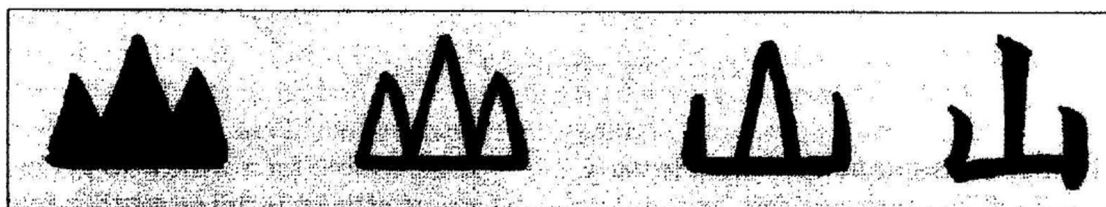


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PHILOSOPHY

Eastern Language Games
A philosophical analysis from Wittgenstein's point of view
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The Chinese character for mountain (san or yama in Japanese) evolved from a sketch of a group of three mountains. Chinese characters serve as virtual empirical propositions, which, according to Wittgenstein, should work as certainties in language.

CHINESE is a typical example of what Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) referred to as a language game. Because the Chinese language has played an instrumental role in Eastern philosophy, Eastern philosophy does not pose the questions Western philosophy does. In the context of Western logic, Wittgenstein tried to show that no philosophical problems exist. In the East, however, his ideas were embodied long before Western thought originated with the Greeks.

We call Chinese a typical language game because its logic does not function as logic does in Western languages, and because Chinese characters virtually serve as empirical propositions, which Wittgenstein says should work as certainties in a language. For these two reasons, the Chinese language long prevented East Asians from posing philosophical questions like those of Western philosophers.

Western logic is not easily applicable to East Asian languages - Chinese, Korean and Japanese - with their dominant use of Chinese characters, or ideas originally represented by Chinese characters. Therefore, if Chinese has the typical features of a Wittgensteinian language game, East Asian languages can help prove Wittgenstein's assertions that

philosophical problems will disappear if we investigate our "illogical" languages as language games.

Wittgenstein's assertion is one that denies all the developments of modern Western philosophy. Of course, this assertion is difficult for Westerners, accustomed to logical thinking, to accept. As Western languages are based on rules of grammar, Western philosophers working in those languages had no choice but to seek solutions to philosophical problems within logical frameworks.

Here we must note that Wittgenstein, too, conceived his ideas in Western languages (German, English). Therefore, it can be argued that Wittgenstein's difficulty in proving his ideas arises from an obligation to demonstrate the illogicality of language within the framework of Western languages. If what he says is truly that which would end all philosophical problems, as long as his philosophy -or non-philosophy- is argued in the framework of Western languages, it is unlikely that his aim was ever fulfilled.

Thus, it is important to consider what Wittgenstein says from a standpoint other than that of Western philosophy. We need to determine how his ideas can be related to Eastern philosophy, which was expounded in a different type of language.

Of course, Wittgenstein's ideas have been introduced to East Asia through translation. As a result, certain East Asian commentators have detected similarities between his ideas and Zen Buddhism. However, we need to investigate how his ideas can be applied to Eastern thought. This requires that we analyze the function of East Asian languages themselves, rather than attempt to consider Eastern philosophy independent of language. Then all philosophical problems, both in the West and the East, might, as Wittgenstein says, disappear.

Wittgenstein once thought that a language constructed in logic corresponded to reality. Therefore, he concluded, final solutions to all philosophical problems can be found through logical analysis of how language works in relation to reality.

Later, Wittgenstein introduced the idea of a language game. He tried to show that a language in which we participate as game players is not logical. In other words, a language consists of not only logical elements but also elements unrelated to reality.

This view, which he presented in his posthumously published work *Philosophical Investigations* (PI), contrasted sharply with his early thought.

However, his investigations went a step further: If all the elements in a language game are not logically guaranteed, the inevitable conclusion is that a language game itself is ground- less. Toward the end of his life, therefore, Wittgenstein struggled to find certainties in that groundless language game. He referred to such certainties as empirical propositions, but could not explain what these actually were.

Bearing in mind the evolution of Wittgenstein's thinking, we will explain how analysis of the Chinese language can present a fresh understanding of his ideas.

First of all, we have to consider one of the biggest problems Wittgenstein wrestled with in PI owing to the introduction of the idea of a language game. This problem is that when we are engaged in a language game, because language is by nature groundless, we encounter a paradox:

"No course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule."(PI 201-1)

In other words, there are no rules in a groundless language itself by which we can determine any course of action but rather when we take action, any kind of rules can be created in the language to fit the action.

