

Wang, Shuren 王樹人, *Back to the Original and Creative Thinking—Chinese Wisdom Viewed from “Image Thinking”* 回歸原創之思—“象思維”視野下的中國智慧

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WANG Shuren’s book aims to uncover and clarify the original and creative nature of image thinking (*xiang siwei* 象思维), and this effort is highly original and creative. According to Wang, there are fundamental differences between image thinking and the typical Western understanding of thinking and reasoning based on concepts and arguments. This is a very important topic that has been widely recognized in contemporary literature.

One thesis Wang tries to establish is that image thinking is a key component and a distinct feature of Chinese thinking. Wang discusses in detail the intimate relation between the image thinking and the philosophical ideas in the *Book of Changes*, *Laozi*, *Zhuangzi*, and Chan Buddhism. He finds that image thinking is not only fully explicit in these schools of thoughts but is also a prominent and defining feature of them. Image thinking also permeates other cultural aspects of Chinese life, including poetry, calligraphy, and painting. Wang has a rich discussion (the major part of the second half of the book) about these topics.

This certainly is not the only goal of the book. Wang is not merely interested in a descriptive account of image thinking in the history of Chinese thought, but also has a philosophically more significant agenda: how to understand and clarify the nature of image thinking. Image thinking is a key feature of Chinese thought, but it is not limited to the Chinese mind or to Chinese culture. Instead, it can be a universal feature of human thinking. Actually, as Wang tries to argue, image thinking is a higher form of human thinking, as it is responsible for the originality and creativity of the human mind. This is a very important philosophical claim. If it is true, it will certainly bring profound knowledge to our understanding of the human mind and its nature.

So, what exactly is the nature of this image thinking? What kind of functions does it have? What kind of evidence do we have for the claims made about image thinking? These are crucial issues. In order for us to get a clear idea about this notion, Wang has some quite interesting discussions. It is also in this part that I find some confusions in Wang’s

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explanations and arguments. In the following I will try my best to understand and capture Wang's ideas and arguments and put forth some questions along the way.

Wang gives both negative and positive characterizations of image thinking. In the Introduction, he compares image thinking with traditional conceptual thinking. From this comparison, we can gather the following negative characterizations of image thinking: (1) Image thinking is non-conceptual; (2) Image thinking is non-linguistic; (3) Image thinking is non-substantial; (4) Image thinking does not distinguish between the subject and the object.

The first statement is made in contrast to the conceptual thinking that we are familiar with. It claims that image thinking does not, or need not, use concepts in its thinking process and so is a distinct process from conceptual thinking. The second statement claims that image thinking is beyond language, i.e. it does not need any language in its process. This claim is closely related with the first one, since it is often assumed that conceptual thinking is identical to thinking with language. Strictly speaking, concepts that do not belong to a language or are not expressible in a language are not really concepts. Yet this assumption is challengeable. If we think some animals can have concepts (such as dogs can have concepts of food and danger), since these animals do not have language, it shows that concepts are not dependent on language. Instead, language may just be the external expressions of internal conceptual structures. So these two claims are different claims. Since language is still dependent on conceptual thinking, thinking with language presupposes conceptual thinking. That implies that if image thinking is non-conceptual, then it is non-linguistic, but not the other way around.

As we look at the history of Chinese thought, there is clearly a tendency to emphasize non-linguistic understanding and knowledge. Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Chan Buddhism all point out the limitation of linguistic knowledge, and aim to go beyond linguistic means to achieve true knowledge. So this kind of thinking favored by Daoists and Chan Buddhists must be non-linguistic. The Daoists and Chan Buddhists have used a lot of words to explain their ideas and to teach their students, but this does not contradict their teachings. Linguistic teachings merely serve as tools to reach the state of non-linguistic thinking. There are also elements against conceptual thinking in these teachings. They emphasize making no classification or distinction among things, making no value judgments, and doing no calculation or deliberation. It seems that true knowledge is beyond the reach of these conceptual tools, and is only attainable by shedding these conceptual tools. However, the nature of this kind of true knowledge and its relation to non-conceptual thinking is not clear. This question is further complicated by the lack of a clear definition of the notion of non-conceptual thinking, and for that matter, the notion of conceptual thinking.

The third claim is made in the context of Aristotelian metaphysics, which postulates substances as fundamental entities in the world. Wang thinks that substances postulated by conceptual thinking are fixed and distorted representations of the dynamic flow of reality, while image thinking can capture and grasp the full scope of reality. This point is made quite explicit in his Preface to the book. As we will see later, Wang does admit the usefulness of conceptual thinking, and applauds the success of scientific progress connected with it. His concern is to underscore image thinking as a distinct and complementary approach to thinking. However, this claim is quite vague and problematic. First, conceptual thinking does not have to commit itself to the metaphysics of substance. Second, if the general idea is that concepts are abstract representations of the world, so that they must cut the world in a particular way to fit the so-called conceptual box, then this is a valid and well-known point. However, it is not clear whether image thinking can avoid the same fate, assuming that it also involves some kind of representation of the world.

