” or “sign” in their titles. That is to say, now in China, roughly 3 papers concerning semiotics and 30 concerning linguistic signs come out per day. (Yiheng Zhao 2012)

All this indicates that semiotics is flourishing to become a popularly recognized branch of learning in China, and semiotics studies in China has aroused the attention of the world’s semiotics community.

In response to the prospects of semiotics studies around the world, how should China, with its deep-rooted traditional culture and unique semiotic resources, integrate itself with the world as a powerhouse in semiotics studies? How can it gain its access to the academic discourse of semiotics? What should it do to establish a school of semiotics studies featuring Chinese characteristics and to contribute to the world’s semiotics studies? These questions, which concern not only the process and progress of semiotics studies in China, but the historic mission of Chinese semiotics as well, still remain to be answered. And we hold that, generally, these questions can be approached from two perspectives – the semiotic spheres and the academic philosophy of Chinese semiotics.

3 The semiotic spheres of Chinese semiotics

3.1 *I Ching* semiotics

From the *Ho Tu* (‘The river map’) and the *Lo Shu* (‘The Luo scroll’), two legendary diagrams that represent the oldest Chinese mathematical and divinatory traditions, to the world-renowned *I Ching*, or *Book of changes* in the Western Zhou Period (c. 1000–750 BC) and especially the hierarchal spectrum of signs in this divination text, which embodies the ideas of image semiotics,

China's *I Ching* divination constitutes in its own right a complete history of *I Ching* semiotics.

3.2 Onomatological semiotics

Chinese onomatology is a unique ancient theory that studies the significance of proper names. The “rectification of names” advocated by Confucius and Mencius, the distinguishing between “name and nature” and between “name and meaning” in Taoist tradition, the hypotheses of “name and nature” and “name and symbol” in Mohist classics, and the philosophy of rituals of the Legalist School of Thought all fall into the category of onomatological semiotics.

3.3 Exegetic semiotics

While semiotics is generally accepted as a science of signs and meaning-making, Chinese exegetics, which originated in the Spring and Autumn Period (770–476 BC), thrived in the East and West Han Dynasties (202 BC–220 AD), transformed itself in the Northern and Southern Song Dynasties (960–1279), and reached its prime in the Qing Dynasty (1636–1912) and Modern Times (1840–1949), is recognized as a science of signs and meaning-making with particular Chinese styles and characteristics. The theory of meaning in Chinese exegetics, which attempts to explain the meaning of a word by analyzing its form or sound, or simply with another word or a string of words, constitutes a typical semiotic model that represents relations of signification.

3.4 Chinese-character semiotics

The Chinese character is the basic constituent unit of Chinese cultural ideology. The “analytical approach” to Chinese characters, represented by *Suowen Jiezi* (‘Explaining graphs and analyzing characters’), a dictionary of Chinese characters compiled by Xu Shen, a Han Dynasty scholar, and centered on *Liu Shu* (‘The six categories of Chinese characters’), a categorization method prevailing in the Han Dynasty, is of supreme importance both in the Chinese cultural spectrum and in the world’s history of semiotics as well. Nowadays, the unique semiotic way of thinking and philosophical world outlook embodied in Chinese characters, serving as important ideological resources for rethinking and criticizing Western logocentrism, have aroused great attention of the

Western academic community, and it is high time for Chinese-character semiotics to gain its footing on the world's academic stage.

3.5 Wenxin Diaolong semiotics

Wenxin Diaolong ('The literary mind and the carving of dragons') is China's first work of aesthetics and first comprehensive work of literary criticism. Its author, Liu Xie, gave a systematic "semiotic" investigation of Chinese literature from the Pre-Qin Times (c. 2100–221 BC) to the Southern Dynasties (420–589), or in other words, established a semiotic system of discourse in ancient literary criticism. The semiotic features of *Wenxin Diaolong* are mainly represented by the hierarchies of the overall narrative structure and the "meaning interpretation" of categorized description. The book is clearly laid out and rich in cultural signs, indicating the influence of an era of literary self-awareness and symbolizing the identity of hermeneutic literature (Jinsong Zhang 2012).

