A Philosophical Interpretation of the Spatiality of
Oracle Bone Characters

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The spatial consciousness of the ancients is reflected in the character formation, structure, and writing of the oracle bones. Piaget’s genetic epistemology, Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of body, and cognitive linguistics suggest that human spatial awareness is derived from the formation of a spatial awareness of the body, and evidence for this can be found in the body-related characters in the oracle bones. As a combination of symbols and images, the oracle bones are themselves a spatial metaphor that can compensate for the lack of symbolic language and serve as a reference for the aesthetic language advocated by Adorno.

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The oracle bone character is the earliest known Chinese character, excavated at the site of the Shang Dynasty and carved on turtle shells and animal bones, and used mainly for divination. According to expert research, the oracle bone script was already a relatively mature character, and the so-called “Liu Shu” (六书, six categories of characters) of Xu Shen (许慎) can be found in the oracle bones character. At the same time, however, the oracle bone script is still an early script, and therefore retains many of the characteristics of early scripts, especially the pictorial aspect. Scholars generally believe scripts originated from pictures, such as Tang Lan (唐兰), who argues that “scripts originated from pictures, and the first scripts was pictures that could be read” (Tang, 2001, p. 55). Primitive scripts and pictures have the same origin in that they were born in a similar way, i.e., they are both figurative simulations of natural things, as Xu Shen says: “When Cang Jie (仓颉) first creates scripts, they were called ‘Wen’ (文, culture) because they were based on analogies and pictograms” (Xu, 1963, p. 314). Of course, there is a clear difference between characters and painting: Although character is a simulation, it has been processed by people, so that, compared with painting, there is a process of refining the image and giving and fixing its meaning. Paintings are concrete images, while words are abstract images. According to Xu Shen’s “Liu Shu”, in addition to hieroglyphs, there were other ways of creating characters, such as “Zhishi” (self-explanatory characters) and “Xingsheng” (pictophonetics), which were later simplified by Tang Lan into three categories: pictographs, picto-events (象事) and pictophonetics. Therefore, pictographs were the basis for several other types of character formation. Early scripts, particularly the Chinese oracle bones, were still based on pictographs, which are homologous with pictures and have a distinctly figurative character. This figurativity also means that the script has a distinctly spatial character. The image of the oracle bones character gives a spatially formal intuition, which makes it different from the thoroughly abstracted...
symbols, and this spatial image has been preserved to some extent by modern Chinese characters.

**Spatiality in Oracle Bone Characters’ Formation, Structure, and Writing**

The spatiality of the image in the oracle bones reflects the spatial awareness of both the character maker and the viewer. Both the character maker observing the object, creating the character and the observer viewing it rely on a certain spatial awareness. There are at least three levels of spatial awareness in the design and viewing of characters: the space of the character maker and the object of observation, the configuration of the character, and the spatial layout between the characters. The oracle bones characters embody all three levels of spatial awareness at once.

Firstly, when creating characters, one has a certain spatial awareness of the observation of objects. Both the pictographs and picto-events in the oracle bones characters are in fact copies of people, objects, and events in a fixed scene. When examining the foundations of these characters’ composition, we should focus on the spatial awareness of the character makers themselves, i.e., the different viewpoints they adopted to view objects. Based on the characteristics of the oracle bones characters, the author believes that, similar to the observation principles of painting, the character maker’s observation angles include looking upwards, downwards, flat, and composite point of view, and flat view can be divided into frontal and lateral views. When choosing the angle of observation, the character-maker was thinking and making trade-offs. In the composite perspective texts, in particular, it is clear that the maker did not rigidly follow a single perspective of the object, but rather tried to represent as many of its features as possible within a single plane. This imaginary spatial combination according to its characteristics is quite similar to ancient Egyptian painting, “everything had to be represented from its most characteristic angle” (Gombrich, 2006, p. 52). The character-maker, like the ancient Egyptian artist, looked for the timeless features of the object and depicted it in a way that was inevitable rather than accidental. But unlike painting, where ancient Egyptian painting required completeness and clarity, writing, after all, also required simplicity and certainty, so that it was sufficient to replace the whole with the most characteristic parts, leaving the other aspects to be automatically complemented by people’s psychology of completeness, or clarified by convention.

Secondly, the structure of the oracle bones characters themselves also reflects spatiality. When the oracle-bone character makers observed things and wrote them down, they needed to transform the copied images spatially, from three-dimensional space to two-dimensional flat space. This process is one of the signs of the maturity of the development of human spatial thinking patterns. The character makers did not simply copy down what they saw; they already had a certain ability to think abstractly and inductively, and also had a fairly mature concept of space. This can be seen in the layout of oracle bones characters. In the case of single font character, for example, the planar space of this kind of character can be simply divided into upper and lower, left and right, enclosing and composite structures. The upper and lower structures are generally definite and cannot be reversed. Because the object of observation is spatially oriented up and down, the corresponding characters are also generally not reversed. The left-right structure of single-font character, which can often be reversed, was fixed only later on, mainly due to writing habits and conventions. This is probably mainly due to the fact that the human body and the objects copied are mostly symmetrical. The structure of characters with enclosing and compound structures, on the other hand, could not be reversed or split up. Some scholars have argued that ancient Chinese characters were composed in a “form-combination” way, which means that the ancient Chinese characters themselves were an organic structure, and that some of them embodied “the original
situation of things” (Wang, 2002, p. 28). Hence the way Chinese characters are created determines their spatiality, which in turn makes their development only non-linear.

