

## CHAPTER ONE

# The Crisis of Blockage

## Accessing and Transmitting Obscure Things

The language crisis that some Sinologists claim to have identified in Early China assumes two basic forms. In the version I will discuss in this chapter, which often presumes that the role of language is representation, the crisis centers on a gap: a separation between words and reality, whether ordinary or ultimate; a disjunction between names, words, and real things; or ultimate reality's fundamental inaccessibility to language.<sup>1</sup> In addition to the paradoxical language attributed to "sophists" or the "school of names," arguments about this gap locate evidence of the crisis in the antilanguage bias of Daoist texts.<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter, I maintain that while there is much discussion of a failure of access and transmission in early Chinese texts, that failure is not restricted to "language" (a concept I will later problematize), and therefore the "crisis" (perhaps

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1. Again, for Benjamin Schwartz the language question is the inaccessibility of reality to language. The Ming Jia represents the climax of it. For Kongzi, it is only a "concern" about the abuse of language. Schwartz, *World of Thought*, 197, 91. In Lisa Raphals's description, the crisis is that language cannot provide an accurate representation of reality. Raphals, *Knowing Words*, 18. In her earlier work, Michael Nylan calls the crisis "an awareness of the difference between names, words, and real things." Nylan, "Textual Authority in Pre-Han and Han," 250. Her later position is that the "naming crisis" involves social chaos due to not matching *ming* to actions or things, similar to the situation described in *Thucydides* 3.82.4. Nylan, *Five "Confucian" Classics*, 288, 274. See introduction, n. 10 and n. 35 for another discussion of these points.

2. Scholars commonly use the metaphor of blocked access in relation to Daoist ideas. For example, Isabelle Robinet contends that the *Laozi* rejects language because it cannot "access truth." Robinet, "Later Commentaries," 12.

Schwartz argues that language cannot access the dao because it is beyond organizing principles and determinate knowledge, "ineffable eternal . . . nondeterminate and nameless." Schwartz, "Thought of the *Tao-te-ching*," 191–93.

too extreme a term) should not be confined to “language” alone but should be understood more broadly. If we read early Chinese texts through the presentist filter of our familiar philosophical views concerning language, we might well locate vivid stories that seem to criticize language for reasons like inaccessibility, or blockage, and ineffability. But a subtle shift in attention corrects such a reading. That shift involves recognizing that there is a difference between, on the one hand, impugning language for preventing the transmission of something and, on the other, asserting that there is something that cannot be transmitted through any medium whatsoever. To attribute the problems of “access” (*de* 得) in early Chinese texts to linguistic blockage is to give undue weight to the role of language. The many elusive and unknown things that early Chinese texts present as inaccessible are not so through language alone.

Textual passages about failures of transmission often have a dual focus: (1) the things themselves—only occasionally “gotten” or “achieved” (*de* 得)—that are barely known, and (2) the failure to transmit them. That is, some passages focus on these elusive things, while mentioning a failure of transmission only in passing. They assert that there are things that are obscure, imperceptible, or “unmeasurable.” These things do not merely escape verbal expression; even though they are sometimes gotten, they exceed any ordinary kind of knowing. A second type of passage stresses the point that some things, because they are obscure, are also “unteachable.” In other words, some passages describe not just not knowing but also an incapacity to transmit. Yet even when the context specifies speech and writing as the media for transmission, descriptions of the thing imply in addition that no other medium is capable of transmitting it. That no particular medium is at fault is clearest in passages that address the transmission of skills. While at times the thing to be transmitted looks like what we might call “ultimate reality,” often it is a skill that, as is stressed, cannot be transferred from one person to another. If gotten at all, it must be gotten by means other than transmission or teaching. Taken, then, within a larger frame in which transmission fails, these passages go a long way toward illustrating that there is a difference between assertions about the difficulty of transferring knowledge and claims that language blocks the transmission of reality. Specific examples will help clarify the implications for media of transmission.

### Difficult Transmissions

In early Chinese texts, transmission is exceptionally important, which lends special resonance to its failures. Reputation and knowledge are among the most crucial things to be transmitted. Not managing to transmit one’s reputation—an offense

against one's ancestors—is generally presented as one's own fault. But the inability to transmit knowledge often reflects the elusiveness of that which has been learned, which at the highest level involves the task of receiving and transmitting heaven's decree (*ming* 命). As the *Shijing* puts it, heaven has neither sound nor smell, which poses a challenge for those charged with interpreting and enacting its mandate.<sup>3</sup> But there are other inscrutable entities that are sometimes “gotten,” which include, among other things, the *dao*.

Passages about the special things that cannot be transmitted tend to emphasize their exceptional smallness, largeness, inwardness, or even flavorlessness. Such characteristics make it difficult to acquire knowledge of them and impossible for one who possesses such knowledge to transmit it to those who do not know.<sup>4</sup> The *Huainanzi* describes a *dao* like this:

嘗之而無味，視之而無形，不可傳於人。

Taste it but it has no taste, look at it but it has no form, it cannot be transmitted to others.

*Huainanzi* 淮南子 繆稱訓

An example from *Chuci* depicts the *dao* in similar terms:

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3. The description suggests that heaven, although lacking sound and smell, might have visible patterns or, at least, patterns that former kings made visible. The implicit instruction is for the leader to enact heaven's mandate in his dutiful behavior, presumably because the behavior will constitute a visible model. The implication might be that the rarified workings of the upper regions cannot be heard/smelled (related sensory modes) but can be known through something more solidified.

上天之載，無聲無臭。儀刑文王，萬邦作孚！

The doings (*zai* 載) of High Heaven

Have neither sound nor smell.

Take your pattern from King Wen,

And the myriad regions will repose confidence in you.

