Estudios de Filosofía
ISSN 0121-3628 | ISSN-e: 2256-358X

Artículo de Investigación

From graph to meaning: A phenomenological challenge to phonocentric readings of Chinese pictographs

Christopher Gutland
Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, China
ORCID: 0000-0003-1711-957X
gutland@zju.edu.cn

Received: September 13, 2025 | Approved: November 19, 2025
Online First: February 12, 2026
DOI: https://doi.org/10.17533/udea.ef.362210

Estudios de Filosofía
ISSN 0121-3628 | ISSN-e: 2256-358X

Artículo de Investigación

From graph to meaning: A phenomenological challenge to phonocentric readings of Chinese pictographs

Christopher Gutland
Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, China
ORCID: 0000-0003-1711-957X
gutland@zju.edu.cn

Abstract:
This article conducts a phenomenological exploration of how Chinese pictographs could function as language signs before their visual resemblance to their referents entirely faded. The aim is to reassess the dominant explanation of this development, namely, William Boltz's phonocentric view that writing must derive meaning through sound. Drawing on Husserlian phenomenology, the article advances the thesis that pictographs can motivate linguistic meaning directly through visual schematism, not only through association with spoken words. Methodologically, it analyzes Husserl's distinctions between image-consciousness, hieroglyphs, and linguistic sign-consciousness to explicate how Chinese pictographs prevent the opening of an image space and instead prompt the constitution of general meanings that are further intersubjectively stabilized through conventionalization. The result is a phenomenological model that not only counters phonocentric accounts but also clarifies how pictographs, despite their visual resemblance, could function as linguistic signs. The conclusion shows that written graphs can function as words independently of speech, thereby complementing sinological and linguistic research with a phenomenological account of meaning constitution.

Keywords: Chinese pictographs, phonocentrism, Husserl, phenomenology, image consciousness, language signs, hieroglyphs

How to cite this article

Gutland, C. (2026). From graph to meaning: A phenomenological challenge to phonocentric readings of Chinese pictographs. *Estudios de Filosofía*, *xx*, xx–xx. https://doi.org/10.17533/udea.ef.362210

Estudios de Filosofía
ISSN 0121-3628 | ISSN-e: 2256-358X

Del grafo al significado: un desafío fenomenológico a las lecturas fonocéntricas de los pictogramas chinos

Resumen: Este artículo realiza una exploración fenomenológica de cómo las pictografías chinas podían funcionar como signos lingüísticos antes de que su semejanza visual con sus referentes se desvaneciera por completo. El objetivo es reevaluar la explicación dominante de este desarrollo, a saber, la visión fonocéntrica de William Boltz, según la cual la escritura debe derivar significado a través del sonido. Basándose en la fenomenología husserliana, el artículo plantea la tesis de que las pictografías pueden motivar el significado lingüístico directamente a través del esquematismo visual, no solo mediante la asociación con palabras habladas. Metodológicamente, analiza las distinciones de Husserl entre la conciencia de imagen, los jeroglíficos y la conciencia del signo lingüístico para explicar cómo las pictografías chinas impiden la apertura de un espacio de imagen y, en cambio, impulsan la constitución de significados generales que se estabilizan intersubjetivamente mediante la convencionalización. El resultado es un modelo fenomenológico que no solo contradice las teorías fonocéntricas, sino que también aclara cómo las pictografías, a pesar de su semejanza visual, podrían funcionar como signos lingüísticos. La conclusión muestra que los gráficos escritos pueden funcionar como palabras independientemente del habla, complementando así la investigación sinológica y lingüística con una explicación fenomenológica de la constitución del significado.

Palabras clave: Pictografías chinas, fonocentrismo, Husserl, fenomenología, conciencia de imagen, signos del lenguaje, jeroglíficos

Christopher Gutland is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, China. He received his PhD in philosophy from the University of Freiburg on the topic of a phenomenology of thinking. His research focuses on phenomenology, consciousness studies, epistemology, cognitive phenomenology, and German idealism. He has published in peer-reviewed journals such as *European Psychologist, Frontiers in Psychology*, and *Journal für Psychologie*, and co-edited several volumes on phenomenology and consciousness research. He has held research fellowships at Sun Yat-sen University and worked as a research assistant at the Husserl Archive Freiburg. He serves as an associate editor for *Frontiers in Psychology*'s Consciousness Research section.

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1711-957X

Estudios de Filosofía
ISSN 0121-3628 | ISSN-e: 2256-358X

Introduction

In its earliest attested stages, the Chinese script included characters that visually resembled their referents. These characters, known as 'pictographs', are called 象形 *xiangxing* in Chinese, a term that conveys the similarity (象) in shape (形) between a graph and its referent. They are frequently taken to have begun as relatively faithful depictions that later became increasingly abstract. On this usual assumption, early readers are thought to have understood pictographs primarily through their imagistic qualities, which raises the question: How could such graphs continue to function as linguistic signs once their pictoriality faded?

In Western sinology, William Boltz offered an influential answer. He argued that pictographs were able to sustain their referential function by representing words, which he understands as meaningful pronunciations—an approach often described as 'phonocentrism', since it grounds the capacity of writing in its relation to sound. While this explanation is possible, the present article argues—drawing on Husserlian phenomenology—that it is by no means necessary, since pictographs are able to *graphically* evoke *linguistic* meaning. The analysis is phenomenological rather than empirical; it explores general possibilities of meaning-construal in consciousness and does not attempt a historical reconstruction of Shang scribes' actual experiences, which cannot be recovered from the surviving material record.

At first glance, this may seem like a narrow issue confined to one language (Chinese) and one field (sinology). Yet what is at stake is the broader philosophical question of what constitutes language and words as its elements. Must words, as Boltz maintains, be meaningful sounds? Or can any sensory medium carry linguistic meaning, as Husserl's revised reflections on language signs suggest? Chinese writing provides a particularly fruitful case for this inquiry, since it is one of the few languages still in use that never developed an alphabet. Alphabetic writing inevitably supports phonocentrism, since it functions by transcribing sounds. To generalize from this model, however, risks a one-sided doctrine that reduces writing to sound.

To counter this, the article draws on Husserl to investigate how the graphic form of early pictographs motivates linguistic meaning without reliance on sound. What distinguishes this study is that it addresses a long-standing sinological debate phenomenologically, examining how the meaning of pictographs is constituted *in consciousness* rather than presupposing an abstract notion of linguistic meaning detached from the human mind, the only place where such meaning is actually experienced. In this way, the article bridges disciplinary boundaries by

showing how phenomenological analysis can reframe a linguistic question traditionally addressed within sinology.

The argument proceeds in several steps. First, the article outlines key debates in sinology concerning the nature of the Chinese script. Second, it introduces Boltz's phonocentric thesis, which became the most influential outcome of these debates, offering critical reflections. Third, it examines examples of pictographic writing and highlights features that distinguish them from faithful depictions. These examples are chosen as representative cases to clarify a philosophical point, not as an exhaustive survey of all pictographs. Fourth, Husserl's account of linguistic signs and image-consciousness is introduced to show how pictographs blur the boundary between the two, thereby calling for phenomenological analysis. Finally, Husserl's reflections on hieroglyphs are applied to illuminate how Chinese pictographs initially occupied a middle ground between images and linguistic signs, and how they eventually became conventional symbols once their pictoriality diminished.[1]

1. The Background Debates on Classifying the Chinese Script

Before turning to a phenomenological analysis of pictographs, it is helpful to recall how the Chinese script has been viewed within broader philosophical and sinological debates. In her recent extensive study, *The Origins of Chinese Writing*, which this article frequently references, Paula Demattè (2022, pp. 21–36) explores philosophical perspectives on the relationship between writing and speech that provide the context for examining the Chinese script.

The belief that the entire script is pictographic is still occasionally voiced, both in the West and in China, but it is demonstrably false: Almost all of the original pictographs have long lost their visual resemblance,[2] and today, pictographs constitute only about 1% of the script.[3] In the earliest inscriptions, however, pictographs still comprised roughly 23% (DeFrancis, 1984, p. 84; Demattè, 2022, p. 345, note 4). While this still does not justify calling the entire script

[1] This article combines and extends arguments developed in two other articles. One employs Husserl's revised account of linguistic signs to challenge phonocentric explanations of the Chinese script *as a whole* (Gutland, in press-a). The other investigates how Chinese pictographs were likely read in contrast to both arbitrary sign consciousness and image consciousness (Gutland, in press-b). The present article fuses these lines of inquiry: It explores the specifics of linguistic meaning intention that pictographs motivate and, on this basis, rejects phonocentric explanations—not for the entire script, but specifically for pictographs.

[2] Demattè (2022, p. 15) mentions 串 *chuan* ('to string together') as one of the few exceptions.

[3] This method of counting disregards the fact that former pictographs sometimes persist as components within other types of characters. In such cases, the character is not classified as a pictograph here.

'pictographic', it does represent a significant proportion. The present article focuses on these early pictographs.

