

***Language as Bodily Practice in Early China:
A Chinese Grammarology***
By J. Geaney (2018)
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Reviewed by Sharon Sanderovitch

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The relationship between language and body has stood at the centre of Jane Geaney's scholarship since the publication of her previous book, *On the Epistemology of the Senses in Early Chinese Thought* (Hawaii, 2002). That former book sought to reconstruct an early Chinese understanding of sense perception and, based on rhetorical articulations, to argue for the perceived dominance of the aural and visual faculties. In her new monograph, *Language as Bodily Practice in Early China*, Geaney proceeds to reflect back on language itself through the prism of sense perception. As the argument goes, to the extent that linguistic formulations in early Chinese texts reflect distinctions that Geaney traces primarily to sensory discrimination (e.g. pp. 77, 81 and the entire fourth chapter), and to the extent that in these texts language *qua* 'speaking and naming' appears to involve the psychophysical impact of sound as well as the evaluation and subsequent cultivation of one's speech and action (e.g. pp. xi, 233), language in early China should be seen to constitute a bodily practice. Geaney's mission throughout the book is to link together this chain of disparate claims so as to construct an analysis of a historically and culturally unique understanding of language, epistemology and social cultivation. In order to do that, the first and ultimately the most consuming task she undertakes is

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the refutation of previous assertions with regard to linguistic theory and practice in early China – primarily those that presuppose language as an abstract system.

The argumentation thus proceeds on two planes, yielding what Geaney dubs a ‘Chinese grammatology’ (alluding to Derrida’s *Of Grammatology*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976): an analysis of early Chinese linguistic and cultural concepts that fervently rejects ‘Western philosophical dualisms’ (such as reality/appearance, presence/absence, type/token) as the main interpretive framework, and advances, in their stead, ‘aural/visual polarities’ (p. xi). The volume closes with an appended ‘Glossary of Terms with Aural or Visual Associations’ which includes terms that are central to Geaney’s textual analyses, and, assisted by further explanations and citations, indicates with regard to each ‘whether it is paradigmatically aural or visual’ (p. 235). Among the glossed terms are, as classified and translated by Geaney: ‘*guan* 觀 (mostly visual): observe’ (p. 240); ‘*ming* 名 (audible): generally personal names, titles, naming’ (p. 241); ‘*xing* 行 (visual): walk, act’ (p. 251); and ‘*yan* 言 (aural): speech’ (p. 252).

The book’s main contribution is in the questions it brings to the fore, or makes resurface, concerning linguistic practices and metalinguistic thought as attested in (or absent from) the textual corpus that Geaney reviews. Such is, for example, the extended discussion of previous claims concerning a ‘language crisis’ that supposedly transpired in the fourth and third centuries BCE and prompted various reconsiderations of the relation between words/names/titles and their referents (pp. xii–xxiii, and *passim*). Geaney correctly chooses to follow those scholars who have previously questioned the historicity and/or modern characterisations of a full-fledged ‘linguistic crisis’ (p. xiii, note 10), and proceeds to consider the recurrent call for the ‘rectification of names’ (*zheng ming* 正名; alt., ‘the use of accurate names’ or ‘correct naming’) on separate terms. Another area of inquiry that deserves renewed attention and does arise from Geaney’s discussions is the somatic language so widely used in early Chinese rhetorical literature. As this aspect may be of special interest for the readers of this journal, I make it the main focus of my comments below. The light that Geaney throws on both these topics certainly provokes further thought. Unfortunately, however, flaws in the argumentation leave the answers she offers shrouded with question marks.