*Mao Shi* 毛詩〈大雅·文王之什〉〈文王〉

James Legge translation, 431.

4. In an aural/visual contrast, the second century c.e. text, the *Fengsutongyi*, simply blames transmission and diagramming.

傳言失指，圖景失形。

Transmitting speech misses its point, diagramming images loses their form.

*Fengsutongyi* 風俗通義 正失第二

道可受兮，不可傳；其小無內兮，其大無垠。

The dao can be received, [but] it cannot be transmitted. Its smallness [is so small that it] has no inwardness. Its greatness [is so great that it] has no limits.<sup>5</sup>

*Chuci* 楚辭 九章 遠遊

With entities of this vague sort, there is a correlation between resistance to measurement and resistance to being transmitted.

宙合之意，上通於天之上，下泉於地之下 . . . 是大之無外，小之無內。故曰有橐天地。其義不傳。

The all-embracing intention: above freely passes in the heaven's heights,<sup>6</sup> below springs forth in the earth's lows. . . . Expand it, there is no outside; minimize it, there is no inside. Hence the saying: "having the receptacle for heaven and earth." Its *yi* 義 (model)<sup>7</sup> is not transmitted.

*Guanzi* 管子卷第四 宙合第十一

The affairs of the sages, too, are simultaneously too large and too small.

故聖人之事，廣之則極宇宙、窮日月，約之則無出乎身者也。慈親不能傳於子，忠臣不能入於君，唯有其材者為近之。

Thus, regarding the work/service of the sages: if you broaden it, then it reaches the limits of the universe and exhausts the sun and moon; if you restrict it, then it has that which does not exit the body. Affectionate parents are unable to transmit it to their children. Loyal ministers are unable to make it penetrate into rulers. Only those with the materials come near to it.

*Lüshichunqiu* 呂氏春秋 審分覽第五 《執一》

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5. A statement in the *Zhuangzi* reverses this claim about transmission and receipt without the effect being different:

夫道，有情有信，無為無形；

可傳而不可受，可得而不可見；

The dao has *qing* and has reliability; but lacks doing and lacks form.

It can be transmitted but not received; it can be obtained, but not be seen.

*Zhuangzi* 莊子 大宗師第六

6. The reasons for my translation of this use of *yi* 意 in proximity to *tong* 通 are hopefully apparent from my discussions these two terms in chaps. 5 and 6.

7. I translate *yi* 義 as "model" because of its relation to *yi* 儀 and because "model" makes sense of multiple puzzling uses of the term in the early Chinese corpus that do not admit ethical readings, such as a term like "duty." I discuss this in my forthcoming *Emergence of Word-Meaning*.

This rhetoric of immeasurability applies to abstruse intellectual discussions (*yi* 議) as well. For instance, when a character in the *Zhuangzi* is asked to choose between two discussions regarding whether things have or lack causes, he responds as follows.<sup>8</sup>

雞鳴狗吠，是人之所知；雖有大知，不能以言讀其所自化，又不能以意〔測〕其所將為。斯而析之，精至於无倫，大至於不可圍。

Birds call and dogs bark. These are things everyone knows. But even if we have great knowing, we are unable to use speech to study what automates their [possibly barking or calling's] changes, and we are also unable to make a guess (*yi* 意) about their future behavior. If we take this and analyze it, its refinement reaches to where there is nothing to assess and its broadness reaches to where there is nothing to be mapped.  
*Zhuangzi* 莊子 則陽第二十五

The speaker declines to privilege one discussion over the other for reasons that remain somewhat unclear but are related to the immeasurability of the topic at hand. Bird and dog noises represent the density of an occupied territory when they appear in the *Mengzi*. Here in the *Zhuangzi*, the reference to them seems to posit that it is difficult to predict or speak of even the most familiar vocalizations, never mind arcane discussions. If accounting for mundane animal noises is beyond the ken of those who possess great knowing, how could the speaker choose between competing articulations of abstruse ideas? The passage ends with assertions about transmitting extreme limits.<sup>9</sup>

言而足，則終日言而盡道；言而不足，則終日言而盡物。道物之極，言默不足以載；非言非默，議有所極。

When speaking is sufficient, then speaking all day exhausts the dao.  
When speaking is not sufficient, then speaking all day exhausts things.

8. My interpretation of the two topics is tentative. They concern an opposition between *huoshi* 或使 and *mowei* 莫為 that seems to be about causality.

9. In this case, the term for “transmit” is *zai* 載, as if speech and silence were bearing something on their backs and as if being “sufficient” were a matter of being up to the task. The passage also adds that the subject can be spoken and guessed at, but it expresses doubt about the outcome of such speaking.

可言可意，言而愈疏。

It can be discussed and guessed at, but speaking [on the subject] increasingly diverges.

*Zhuangzi* 莊子 則陽第二十五

For the translation of *yi* as “guess,” see my *Emergence of Word-Meaning*.

At the extreme limit of the dao and things, speech and silence do not suffice to carry it. At not-speech and not-silence, discussions reach their extreme limit

*Zhuangzi* 莊子 則陽第二十五

Each line is open to multiple readings, but the passage contends that some things at their limits are beyond speech and silence, both of which are situated on the same plane.<sup>10</sup> Neither speech nor silence is assigned any blame; rather, there is a type of thing that can barely be known, let alone transmitted.

Of the various passages I have cited concerning things that cannot be transmitted, only the last directly mentions a failure of speech, and then only as a consequence of a more generalized problem of elusiveness. Thus, examining cases in which speech fails, along with silence, in light of claims about immeasurability shows that in early Chinese texts, speech is not singled out as a special target of criticism. Instead, the focus is on something that has no discernible boundaries, in other words, something that eludes transmission and even, in some cases, any knowledge or reception of it at all. Hence, to interpret such passages about the obscurity of certain things as an indictment of language is to mistake a concern about inaccessibility for a problem about language.