Philosophical judgments of scripts diverged sharply. Rousseau placed pictorial signs at the lowest stage of civilization—appropriate only to "savage peoples"—while elevating the alphabet as the mark of the "civilized" (Demattè, 2022, pp. 24–25; Rousseau, 1998, p. 297). By contrast, Plotinus praised Egyptian hieroglyphs precisely because they eschewed phonetic transcription, regarding them as more directly connected to knowledge (Demattè, 2022, p. 24; Plotinus, 2018, p. 616 / V.8.6). Leibniz speculated that due to the absence of an alphabet, Chinese graphs might reveal the structure of thought itself (Creel, 1936, p. 105).[4]

These philosophical assessments represent opposite poles—one dismisses, the other celebrates pictographic writing—but neither fully matches the Chinese case. After all, even at its earliest documented stage, only a quarter of the script was pictographic, its pictoriality quickly diminished, and, as will be shown, pictographs were likely never faithful images.

In modern sinology, the idea that the script is entirely pictographic is seldom defended. Instead, a major debate of the 1930s opposed Herrlee Glessner Creel, who claimed that Chinese writing is essentially ideographic (graphs represent ideas), and Peter Boodberg, who argued that it is logographic (graphs represent words understood as meaningful phonetic entities) (Boodberg, 1937, 1940; Creel, 1936, 1939). The logographic view was carried forward by Boodberg's student William G. Boltz (1994, 1999, 2006). As Sampson and Chen (2013, p. 257) observe, today "no knowledgeable scholar would support" Creel's ideographic thesis. In contrast, the phonocentric perspective of Boodberg and Boltz continues to shape the field (Demattè, 2022, p. xxvii). Let us now turn to this perspective and examine in more detail how it explains the loss of visual resemblance in pictographs.

2. Phonocentrism and Its Limits

The logographic framework developed by Boodberg and Boltz rests on a distinctly phonocentric premise: Chinese graphs became writing only when they came to represent spoken words. This assumption echoes a long Western tradition. Aristotle had already declared

[4] Naturally, when discussing phonocentrism, Derrida (1976) comes to mind with his critique of Western logocentrism, instead proposing that Chinese characters are ideographic (Demattè, 2022, p. 26). Yet graphically mimicking the *visual appearance* of referents—the topic here—is not the same as writing an *idea*, which is why I do not delve into Derrida further here. For an argument why the Chinese characters are neither all logographs nor all ideographs, see Gutland (in press-a).

that "writing is a sign of a sign" (Aristotle, 1963, p. 16a3; Demattè, 2022, p. 23). For alphabetic languages such as Aristotle's native language, Greek, this claim holds: The letters of the alphabet serve to represent sounds. In themselves, such letters carry no discernible meaning. Their graphic forms thus connect to meaning only indirectly, by way of sound. Granting this indirectness in alphabetic languages, the present section examines Boltz's attempt to impose the same principle on Chinese writing.

2.1.Boltz's Explanation of the Compensation for Lost Pictoriality

In this subsection, I focus on Boltz's explanation of what compensated for the declining pictoriality in pictographs. Section 3,4, by contrast, turns to how Boltz describes this gradual decline as such. He explains the compensation for pictoriality in the following way:

> Once a pictograph has become a logograph, standing for a word, not a thing, and conveying its meaning by virtue of the *word* it represents, not by a visually identifiable representation of the *thing* it depicts, it need not maintain its depictive realism any longer (Boltz, 1999, pp. 112–113).

According to this view, once a graph stands for a spoken word—understood as a "meaningful phonetic entity," as it entails "both a pronunciation and a meaning" (Boltz, 1999, pp. 117, 122)—the spoken word 'takes over' the function of meaning-reference. Written signs themselves, Boltz insists, cannot be words:

> Chinese characters stand for words rather than for individual sounds. Bear in mind that a *word* is a spoken thing; to refer to the written representation of a word as a 'word' is a convenience, but is not precise. Inasmuch as words, by definition, have not only sound, but also meaning, so Chinese characters, which stand for words, therefore also carry meaning as well (Boltz, 1994, p. 4).

Boltz thus attributes to Chinese writing the same indirectness characteristic of alphabets: Written graphs mediate meaning only through sound. His belief in the primacy of sound as the carrier of linguistic meaning becomes explicit when he claims that "the graph stands for the meaning of the word *only* by virtue of standing for the *sound* of the word in question" (Boltz, 1994, p. 19). On his account, non-phonetic symbols—such as graphs—can *represent* words but never *be* words.

Once a pictograph acquires such a phonetic association, Boltz terms it a "zodiograph" (Boltz, 1999, p. 110) or "iconic graph" (Boltz, 2006, p. 43). He explains: "The difference between a pictograph and a zodiograph lies not in the graph itself, but in whether in its usage it

carries a conventional phonetic association (a pronunciation) or not" (Boltz, 1999, p. 110). Phonetic association indeed does not alter the graph's visual form.

Boltz's explanation of the loss of pictoriality cannot be dismissed outright. Yet it is not the only possible explanation. The following subsections (2,3 and 2,4) offer critical philosophical reflections on phonocentrism to show this. These preliminary reflections do not yet address the particular case of pictographs but aim to loosen the grip of phonocentric bias.

2.2.The Principle of Phonocentrism

Boltz summarizes: It is through the "process we call 'phonetization'" that "pictographs, or any other kinds of graphs, turn into writing" (Boltz, 1999, p. 110). This indicates that Boltz holds *all* Chinese characters—not only pictographs—"convey their meaning by standing for words, and the words carry the meaning intrinsically" (Boltz, 2006, p. 42). His belief in the primacy of sound permits only the following path to linguistic meaning:

Pronunciation → *Meaning*

Consequently, for written graphs to possess linguistic meaning—that is, to qualify as writing—they must adhere to the following structure:

Written Graph → *Pronunciation* → *Meaning*

What Boltz denies is the possibility of:

Written Graph → *Meaning*

Sampson and Chen (2013, p. 258) aptly characterize this position as "script phonocentrism". Its one-sidedness, as Dematté (2022, p. 62) notes, lies in the insistence that Boltz allows graphs to "signify only through their phonetic value and never directly through their graphic form". By contrast, other sinologists emphasize that certain graphs do convey meaning through their form. In line with this, Dematté states that "the modern equivalents of pictographs are considered semantographs—graphs that signify through form" (Dematté, 2022, p. 345, note 8) even after losing visual resemblance to their referents. She clarifies that 'form' here does "not refer to realistic representations of things, but to the use of visual convention for recognition" (Dematté, 2022, p. 5).

This alternative view thus holds that graphs may *directly* evoke linguistic meaning through their *visual* structure alone. If such graphs are *additionally* associated with a pronunciation that conveys the same meaning in speech, this does not preclude understanding the meaning through the graph alone. The remainder of this article seeks to phenomenologically clarify the specific way in which the *visual form* of early Chinese pictographs motivates the

construal of *linguistic* meaning without recourse to sound. The claim is neither that pictographs were not associated with a pronunciation nor that their meaning was not *also* entailed in their pronunciation. Rather, the claim is that early pictographs use *graphical* means that convey *linguistic* meaning, such that knowing their pronunciation was *not essential* to understanding them. For readers accustomed to alphabetic scripts, the idea that a graph can function as a word independent of sound may seem counterintuitive. Yet habits aside, Boltz's assumption that only sounds can directly link to meaning is far from self-evident. To probe this assumption, we now turn to the common arbitrariness of linguistic signs.

2.3.The Common Arbitrariness of Language Signs

Phonocentrism holds that only speech can entail linguistic meaning. Let us first note that spoken words rarely convey meaning through auditory resemblance. Onomatopoeia—such as Chinese *mao* 猫 for 'cat', echoing a cat's meow[5]—is the auditory equivalent of pictography, but it is exceedingly rare. Instead, as linguistics emphasizes, arbitrariness overwhelmingly governs the relation between sounds and meanings (Kortmann, 2020, pp. 7–8).

Husserl underscores this arbitrariness: "given the most diverse word sounds, think of 'the same' word in different languages, the relation to the cognized can be identically the same" (Husserl, 2002, p. 33).[6] The sign–signified relation is one "of concrete, mutually unrelated [*sachfremder*] objects" (Husserl, 2002, p. 91).[7]

One may thus ask: How does an arbitrary sign come to be associated with a meaning? Husserl explains this as an associative tendency, originally instituted through the will of subjects, such that the sign 'ought' to indicate a particular meaning. Bernet elaborates: "Genuine signs […] signify (*bezeichnen*) on the basis of […] a will" (Bernet, 1988, p. 6). He further explains Husserl's view in that "for lingual signs this will can become an impersonal, anonymous one, and the ensuing obligation may become 'unconscious', obeyed in the form of a 'blind, habitual tendency'" (Bernet, 1988, p. 8; see Husserl, 2005a, pp. 79–87, 170). While this explanation warrants critical reflection (Bernet, 1988, pp. 11, 24), it suffices to illustrate that sounds can become signs through convention and association.