Chinese is known as a language in which there is no "grammar" in the Western sense of the word. The meaning of a Chinese sentence is determined by the order of the words. Chinese is a language game where the composition of a sentence is left to the indeterminacy intrinsic to the language. However, the meaning in Chinese is determined within the sentence itself. We can argue that Chinese is a language that typically presents Wittgenstein's paradox.

The fact that there is no "grammar" means that it is difficult to establish logic "within the language," because a grammar serves as the base upon which logic is built in a language. And, of course, vertical logic is the basis of all Western ideas. We cannot say there is no logic in Chinese, but it is certain that the logic of Chinese is different from that of Western languages.

Secondly, in another posthumously published work, *On Certainty* (OC), Wittgenstein tried to search for the foundation of such a groundless language game. We can also argue that Chinese is exactly what Wittgenstein sought - a groundless language game with certainties, however contradictory that may sound. How can that be so when we have just said there is groundless nature in Chinese?

Let's return to Wittgenstein's early thinking. In his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (TLP) Wittgenstein argued as follows:

The world consists of the totality of facts. A proposition corresponds to a fact. So whether a fact is true or not depends on whether a proposition is true or not. The proposition is made up of names, and the names correspond to objects in the world. This is called "picture theory," where the language is a picture of reality in a logical form.

We understand, to establish the argument of TLP that correspondence between names and objects is required.

Although he discarded this earlier theory with the introduction of the idea of a language game in his later thinking, in order to resolve the "contradiction" in OC, Wittgenstein needed to discover some empirical propositions, which he believed could serve as certainties in a language game.

Here we should point out that to have empirical propositions, there must be correspondence between names and objects. Without this correspondence, it seems impossible to have even empirical propositions.

In Western languages, we cannot question if the word "sun" corresponds to the sun as the celestial body. If the sun does not mean the luminous celestial body around which the earth revolves, the whole notion of language disintegrates. Of course, the notion of the sun as a celestial body may be explained by a variety of different expressions without the use of the word "sun." However, the meaning of the word "sun" itself cannot be in doubt. The "sun" must be that sun we all know. This shows that we cannot avoid a sort of tautology in Western languages because of the use of alphabetic characters.

However, in the case of basic Chinese characters, rather than seeking the correspondence between words and objects, the meanings of objects themselves are "internalized" in words. In that sense, we don't have to say that there is "picture" correspondence between words and objects. As pictographs, basic Chinese characters are literally pictures of objects, such as mountains or rivers. Basic objects are "internalized" or we can say "correspondence" itself is 'internalized.'" As for the 'sun' we can accept the shape of the Chinese character "日" that "literally" represents the celestial body because we know the shape is an exact picture of what we all see with our own eyes.

Therefore, basic Chinese characters work as "certainties" in the Chinese language game. Chinese characters may shed new light on Wittgenstein's fundamental questions posed by a language game because, if people doubt the existence of what basic Chinese characters represent, it renders their communication through the language game virtually impossible.

In other words, the Chinese language proves the assertion that Wittgenstein made in TLP. Thus we can refer to Chinese as the embodiment of what Wittgenstein tried to explain - a groundless language game with a picture theory that serves as certainty.

Had Wittgenstein paid attention to Chinese characters, his thinking might have been different.

If Chinese is actually the language that depicts what Wittgenstein wanted to say, it is important to investigate how philosophical problems have been addressed in the East.

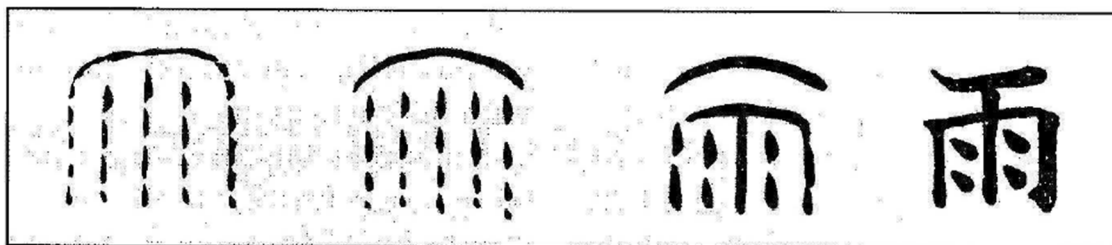
Western philosophy has been expressed in Western languages belonging to the Indo-European language family. In the case of Western philosophy, if Wittgenstein is correct, all philosophical problems might be eliminated because philosophical concepts are clearly specified in the Western languages.

On the other hand, Eastern philosophy has developed in a form entirely different from Western philosophy. The difference dates back to some 2,500 years ago when Greek and Chinese philosophers developed systems of thought.

Interestingly, in the beginning, the two philosophic traditions had similar aspects. For example, in explaining their ideas, both Plato and Confucius used the philosophic method of the dialogue.