3.6 Buddhist-philosophy semiotics

This mainly refers to *Yin-min* (Hetuvidya) and *Wei-shih* (Vijnanavada). *Yin-min*, originating from ancient India's elocution practice, is a term in Buddhist logic, which consists of 16 doctrines regarding understanding and reasoning; *Wei-shih*, or the Consciousness-Only School of Chinese Buddhism, finds its origin from Indian Buddhism, and the "consciousness-only" ideas are recognized as the fundamental theories of *Yogacara*, a school of Indian Mahayana Buddhism. *Yin-min* and *Wei-shih*, both focusing on the study of religious practice though, shed light on language and signs and claim that they are related to human cognitive behavior and even produce the human world of meaning.

3.7 Divination-based semiotics

The ancient Chinese art of divination remains an exceptionally unique and charismatic part of Chinese culture. Chinese divination is dedicated to explaining universal phenomena, forecasting events, telling one's fortune, or determining auspicious sites. It encompasses many different forms such as *Dun Jia* and *Liu Ren*, the two highest forms, *Mei Hua* and *Liu Yao*, the two most accessible forms, as well as *Feng Shui*, *Gui Bu*, and *Zi Wei*, each having a system of signs to signify meaning.

3.8 Allusion-based semiotics

Chinese culture embraces more ancient than modern traditions, and writers are inclined to cite ancient scholars and anecdotes to make their arguments more convincing. Compared with any other cultural or literary phenomenon, allusion plays a critical role in ancient Chinese literature. And we might even say that Chinese linguistics is derived and developed from Chinese allusions. Ancient Chinese authors would use allusions with a view to expressing the most profound meanings in the fewest words possible – a principle that coincides with semiotics and highlights image, symbol, and, more importantly, intertextuality.

3.9 Classical-literature semiotics

Unlike modern Chinese literature, whose major concepts trace their origins from Europe and America, classical Chinese literature, as the quintessence of Chinese culture, covers all cultural and educational philosophies of Confucianism. It is, moreover, a system of signs that represent concepts different from those of European and American culture and feature distinctive social, political, cultural, and academic connotations. *Shih Chi*, or *Records of the Grand Historian*, *Tang Poems*, *Song Lyrics*, *Yuan Songs*, *A dream of red mansions*, etc. are all recognized as treasured resources for the world's literary semiotics.

3.10 Artistic semiotics

Chinese art (painting, calligraphy, music, traditional opera, etc.) attaches great importance to the aesthetics of structure and form and embodies a distinctive and invariable Chinese spirit. After a 3,000-year history, it has been categorized with such terms as “Chinese expressionistic art,” “Chinese style art,” “Chinese subjectivist art,” “Chinese natural and spiritual art,” etc., and emerged as a semiotic system with unique Chinese characteristics. The semiotic nature of Chinese art is manifested by a structuralist tendency that embraces fixed forms and genres of text which pursue artist wholeness, a formalist tendency that ignores structural narrativity while strongly upholding formalist aesthetics, a symbolist tendency that attempts to pursue the “metaphysical” through imaginative symbols, as well as an isomorphic ideographic tendency which

believes that poetry is the root of Chinese culture, and all forms of Chinese art try to express the relation of signification through poetry (Youzheng Li 1995).

3.11 Phonological semiotics

Old Chinese phonology is the study of the systems of sound, rhyme and tune in the ancient Chinese language of different periods. Different from modern Chinese phonetics, it focuses largely on the analysis of the interrelations between different phonetic phenomena before the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368), which are of distinctive national characteristics. Representative works in this area include *Shih Ching, or The book of songs* (c.1100–771BC), *Qie Yun, or The dictionary of rhymes* (601), *Zhongyuan Yinyun, or Phonology of the Central Plains* (1324), etc. Old Chinese phonology, which is loaded with such semiotic elements as layer, icon, sign, and signification, turns out to be a wealth of treasure awaiting exploration.