[5] I thank Zhiyu ZHOU (周芝雨) for pointing out that, given the historical change in pronunciation and dialectal variations, this example might be coincidentally onomatopoetic rather than by design.
[6] Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from non-English sources are my own.
[7] Merleau-Ponty (2002, pp. 217–218) presents a noteworthy speculation that this may not have always been the case historically. Yet Husserl's perspective aligns with contemporary linguistic experience.

Yet if arbitrary sounds can convey linguistic meaning by means of convention, then why not also arbitrary graphic forms? And if both sounds and graphs can function in this way, why should sound be granted a privileged role in signification? To press this point, we now turn to domains where complex linguistic meaning is conveyed uncontroversially without recourse to speech, namely, mathematics and sign languages.

2.4.Linguistic Signs Beyond Speech: Mathematics and Sign Language

Phonocentrism assumes speech has a privileged connection to linguistic meaning. Husserl, mostly familiar with alphabetic languages, initially appears to endorse this view:

> I generally 'translate' printed and written material into spoken language (I will discuss the exceptions in a moment). The acoustic words are superimposed on the written ones and primarily carry the understanding. However, I cannot say that they alone carry it, but the written, visual wording [carries the understanding] only indirectly (Husserl, 2005a, p. 114).

Yet he immediately adds the counterexample of mathematics:

> It is different with mathematical symbols: √, ∫ and various mathematical symbols may carry their acoustic wordings with them, but these are not the actual, primary carriers of meaning. This is shown by the fact that here I have to 'translate' the acoustic into the optical, and by no means always have the optical translated into the acoustic in the case of understanding (Husserl, 2005a, p. 114).

Mathematical notation thus demonstrates that meaning can emerge directly from visual signs, with sound playing at most a secondary role.

Phonocentrists might object that such notations do not represent spoken language and therefore do not count as writing. But this objection fails to acknowledge that writing systems can exist without phonetic alignment. This is why linguistics, while not considering mathematics a natural language, still considers it a formal language.

Maybe the strongest case for the presence of a language in the absence of phonetics are sign languages. A contemporary textbook on linguistics opens by asserting that "language is much more than speech. The languages of the deaf communities throughout the world are equivalent to spoken languages, differing only in their modality of expression" (Fromkin et al., 2017, p. 2). If, as Boltz (1994, p. 4) insists, only meaningful sounds qualify as words, then sign languages would not only fail to run on words but fail to qualify as languages—an absurd conclusion. Hansen (1993, pp. 382–384) similarly invokes mathematics and sign languages as evidence that phonocentrism is but an "traditional Western prejudice".

Dematté (2022, p. 63) likewise mentions mathematics among the non-glottic systems of record—pictorial or numerical codes that "do not rely on speech to store information because, like music scores or mathematical formulas, they use quantitative or pictorial codes that transcend speech". Such systems predate the alignment of graphs with speech, showing that writing need not be phonetic to function meaningfully. If language is understood as requiring a medium capable of structurally conveying relations among meanings, then visual graphs, spoken sounds, and gestured signs are all equally adequate carriers. This aligns with Husserl's insight that the defining feature of language signs is how several of them, orchestrated by *grammatical conventions*, form a *logically structured whole entailing categorial acts*.[8]

2.5.Interim Summary

Boltz's phonocentrism reduces writing to being "entirely secondary and derivative" (Boltz, 1994, p. 19) to speech. However, if spoken words themselves are arbitrary and signify only through convention, there is no reason why graphical forms cannot do the same without requiring pronunciation. Mathematical notation and sign languages further demonstrate that conveying complex interrelated meanings need not depend on sound. Historical evidence from early non-glottic writing systems supports this point, underscoring that meaning can be conveyed through graphic forms independently of phonetic mediation.

This undermines the core assumptions of phonocentrism and reopens the possibility that graphs themselves can be words. Importantly, the association of meaning through convention can occur with *any* graphical form, whether or not it still bears vestiges of pictoriality. Thus, even as the visual resemblance of pictographs faded, it remained possible to associate their linguistic meaning with their graphical form without needing sound as a mediator. Section 2,2 mentioned that graphs evoking meaning through graphic forms are called 'semantographs'. Yet semantographs comprise not only pictographs that have lost their pictoriality, but also two other traditional character types: indicators (指事 *zhishi*) and semantic compounds (会意 *huiyi*). As Dematté (2022, p. 316) explains, "recent character classifications […] group pictographs, indicative symbols, and logical compounds into the category of semantographs. This move allows one to see these signs as symbols that signify through form rather than through sound".

[8] I develop Husserl's respective insight in more detail and use it to refute a phonocentric explanation of the Chinese script as a whole in Gutland (in press-a).

Importantly, semantographs, "although associated with a sound, convey meaning mainly through form" (Dematté, 2022, p. 5). Thus, besides being associated with a linguistic meaning, semantographs are also associated with a pronunciation. However, when *reading* these graphs, the association with their meaning may rely solely on their graphic form. A striking illustration of this is that many deaf people read and write Chinese fluently.

While the functioning of semantographs is crucial for understanding how pictographs remained meaningful after they lost their pictoriality, the focus of this article is the peculiar way in which they conveyed their meaning graphically while still bearing pictorial resemblance. With the limitations of phonocentrism clarified, we now turn to a closer examination of how these early characters were most likely read and understood.

3. The Origin and Further Development of Chinese Pictographs

3.1. The First Documented Cases of Chinese Writing

The reconstruction of script development in any language depends on the survival of material remains, which makes the early history of the Chinese script particularly difficult to trace. The earliest unambiguous examples, dating to 1300–1250 BCE, were discovered in the Anyang (安阳) region. These inscriptions, known as 甲骨文 *jiaguwen*, are commonly translated as 'oracle-bone inscriptions', although the term is somewhat misleading. The medium was not limited to bones (骨) but also included turtle plastrons (甲), and "short inscriptions cast in ceremonial bronze vessels are also known from the same period" (Boltz, 1999, p. 107). For lack of a more accurate English equivalent, the Chinese term 甲骨文 will be used here. Peculiar about the 甲骨文 is that their content is "limited almost exclusively to divinatory matters" (Boltz, 1999, p. 88). Although they contain "over 4000 distinct graphs," "only about 1000 Shang bone graphs are firmly interpreted" (Dematté, 2022, p. 314).

As Dematté notes, the 甲骨文 already represent a sophisticated form of writing, yet the archaeological record does not allow us to reconstruct how this sophistication developed. Boltz (1994, p. 38) argues that the invention of writing was a "momentary occurrence," whereas Dematté (2022, p. 85) favors a much slower process. She explains:

> [W]hat appears to be the abrupt appearance of writing on oracle bones circa 1300–1250 BCE is likely to be an accident of material history, where the primary documents have completely disappeared and the secondary ones, by dominating the archaeological record, have dictated the discourse (Dematté, 2022, p. 363).

On the basis of earlier evidence, she concludes that "around the beginning of the second millennium BCE graphs were coalescing into a writing system" (Dematté, 2022, p. 366). Within this development, pictographs are of special significance, since they raise the question of whether *visual resemblance alone*—independently of convention or sound—can convey *linguistic* meaning.

3.2.An Example Case of a Pictograph

During the time of the 甲骨文, pictographs still retained some visual similarity to their referents. Consider, for example, several early variants of the graph for 'horse' depicted in Image 1:

Image 1

Early graphic variants of the character 马 (horse)

Composite illustration (oracle-bone glyph sequence)

Source elements: Remsense (馬-oracle) and Wargaz (馬-oracle-2, -4, -5), Wikimedia Commons, accessed 23 December 2024.

Composite layout adapted by author

These variants illustrate stages of abstraction in early writing. The rightmost figure would likely appear ambiguous to modern readers. The one immediately to its left is more recognizable as a horse, though without prior knowledge it might equally be taken for a lizard or a dog. The second figure from the left is closer to the intended referent, while the leftmost figure is the most representational—though even this form could be interpreted as a mule or donkey.

As Dematté (2022, p. 318) observes, early pictographs "highlight peculiar aspects, characteristics, or perspectives of the creature or thing they indicate". They differ from photographic realism not only in the absence of color but also in deliberate distortions of proportion. In the leftmost graph, for instance, the head is drawn disproportionately large, and the mane much thicker and sparser than in life. Even the most faithful variants thus already

depart from photographic realism. This observation leads directly to Boltz's skepticism regarding the pictographic interpretation of these graphs.

3.3.Just How Pictorial are Pictographs? – A First Reflection

Boltz (2006, p. 42) defines: "A pictograph conveys meaning through its depictive realism; by this quality alone it represents a thing". And he is skeptical of the term 'pictograph', so defined, for good reasons. To prove his point, he lists the graphs in Image 2 below from 甲骨文 times:

Image 2

Oracle bone character variants, reproduced from William G. Boltz,
"Pictographic Myths," Bochumer Jahrbuch zur Ostasienforschung 30 (2006), 41.
Reproduced under scholarly quotation and fair use for purposes of academic critique.