Later, however the two traditions diverged. Western thinkers have posed and attempted to solve philosophical problems. On the other hand, Eastern philosophy has posed few problems equivalent to those of Western philosophy. After Descartes inaugurated modern philosophy, the difference widened to the extent that it seems impossible to discuss the two on the same ground.

In Eastern philosophy there are three mainstream schools of thought - Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. Not one of these schools raises the sorts of questions Western philosophy does. In other words, philosophical problems were, in a sense, already solved in the East by virtue of their nonexistence.



The character for rain (雨, yǔ). In the first two pictures the arc indicates the clouds and the dotted lines, drops of rain. Later a line was added to represent the sky (third picture).

Basic Chinese characters "internalize" the meanings of objects, for which reason they function as "certainties" in the Chinese language game.

Why do people in the East think so differently from those in the West? The reason is first and foremost the impact of Chinese characters on East Asian thought. Because of the dominant use of Chinese characters, Chinese people were able to lead practical lives without having philosophical questions in the Western sense.

Each of the three mainstream schools developed their original ideas in an environment where Chinese characters were dominantly used in presenting ideas.

Influenced by the grammarless Chinese language, Eastern philosophy even negates the fundamental principle of Western logic: the proposition that either A or not-A is true. This absence of fundamental logic in Eastern thought has made people seek "practical" solutions to life's questions by a way of thinking that problems are not always amenable to black-and-white solutions. Eastern thought still permeates the lives of East Asians. From the Western standpoint, however, it is easier to live in a logical world and it is difficult to comprehend how people in East Asia can live in a world that seems to be so "illogical."

Originally there had been no philosophical problems in East Asia. Philosophical problems only arose when East Asians translated Western philosophical concepts into their languages using Chinese characters. When there was no translation of Western ideas into Chinese characters, there had been no philosophical problems represented by them.

The Japanese were the first East Asians to translate advanced Western ideas into Chinese characters, about 140 years ago. Those newly invented Chinese character compounds spread throughout East Asia and raised philosophical questions among its peoples. Therefore, resolving philosophical questions in East Asia equates to interpreting the meanings of those character compounds invented for originally Western ideas. People in East Asia have been trapped in those philosophical problems ever since. For example, philosophers in East Asia argue about the meaning of "自我." The word "自我" pronounced as "ziwo" in Chinese, "cha-a" in Korean, and "jiga" in Japanese, is a translation of the Western word "self" ("ego" in Latin), which Descartes established as the key word of his philosophy.

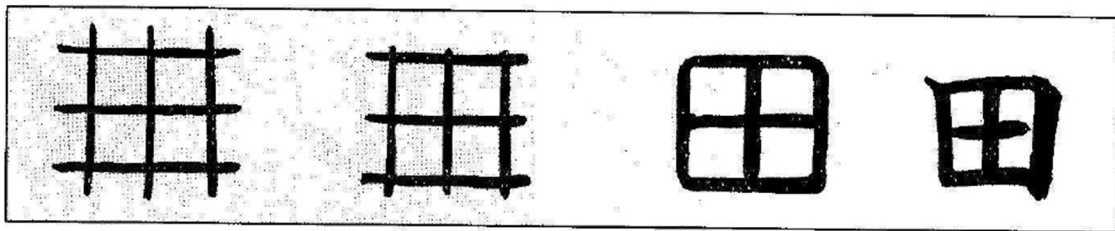
We can easily imagine, however, that if the concept of "ego" had not been borrowed from the West, there would have been no creation of such Chinese character compounds as "自我." After the compound 自我 was created, East Asian philosophers began their attempt to determine the nature of 自我.

We can argue that any attempt to determine the meaning of 自我 could end up in the deconstruction of the Chinese characters themselves. The word 自我 is a typical two-character combination, of "自" (self) and "我" (I). The combination of their meanings constitutes the meaning of 自我. In other words, when the Chinese characters were created, the task of determining the meaning of the word was completed.

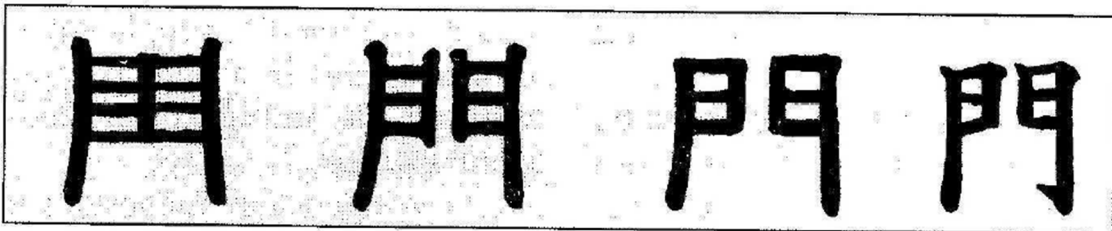
Since the mid-19th century, East Asian philosophers have worked with words originally translated from Western languages. While digesting those newly created philosophical

terms, they have made attempts to formulate "original" philosophical concepts that are different from both traditional Eastern and Western concepts.