### Successful Speech

Cases in which speech successfully fulfills its role and yet transmission still breaks down also help demonstrate that failures of transmission often involve concerns other than speech. For example, consider a passage in the “Tian Dao” chapter of the *Zhuangzi* that is often cited as being antilanguage.

世之所貴道者書也，書不過語，語有貴也。語之所貴者意也，意有所隨。

意之所隨者，不可以言傳也，而世因貴言傳書。世雖貴之哉！猶不足貴也，為其貴非其貴也。

故視而可見者，形與色也；聽而可聞者，名與聲也。悲夫！世人以形色名聲為足以得彼之情！夫形色 名聲果不足以得彼之情，則知者不言，言者不知，而世豈識之哉！

The world's most valued dao is books. Books do not surpass conversation (*yu* 語). Conversation has something of value. What is of value in

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10. On my reading, the point is that the arcane discussion (possibly about causality) that begins the passage is itself beyond speech and silence. But the passage can be read as being about the dao, in which case the *yi* 議 in the last line need not refer back to its occurrence at the beginning of the passage.

conversation is *yi* 意 (what is on the heartmind). *Yi* has something it follows (*sui* 隨). What *yi* follows cannot be transmitted in speech. Nevertheless, the world—because it values speech—transmits books. Although the world values them, I still do not consider them sufficiently valuable, [because] I deem their value to be not their value.

Thus, what can be seen by looking is form and color. What can be heard by listening is name and sound. Alas! People of the world take form, color, name, and sound to be sufficient to get its [= the dao's? the thing *yi* follows?] *qing* 情 (motivations).<sup>11</sup> So, form, color, name, and sound are not sufficient to get its *qing*. Therefore, those who know do not speak and those who speak do not know, but how would the world be aware of this?!

*Zhuangzi* 莊子 天道第十三

As with many passages in early Chinese texts, this one betrays signs of having been composed of smaller passages subsequently joined together. (Indeed, it is difficult to produce a coherent interpretation that directly relates the second section of the passage to the first.) Consequently, it is useful to examine the larger passage's three distinct elements (two sections and a capping line) independently of one another.

The first part of the passage does not claim that speech fails to perform its normal task, which is to provide the speaker's *yi* 意. Getting the speaker's *yi* is a pursuit that the passage belittles for its relative triviality but not for its ineffectiveness. That is, the passage asserts the value of that which *yi* follows (*yi zhi suosuizhe* 意之所隨者) over the dao of books, which the world values because they contain speech, which conveys speakers' *yi*. While that which *yi* follows cannot be transmitted through speech, speech does allow people to get *yi*. The chain of reasoning supports this inference. Books, we are told, contain conversation.<sup>12</sup> Conversation is credited with having (or possessing, *you* 有) some value; therefore, the passage suggests, conversation possesses *yi*, which is to say, one can get *yi* from conversation.

The assertion that speech does not transmit the thing that *yi* follows also indirectly confirms that *yi* can be gotten through speech. Books contain conversation and conversation possesses *yi*. Hence, ordinary people are not wrong to expect to get *yi* and dao from books and speech. The point is not that books and speech do

11. I adopt the translation of *qing* 情 as something like motivational states, which could include feelings and attitudes, from Dan Robins. For an explanation of this way of bridging the fact and value uses of the term, see Robins's discussion in "Debate over Human Nature in Warring States China."

12. Although *yu* 語 is often used more specifically for "discussions" or "conversations" as distinct from *yan* 言 (speech), I am treating *yu* and *yan* as generally synonymous here because the passage does.

not have the valued *dao* that people routinely seek from them; rather, the narrator who speaks in this passage values something beyond what the whole world values—something in comparison to which the *dao* in books lacks value. Thus, despite minimizing its value, he does not assert that the world values something that has no value at all; instead, he maintains that the world is overlooking something of even greater value that is not part of books, conversation, or even *yi*. The world's values are off kilter; its expectations for speech are not. Language does not fail to convey *yi*; but that which *yi* follows, which most interests our exacting critic and which he does not specifically identify, evades transmission.

The passage offers three statements about the mysterious “that which *yi* follows.” First, the world does not value it as much as it does the *dao* of books, which contain conversation, which in turn possess *yi*. Second, *yi* follows it. Third, it cannot be transmitted by means of speech, whereas *yi* can. These three characterizations provide no definitive evidence that would allow us to make the case that the mysterious entity is reality or ultimate reality. Still, they do not preclude such interpretations. When the entity in question is mysterious, it is common to equate it with something else that is mysterious, like ultimate reality or an ultimate *dao*. Such an approach is compelling for scholars who identify the function of language as transmitting representations of reality. Accordingly, the passage would maintain that language is incapable of transmitting the ultimate *dao*. A failure to transmit might not seem too different from a failure to represent. Thus, if there is a failure to transmit the ultimate *dao*, it could seem tantamount to saying that language fails in its usual function of representing, in this case, ultimate reality.

On the other hand, we might interpret the passage's emphasis on books and conversation to mean that the mysterious, valuable thing is closely related to the function of speech, which involves transmitting what is on the heartmind. From that perspective, the thing that *yi* follows would be something specifically related to a person's intentions, feelings, thoughts, or motivations. Thus, it would be integral to the process of feeling and articulating intentions of the heartmind and unlike them only insofar as it is not transmittable via speech. Such an interpretative approach would recognize that, in claiming that the world places the highest value on the *dao* of books, the *dao* becomes an ordinary term in the passage. This usage—as if this particular *dao* were one among many—thus makes it less likely that the elusive, untransmitted thing that *yi* follows is “*dao*,” understood as the ultimate, only real way. Whether this passage addresses that sort of overarching *dao* is not, finally, resolvable, but the latter reading has more textual evidence in its favor.