Boltz points out that

> these are often described as pictographs; this implies presumably that they convey their meaning by virtue of their intrinsic depictive realism, i.e., they look like what they signify. This claim can be easily tested: take the list out into any public place and ask a few people at random what the graphs depict, and see how many of the answers conform to the actual meaning of the words that the characters in question write (Boltz, 2006, p. 41).

Readers unfamiliar with Chinese are hereby invited to take this test—the answers from left to right are: moon, person, king, woman, stream, elephant, ox, servant, vessel, boat, grain, basket. Consistent with his own definition, Boltz concludes that "these graphs are not, I would claim, pictographic at all" (Boltz, 2006, p. 41). Most readers will presumably concur, at least in view of Boltz's definition of 'pictograph'.

Yet Boltz also acknowledges a limitation of this test: "[D]epictive practices are not necessarily culture-neutral and may be subject to both natural and conventional limits in practice" (Boltz, 2006, p. 41). Cultural distance between present-day readers and Shang-dynasty scribes makes any direct test of depictive realism problematic. Insights from art history, phenomenology, and anthropology confirm that standards of depictive realism are culturally variable.

Art historian Erwin Panofsky (1992, p. 104) argued that modern perception has been habituated by photographic perspective. For this reason, observers today perceive the sides of a Greek pillar as slightly curved, whereas ancient viewers likely perceived them as straight (Panofsky, 1992, pp. 99–108). This implies that the construal of space in our everyday perception is subject to cultural change. Likewise, optical illusions such as the Müller–Lyer figure affect only those trained to judge size by contingent perspectival rules (Alter, 2013, p. 117). What counts as 'realistic depiction' thus depends on historically conditioned modes of seeing.

Yet we can go even further. In an influential essay, anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973, p. 6) argues that a purely visual, "I-am-a-camera, 'phenomenalistic' observation" must, in principle, miss the cultural significance of things and processes. Certain art forms, such as Egyptian art and Byzantine book illustrations, compensate for this absence. In these traditions, culturally significant objects are depicted much larger, violating photographic realism. This use of size as a symbolic metaphor for cultural significance is known as 'hierarchical proportion'. As noted, Chinese pictographs similarly deviate from camera-like spatial proportions, yet they use exaggerated scale to highlight characteristic features to facilitate clear recognition. Arguably, the features that are highlighted and how they are presented already show signs of cultural contingency.

By acknowledging these cultural variations, we can better appreciate how ancient scribes and readers construed pictoriality. What appears distorted to a modern eye may have been legible within its original cultural framework. By acknowledging these cultural variations in depictive standards, we may better appreciate how, even today, we are still able to recognize what at least some of the early Chinese pictographs depict.

3.4.The Development Away From Pictoriality

As seen, Boltz (2006, p. 42) is correct in stressing that the pictographs listed above "do not seem to function in any real sense pictographically". He adds: "Once we know what words they stand for, we can then see that they were likely to have been pictographic in origin. And for most of these characters this is probably not wrong historically" (Boltz, 2006, p. 42). This means Boltz believes in a three-stage trajectory: genuinely pictorial beginnings, an intermediate use in non-phonetic notational systems where pictorial realism was already in decline, and a final phoneticization that made pictoriality entirely dispensable. In Boltz's words:

> writing systems came about as transformations of non-writing graphic notational systems. Such a transformation can be characterized as a shift from an exclusively semantically-based sign system to one that is both phonetically and semantically based. Some of the signs in these notational systems were iconic; others were not. And the degree of iconicity that characterizes a particular sign may be affected by the sign's use within the system. If the context within which the sign appears, for example, determines a part of the meaning, the need for a high level of iconic realism may be reduced accordingly. This would in turn set the stage, so to speak, for a further deemphasis of iconicity when such graphs are phoneticized and come to serve as writing (Boltz, 2006, p. 44).

In this framework, the decline of pictoriality is explained functionally: Once graphs became conventional signs within a notational system, faithful visual resemblance to their referents was no longer required. Boltz accordingly distinguishes between *pictographs* "that are depictively identifiable […] serving chiefly to portray in a picture some *thing*," and *iconic graphs*, which "function formally as a part of a system […] and convey meaning chiefly by virtue of […] iconicity" (Boltz, 2006, p. 43). In line with this, he urges us to "see any supposed or alleged pictographic quality as a vestige of a pre-writing stage of the graph's usage" (Boltz, 2006, p. 42). If so, once mapped to a pronunciation, any remaining pictoriality would be superfluous, if not an impediment, to recognizing the graph as a written sign.

Demattè (2022, p. 329) describes the further development after the 甲骨文 period toward complete arbitrariness, noting that over time, most pictographs "were streamlined, becoming less pictorial and more abstract". The character for 'horse' provides an example of this transformation, evolving from early forms to its modern version, as shown in Image 3 below:

Image 3

Historical transformation of the character 馬 (horse): bronze inscription (金文), large seal script (大篆), small seal script (小篆), clerical script (隶书), regular script (楷书), and simplified Chinese (简体字), shown from left to right

Composite illustration (bronze to regular script glyph sequence)
Source elements from Remsense (馬-bronze, 馬-seal, 馬-clerical-han) and Erin Silversmith (馬-bigseal), Wikimedia Commons, accessed 5 January 2025.
The two script forms to the right are rendered in standard word-processing font.
Composite layout adapted by author

This evolution confirms a point made by Noel Barnard (1978, pp. 189–190): "Angularity of execution becomes the rule in later calligraphy; circles, crescents, curves, etc. […] lose their graceful sinuosity". This was not least due to the signs then frequently being carved into stones, where curves are comparatively harder to inscribe. Consequently, round shapes, still present in the 甲骨文, gradually disappear. Today, we no longer visually recognize characters like 马 or 馬 as a horse.

Boltz's three-stage trajectory presupposes that depictive realism was the historical starting point—a premise the following discussion will prepare to challenge by introducing Husserl's distinction between image and language sign consciousness.

4. Contrasting Image and Linguistic Sign Consciousness

How does our conscious experience of realistic images differ from that of linguistic signs? To clarify this, we set aside cases where signs imitate their referents (pictographs or onomatopoeia). Instead, we assume linguistic signs are unrelated (*sachfremd*) to their referents, and limit the analysis of image consciousness to depictive representations rather than abstract art. Husserl acknowledged limits in his aesthetic assumptions, treating photographic realism as the measure of aesthetic quality (Husserl, 1980, pp. 159, 514; see also Gutland, 2021). Although this one-sidedness neglects crucial aesthetic dimensions, in the present context, it helps isolate a pivotal difference between faithful images and Chinese pictographs. Following this framework, we first distinguish image and sign consciousness in Husserl's sense, and then reconsider how pictographs complicate this distinction. The contrast established here prepares the ground for showing later how pictographs are graphic forms that directly motivate linguistic meaning intentions, yet are not images in a strict sense.

4.1.The Common Ground Between Image and Sign Consciousness

Both image and language sign consciousness typically involve sensing—rather than merely imagining—a physical carrier, such as a book page, a canvas, or a bronze vessel. Yet neither

mode of consciousness arises if we perceive this carrier as we would a tree or a car. When we engage in ordinary perception of the carrier as a physical object, we neither enter image consciousness nor language sign consciousness. Instead, we must 'use' what we sense as a foundation for a distinct conscious act.

For this reason, Husserl (2005a, p. 217) describes both image and language sign consciousness as "founded acts (indirectly objectifying)". In each case, there is "an intentional tendency to the higher level […] such that the attention to the object of the lower level has the character of an attention against a tendency that is inhibited" (Husserl, 2005a, p. 217). Our awareness thus shifts away from the material bearer and toward either the image or the linguistic meaning. Nevertheless, the nature of this tendency—its objective and its mode of realization—differs between image and sign consciousness.

4.2.Individualization in Images versus Typification in Signs

The first key difference concerns how the sensory carrier functions. To illustrate image consciousness, take the example of an oil painting of a clouded landscape on canvas. If we treat the canvas as a physical object (*Bildding*) and perceive it, we see only patches of paint. To become conscious of the landscape, we must constitute a distinct 'image space' and 'image time'. Husserl (1980, p. 46, 2005b, p. 50) explains: "We look through the frame, as if through a window, into the space of the image, into the image's reality".

Image consciousness requires that the space and time of the image *contrast* with the real-world space and time in which we view the image (Husserl, 1980, pp. 486, 509). If no such contrast exists—if we mistake a painting for an actual landscape seen through a window—we are not engaging in image consciousness but in illusion consciousness.