3.12 Human semiotics

Chinese culture is best known for its long-standing history and profound essence. Throughout Chinese history, which endorses the “unity of heaven and earth,” colored potteries and oracle characters, as well as carvings and rock paintings found across the Central Plains area, all remain as semiotic mysteries; hordes of sign objects of the ancestors have been discovered at the *Banpo* Neolithic Village, the ruins of the *Dawenkou* Culture, the *Wei-Jin* Tombs at the *Jiayuguan* Pass of the Great Wall, the *Duhuang Mogao* Grottoes, the *Maijishan* Grottoes, the *Longmen* Grottoes, etc. All this indicates the ever-betterment of humans as signs and the infinite richness of the semiotic world.

4 The academic philosophy of Chinese semiotics

We have listed above 12 semiotic spheres unique to China, which turn out to be the greatest wealth of Chinese semiotics. We are thus fully convinced that “the awakening of Chinese semiotics is gaining a high profile in the academic research communities” (Yiheng Zhao 2012). Then what should we do to seize the opportunities and deliver the responsibilities endowed upon us? That is the discussion in the remainder of the paper.

4.1 An attitude of reference and innovation

Semiotics as a discipline has remained, since its founding, a privileged favor of the European and American academia, and it was not until the past 30 or 40 years that Chinese scholars have been comprehensively involved in the studies of semiotics. While introducing and learning from Europe and America is undeniably necessary, what we need to do is hold a correct attitude. Firstly, “the theoretical argument that ‘West is West and East is East’ is no longer justifiable” (Youzheng Li 2004). In the globalized era, human knowledge of all sorts should be re-sorted and reoriented under a unified academic framework. Secondly, we should make innovations while taking reference from Europe and America to address the problems of Chinese semiotics with cutting-edge semiotic theories and facilitate the localization of semiotics in China. Thirdly, we should devote more efforts to exploring the semiotic resources deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture and be confident in establishing semiotic theories with Chinese characteristics.

4.2 A call for dialogue and argument

It has long been a fact that Chinese scholars address issues of Chinese semiotics by referring to either Saussure’s or Pierce’s theories or taking either of these theories as absolute truth; meanwhile, European & American semiotics¹ and traditional Chinese semiotics each tell their own stories. How this dilemma can be resolved by initiating a dialogue between European and American semiotics on the one hand and Chinese semiotics on the other so that China’s own semiotic theories can be constructed and the essence of traditional Chinese semiotics can be shared by the world’s semiotics community has become a question facing the Chinese semiotics community. To gain a footing in the world’s semiotics community, Chinese semiotics calls for dialogue and argument: firstly, “the Chinese academic tradition is not only an important ‘otherness’ in but also a necessary interlocutor and supplement of the European and American scholarship” (Youzheng Li 2004); secondly, an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural research area, Chinese semiotics should meet with modern semiotics in its own and an all-round way to establish its say and earn its independence; thirdly, the emergence of Chinese semiotics “contributes itself to

¹ "European & American semiotics" is written in this form to underline that it is a single category.

both the advancement of humanities studies in China and the self-reflection and readjustment of European & American semiotics” (Youzheng Li 2004).

4.3 An eclectic approach to Chinese and European & American Semiotics

Modern semiotics, despite its various schools, is acknowledged as having two paradigms – the Saussurean tradition and the Peircean tradition. The former, which is close to the humanistic trends in modern philosophy and based on Kant’s transcendental philosophy and structuralist thoughts, features a humanistic tendency and social interchangeability, and focuses on signification and exchange; the latter, which is close to the trends of scientism in modern philosophy and based on pragmatic philosophy, the theory of categories and logic, features scientism, empiricism, bio-behaviorism, cognitivity, and interactivity, and focuses on cognition and thinking (Hong Guo 2008). Toward the different semiotic theories and, in particular, the two major schools of semiotics, Chinese scholars tend to be hesitant in deciding which side to take or to take one extreme side or the other, which may hamper Chinese semiotics from establishing itself independently.