While the first part of the passage considers the act of transmitting the unknown thing that *yi* follows, the second part concerns the act of getting (*de* 得) the *qing* 情 of some unidentified thing. Hence, both the action and the subject shift: transmitting and getting are not the same activities; moreover, the thing whose *qing* is not gotten is not obviously the same as the thing *yi* follows (*yi zhi suosuizhe* 意



之所隨者). The first section's focus on books, conversation, and *yi* is entirely absent in the second section. Viewed on its own, the second section has nothing to do with speech at all.

While the first section states that the world values books, the second section implies that the world values the important thing, although the world wrongly assumes it is available through the senses. Moreover, while the first section implies that the world gets what it values, the second section implies that it does not. That is, the first section says that the world places the highest value on the *dao* of books, which the speaker says do not contain the thing that should be valued. Hence the world does not value the right thing. The first section does not deny that the world gets what makes the *dao* of books valuable (presumably the *yi* of the conversation of the sages). Instead, it posits a more valuable thing that the world does not value. By contrast, in the second section, the presumption is that the world values the right thing, not a less valuable thing. Furthermore, in the first section, the world gets the thing it mistakenly values (which is audible and visible). By contrast, in the second section, the world values the right thing, but—unlike in the first section, when the world gets that thing it mistakenly values (which is audible and visible)—it gets nothing because it wrongly assumes that audible and visible things will provide it. Nothing can accommodate these divergences. The differences make it impossible to produce a coherent narrative that includes the details of both sections.

The notion of value and our lack of understanding of precisely what is meant by terms like *yi* and *qing* provide a shaky bridge between what *yi* follows and the *qing*. If we pursue that connection, however, the passage's second section expands the range of transmission's failures to all that is visible and audible. If the *qing* of the mysterious thing cannot be gotten via sound or sight, then the target of the passage's criticism is not speech or books alone but something more. Transmitting and getting this elusive thing is not possible by any means whatsoever. The unidentified entity sought is beyond anything visible or audible, including speech and books. The thing of highest value cannot be transmitted.

Like many passages in early Chinese texts, this one ends with a stylistic flourish, a line from the *Laozi* that juxtaposes speaking and knowing by way of objecting to verbosity. Knowing has not been mentioned earlier in the passage, but the capping line's reference to speaking, which is not raised in the second section, gives the appearance that it is tying the two sections together. Positioned as a final line to the passage, the quotation seems to suggest that, lest one sound like an idiot, one should not speak of the elusive thing (either the thing that *yi* follows or the thing whose *qing* is not audible or visible) since knowledge of it cannot be transmitted. In other words, even when read as a whole unit, the passage does not quite express an opposition to language. While it might be foolish to speak of things that cannot be transmitted, speaking in and of itself is not disdained.

### The Wheelwright's Failure to Transmit

In another passage in the “Tian Dao” chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, a wheelwright notes how difficult it is for him to transmit his knowledge, but he does not blame the medium of communication. To justify his outrageous claim that the ruler is reading the “dregs” of the ancients, he presents his own skill as analogous to that of the ancient sages. He thereby implies that the sages also had skills they could not transmit. They could not do so for the same reason that he cannot teach his son.

輪扁曰：「臣也以臣之事觀之。斲輪，徐則甘而不固，疾則苦而不入。不徐不疾，得之於手，而應於心，口不能言，有數存焉於其間。臣不能以喻臣之子，臣之子亦不能受之於臣，是以行年七十而老斲輪。古之人與其不可傳也死矣，然則君之所讀者，古人之糟魄已夫！」

The wheelwright said, “I use my work/service to consider it. In making a wheel, if my method is gentle, the outcome is sweet but not firm; if my method is violent, the outcome is bitter and does not penetrate. If I proceed without slowness or hurry, I get (*de* 得) it with my hand and respond to it with my heartmind. My mouth cannot say, but there is a knack surviving within it. I cannot make it clear to my son, nor can my son receive it from me. Thus, doing this for seventy years, I am making wheels in my old age. These ancients, and that which they could not transmit, are dead. That being the case, what you, lord, are reading is just their dregs!”

*Zhuangzi* 莊子 天道第十三

The wheelwright says that his mouth cannot explain what his hands and heartmind are doing, but we learn that the problem is more general than that: teaching itself is impossible. Whether the teachers in question are wheelwrights or sages, they cannot transmit the thing they value. The failure of transmission from parents to children is particularly poignant, for even in a relationship that intimate, imparting a skill is not possible.<sup>13</sup>

The wheelwright's description of his skill reminds us that there is more than one kind of teaching; therefore, to interpret the passage as an attack on language is to miss the larger point. Given the physical nature of making wheels, we can assume that the wheelwright tried to convey his skill to his son by showing as

13. This theme also occurs in *Huainanzi* 11 (齊俗訓) and the *Lüshichunqiu* (審分覽) 第五—17.8 (執一).

well as telling, but neither method succeeded.<sup>14</sup> The wheelwright mentions his hands' ability to "get" something and his heartmind's response. The getting seems to involve his hands making fine adjustments; the heartmind's response seems directed toward their effect. In this two-part process, the wheelwright's hands and his heartmind each exert their particular skill. Although the wheelwright does not specifically mention that he could not hold his son's hands to the wheel and make them get what he himself gets or make his son's heartmind respond in the same way, presumably his son would be making wheels if demonstrations had sufficed to transmit the wheelwright's skill. Hence, the reference to his mouth's failure is potentially misleading.

