

THEORETICAL APPROACH IN TRUE ALPHABETS VS. EXPEDIENT APPROACH IN CHINESE CHARACTERS AND SOME EFFECTS: REALISTIC VS. IDEALISTIC ACCOUNTS

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Abstract: True alphabets are theoretical, grounded in facts, structured orderly by rules, and practical. In contrast, Chinese characters are purely practical, designed to represent intended meanings by any means, being expedient. The approaches embedded in writing systems, which people become accustomed to, can extend to all aspects of human life as part of the conventions. These conventional approaches diverge significantly in their starting points, considerations, etc., and ultimately, their far-reaching effects. Theoretical approaches in the West emphasize intrinsic features, realistic accounts by facts, and the realistic essences of instances. Likewise, expedient approaches in Chinese tradition emphasize extrinsic features, idealistic accounts by attributes, and the essence of instances. Expedient approaches and idealistic accounts are intuitive, elementary, and pervasive, while theoretical approaches and realistic accounts are specific to the West. In modern non-Western societies, indigenous conventions have been blended with imported Western ones.

Introduction

As one of the earliest artificial constructs, a writing system employs a particular approach to determine the forms and meanings of written scripts. While pinpointing the exact origins may be challenging, the conventional approaches used, documented, and propagated by writing systems can be easily traced and identified. These approaches can extend further and inevitably influence all human activities, including thinking and doing.

All people are practical, sometimes exceedingly so, or expedient in achieving preset aims regardless of the means. Only an exceptional few are theoretical and meticulous about reasons and explanations. This paper aims to uncover and compare the theoretical approach in true alphabets versus the expedient approach in Chinese characters and to explore two remarkable effects among many others. People form rational accounts of the external world through instances of all kinds. The first effect concerns the conventional attention to intrinsic versus extrinsic features of an instance. The second effect involves realistic accounts by facts versus idealistic accounts by attributes of all instances. True alphabets, like English, are phonographic and descended from the Greek alphabet; Chinese characters are logographic and remain prominent today.

1. Preparation

People are practical about getting things done and rarely ask why; few are theoretical, seeking explanations. There are many theoretical approaches or explanations, and the primary two are observing natural phenomena or self-explanatory facts and following rules strictly. Writing systems are designed with specific principles and methods and

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function in predictable routines. For convenience and familiarity, the methodologies of writing systems can be extended and applied anywhere and become widespread, being more significant than other conventional routines.

1.1 Practical vs. theoretical approach

An approach encompasses the overarching strategy or framework that guides the overall process. Before any action, people supposedly have an intended goal and plan for the procedure. The *practical approach* is deciding how to act for the preset goal, and the *theoretical approach* is understanding why to act first and then how to act accordingly. A practical approach concerns how, while a theoretical approach focuses on why. The former emphasizes the goal, whereas the latter the means. A comprehensive and coherent collection of theoretical approaches in a specific realm is a *theory*, including relevant concepts, presumptions, and propositions to explain the past and present and to predict the future.

Fact-based and rule-following explanations are two primary examples of theoretical approaches—a *rule refers* to artificial regulations governing conduct, procedures, arrangements, etc. Meanwhile, natural phenomena are self-explanatory facts, as they occur independently of human intervention in their originations. Adhering to natural phenomena or artificial rules explains the means of attaining the goal, being theoretical.

An extreme case of practicality for an intended goal, regardless of means, is *expediency*. Practical approaches and expediencies are intuitive, elementary, and common in daily life; by all means, people need to survive. Most people are less interested in explanations and more in the practicality of daily life. Striving to get rich and famous above animal instincts is human-specific. Some people may have human-specific desires to understand the past and forecast the future, and theoretical approaches appear more traceable, convincing, and enduring than practical ones. Many theories have been developed in human history, like mythologies and sciences, as people have many reasons to contemplate and articulate. Meanwhile, expedient practices are sporadic, uncontrollable, and more widespread in real life.

1.2 Significances of the methodologies extended from writing systems

For convenience, people usually follow routines, especially those proven successful, which can become popular and formally elevated as *methods*. The rationale for a method is the *principle*. Methodology is the collection or systematic study of methods and principles in a specific field. The methodologies of various fields, such as sociology and biology, can be related and overlap. Writing systems represent one of the earliest intellectual constructs, with specific principles and methods. Notably, the methodologies of writing systems have been traceable and influential since the dawn of civilization, primarily for intellectual activities. Both writing systems and their methodologies remain significant today.

In human society, the writing system plays a crucial role in facilitating communication, preserving knowledge, and advancing civilization, and its methodology has proven effective since the inception of history. People typically apply familiar methods by instinct or for convenience, such as those proven in writing systems. If one routine is successful, they adopt it; if not, they try another. For example, after successfully domesticating dogs, similar techniques with the same principles were likely applied to chickens and sheep and might even apply to aliens someday. Educated individuals become familiar with these methods and principles through learning and using the writing system, making the writing methodologies their primary habits, and then applying them anywhere

and anytime, provided they seem applicable and effective. Consequently, writing methodologies have been extended and become conventional; their significance and impact are more extensive and profound than most people realize.