Even though the image's reality exists in a different space and time, we 'see' its contents *as if* they were real. Consider the Mona Lisa: When viewing the painting, we do not merely see brushstrokes on a canvas, but constitute an individual woman with unique features. These distinguishing characteristics allow us to perceive the Mona Lisa as a particular woman, not simply as a generic female figure. The same applies to the elements of the painted landscape—clouds, hills, and trees are all constituted as particular entities.[9]

[9] In this article, I use the words 'individual' and 'particular' interchangeably.

Language sign consciousness works differently. As with images, we do not normally focus on the material bearer of a sign when reading or listening. Our attention may shift to its material aspects—Husserl (2005a, p. 214) notes that a beautiful print might draw our focus—but such attention counteracts the tendency to bestow meaning. For meaning-bestowing acts to occur, there must be "no intention toward the sign" (Husserl, 2005a, p. 214) as a physical object.

Unlike image consciousness, however, sign consciousness requires that we *abstract from the very sensory features that ground individualization in image consciousness*. Rather than construing a sign as an individual entity, we intend it as a *type*. In the study of spoken language, this corresponds to the step from phonetics to phonology. Yet a similar step occurs in writing. Therefore, Husserl can claim that

> the sensory 'sound' (the wording, the graph, etc.), taken in its respective individual reality as the articulated sound etc. that resounds in actual speech, can change and multiply in many ways, while for our comprehension […] the 'same' word, the same speech is there (Husserl, 2005a, p. 112).

In physical reality, a linguistic sign can be spoken or written with countless variations. Different people pronounce the 'same' word in different voices, and no two handwritten versions are ever fully identical. Because of this variability, Husserl (2005a, p. 113) asserts that "the sounding word, the ink and paper word, is not the word". As Bernet (1988, p. 23) explains, the "ideality of the sensuous sign thus appears as a minimal requirement for the meaningful signifying of lingual signs".

Thus, linguistic signs must be abstracted from their particular sensory carriers and intended as types. This marks the first fundamental difference: In image consciousness, sensory features support the constitution of *individual objects*, whereas in sign consciousness, sensory features are abstracted to achieve *typification*.

It is important, however, not to conflate the typification of the sign with its meaning-bestowal. Recognizing a language sign enables us to identify the sign type as such, but this is distinct from grasping its meaning. We sometimes encounter a word we do not understand. We then acknowledge it as a linguistic sign because we assume it has a meaning. Although its meaning escapes us, we could reproduce it in speech or writing, maybe even inflect it. Husserl describes this as "a peculiar identification, which, although related to the meaning-intending, is nonetheless not related to the specific meaning" (Husserl, 2005a, p. 117).

To sum up: *We intend linguistic signs as types, not individuals, while we intend the elements in images as individuals, not types.*

4.3.Resemblance in Images versus Unrelatedness in Signs

A second distinction lies in the relationship between sign and referent. As already noted in Section 2.3, linguistic signs are typically unrelated (*sachfremd*) to their referents. Husserl (2005a, p. 136) observes that "the word sound [*Wortlaut*] is foreign to the matter, while the image 'depicts' the matter". This unrelatedness, which Husserl analyzes for spoken words, applies equally to written ones. Husserl summarizes: "[I]n image consciousness, I have a multiplicity of features of the image, all of which exercise a depicting function, and in the linguistic representation I have a multiplicity of linguistic contents and forms, all of which exercise a meaning function" (Husserl, 2005a, p. 128). Because language signs refer to their referents through the meanings they bear via intersubjective convention, they are not required to resemble their referents in either sound or visual appearance.

In short: *Images resemble their referents through their visual features, while arbitrary linguistic signs relate to their referent by intersubjective convention*.

4.4.Spatial Relations in Images versus Categorial Relations in Signs

Images often depict multiple interrelated elements while sentences unite multiple words, and in this broader context, a third difference emerges. While both images and written signs typically occupy a flat surface, the conscious acts relating these elements differ fundamentally.

To be a faithful imagistic depiction in Husserl's sense, an image must allow for the opening and population of an image space. This requires the distribution of pictorial elements to be a two-dimensional perspectival foreshortening of their three-dimensional positions and proportions within the image space. As noted, images may employ space symbolically, such as to emphasize importance—for example, by placing an object centrally or depicting it disproportionately large.

Viewers interpret these spatial relations through their own cultural and historical lenses. Each observer, as what Husserl (1973, pp. 134–135) calls a concrete monad, enriches an image with layers of meaning that are not fixed in the image itself. Hence the adage, 'a picture is worth a thousand words'. Yet these 'thousand words' are not identical for each viewer.

This variability also shows why images are often ineffective for communication requiring precision. By contrast, as Husserl (2002, p. 81) stresses, linguistic signs are structured by grammar and relational words like prepositions and conjunctions, which motivate us to connect the individual word meanings with categorial relations. In an isolating language like

Chinese, word order plays a crucial role in this process, reinforcing the construal of relational categories motivated by conventionalized grammatical structures.

A notable exception to language's precision in prose occurs when polysemy is intentionally employed and the rules of grammar bend for aesthetic effect, as in poetry. However, just like we set aside abstract and ambiguous painting styles in this discussion, we will also exclude artistic and ambiguous linguistic forms. In ordinary prose, grammar constrains interpretation to ensure clarity and precision.

It is important not to privilege one of these cultural forms over the other, as they serve different goals. Furthermore, images are not inherently richer in all kinds of meaning. As Demattè points out, certain meanings are difficult, if not impossible, to convey visually, whereas language can express them with ease:

> Systems like picture writing or picto-numeric recording are generally unable to effectively convey action or thought except through cumbersome and detailed narrative illustrations. They can record the concept of 'three apples', but cannot easily signify 'I want you to give me three apples'. This happens not only because 'I' and 'you' are concepts that are hard to represent pictorially, but also because it is not easy to render visually the direction of actions (Demattè, 2022, pp. 82–83).

Summing up: While images excel in richness and openness, linguistic signs employed in prose excel in precision. In images, elements are primarily related through *spatial arrangement*, which—unless symbolically employed—leaves further dimensions of meaning indeterminate. By contrast, linguistic signs are integrated through *grammatical conventions* that motivate *categorial acts*, thereby becoming more effective in expressing actions and their direction.

4.5.Interim Summary

Let us briefly recapitulate the insights of this section. Image and language sign consciousness are alike in that both 'pass through' a sensed material carrier toward a higher act. Yet they differ in three decisive respects.

1. *Individualization versus typification*. Images are construed as populated by individual entities, whereas linguistic signs are abstracted as types.
2. *Resemblance versus unrelatedness*. Images depict through visual similarity, whereas signs function conventionally without resemblance.
3. *Spatial versus categorial relations*. Images serve to construe spatial relations, while linguistic signs specify categorial relations through features like grammar.

With these distinctions clarified, we face a peculiar conundrum once we return to Chinese pictographs. For if pictographs visually resemble their referents *just like* images, this resemblance seems to undermine the very distinction just established.

Consider an example: We begin reading a sentence composed of non-pictographic graphs. Their graphic forms motivate us to associate them with conventionalized meanings in line with grammatical conventions, which, in turn, motivate us to think categorial relations connecting these meanings. Suddenly, we encounter a pictograph. If it were to prompt us to open an image space, the ongoing linguistic act would be interrupted. We would have to suspend the significative act, instead entering image consciousness, and construe the pictograph's referent spatially in relation to the surrounding signs. Yet this would be misguided—and indeed impossible—since the preceding signs are not pictorial. To continue reading, we would need to exit image consciousness, reestablish language-sign consciousness, and somehow extract linguistic meaning from the individual entity we had just imagined.

This scenario illustrates why pictographs, in some sense yet to be clarified, *must not* motivate the opening of image consciousness: Such a shift would disrupt the reading flow. The crucial question, then, is how pictographs—*despite their visual resemblance*—can nevertheless function as *elements of language*. To address this, the next section turns to a phenomenological analysis of pictographs.

5. A Phenomenological Investigation of Pictographs

Although Husserl never engaged with Chinese pictographs or their historical development, he did reflect on hieroglyphs as language signs. His remarks, especially on the transition from depictions to hieroglyphs, provide a framework for understanding the peculiar position of pictographs between image consciousness and the consciousness of arbitrary language signs.

5.1.Husserl on Hieroglyphs

Husserl generally assumes a factual unrelatedness between signs and their referents, but he acknowledges that depictions can come to function as signs. Namely, he explains hieroglyphs like this: "In no case do we live in image consciousness, but we go out of the image and have something outside of it that is meant by the image" (Husserl, 2005a, p. 101). This captures the crucial difference between looking at faithful depictions and reading signs still bearing visual resemblance, such as hieroglyphs: When *reading* hieroglyphs, we do *not* open an image space.