Linguistic teaching is the most obvious way for the wheelwright to illustrate his point to the ruler, but his choice of the linguistic medium does not turn his criticism into one aimed at speech and books in particular.<sup>15</sup> His claim is broader; it is directed toward the failure of teaching itself. By comparing the ancients' skills to his own, the wheelwright implies that the ancients are not to be faulted. In their speech and actions, they responded skillfully to their circumstances, just as he does. Like him, they were thwarted in their attempts, during their lifetimes, to teach their skills to anyone else. Because the wheelwright concludes by saying that the ancients and their failed transmissions are dead, readers might infer that ancient failed transmissions are even less useful precisely because they are ancient. The wheelwright's personal story, however, has just shown that being alive offers

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14. This resembles what Chad Hansen describes as a problem of guidance (see chaps. 3–5 below), but the guidance is not necessarily verbal, so the problem is not about language per se. The claim is not that speech is flawed because learning someone's speech means applying a static code to new situations. Teaching itself is at fault because—whether in speech or action—adjusting and responding to circumstances cannot be taught.

15. Claims about transmission often explicitly concern writing. *Mozi's* "Jian Ai Xia" 兼愛下 chapter assumes that writing is precisely that which can be transmitted, while the *Huainanzi* and the *Wenzi* criticize writing even as they assert that it can be transmitted. Speaking of perfected people who gag their mouths to refrain from speaking, the *Huainanzi* says:

然天下莫知貴其不言也。故道可道，非常道；名可名，非常名。著於竹帛，鏤於金石，可傳於人者，其粗也。

Yet none in the world knows to value their non-speaking. Thus, ways (dao) can be used as ways (dao-ed); they are not constant daos. Names can be named; they are not constant names. Writing on bamboo or silk and carving in metal or stone which can be transmitted to others are their dregs.

*Huainanzi* 淮南子 本經訓

See also *Wenzi* "Jing Cheng" 文子 精誠.

no advantage over being dead in that regard. Perhaps there is some tension in the passage insofar as these two ideas suggest different conclusions. Readers in the habit of assuming that writing is dregs because it is not present might look past the wheelwright's illustration and think they recognize a familiar idea here: writing implies the past and absence; speech implies the present and is superior to writing; and the full presence of the mind's inner speech or silent thinking is best of all. In contrast to how the passage is typically read, however, it does not accuse writing of being more out of touch than speech. The logic of the wheelwright's illustration is remarkable for not implying that being dead for less time—or being alive and talking in front of the ruler—would improve the situation. Even hands-on training would not help. Although the wheelwright does not explicitly say so, his own presumably manual as well as verbal teaching attempts are as much “dregs” as the ancients' were; hence this attack is not targeted at language.

The wheelwright's description of his unteachable skill makes it clear why his teaching attempts are dregs by emphasizing the continuous adjustments and responses the skill encompasses. Steering between extremes, he finds the action that is just right. The problem with transmitted knowledge, we can hence infer, is that it presumes that such adjustments and responses are teachable. The wheelwright implies that if one learns at all, one acquires the skill oneself, by doing. Therefore, even though it is a book that prompts the wheelwright passage, the problem it investigates does not lie in writing or speech. By comparing a wheelwright's skill to those of the sages, the passage minimizes the difference between verbal and nonverbal skills and indicates that teaching is not always verbal. The recorded teachings in the books the ruler is reading are indeed useless but no more so than the hands-on teaching the wheelwright presumably tried to share with his son. Here, the reason for the inability to transmit is evident: attunement cannot be taught.

### Transmitting the “That By/For Which” of Speech

A passage in the *Wenzi* that is often interpreted as antilanguage is likewise better understood as concerning an incommunicable knack. The passage identifies the feature of speech that cannot be spoken as its *suoyiyan* 所以言. The grammar of *suoyi* 所以 implies “that by/for which” an action occurs. The “by” and “for” in “that by/for which they spoke” indicate two possible readings of *suoyiyan*: on the one hand, as a method of acting or, on the other, as a purpose or reason for acting.<sup>16</sup>

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16. “Reason” (as in “the reason why they spoke”) is a variation on “purpose.” If we understand this to be about reason, then “reason” in the sense of purpose or motivation—as opposed to cause or justification—works best here. In that sense, their goal of eradicating disorder could be the reason for their speech, which is then used by someone.

Thus, we can assert at the start that the *suoyiyan* can be read as either the reason for speaking or the means for speaking.

As in the wheelwright passage, the *Wenzi* passage emphasizes the idea of being attuned, but in this case there is also particular emphasis on the impact of time.<sup>17</sup>

苟利於民，不必法古，苟周於事，不必循俗。故聖人法與時變，禮與俗化，衣服器械，各便其用，法度制令，各因其宜，故變古未可非，而循俗未足多也。誦先王之書，不若聞其言，聞其言，不若得其所言，得其所言者，言不能言也，故「道可道，非常道也，名可名，非常名也。」

If you want to benefit the masses, you do not have to make antiquity the standard. If you want to make events/service universal, you do not have to adhere to customs. Thus, the sages' standards change with the times, *li* [ritual action] changes with customs; clothes and implements, each avails of its use; standards, measures, and establishing orders, each adapts its appropriateness. Thus changing the old cannot be rejected. Adhering to custom does not merit much. Reciting the books of the ancient kings is not as good as hearing their speech; hearing their speech is not as good as getting their that for/by which they spoke (*suoyiyan*). [But] getting their that for/by which they spoke [is something that] speech cannot speak. Therefore, "Ways (dao) can be used as ways (dao-ed). They are not constant ways. Names can be named. They are not constant names."