Once again, the arrangement and layout of divination on oracle bones are also spatial in nature. This spatiality is reflected above all in the order in which the characters are inscribed and read. Generally speaking, the inscriptions and readings are made from the top down, after a vertical column to the bottom, sometimes from right to left, or from left to right, or from the centre to the sides.

In summary, we can see that the oracle bones characters embody at least three dimensions of spatial awareness: the need to observe objects with a human centre of observation before making the characters, the need to transform objects into written images when making the characters, and the need to pay attention to the position of the characters in relation to each other when writing. This is what distinguishes oracle bones characters from other pictographs and alphabetic scripts. This shows that the spatial awareness of the people, especially the spatial awareness of looking at things and translating them into two-dimensional shapes, has been already very well developed.

The Philosophical Significance of the Spatiality of Oracle Bone Characters

Spatiality has been interpreted in different ways in physics and philosophy, and can be seen as a physical space, an intuitive form of knowing, a situation of being, or a place of practical activity. According to Kant, time and space are intuitive forms of human cognition (Kant, 1974, p. 71(A23)) and it is within this spatio-temporal form that one must process the objects of knowing through imaginative schemata and categories in order to form knowledge. But how this subjective spatio-temporal form is formed is not answered by Kant. Later cognitive psychology, existentialist philosophy of the body, and cognitive linguistics have further explored the relationship between bodily space and human spatial awareness. But what concrete evidence is there for the relationship between human bodily spatial awareness and cognition? The author argues that writing is a vehicle for human cognition. Chinese characters, especially spatial figurative writing such as the oracle bones characters, suggest that humans establish a spatial-graphic connection with things in the outside world, and that this form of spatial intuition is acquired through bodily perception. We may therefore be able to find clues to this in oracle bones characters.

As mentioned earlier, the oracle bones embody the triple spatial awareness of man. Viewing things is a transformation of the human point of view, which involves the visual perception of space. The conversion of three-dimensional things into flat images, in turn, involves human abstract spatial awareness. This process includes the structure of the script, the layout between characters, which relates to the basic human sense of spatial position. The order in which humans write and read involves the movement of the eyes, hands, and other bodily movements. These are in terms of specific human uses of spatial awareness, and if we go into detail about how these spatial senses were formed, we need to trace them further back to the spatial awareness of the body, proof of which can also be found in the oracle bones characters. The words in the Yizhuan (易传) and in the Shuowen Jiezi Xu (说文解字叙), which state that “from close up, the body is used as the original, and from far away, things are used as the model” (近取诸身，远取诸物), clearly indicate that a large part of the Chinese characters were created from the observation and imitation of the body, and the appearance of these characters indicates that the spatial awareness of the human body has been recorded in the form of images. Many oracle bone characters directly or indirectly reflect specific body parts and movements.

These body-related characters in the oracle bones reflect, in part, the important role of bodily space in human observation of the world. According to Jean Piaget, human spatial awareness initially originates in the
body. He suggests that in the process of construction, in the spatial realm, and in the different spheres of perception, the infant associates everything with its own body, as if its own body were the centre of the universe—but is a centre that cannot be conscious of itself (Piaget, 1985, p. 23). It is from the sensation and perception of the self that human beings slowly expand into the knowledge of the world. Piaget proposed a recapitulation law of human awareness and argued that early human awareness had similarities to that of children. The spatial awareness of the body, as embodied in the oracle bones characters, deserves to be one of the evidences of the development of human spatial awareness.

From the perspective of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of the body, it is argued that human space is not simply a physical space, but rather a human existential situation. Merleau-Ponty argues that the spatiality of the body is, in fact, not a spatiality of location in the same way as the spatiality of external objects or the spatiality of “spatial sensation”, but a spatiality of situation (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 116). And there are many oracle bones characters that describe scenes of people doing something, which the “Liu Shu” calls “self-explanatory characters” (指事) and Tang Lan classifies as “picto-events”. All of these characters can be thought of as expressing people in some kind of spatial relationship with things. There are also characters relating to psychological states, which often include the structure of body-shaped characters, reflecting in some way the relationship between the body and the situation.