Husserl distinguishes further stages before this transition. In what he considers *perfect images*, we find a "*genuine* image-consciousness [that] does indeed truly see the like in the like; it is characterized by pure re-presentational consciousness" (Husserl, 1980, p. 143, 2005b, p. 163). Such purity, however, can be disturbed. With *imperfect images*, our attention shifts away from the depicted object toward the representation[10] itself:

> Only the 'impure' consciousness has its degrees. It is still image consciousness as long as we have in the appearing object an image object in which we find the subject re-presented with respect to at least certain moments […]. As soon as we sense the impurity, we can no longer see the subject in the object exactly as if it were there itself. It is then no longer genuine re-presentational consciousness with regard to what is perfectly like it (Husserl, 1980, p. 143, 2005b, p. 163).

This analysis accounts for paintings where flaws draw attention away from the subject. But hieroglyphs involve a still greater distance:

> If the disparity is very great, then a tendency toward coinciding identification no longer occurs. On the contrary, a mere hieroglyph, a mere resemblance-sign is there. When this occurs, we find in the content of the sign the meaning of what resembles it (Husserl, 1980, p. 143, 2005b, p. 164).

Here, the decisive step occurs: The hieroglyph no longer motivates us to open an image space with an *individual referent*, but prompts a significative act, through which we bestow the sign with *linguistic meaning*.

Yet hieroglyphs are not fully arbitrary. Their residual resemblance still hints at what is meant. However, this hinting no longer takes the route of image consciousness. Husserl (2005a, p. 101) notes: "There is still something of imagery there and there in terms of understanding, but […it] designate[s] something outside itself, serve[s] as a sign, and this is what happens with the hieroglyphic symbol". He illustrates this with the analogy of a child's drawing of a person: "[T]he image *means* a human being—we know this, we are reminded of a human being and

[10] Husserl's use of 're-presentation' (*Vergegenwärtigung*) contrasts with 'presentation' (*Gegenwärtigung*) in perception. In perception, the object presents itself *as it is*; in re-presentation, *we* intend the object as absent but brought to consciousness *indirectly*, for example in memory, imagination, or image-consciousness (Husserl, 1966, p. 41). Both terms, however, are misleading, as they emphasize temporality, whereas the key point is the contrast in the mode of givenness. Also, this should not be confused with the analytic-philosophical sense of 'representational', which often treats consciousness as a representational state to be explained (*explanandum*). For Husserl, consciousness is not explained through representation but functions as the explanatory ground (*explanans*) and epistemological premise. Notably, certain strands of analytic philosophy have moved closer to Husserl's view, emphasizing the role of phenomenological access to the world and, in some cases, almost 'bracketing' the mind-external starting point (Montague, 2011).

know that the image is *supposed* to represent a human being—but for all that we no longer see a human being in the drawing. Or perhaps just a little" (Husserl, 1980, p. 143, 2005b, p. 164). The 'seeing a human being in the drawing' refers to the constitution of an *individual* human being in an image space, which is thwarted. Yet the drawing still bears enough resemblance to notice that '*a* human being' is meant by it.

Here, my analysis extends Husserl's framework: Hieroglyphs occupy a unique position in which their schematic features do not simply fall short of faithful depiction but actively motivate the constitution of *general* meanings. Consider first the case of painting: A realistic depiction of a human being is impossible without introducing individuating details. As soon as such details appear, the image motivates us to construe *this* particular person, not the *general meaning* 'human being'.[11] By contrast, when individuating detail is omitted, crude drawings of humans, birds, horses, and similar beings produce a peculiar effect. The more schematic the drawing, the less it invites us to constitute an individual in an image space, and the more its vestiges of resemblance motivate us to *think* the corresponding *general* meaning. For certain meanings, there is thus a 'sweet spot' between a faithful depiction of an individual and an arbitrary symbol of a type. Hieroglyphs (and by extension pictographs), I suggest, occupy precisely this position.

While my analysis highlights how the reduction of individuating visual detail *positively* motivates the constitution of general meanings, Husserl instead emphasizes that the loss of faithful pictoriality *negatively* impacts the identification of the depiction with an individual object. At a certain point, the "difference is so great that we no longer feel disturbed by the consciousness of falsification in the inclination toward identification. On the contrary, the inclination toward identification is missing" (Husserl, 1980, p. 143, 2005b, p. 164).

Crucially, Husserl does note that this transition coincides with hieroglyphic signs beginning to fulfill their meaning function "on the basis of an agreement, of a voluntary stipulation" (Husserl, 1980, p. 155, 2005b, p. 185). In other words, while schematic depictions may prompt us to intend general meanings, their comparative ambiguity prevents us from

[11] This is somewhat reminiscent of how Husserl (1984, pp. 138–141, 160–161) defends the general idea 'triangle' against Locke's nominalist objection that it cannot be adequately constituted in imagination, since every drawn or imagined triangle collapses into a particular case (equilateral, isosceles, right-angled, etc.). For Husserl, this only shows that the general meaning 'triangle' is irreducible to imagination: It is an *ideal* object grasped at the level of signification, not of image. Interestingly, one might note that some imagined figures may feel more 'prototypical' than others—for example, an isosceles triangle with equal sides might more readily evoke the general idea of 'triangle' than a highly acute or obtuse figure. This illustrates that even within imagination, certain images more strongly motivate the move from individual depiction to the constitution of a general meaning.

determining precisely which meaning is intended. Yet conventionalization here serves to stabilize the otherwise indeterminate relation between graph and meaning. The role of such culturally contingent conventionalization is important to bear in mind when evaluating Boltz's examples of pictographs and the test for pictoriality he proposes. A further meaning-determining factor, as was noted above, occurs through the grammatical convention and the respective role of the graph in the sentence.

In sum, three overlapping effects mark the move from depictions to hieroglyphs. First, visual resemblance falls below the threshold for opening image space, but it remains sufficient to guide us toward a general meaning (*a* human, *a* horse, etc.). Second, conventionalization stabilizes this meaning across subjects. Third, grammar helps construe relations to other meanings in the sentence. Importantly, all these processes may operate independently of sound. These insights prepare the ground for applying Husserl's framework to Chinese pictographs.

5.2.Application to Chinese Pictographs

For Husserl's account of hieroglyphs to illuminate Chinese pictographs, these graphs must be sufficiently different from faithful depictions to prevent image consciousness. As we saw, this is the case: Original pictographs lack individuating sensory details and highlight features through distortion of proportion, thereby thwarting the opening of an image space.

Husserl's framework helps explain how these features place pictographs between images and language signs. In image consciousness, we construe individual objects; in linguistic sign consciousness, we first typify the sign, then bestow it with linguistic meaning. Notably, Chinese pictographs emphasize general features of their referents. The way they highlight features is unlike, for instance, caricatures of famous persons, where exaggeration underscores an individual's traits. Instead, the pictograph for 'horse'—with its disproportionately large head and thick mane—depicts no particular animal, but highlights *general characteristics* of horses. The same holds for graphs of 'bird', 'dragon', or 'turtle': They do not invite us to imagine individual creatures, but guide us toward intending a type.

Thus, the phenomenological picture is more complex than Boltz suggests (see Section 3,4). Image 4 below illustrates the development in light of the newly gained phenomenological insights. Assuming pictoriality decreases linearly, then the tendency to open an image space initially remains relatively high but then declines more rapidly than pictorial resemblance. At a certain point, conventionality becomes increasingly necessary to secure a stable reference. As the propensity to open an image space wanes, a phase arises in which schematic recognition of

meaning becomes more likely—one 'sees' what is meant without entering image consciousness. Yet as pictoriality continues to fall and the signs approach arbitrariness, this tendency also diminishes, until convention alone maintains semantic stability.

