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LANGUAGE AS
BODILY PRACTICE IN
EARLY CHINA

A CHINESE GRAMMATOLOGY

JANE GEANEY

SUNY
P R E S S

Introduction

Part of the challenge to understanding ideas about linguistic entities in Early China (ca. 500 B.C.E. to 200 C.E.) is that even the term “language” is misleading.¹ If by “language” we mean a single phenomenon that includes speech, names, and writing—that is, a structure or an abstraction that is manifest in speech and writing—then early Chinese writers were not talking about “language” even implicitly. I cannot avoid the term, however, at least not in my title, because I will be responding to arguments that take for granted that ideas about language in Early China spawned a crisis. The presumption of a language crisis serves as my hook, which helps me organize various scholars’ ideas: I strive to argue for an accurate understanding of conceptions of speech and names in early Chinese texts, and the very notion that their presentation of “language” could foster a crisis presupposes erroneous conceptions. This much will become obvious as I approach the idea of language from an unusual angle: its interaction with human bodies.

The interpretation of “language” in early Chinese texts that emerges from my investigation is distinctive. Here, the texts do not describe language in relation to a world of sensory experience and mental ideas; rather, early Chinese texts are repeatedly seen to create pairings of sounds and various visible things. In formulating my analysis of early Chinese ideas about “language,” I resist the impulse to fit it into familiar constructions and instead attempt to account for such pairings by conceptualizing how things related to what we think of as language must have been understood in Early China. That is, by “language” in Early China, I mean sounds: speech (*yan* 言) and names/naming (*ming* 名, 命). Language in this sense is more like sounds that issue from the mouth and enter the ears. It is bodily utterances that are emitted and heard—not an abstraction. For some, to describe language as

1. Hans-Georg Moeller succinctly articulates the difficulty of wanting to use the term “language” to describe what is discussed in early Chinese texts. “I am well aware that it is problematic to apply the term ‘language philosophy’ in its strict sense in regard to ancient Chinese philosophical reflections on ‘forms and names’ (*xingming* 形名), speech (*yan* 言), writing (*shu* 書), or literature (*wen* 文). Chinese philosophy did not operate with a general notion of ‘language’ subordinating those concepts and establishing a general and explicit discourse of ‘language philosophy.’” Moeller, “Chinese Language Philosophy and Correlativism,” 91.

a “bodily practice” might conjure the idea of performance, but I have something different in mind. As I explain below, in early Chinese texts sounds that issue from the mouth are a matter of practice insofar as speech (*yan* 言) is something that is habitual. Along with action and bodies, early Chinese texts present *yan* 言 as a target of self-cultivation. Physiologically speaking, *yan* originates from *qi*. It is an auditory expression of one’s heartmind (*xin* 心).² As such, it is within one’s control. Thus, people can construct their *yan* by cultivating their aims, which precede it. They can also develop habits of *yan* that improve its virtue, in particular, by matching their *yan* to their deeds, thereby achieving a balance between that which is audible and that which is visible. That is, matching one’s *yan* to one’s actions is a form of matching aural and visual, which is an embodied virtue that is to be expected from a sage and from a virtuous person. Hence, when I refer to early Chinese language as a “bodily practice,” I want to suggest not a performance but something more akin to a technology of the self.

This bodily practice of “language” differs from more familiar ideas about speech acts in two specific ways. First, early Chinese texts do not discuss phenomena such as a spoken promise making something happen. But in certain contexts, names or naming (*ming* 名, 命) has the power to make something the case. Unlike *yan*, which typically issues from inside a person, *ming* does not express the heartmind, and it is only indirectly an area for self-cultivation.³ A ruler’s *ming*, however, resembles a speech act insofar as the authority to name—that is, to assign titles or issue decrees—makes something the case. Thus, dispensing titles and delivering commands renders the ruler’s *ming* a specific kind of utterance that “does things with words.” Nevertheless, there is a fundamental disparity between a ruler’s *ming* and more familiar understandings of speech acts. Unlike a speech “act,” early Chinese texts do not describe this naming as an “action.” From the perspective of aural/visual polarities, an action is something else entirely—walking, sitting, standing, and moving. In an aural/visual polarity, what rulers say is audible and what they do is visible, but while a ruler’s naming accomplishes the act of making a name refer to something, as I argue below, from the viewpoint of early Chinese texts, it does not thereby count as “doing.” Instead, the naming functions as a complement to something visible, like treating the person differently or the person behaving differently.

2. As a translation of *xin* 心, I use the awkward but useful term “heartmind” to signal that the faculties of reason and emotion are not separate. In general, to facilitate reader-recognition of graphs that I discuss often, I gloss them using a single term when possible. The admittedly wooden translations that sometimes result serve my goal, which is to emphasize the way words and phrases are repeated.

3. That is, while one can work on earning a name, ultimately it is up to others to repeat it.

In sum, in describing early Chinese “language” as a “bodily practice” in my title, I mean “language” only in the sense of speaking and naming. I call it “bodily” because it is not an abstraction. Paradigmatically, as I argue below, *yan* come out through the mouth, whereas *ming* enter the ears. Moreover, these sounds should correlate with visible actions or shapes. Finally, I characterize language as a bodily “practice” to emphasize that it is not detachable from its use in everyday experience. Speech is a habit to be cultivated. Names are earned when others take note of one’s speech and action.