We argue that the particularities of Chinese culture call for an eclectic approach to Chinese and European & American semiotics, a third option for the Chinese scholars, by which the subjective dignity and the academic philosophy of Chinese semiotics can be revealed. The eclectic approach is not simply a compromise or synthesis of the two schools of thought; rather, it is a concept aiming at highlighting traditional Chinese culture while drawing on the essence of European and American traditions. At the core of this concept are these key elements: (1) ontologically, the motivation of a sign should be prioritized while conventionality should also be taken into account; (2) regarding the subject-object relations of the sign, how the subject interprets and creates the object should be addressed based on the “motivation” of a sign; (3) in terms of research methodology, the principle of rhetorical rationality and practical rationality should be followed to avoid the impulse of ideological criticism and truth-seeking and focus on the creation and interpretation of sign objects; (4) a theory of linguistic forms and true value logical pragmatism, or in other words, formalization plus materialization, should be advocated; (5) a way of thinking featuring quasi-signs and a principle of imagery should be encouraged.

4.4 An exploration of the semiotization of meaning

Since Ernst Cassirer, European and American scholars have seen a sign as something that has a life of its own and even called semiotics a science of life, which is mainly attributed to the vigor and vitality of meaning. Semiotics is, in itself, a science of meaning, and meaning which is born out of the cognitive abilities of human beings is subject to growth and decay. The process of semiotization is, so to speak, a process through which meaning is endowed with life. And to examine Chinese semiotics from the perspective of semiotization can help rectify deviations in as timely a way as possible. “Semiotics is seldom applied to China’s academic practices, and once it is, it tends to be speculative. Some alleged theoretical works on semiotics tend to be complacent about being able to identify signs in some work or phenomenon. However, we should know that the identification of signs does not indicate the end of semiotic practices but rather the beginning of such practices. It is the process of semiotization that marks the central concern of semiotics; otherwise semiotics will degrade to a ‘science of semiotic classification’” (Yiwei Xue 1996).

4.5 An inclusive embrace of “sign”

Previous studies of semiotics focus on primarily intentional signs (e.g. languages and artificial signs) while neglecting numerous unintentional signs (e.g. natural marks and object signs). In traditional Chinese semiotics, intentional signs remain the major object of study while divinations, relics, and object signs, not rarely seen and with distinctive features, fail to arouse the attention of the academia. We therefore propose an inclusive embrace of “sign” for China’s semiotics studies, the thrust of which is that attention should be paid to both intentional and unintentional, non-systematic signs, to both natural and artificial linguistic signs and non-linguistic signs, and to both formalized and materialized study of signs. We argue that this will be conducive to the incorporation of the resources of traditional Chinese semiotics into the world’s stock of semiotic resources, as well as to highlighting the features of semiotics studies in China.

4.6 A unique mode of signification

The relation between the sign and the object, between the signifier and the signified, and between expression and content is generally referred to as “signification” through which people can examine the subjective and objective worlds by means of signs, which constitute modes of signification. Different semiotics theories adopt different modes of signification, which lead to different types of semiotic systems.

Traditional Chinese semiotics boasts a unique mode of signification – an integration of a way of thinking featuring quasi-signs and a principle of imagery. And the world of generic signs this mode of signification reflects can transcend the boundaries between the subject and the object, the sign and the object, the linguistic sign and the non-linguistic sign, motivation and arbitrariness, reference and implication, system and process, as well as entity and form, establishing itself in the world’s semiotics community and demonstrating the magnificence of Chinese semiotics.

5 Conclusion

Chinese semiotics boasts a long-standing history and a rich variety of resources, and it is now witnessing burgeoning research activities and proliferating research publications. However, more urgent efforts are still required, in light of the existing constraints, to enhance the influence and to elevate the status of semiotics studies in China. It is our belief that by advancing its progress based on the 12 theoretical spheres and six aspects of the academic philosophy mentioned in this paper, Chinese semiotics will embrace a brilliant future and China’s bountiful semiotic resources and relevant research achievements will be a contribution to the world’s semiotics studies.

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Bionotes

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