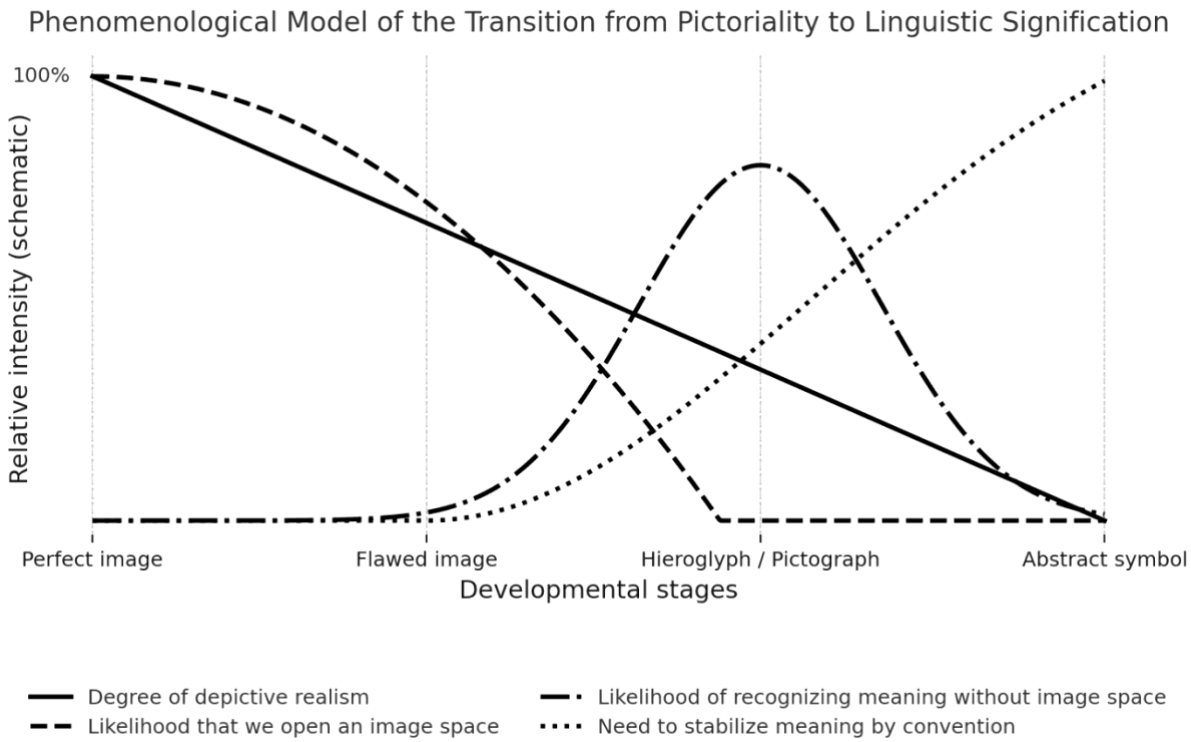

Image 4

Christopher Gutland

Phenomenological Model of the Transition from Pictoriality to Linguistic Signification (2025)

Diagram / analytic illumination

Created with ChatGPT by the author of this article

Image courtesy of the author

We must, however, remain mindful of Husserl's distinction between sign typification and meaning-bestowal. Recognizing a sign as the same word each time (sign typification) is distinct from understanding a sign's meaning (significative act). Both proper names, such as 'Jane', and general terms, such as 'bird', must first be *typified as signs*. Yet their semantic orientation differs: A proper name directs us toward an individual referent, whereas a general term motivates the construal of a general meaning. For general terms like 'bird'—and it is precisely such meanings that Chinese pictographs typically convey—the constitution of a general meaning is the first step. Even in a sentence such as 'This bird is an albino', we begin with the general meaning 'bird' before recognizing that, in the context of this sentence, it refers

to a particular individual. As Husserl (2005a, p. 279) observes, "the spiritual layer of expression can only express what is ideal, not the individual in its individuality".[12] This resonates with Hegel's claim that linguistic meaning belongs to the level of generality and cannot adequately express sensory concreteness (Hegel, 1986b, pp. 85, 91–92, 1986a, p. 74). This holds even for proper names: Hearing the name 'Jane' may leave us unsure who is meant if we know several Janes, underscoring that not even proper names fully capture individual specificity.[13]

Yet remarkably, whereas arbitrary signs allow us to keep typification and meaning-bestowal clearly distinct—first recognizing the sign type, then assigning it with meaning—these two acts almost 'cooperate' in the case of pictographs. Namely, the schematism of pictographs motivates the kind of general meaning linguistic expressions commonly express. This coherence of acts is what allows pictographs and hieroglyphs to function linguistically without invoking image consciousness. For this reason, one can understand them within written sentences without knowing their pronunciation or opening an image space.

Yet the construal of pictographs with linguistic meaning does not occur context independent. For instance, if placed within a drawing, the Chinese character '田' *tian* would not motivate its linguistic meaning ('field' or 'farmland') but might instead be seen as a window frame.[14] And in a recent trend in China, certain characters are used not to convey their linguistic meanings but as emojis. For example, the character '囧' *jiong*, which means 'window' or 'bright', is now used as an emoji because it resembles a face expressing awkwardness, shock, or embarrassment. [15] Although script development typically drives characters toward arbitrariness, in this case, it unintentionally produced a new quasi-pictorial quality.

[12] This quotation stems from Husserl's attempts to revise the Sixth Logical Investigation. At first glance it may appear 'un-Husserlian' to readers familiar only with the published *Logical Investigations*, where Husserl (1984, p. 564) still maintains that the ideality of linguistic meaning encompasses both individual *and* general reference. This position, however, is tied to what Husserl later regarded as a mistake in the Sixth Investigation: the conflation of cognition (*Erkenntnis*) with sensory fulfillment (Husserl, 2005a, pp. 312, 140). Once Husserl recognized this limitation, he came to see that even occasional expressions and proper names presuppose categorial acts (Husserl, 2002, p. 81). According to Melle (2002, p. 115), the realization that categorial acts would already have to be introduced in the First Investigation may even explain why Husserl abandoned his attempt to revise the Sixth. For further discussion of Husserl's revisions in the context of the Chinese script, see Gutland (in press-a).

[13] There is a notable exception. Dematte (2022, p. 40) cites the ancient *Shuowen Jiezi* explanation of pictographs, which lists "日" (sun) and "月" (moon) as examples. In the Shang dynasty, people likely did not yet abstract these terms into '*a* sun' or '*a* moon', so their meaning was probably '*the* sun' and '*the* moon'. This shows that although schematization motivates generalization, it need not succeed, especially when no generalization is or was known. This case reverses the one in footnote 11, where an individual image may prompt a general meaning.

[14] My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for coming up with this scenario.

[15] I am grateful to Luqi TANG (唐璐琪) for pointing out this example.

Such cases show that without proper context, the motivation to endow a pictograph with its linguistic meaning may be greatly reduced. In the drawing example, there is no linguistic context at all. As an emoji, a character like '囧' may appear in a linguistic context, such as a chat, yet it then typically stands alone rather than functioning as a grammatical element. It is precisely this *grammatical embedding in sentence structure* that largely motivates construing the sign linguistically rather than pictorially.

Seen within sentences, pictographs thus reveal two further factors that promote linguistic construal. First, even if a sentence were composed entirely of pictographs, its elements would be organized by grammar and categorial relations rather than by spatial relations, as in images. I discuss this in greater detail in Gutland (in press-a). Second, pictographs represented only a minority of the early script: Roughly 23% of the 甲骨文 corpus is pictographic, while the remaining 77% lack pictorial resemblance and thus further hinder the opening of an image space.

5.3.Rebutting Boltz's Phonocentric Explanation With These Findings

These findings challenge Boltz's phonocentric model, which treats the decline of pictoriality as a deficiency requiring phonetic compensation. A phenomenological perspective suggests the opposite: Schematic abstraction can motivate the constitution of linguistic meaning without recourse to sound. Nor is it clear that most pictographs began as faithful depictions, as Boltz (2006, p. 42) assumes—most may have been schematic from the outset, for their linguistic functioning was conditional on their being schematic. Namely, by preventing the opening of an image space, their stylized features prompted significative acts and the intention of general meanings.

Two key implications follow from this phenomenological analysis. First, what Boltz regards as a loss of pictorial realism is in fact a productive reduction: The fading of depictive detail is precisely what enables pictographs to operate specifically as linguistic signs. Hence Boltz (2006, p. 42) is mistaken in urging us to "see any […] pictographic quality as a vestige of a pre-writing stage of the graph's usage", for at a certain point in the reduction of depictive realism, resemblance itself facilitates—rather than hinders—the constitution of general, linguistically operative meaning.

Second, this trajectory does not necessitate phonetic supplementation. The *graphical form, as such*, by abstracting from individual features, motivated linguistic meaning.

Ambiguities were resolved through grammar and conventionalization, which strengthened as visual resemblance faded. To assume that phonetic association was essential is unwarranted. Once graphs were adapted to the logic that structured speech, pronunciations became attached to them—but in a non-alphabetic system like Chinese, this link is incidental, not fundamental, to meaning-bestowal.

Chinese pictographs thus stand as a clear counterexample to phonocentric assumptions: They can convey linguistic meaning through graphical abstraction, grammar, and conventionalization, without relying on sound.

6. Conclusion

This article has complemented sinological and linguistic accounts with a phenomenological analysis of how pictographs differ from both arbitrary signs and images. Applying Husserl's framework to the Chinese script shows that pictographs likely never were straightforward depictions. Their visual 'imperfections'—disproportion, stylization, and lack of color—prevented the opening of an image space. Instead, they motivated intending general meanings as is common for language signs.

On this basis, the schematization in Chinese pictographs neither jeopardized their linguistic function nor required compensation through sound. To the contrary, their paucity of imagistic detail facilitated the constitution of linguistic meaning, while conventionalization stabilized intersubjective reference. This challenges phonocentric accounts and demonstrates that writing can convey meaning independently of speech. Even as early pictographs lost their visual resemblance and became semantographs, their graphical forms retained the capacity to convey meaning directly via convention, i.e., without requiring phonetic mediation. This insight not only illuminates the Chinese case but also destabilizes the assumption in Western thought that language is essentially phonetic.