*Wenzi* 文子 上義

The beginning of the passage affirms the necessity for change, which establishes a ranking for books and speech according to measures of timeliness, which determine usefulness and appropriateness. When the passage moves to the body's processing of teachings, it asserts that reciting something from the past is inferior to hearing something in the present. At this point, the passage veers off in a new direction, one that poses an interpretive challenge. Being able to hear the ancients speak is less valuable than "getting" (*de* 得) something else: that by/for which they spoke (*suoyiyan*). It is not clear what the *suoyiyan* is, but the implication is that getting it is more beneficial than hearing someone speak.

The temporal ranking in the passage sheds light on the meaning of getting the *suoyiyan*. The opening lines rebuff rigidity, which provides an interpretive clue toward explaining why the passage then situates books at the far end of a spectrum. On a scale of rigidity, books are at one end because they are further removed than speech from the events to which the ancients were responding. At the other end of the spectrum is the *suoyiyan*, which is extremely sensitive to change.

17. As I explain in the introduction, n. 5, it is difficult to date passages, but here we should keep in mind that the *Wenzi* passage could be from a much later date than the *Zhuangzi* passage.

This reading is further supported by the passage's emphasis on the processes involved in the activities of hearing, getting, and reading. In early Chinese texts, *yi* 意 is generally what people seek to get from speech, but the "Tian Dao" chapter makes it clear that there is something other than *yi* that can be sought from speech. Even if this *suoyiyan* in the *Wenzi* is not the thing to which the "Tian Dao" chapter alludes, the existence of something else that is sought from speech contradicts the assumption that whatever is gotten from speech must be *yi*. Indeed, it is notable that the term *yi* is altogether absent from the *Wenzi* passage. Rather than looking to uses of *yi* for clues to interpret the *suoyiyan*, then, a more effective means might be to examine its series of verbs, which compare three kinds of action: reciting books, hearing speech, and getting the *suoyiyan*. The act of getting the *suoyiyan* is given more weight than the *suoyiyan*; as the text states, it is not the *suoyiyan* itself that cannot be spoken, it is the getting of it. Thus, we can conclude that the opposite pole from the untimeliness of books is the immediacy of an action: getting something from speech. Because this getting is not a thing but a process of doing something, we can infer that it cannot be spoken for the same reason that the wheelwright's skill cannot be transmitted to his son. That is, this getting requires attunement and responsiveness, which one must apparently acquire on one's own. Hence, the getting cannot be spoken, or articulated, because certain things simply cannot be transmitted. Even to attempt to explain the skill of getting the *suoyiyan* would be contrary to its responsiveness. Thus, the passage does not assert the ineffability of the *suoyiyan*; rather, despite its explicit mention of speech's inability to speak, it asserts something broader: the skill of getting the *suoyiyan* requires sensitivity and thus cannot be taught.

The appearance of the *suoyiyan* in the *Huainanzi* sheds further light on how early Chinese texts might use the term. In the *Huainanzi*, getting the *suoyiyan* helps differentiate sagelike speech from parrot speech.

16.8 聖人終身言治，所用者非其言也。用所以言也。歌者有詩，然使人善之者，非其詩也。鸚鵡能言，而不可使長〔言〕。是何則？得其所言，而不得其所以言。故循迹者，非能生迹者也。

The sages spend their lives speaking about order. But what is used is not their speech. [They or we] use that by/for which they speak (*suoyiyan*). Singers have lyrics (*shi* 詩), but what causes people to appreciate them is not their lyrics. Parrots can speak, but they cannot be made to extend [their speech]. Why is that? Because they get (*de* 得) that which is spoken, but they do not get their that by/for which it is spoken (*suoyiyan*). Thus, following footprints is not [the same as] being able to generate footprints.<sup>18</sup>

*Huainanzi* 淮南子 說山訓

18. I thank Dan Robins for his suggestions about translating this passage.

In sum, the analogies stack up as follows: sages, singers, and parrots all speak (in some sense), and in each case there is something unexpected about their speech.<sup>19</sup> But sages have something that parrots lack.<sup>20</sup> While parrots are able to speak, they are not able to generate speech.<sup>21</sup> “Getting/achieving speech” (*deyan* 得言) must be a minimal skill because parrots can do so.

It might seem reasonable to read the first two lines of the *Huainanzi* passage as an antilanguage statement, one that asserts that the referent or meaning of speech (in this case “order”) is more important than speech itself. In other words, order is used, and the sages’ speech is just a means to that use. However, the grammar of *suoyiyan* precludes such a reading.<sup>22</sup> “That by/for which” applies to an action. Thus, *suoyi* must be a means or purpose of an action. In this context, *suoyiyan* can be only a method for speaking or a purpose or motivation for speaking.

As in the *Wenzi* passage, I argue, the use of *suoyiyan* in the *Huainanzi* case is more plausibly viewed as a method than as a purpose for speaking. There are several grounds for such an interpretation. First, recall that the *Wenzi* asserts that getting the *suoyiyan* is something that cannot be spoken, but early Chinese texts do

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19. As the *Shiji* puts it, lyrics (or poems) are the speaking of the *yi*, which is elongated by the songs.

詩言意，歌長言 . . .

The *Shi* speaks the *yi* 意, the songs elongate the speech . . .

*Shiji* 史記 紀《五帝本紀第一》

20. There is no basis in this passage for saying whether the singers are more like sages or parrots on this point. But the *Huainanzi* mentions that the songs of Hu Liang can be followed, whereas the “that by which” (*suoyi* 所以) he sang them cannot be made; hence, at least one famous ancient singer seems closer to a sage than to parrots.

故狐梁之歌可隨也，其所以歌者不可為也。

Therefore, the songs of Hu Liang can be followed, but his “that by which” he sang cannot be made.