As we gradually expand from physical space to living space, to the human situation, we need more abstract cognitive abilities to perceive things, to refer to objects, to convey information, and to express moods. As a result, people have created language and writing as vehicles and media of expression and perception. And most scripts had a spatial basis, that is, an image, at the time of their creation. Not only pictographs, but even alphabetic scripts have a spatial and figurative basis; it is just that alphabetic scripts have lost their intuitiveness as opposed to pictographs, which can visualise images. Cognitive linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue that metaphor is involved in human language, thought, and behaviour, and that metaphor is the cognitive basis of our lives, culture, and science.

We have found, on the contrary, that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, p. 4)

Metaphors can be divided into orientational, ontological, and structural metaphor. Metaphor is the mapping of a known conceptual domain to an unknown conceptual domain through cognition and reasoning, resulting in new understanding. For example, we extend our knowledge of mental space through our knowledge of physical space. The mapping of metaphors is controlled by “imagery schemas”, the structures that recur in our everyday bodily experience (Lu, 2007, p. 119). The orientation schemas, or spatial metaphors, are the most basic imagery schemas, mapping from primordial spatial structures to abstract, non-spatial conceptual schemas. Thus, the spatial graphic of the body is the basis for other graphics. We can see this mapping, as Lakoff and others call it, perfectly in those oracle bones characters that are derived from body parts.

Jean-Paul Reding argues that the Chinese language contains a large number of metaphors and that, unlike the ancient Greek philosophers who often created new metaphors, the use of metaphors by ancient Chinese thinkers was conventional and highly organised (Reding, 1998, p. 79). In fact, the reason why Chinese philosophers used metaphors with a certain degree of conventionality is precisely because the Chinese script itself is a metaphor. We can see that Chinese linguists such as Xu Shen often interpreted the meaning of
Chinese characters directly according to their construction. The author argues that if the meanings of alphabetic characters embody metaphors, then the oracle bones characters themselves are spatial metaphors, each capable of visualising the object, and the process of evolving to generate composite-fonts and pictophonetic characters is itself a process of recognising something new. The intuitive and metaphorical nature of Chinese characters has led to a certain metaphorical nature in the Chinese way of thinking.

Beyond this, the oracle bones characters are also important in terms of language aesthetics. As a hieroglyphic script, the oracle bones characters are intuitive and unifying, and its symbols and pictures have not yet been separated. Walter Benjamin argued that hieroglyphs were graphically able to grasp things directly and with a certain abstraction, so that the script bridged the human and the divine, “The hieroglyphs are therefore an image of the divine ideas!” (cf. Benjamin, 1991, p. 346) M. Horkheimer and T. Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* examine the basis for the creation of hieroglyphics—sacrifice. The doctrine of sacrifice is symbolic because the symbols and images in it are identical. As the hieroglyphs suggest, originally writing also had a pictorial function (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2003, p. 33). And the oracle bones characters are the very script in which the ritual divinations were recorded. Both Benjamin and Adorno believed that the unified language was the hieroglyphic or pictorial enigma, which was a pattern similar to that of the hieroglyphs (Adorno, 2003, p. 184). This enigmaticalliness derives from the linguistic nature of art, which is a special kind of language that retains its original form. Art and hieroglyphics are isomorphic in that they are both pictorial in nature. Adorno sees art as a synthesis of symbolic and figurative writing, a hieroglyphic and enigmatic painting, in which the figure and the symbol of language are also unified. He attempts to draw on the expressive and mimesis rationality of art to transform concepts figuratively—that is, to construct forms as ideas—so that the symbol and the image are finally reconciled and unified, thus returning the broken and reified language to a state of unity as an authentic language. In fact, this so-called unification of symbol and image means that concepts and language should return to concrete situations and spaces, and should be examined in their historical and social dimensions. As mentioned earlier, each oracle bones character is spatial and temporal; the oracle bones characters are spatial metaphors, the intuitive and simple knowledge and understanding of the world by the ancients. By parsing the shape and meaning of the oracle bones characters, we can see the concrete human understanding and behaviour that lies behind the words. Moreover, the pictorial and figurative nature of the oracle bones characters makes Chinese characters inherently artistic and aesthetically possible. It is no wonder that the art of calligraphy was born out of Chinese characters and has become the most common form of art in China. When we perceive and write Chinese characters, we are to some extent imitating the object. Chinese characters are not just symbols; they are also images that can be developed into art. Therefore, in Chinese characters we have the possibility of achieving the unity of mimesis rationality and instrumental rationality, the unity of symbol and image, the unity of communication and expression that Adorno desired, and this unity of script is the important inspiration that the oracle bones characters have given us.

In summary, we can see that the spatiality of the oracle bones characters is not only reflected in the figurative nature of their characters, but also in the spatial consciousness of people in the process of creating the characters, which epitomises the spatial consciousness of humans as a whole. Human spatial awareness stems from the perception of physical space, a perception that can also be seen in the oracle bones characters. For us, therefore, the oracle bones character is not only a record of history, but it is history itself. The development of language and writing is a reflection of the development of human understanding of things. The study of the oracle bones is therefore important for the study of the process by which human perception occurs, and we can
predict that the oracle bones can also serve as a reference for the future development of human language and perception.

References