Philosophically speaking, the phenomenological analysis of pictographs shows that written graphs can themselves *be* words, independent of sound. Future research might extend this inquiry beyond prosaic texts to explore the aesthetic dimensions of poetry and calligraphy, where the interplay between image and sign acquires new layers. Such work would benefit from engaging not only Husserl but also other phenomenological perspectives. More broadly, the analysis highlights the need for cross-cultural phenomenology of writing systems, one that does not assume alphabetic structures as the default.

Acknowledgments: I sincerely thank the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions. The initial idea, which eventually became three different articles, was presented in 2024 at Shanghai Tongji University. I am grateful to Huan LIU (刘环), Wei ZHANG (张伟), Peter Trawny, Alexander Schnell, and Song GAO (高松) for commentary. In May 2025, the article was presented at Sichuan University, and I thank Zhangmei TANG (唐章梅), Qi WANG (王齐), and Yuelin FU (岳富林) for their feedback. In October 2025, the paper was discussed at Zhejiang University, and I am grateful to Dong AN (安冬), Davide Fassio, Bruno Bentzen, Adam Quibell, Luqi TANG (唐璐琪), and Xian HE (何弦) for inspiring questions and suggestions. My thanks also go to Siyan LIU (刘思言) and Zhiyu ZHOU (周芝雨) for valuable discussions. Finally, I sincerely thank Marc Winter for sparking my interest in the Chinese script and Liangkang NI (倪梁康) for welcoming me to China and for his ongoing support.

References

Alter, A. (2013). *Drunk tank pink: And other unexpected forces that shape how we think, feel, and behave*. Penguin Press.

Aristotle. (1963). *Categories and De Interpretatione* (J. L. Ackrill, Ed. & Trans.). Clarendon Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780198720867.book.1

Barnard, N. (1978). The nature of the Ch'in 'reform of the script' as reflected in archaeological documents excavated under conditions of control. In D. T. Roy & T. Tsien (Eds.), *Ancient China: Studies in early civilization* (pp. 181–213). The Chinese University Press.

Bernet, R. (1988). Husserl's theory of signs revisited. In R. Sokolowski (Ed.), *Edmund Husserl and the phenomenological tradition. Essays in phenomenology* (pp. 1–24). The Catholic University of America Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv176fj.4

Boltz, W. G. (1994). *The origin and early development of the Chinese writings system* (Vol. 78). American Oriental Society.

Boltz, W. G. (1999). Language and writing. In M. Loewe & E. L. Shaughnessy (Eds.), *The Cambridge history of ancient China: From the origins of civilization to 221 B.C.* (pp. 74–123). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521470308.004

Boltz, W. G. (2006). Pictographic myths. *Bochumer Jahrbuch zur Ostasienforschung*, *30*, 39–54.

Boodberg, P. A. (1937). Some proleptical remarks on the evolution of archaic Chinese. *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, *2*(3/4), 329–372. https://doi.org/10.2307/2717943

Boodberg, P. A. (1940). "Ideography" or iconolatry? *T'oung Pao*, *35*(4), 266–288. https://doi.org/10.1163/156853239X00062

Creel, H. G. (1936). On the nature of Chinese ideography. *T'oung Pao*, *32*(2/3), 85–161. https://doi.org/10.1163/156853236X00056

Creel, H. G. (1939). On the ideographic element in ancient Chinese. *T'oung Pao*, *34*(4), 265–294. https://doi.org/10.1163/156853238X00144

DeFrancis, J. (1984). *The Chinese language: Fact and fantasy* (1st ed.). University of Hawaii Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780824840303

Demattè, P. (2022). *The origins of Chinese writing*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197635766.001.0001

Derrida, J. (1976). *Of grammatology* (G. C. Spivak, Trans.). Johns Hopkins University Press. http://archive.org/details/ofgrammatology1976derr

Fromkin, V., Rodman, R., & Hyams, N. (2017). *An introduction to language* (11th ed.). Wadsworth.

Geertz, C. (1973). Thick description. In C. Geertz (Ed.), *The interpretation of cultures; selected essays* (pp. 3–30). Basic Books.

Gutland, C. (2021). Einführung in Husserls phänomenologische Analyse des Bildbewusstseins. In Fan Jieping (范捷平) & Liu Yongqiang (刘永强) (Eds.), *Bildforschung aus interdisziplinärer Perspektive* (pp. 207–235). Zhejiang University Press.

Gutland, C. (in press-a). Applying Husserl's phenomenology to the Chinese script. Debunking the phonocentric myth. *Studia Phaenomenologica*.

Gutland, C. (in press-b). 对中文象形文字及其图像性之丧失的一项现象学考察 (H. Zhang & S. Liu, Trans.). 中国现象学与哲学评论.

Hansen, C. (1993). Chinese ideographs and western ideas. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, *52*(2), 373–399. https://doi.org/10.2307/2059652

Hegel, G. W. F. (1986a). *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse 1830. Erster Teil. Die Wissenschaft der Logik* (E. Moldenhauer & K. M. Michel, Eds.; 10th ed.). Suhrkamp.

Hegel, G. W. F. (1986b). *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (E. Moldenhauer & K. M. Michels, Eds.; 13th ed.). Suhrkamp.

Husserl, E. (1966). *Zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewusstseins (1893-1917)* (R. Boehm, Ed.). Martinus Nijhoff. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-015-3945-6_3

Husserl, E. (1973). *Cartesianische Meditationen und Pariser Vorträge* (S. Strasser, Ed.; 2nd ed.). Martinus Nijhoff.

Husserl, E. (1980). *Phantasie, Bildbewusstsein, Erinnerung. Zur Phänomenologie der anschaulichen Vergegenwärtigung. Texte aus dem Nachlass (1898-1925).* (E. Marbach, Ed.). Martinus Nijhoff.

Husserl, E. (1984). *Logische Untersuchungen. Zweiter Band. II. Teil. Untersuchungen zur Phänomenologie und Theorie der Erkenntnis* (U. Panzer, Ed.). Martinus Nijhoff. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-009-6068-8

Husserl, E. (2002). *Logische Untersuchungen. Ergänzungsband. Erster Teil* (U. Melle, Ed.). Martinus Nijhoff. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-010-0599-9

Husserl, E. (2005a). *Logische Untersuchungen. Ergänzungsband. Zweiter Teil* (U. Melle, Ed.). Martinus Nijhoff.

Husserl, E. (2005b). *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory (1898-1925)* (R. Bernet, Ed.; J. B. Brough, Trans.). Springer.

Kortmann, B. (2020). *English linguistics: Essentials* (2nd ed.). J.B. Metzler. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-476-05678-8

Melle, U. (2002). Husserl's revision of the sixth logical investigation. In D. Zahavi & F. Stjernfeld (Eds.), *One hundred years of phenomenology: Husserl's Logical Investigations revisited* (pp. 111–123). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-0093-1_8

Merleau-Ponty, M. (2002). *Phenomenology of perception* (C. Smith, Trans.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203994610

Montague, M. (2011). The phenomenology of particularity. In T. Bayne & M. Montague (Eds.), *Cognitive phenomenology* (pp. 121–140). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199579938.003.0006

Panofsky, E. (1992). Die Perspektive als symbolische Form. In H. Oberer (Ed.), *Aufsätze zu Grundfragen der Kunstwissenschaft* (pp. 99–126). Wissenschaftsverlag Spiess.

Plotinus. (2018). *The enneads* (L. P. Gerson, Ed.; G. Boys-Stones, J. M. Dillon, R. A. H. King, A. Smith, & J. Wilberding, Trans.). Cambridge University Press.

Remsense. (2024a). *馬-bronze* [Vector illustration (SVG)]. Wikimedia Commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%E9%A6%AC-bronze.svg

Remsense. (2024b). *馬-clerical-han* [Vector illustration (SVG)]. Wikimedia Commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%E9%A6%AC-clerical-han.svg

Remsense. (2024c). *馬-seal* [Vector illustration (SVG)]. Wikimedia Commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%E9%A6%AC-seal.svg

Rousseau, J.-J. (1998). Essay on the origin of languages (J. T. Scott, Trans.). In J. T. Scott (Ed.), *Essay on the origin of languages and writings related to music* (pp. 289–336). University Press of New England.

Sampson, G., & Chen, Z. (陳志群). (2013). The reality of compound ideographs / 論會意字的眞實性. *Journal of Chinese Linguistics*, *41*(2), 255–272.

Silversmith, E. (2024). *馬-bigseal* [Vector illustration (SVG)]. Wikimedia Commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%E9%A6%AC-bigseal.svg?uselang=de

Wargaz. (2024a). *馬–oracle–2* [Vector illustration (SVG)]. Wikimedia Commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%E9%A6%AC-oracle-2.svg

Wargaz. (2024b). *馬–oracle–4* [Vector illustration (SVG)]. Wikimedia Commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%E9%A6%AC-oracle-4.svg

Wargaz. (2024c). *馬–oracle–5* [Vector illustration (SVG)]. Wikimedia Commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%E9%A6%AC-oracle-5.svg