*Huainanzi* 淮南子 齊俗訓

Compare Andrew Meyer’s translation in *Huainanzi: A Guide*, 413.

21. The other parrot-related claims about getting that which is spoken and its *suoyiyan* are more ambiguous because the passage does not specify whether the speaking in question belongs to the parrots or to others or some combination of both. For instance, it might say that parrots are able to get what they themselves say, but they cannot extend their own speech or get “that by which” they themselves speak. On the other hand, it might be that parrots are able to get what others say, but they cannot extend the speech that they hear from others or get “that by which” others speak.

22. A thing that speech “is about” is not the same as something “by which” we speak. In other words, *suoyiyan* is different from *suoyanzhe* 所言者. Thus, *suoyiyan* is not “what they say.”

not treat getting people's purpose for speaking as beyond expression. As the "Tian Dao" passage discussed above indicates, the common assumption is that speech possesses *yi*, and early Chinese texts often describe people inferring the *zhi* 志 or *yi* from someone's speech. Furthermore, if one assumes that animals have motivations, there is no obvious reason why the *Huainanzi* would say parrots lack motivation or reason for speaking. Indeed, factors like motivation more plausibly account for choices than possibilities, which is what this passage emphasizes. In other words, motivation does not quite address why parrots *bu ke* 不可 (cannot) and *fei neng* 非能 (are unable to) extend or generate speech.<sup>23</sup> Thus, when reading the two passages in light of one another, in both cases "means of speaking" looks like a better understanding of *suoyiyan* than is "purpose for speaking."<sup>24</sup>

If we grant that the passage is about the means by which the sages speak, as opposed to their purpose or motive, we are still left with the task of interpreting the idea of a means of speaking. The implied contrast of sages to parrots makes it likely that the *suoyiyan* is involved with attunement and timeliness. Parrots say

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23. The singing analogy is not complete, and the passage does not mention what constitutes the goodness of the singing. For instance, it could be the motivation for the singing, the response of the audience, the sound of the music, or the skill of the singer. It could be the *suoyi* 所以 of singing. Without more context, it is difficult to say.

24. A few other examples also seem to be about the means of speaking rather than the purpose of speaking. In the subsequent lines of *Huainanzi* example introduced above, the fact that it is a question of "giving shape" to the speech of disputers helps rule out that the matter concerns the purpose of speaking. It says that, while the disputers' speech can be listened to, its *suoyiyan* cannot be given a shape. One need not give a purpose shape; simply being able to listen to it would be sufficient. But, as a method, something like a means of speaking is more amenable to being discussed in terms of taking shape.

故狐梁之歌可隨也，其所以歌者不可為也；聖人之法可觀也，其所以作法不可原也；辯士〔之〕言可聽也，其所以言不可形也。

Therefore, the songs of Hu Liang can be followed, but his "that by which" he sang cannot be made. The sages' standards can be observed, but their "that by which" they made standards cannot be sourced. The speech of disputing scholars can be listened to, but their "that by which" they speak cannot be given form.

*Huainanzi* 淮南子 齊俗訓

A briefer, slightly different version of the passage that appears in the *Wenzi*, which is explicitly about temporality (because it begins with rulers of old and the necessity for change), explains this in terms of the impossibility of recapturing the means by which the sages operated.

聖人〔法之〕〔之法〕可觀也，其所以作法不可原也，其言可聽也，其所以言不可形也。

The sages' standards can be observed, [but] their "that by which" they made standards cannot be sourced. Their speech can be listened to, [but] their "that by which" they spoke cannot be shaped.

*Wenzi* 文子 道德



things at the wrong time. They speak with no relation to what is going on around them. Moreover, nothing can make parrots say more about a situation, even when additional speech is urgently needed. In other words, from an observer's perspective, parrots appear to have no skill in attunement. The passage notes that parrots cannot generate speech. That is, they have the ability to speak but cannot produce new speech. Therefore, although capping lines are often not particularly apt, in this case the capping line of the passage seems fitting. As the metaphor of following footprints suggests, parrots merely imitate what they have heard. If one cannot generate one's own speech, then one is not able to gauge and say what is appropriate in a given situation. At the conclusion of the metaphorical path of footprints, then, the sages' means for speaking seems to be the vehicle that allows them to produce speech that is apt.

Further analysis of the nature of *suoyiyan* requires addressing some of the ambiguity in the passage regarding the agents who "use" it. The passage mentions using speech, getting speech, using the *suoyiyan*, getting the *suoyiyan*, and simply being able to speak. The specific differences between these actions are not always clear; in interpreting the passage, however, the most significant difference concerns the sources of *suoyiyan*.<sup>25</sup> In other words, is using the *suoyiyan* a skill in listening

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The *Fayan* example also concerns time, which makes it seem to be about responsiveness, not reason or purpose. It answers the question of why Kongzi's way is not constant.

聖人固多變。子游、子夏得其書矣，未得其所以書也；宰我、子貢得其言矣，未得其所以言也；顏淵、閔子騫得其行矣，未得其所以行也。聖人之書、言、行，天也。天其少變乎？

The sage certainly often changed. Zi You and Zi Xia got his writings, but did not get his "that by which" he wrote. Zai Wo and Zi Gong got his speech, but did not get his "that by which" he spoke. Yan Yuan and Min Ziqian got his actions but did not get his "that by which" he acted. The sage's writing, speaking, and acting are from heaven. How could heaven rarely change?

*Fayan* 法言 君子卷第十二

The transition between the opening assertion that the sage changed and the subsequent list of the failures of his followers is abrupt unless we see what the final line implies about change. As good as these students were, each one also failed to get something that required attunement to changing circumstances.