It is interesting to point out that once the method of representing Western philosophical concepts by means of new Chinese characters was established, East Asian philosophers have tried to represent their own concepts by positing new key words written with Chinese characters. Whether those thinkers have succeeded in gaining support for their ideas partly depends on whether or not they create catchy Chinese character compounds.



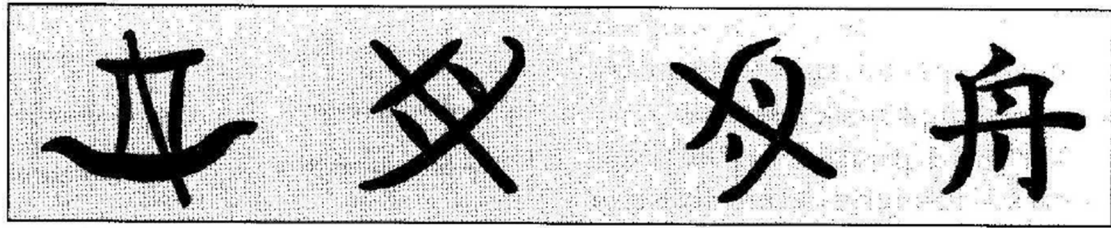
This is the character for rice field (den, ta). The lines represent the furrows for the irrigation of a rice field.



The character for gate (mon, kado) is represented by the leaves of a door.

For example, the Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitaro invented philosophical concepts using Chinese characters. One of his key terms, "絶対無" (zettaimu) or "absolute nothingness," is hard to understand. We can argue that if it is "nothingness" how can it be called either absolute or not absolute. As Wittgenstein says, whenever we encounter "difficult" philosophical terms, we must question whether they can be used in a language game in which people take part. When Nishida gave into the temptation to create new philosophical terms, he fell into a trap that is not easy to avoid without the help of Wittgenstein.

With the invention of those character compounds, people in East Asia started arguing about "Western" ideas and at the same time communicating with the West on the new "common" ground. However, it was also a time when East and West came into conflict.



The character for boat (shu, fune) originated as a sketch of a boat with a pole for pushing the craft in shallow waters.

Today, the East has become increasingly integrated with the West, and Asians are groping for new ideas that could mean a break with tradition. Yet Asian languages and cultures remain dissimilar from the West's.

There still exists a wide difference in thought between the West and the East. One feature of Eastern thought is an emphasis on ethical matters subsumed under the rubric of Neo-Confucianism. This is a philosophic system that originated in China in the 11th century as a modification of the ancient thought of Confucius by Taoism and Buddhism.

Ever since it was founded by thinkers such as Chu Hsi and Wang Yang-ming, Neo-Confucianism has influenced the lives of East Asians and spread widely alongside Buddhism and Taoism.

East Asian rulers emphasized Neo-Confucianist concepts that stressed the importance of seniority and harmony in society. As a result, for over a millennium East Asians have been under the influence of Chinese characters embodying social and ethical meanings. Because of the ethical concepts deeply ingrained in Chinese characters, as long as people use those characters, they cannot ignore their meanings in a societal context.

An example of a character with ethical implications is 仁 (ren), a key word for presenting such Confucian moral concepts as humanity and benevolence. 仁 (ren) is ambiguous, and can be interpreted in various ways according to the societal context.

These Eastern phenomena are not found in the West, where languages are not written in Chinese characters. The Western tradition of logical thinking survives. In Western philosophy, arguments are made in a strictly logical form, such as Hegel's "dialectic," a process in which the contradiction between thesis and antithesis is resolved in synthesis. As Kant did, people argue ethical issues in a logical form without the ambiguity of Neo-Confucianism.

As Wittgenstein suggests, we can see Western and Eastern languages as different language games. Because of the use of different conceptual frameworks based on such

not-alike languages, it might be difficult for the peoples of West and East to understand one another.

However, one thing remains an ultimate certainty in whatever the language - the proper name of each singular individual. Proper names work as certainties when people participate in any kind of language game. Without the certainty of the proper name, people cannot stay within a language game.

Therefore, when East Asians present their ideas, they should be conscious that they themselves participate in language games as singular individuals identified by their own proper names. It is as such individuals—whose proper names provide the certainty of identity—that they engage in new language games.

The interaction between people in the East and the West gives rise to new language games in which East Asians participate as singular individuals identified by their proper names. We may call these "Eastern Language Games," following Wittgenstein's notion.

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