The fourth claim is made in the context of the epistemological distinction between the subject (the perceiver) and the object (the perceived). Ever since Descartes made this distinction clear and necessary for his philosophy, it has been the starting point for all later philosophy. Wang notices the effort of Continental philosophers who have tried to go beyond and to eliminate the distinction between the subject and the object. Wang believes that image thinking can also break *the* subject–object barrier and can even do better than Continental philosophy. However, I cannot figure out how these theses are defended. Wang thinks that all these features are inter-connected, and are essential features of image thinking. Again, I think more arguments and clarifications are needed here.

Besides making the above negative characterizations, more significantly, Wang makes a series of positive claims about the nature of image thinking. This helps us greatly in understanding image thinking. These claims are: (1) The image in “image thinking” is about the “original image,” which has no sensible forms and is much superior to the ordinary images. Image thinking is not the same thing as thinking with pictures, even though it may start from ordinary images/pictures; (2) While conceptual analysis is the means of conceptual thinking, “viewing” (*guan* 觀) is the means of image thinking; (3) Image thinking is creative and original; (4) Image thinking is holistic; (5) Image thinking and conceptual thinking are complementary.

The first thesis is clearly explained in the Introduction: “the image in ‘image thinking,’ as a thinking process, at its beginning or its primitive level, is connected with forms and appearances, but in the activity of thinking of ‘image thinking’ as a creative process, the ‘original image’ is not only different from the images in the forms and appearances, but also far superior to the latter. It is like the image in Laozi’s claim that ‘the great image has no form’” (3). This is a very interesting claim, but needs further clarifications. What is the original image? What is exactly thinking with the original image? Wang gives more details when he discusses particular philosophers, but the discussions there are not focused enough to give a clear answer to these questions. For example, when Laozi says that the image of water is the closest to that of Dao, or when Zhuangzi uses his beautiful metaphors to illustrate Dao, are we not still using the images of ordinary things in our thinking? This is more problematic with the discussions of *Yijing*, the *Book of Change*. Here Wang emphasizes more the pictorial image of *gua* 卦 than he does the literary interpretation of these images. However, these images are just ordinary images. Wang sometimes says image thinking is a highly intuitive form of thinking, but intuitive thinking without clear explanation seems to be mysterious.

The same problem seems to trouble the second thesis. It is quite clear that Wang tries to further explicate image thinking, by touching on its method. Even with many supports from Daoist and Buddhist classics, we are not very clear about the method of “viewing”. What is it? What is the difference between viewing and introspection or perception? Is there the right view of the world? If so, how can we get to that view? Wang introduces a very important notion, “the original true self” (7–10), and I think this notion can provide some further understanding of these questions. What is this true original self? Wang claims that, as he quotes Zhuangzi, “the heaven and the earth are born with me at the same time, and all things and I are the same.” So this true self is not distinct from the heaven and the earth, or all things in the world. Wang believes, as Chan Buddhists do, this original true self is responsible for one’s true knowledge of the world. If one can view the world from the state of the true original mind, then one will get true knowledge. However, these claims, together with the historical discourses on these issues, have not been made very clear. As a result they all have a mysterious and supernatural feel. For example, Wang believes that a shaman’s ability of extraordinary perceptions of connections between things plays a crucial

role in the interpretation of *gua* images, but this kind of perception seems more extrasensory than hypersensory.

The third positive claim is very important. According to Wang, the creativity and originality of image thinking is a key element. Creativity is a very valuable element of our thinking, and it is important to understand how it is possible. Spontaneity has also been a distinctive feature of Chan Buddhism. But Wang's arguments here rely on metaphysical speculations borrowed heavily from Daoism and Buddhism. From his explanations, I still cannot see how image thinking is creative and original. Also, I do not see why conceptual thinking cannot be creative and original, as has been demonstrated in the history of civilization, not only in the West but also in the East.

The fourth thesis is that image thinking is holistic. This is in contrast to conceptual thinking, which is believed to be concerned only with parts of the picture. This claim is problematic. First, I do not know in what sense image thinking is holistic. Second, I do not see why conceptual thinking must be partial. In fact, holistic thinking seems to be more about a general guideline of thinking rather than about any particular thinking process. When one is actually thinking about something, it must be about that thing, and cannot be just about the whole that contains all the things.

The last thesis is the least controversial one, but given that we do not have a clear grasp of image thinking, we do not know what kind of complementary relation exists between image thinking and conceptual thinking. Also, given the concerns about the above claims, we are not clear whether image thinking is actually superior to conceptual thinking.

Overall, Wang's book brings valuable insights to the nature and the functions of image thinking. This effort is highly original and meaningful, and there are very interesting ideas in Wang's book. Anyone who is interested in image thinking will benefit from reading this book. Though there are some places that need to be further clarified, the book is extremely stimulating. One thing is very clear: there are some distinct elements in the thinking of the Chinese mind. Whether they are image thinking, whether image thinking can cover all the varieties in these distinct elements, and whether they are superior to conceptual thinking, Wang's book does not fully answer, but at least these are important questions worthy of further discussion. I am certain that further investigations of these issues can bring us a deeper understanding of the human mind.