25. The question of whose *suoyiyan* is "gotten" is less significant than who uses the *suoyiyan* because the passage does not describe anyone as getting the *suoyiyan*. The passage only mentions that the parrots fail to get it in addition to noting that the parrots also cannot generate or extend speech. But if there is a difference between the claim that parrots are able to speak and the assertion that they "get speech," then getting speech could be a listening comprehension skill. By extension, that would suggest that getting the *suoyiyan* is also about getting something from someone else's speech. But it is also possible that being able to speak and "getting speech" are the same thing. In that case, getting speech consists in realizing or achieving the ability to speak. That is, the speaker is "getting" his/her own speech. On that reading, getting the *suoyiyan* would also pertain to getting or realizing something in oneself.

and comprehending or in speaking? I will explore both options to try to identify the *suoyiyan*.

On the one hand, the agents who use the sages' means of speaking (*suoyiyan*) could be their followers: that is, those who comprehend their talk about order. According to this reading, the sages' followers, having been exposed to the sages' speech, subsequently use their "means of speech" as their own. The passage might even assume that, insofar as speaking relies on the speech of others, all speakers, by default, use others' means of speech. The *suoyiyan*, then, might refer to the way in which, when we use someone else's speech, we do not repeat their exact speech; rather, we model our means of speaking on theirs. Such a reading also poses an analogy between the use of speech and the valuing of singing. Accordingly, we do not value singing for its lyrics (speech) but for something else, supposedly (although it is not directly articulated as such) the means of singing. The third analogy in the passage would thus imply that speech itself (whether it belongs to sages or singers) is no better than the speech of parrots, who "get speech" but cannot get the means of speaking. Taking that reading of the passage to its logical conclusion, the means of speaking is better than speech itself because it generates and extends speech in ways that are appropriate to the occasion. In sum, this interpretation would assert the importance of the means of speaking over speech itself. Scholars who accept such an interpretation might view the passage as criticizing speech, but it cannot be denied that while it does so, it also praises the means of speech.

On the other hand, the passage might be referring to the sages as the agents who use their own *suoyiyan*. Speaking "all day" is a sage's work.

終日言必有聖之事。

To speak all day one must have the service/events of a sage.

*Huainanzi* 淮南子 說林訓

As the *Xunzi* notes, while the *junzi*'s (gentlemen) caution in speaking is well known, the sages characteristically speak a good deal.

多言而類、聖人也，少言而法、君子也。多（少）〔言〕無法而流喆然，雖辨，小人也。

A sage is one who speaks a lot but with classification. A *junzi* is one who speaks little but with method. A small person is one who speaks a lot and in a loose uninhibited way.

*Xunzi* 荀子 非十二子篇第六

Although these passages do not say so, the reader knows that speaking all day is taxing, but the sages are apparently not exhausted. They are able to speak endlessly

because what they use to speak is not speech. Instead, they use “that by which” they speak: a method or a means that allows them to speak for an entire lifetime, possibly even about a single subject like order. Thus, they are able to tap a source like the *Zhuangzi*’s goblet words, which never run out. By contrast, the parrot’s inability to generate speech illustrates not “getting,” and therefore not using, the means of speaking. Singers, too, sometimes sound like parrots, and we do not value such singing. What we do value is not mere lyric production but the singer’s attunement of his or her singing to a particular situation. By extension, ordinary people do not use the means of speaking. They simply use speech to speak, which is to say, they take the speech they have already heard and reuse it with insufficient regard to what is happening around them. They speak like parrots, not like sages. According to the foregoing reading of the passage, the contrast between using speech and using the means of speaking highlights the sages’ uniqueness. No criticism of speech, even a subtle one, is present; instead, what is criticized is a certain type of speaking.

Like the first interpretation, this second reading accounts for the parrot and the singer analogies, but it explains as well why sages are mentioned at the opening of the passage. If the point was merely that the means of speaking is more important than speech, we might expect to see more emphasis on the difference between human speech and parrot speech. Instead, we see a contrast between sages at one extreme and parrots at the other, with humans potentially falling somewhere in between, depending on their ability to rise above their parrot-like tendencies. Furthermore, the second interpretation accounts for why the passage stresses the extent to which the sages spoke, which is made possible by their use of the means of speaking.

But what, after all, is the means by which we speak? Perhaps “means” sounds too mechanical. The “means” is something hard to pin down. It could include the actions of the mouth, the mind, the voice, and the breath as well as those entities’ abilities to act and their capacity to sense when to do so. If *suoyiyan* is a skill that complex, we can appreciate why the *Wenzi* affirms that getting it cannot be spoken.

The *suoyiyan* in the *Huainanzi* and the *Wenzi* are not necessarily equivalent to whatever it is that *yi* follows (*yi zhi suosuizhe* 意之所隨者) in the “Tian Dao” passage. While such a similarity is possible, the texts elicit a more limited conclusion. The passages discuss a skill that is difficult to teach; they are not talking about a reality whose ineffability demonstrates the flaws of language. They associate the skill with speech simply because speaking is an important way of teaching. Moreover, to anticipate my discussion of the prescriptive-inconstancy version of the alleged language crisis (see chapters 3–5), they are not focusing on speech per se as failing to be constant over time. The point is that—whatever the method employed—because nothing is constant over time, teaching a skill that requires responsiveness is impossible.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have set out to show what is lost when we fit passages that describe access and transmission into a readymade framework from the dominant Western philosophical tradition that poses a relation of “language” to “reality.” The idea that language blocks access to reality presumes that language is on a different plane from reality, that its goal is to represent reality, and that for various reasons it fails to do so. Instead, in early Chinese texts, speech is not described as “representing,” and it is something that supplies access. The discourse of “getting” (*de* 得) and “transmitting” (*chuan* 傳) imply the idea of access but not the idea that reality is on the other side of a potential language barrier.