One essential flaw is the polemical approach that structures the entire volume. *Language as Bodily Practice* is constructed of two parts, each composed of five chapters: ‘Part 1: Discounting the Language Crisis in Early China,’ and ‘Part 2: Understanding Early Chinese Conceptions of Speech and Naming.’ The underlying intention was presumably to dedicate the

first part to the deconstruction of claims made in previous research, thus clearing the way for constructive argumentation in the second part. But in effect, with the exception of Chapters 6 and 9, deconstruction – primarily (as in Chapters 3 to 5 and Chapter 8) of arguments made by Chad Hansen in his controversial *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought* (Oxford University Press, 1992) – remains the main thrust of the book, making it difficult to identify the progress of a clear positive argument. Based to a great extent on negative argumentation, the volume consists mostly of the author's efforts to *deny* an early Chinese notion of language as an abstract system ('Introduction' and Chapter 3); *disprove* a presumed perception of a gap between language and reality (Chapters 1 and 2); *downplay* the epistemological role of linguistic discriminations and the prescriptive function of 'naming' (Chapters 3 to 5 and Chapter 8); and *detach* the analysis of 'names' and 'naming' from the realm of ceremonial procedures, ritual propriety and social roles (Chapters 7, 8 and 10). Thus, even if some of the points that the author advances are worth engaging and could potentially lead to nuanced observations, the result of the present crusade is a thin and impoverished perception, not least, of the motif of 'correct naming' – a notion Geaney restricts to the realm of sound and oral utterances (specifically, 'the ruler's vocalisation of his authority', p. xxxviii, and see pp. 216–17), but may be best characterised as a trope used to open up a number of different discursive possibilities in multiple texts of the received (and a portion of the excavated) literature.

To Geaney's credit, it should be noted that, regardless of whether one accepts or rejects her analysis of 'language' in early China, the space that she assigns to the topic and the addition of generous footnotes allow her to incorporate readers in a discussion that is fairly clear and theoretically conscious. Regrettably, this is not the case with the book's stated '[approach to] early Chinese texts from the perspective of bodies' (p. 216). This approach is nowhere defined, contemplated or justified from a theoretical point of view, almost as if the (still) 'recent enthusiasm' about the body in literary criticism, history, philosophy and theology (Caroline Bynum 'Why all the fuss about the body? A medievalist's perspective', *Critical Inquiry* 22(1) (1995), p. 4) makes it self-explanatory. Stated differently, the question that should be but is nowhere asked is: why replace 'dualisms' with 'polarities'? How is this exchange of binary models satisfactory? The author's claim that the said dualisms are imported and distorting whereas the proposed polarities 'are firmly grounded in early Chinese texts' (p. xi) is not sufficient, as it merely directs the attention to the linguistic, aesthetic and rhetorical features that Geaney interprets as supporting the assertion of a perceived 'polarity of sight and sound in early China' (p. 193). It is, furthermore, the

reading and analysis of these very features that constitute the Achilles heel of, I dare say, both her books. In both, Geaney's way to an emphasis on the body passes through a de-emphasis, or lack of proper consideration, of the work of syntactic structures (e.g. parallel constructions as interpreted in pages 148–54 of the present volume), metaphorical paradigms and political tropes.

Thus, for example, the author's interpretation of texts 'from the perspective of bodies' amounts, at times, to a semantic emphasis on body-based metaphors: some of these are simply instantiations of cross-cultural cognitive paradigms (e.g. *guan*, 'watch, observe, examine', pp. 146–7); others represent discourse-specific metaphorical schemes (e.g. the widely used trope of 'keen eyes and ears' 耳目聰明, p. 87); and yet others are intriguing hybrids of the former two types (e.g. the particular application of *ting* 聽, 'listen, obey, follow, heed', in a *Guoyu* 國語 anecdote, 'Zhouyu xia' 周語下 1, partially cited on p. 243). The crude classification that I offer here may be subject to further scrutiny and refinement, but the point is that Geaney offers none, and instead aggregates the 'evidence' indiscriminately (and with little or no regard of context), leaning heavily on the source domain in conclusions that therefore end up highlighting sensorial discrimination (e.g. 'it is safe to conclude that early Chinese texts consider *xing* to be particularly accessible to the eyes', p. 147). At the least, this consistent brushing aside of significant dimensions of meaning construction beyond basic semantic levels should have been self-consciously discussed and hopefully justified. As things stand, it remains unclear how the author's approach contributes towards an understanding of the work of language in early Chinese texts rather than merely latch readers' attention onto the semantic surface alone – a potential pitfall for both students and non-specialists alike (who should therefore consult the appended 'Glossary' with caution).

Another example of this interpretive bias is the author's account of the ruler's decrees, wherein a semantic shade seems to govern assertions of a cultural-analytical scope. Geaney's discussion of royal decrees, introduced via the term *ming* 命 (order, decree), is prompted by the latter's widely assumed etymological connection to *ming* 名 (naming) – a term that the author classifies as predominantly audible. Produced through this narrow lens, her statements on the topic include: 'a ruler's decree makes something happen ... by virtue of a power that reflects the conception of the experience of sound' (p. 189); 'the ruler's decrees, capitalizing as they do on sound's ability to penetrate human ears ...' (p. 206); and 'when rulers command, their voices penetrate' (p. 193). Presumably, such statements are inspired by multiple references to royal speech in the extant literature. These, however, cannot be taken at face value. It has been demonstrated,

for example, that the conferral of royal charges (*ming* 命) in the pre-imperial era involved both oral and written media, none of which can easily be said to have been secondary to the other.

Furthermore, references to the ruler's commanding voice in early imperial texts often exemplify a wider rhetorical phenomenon by which the appeal to simple mechanisms of sense perception (seeing, hearing) and unmediated interpersonal communication (saying, being heard) serves to simultaneously target and disguise more complex administrative and bureaucratic operations. Such is the rhetorical paradigm that Geaney's statements invoke and which is succinctly performed by Liu Xie 劉勰 (ca. 465–522) – only to be exposed in the very last line:

The emperor rules over the world below, [but] his words are divine. While [he remains] deep [in the palace], [sitting] silently in front of the embroidered screen, his voice fills the world in the four directions. This is due to the imperial edicts!

皇帝御宇，其言也神。淵嘿黼宸，而響盈四表，[其]唯詔策乎 (*Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍, 'Zhao ce' 詔策).

Like Liu Xie, authors of the early imperial period knew well to claim for imperial decrees the immediacy of a verbal utterance and the efficacy of 'a voice that penetrates human subjects' (paraphrasing Geaney, p. 190). But, not less than Liu Xie, they were equally well aware of the multiple acts of mediation – in both visible and audible forms – that supported this powerful image: such were the writing, rewriting, performing, copying, disseminating, inscribing and reading out loud of decrees by various members of the bureaucratic apparatus. The question, then, is again, what is to be gained – and what, on the contrary, is lost from view – by classifying such multivalent terms as *ming* 名 and *ming* 命 (both labeled by Geaney simply as 'sounds', p. 190), by reference to one pole of an aural/visual polarity.

In conclusion, *Language as Bodily Practice* does not engage theories about embodied language from the perspective of discourse analysis or cognitive linguistics; nor does it seem interested in historicising the presence of the body – in the linguistic patterns it so helpfully highlights – from the perspective of early Chinese intellectual history or political rhetoric. It is possible that the author's emphasis on 'language as bodily practice' is designed to counter, or otherwise complement, considerations of what may therefore be tentatively termed 'body as linguistic practice.' This, however, is left for the reader's speculation, and the author regrettably misses the opportunity to join in a conversation with prior major contributions that scrutinise the place of 'body' in early Chinese articulations of political and moral philosophy (see, in particular, Nathan Sivin, 'State, cosmos, and body

in the last three centuries B.C., *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 55(1) (1995), pp. 5–37; and Mark Csikszentmihalyi, *Material Virtue: Ethics and the Body in Early China* (Brill, 2004) – the latter does appear in Geaney’s bibliography). Indeed, if my contemplation of the present volume has been coloured by a critical tone, it is only because I believe it touches on fundamental aspects of early Chinese writing about language, body and governance, and as such deserves our full attention.