The conventional methodologies are broader than those extended from writing systems; others could be imported from foreign cultures, discovered, or innovated in activities like farming or herding. The methodologies unrelated to writing systems and those limited to practical matters are out of the scope. Suppose those imported intellectual methodologies are not applied in the indigenous writing system at the foundational level of civilization. In that case, they need more methodological significance, as they are not consistent, systematic, or prevalent. It is also possible that the imported and indigenous methodologies are incoherent. Presumably, in situations of doubt and uncertainty, society often resorts to conventional methods, such as those derived from indigenous writing systems or primary habits.

1.3 Instances and the features and essences associated with them

A thing or a self-contained existence could refer to a thing-kind or a particular instance of the kind. In the presence of an observer or a subject, a thing is often called an *object*, tangible or intangible. A *thing-kind* or an *object-kind* is a collection of known and unknown instances of the kind. *Instances* that share similarities are regarded as belonging to the same kind. For example, humankind could mean all humans or individual persons. In the broadest sense, things could be natural, like humans and gravities, altered like house dogs, or artificial, like computers and writing systems; they could also be physical, like humans and computers, or mental, like gravities and democracies. Realistically, natural objects people observe are instances, not the object-kind; for example, individuals rather than humankind. There are a few exceptions, such as the Earth. People get to know thing-kind or humankind, partially at best, through observing instances or individuals.

Things should be dealt with differently depending on whether they are natural, altered, artificial, or specific ontologies. *Altered things* are those natural but cultivated by humans, such as house dogs; they keep most of their natural characteristics. Natural or altered things are the same and are never fully known, realistically, as humans are excluded from their original creations. Natural object-kinds could be more mysterious for having indefinite instances, considering the unknown future or past. *Artificial objects* are deliberately made with specific intentions by humans, tangible and intangible, such as writing scripts and marriages. Unlike natural objects, artificial ones with precise specifications and intentions are fully known. The instances of an artificial object are limited and the same as the kind. Things created or altered by humans unintentionally are *spontaneous*, and spontaneous things are not artificial.

Instances are distinguished by their associated characteristics, particularly called *features*. The collection of all distinct features of each instance makes up its *essence*. If the instance is natural, all its features come from the creation regardless of humanity and may never be fully known, and its essence is approximately equivalent to it. If the instance is artificial, all its features are specified by the human creator, and its essence is fully known and identical to the instance. Talking about the essence of thing-kind means the essence shared by all kind instances. Only instances are concerned in the following discussion.

The features and essences apply to instances, and the three are external to the observers (minds) and subject to varied interpretations. Presumably, even unaware of formal definitions of features or essences, people can tell the associated features of a particular instance to be distinct, having its unique essence. A feature could be perceived as an intrinsic feature-in-itself, inherent under all circumstances, or as an extrinsic feature-by-others, depending on the circumstance and observation. An individual's human

body is intrinsic from birth, while the weight is extrinsic, depending on the measure and environment. Whether the graphic shapes 一, |, / and \ are considered the same or different depends on the perspective and purpose of the observation.

2. Conventional Approaches Extended from Writing Systems

A writing system comprises indefinite writing scripts; each script is a conjunction of intended meaning, speech sound, and writing form. The methodology used in a writing system encompasses the *orthography* for writing forms and the *semantics* for the meanings of writing scripts. Beginning with the alphabet methodology since ancient Greece, theoretical approaches have been well-established in the West; however, they need to be manifested in character methodology and hence not methodologically significant in Chinese culture, wherein expedient approaches remain the only options. Although the extended methods could be applied far beyond writing systems, examples of English spellings vs. Chinese characters are scrutinized to reveal their approaches, theoretical vs. expedient. Without the details, theoretical and practical approaches are specifically those from true alphabets and Chinese characters.

2.1 The theoretical approach inherent in phonographic alphabets

The alphabet orthography for alphabet forms or arrays of letters is based on three factual presumptions:

- Basic letters are specified with phonemes (vowels and consonants) as their intrinsic values besides extrinsic graphic shapes.
- Phonemes and letters are atomized, basic, and indispensable, no longer divisible.
- An array of letters complies with the orderly utterance of phonemes.

Letters are significant for their intrinsic values, and so are spellings; both are constrained. The letter spellings are strictly structured according to the spoken words and phonemes. Concerning alphabet semantics, spellings carry the meanings of the denoted spoken words. Combining alphabet orthography and semantics makes up the spelling rule (Zhou, 2024).

The general approaches of true alphabets or all spelling rules are traceable, explicable, and strictly theoretical. All elements reflect factual phenomena in natural languages: letters, phonemes, words (meanings) and utterances, arrays of letters, and the meanings of spellings. Postulations are limited to the letter-phoneme mappings and the spelling rules at the foundational level, from which indefinite spellings are derived to denote indefinite spoken words (meanings). The semantics of spellings are reduced to those of spoken language, which is a different subject. Spoken languages are widely considered spontaneous and natural without deliberate interferences, and spoken words (meanings) could be taken for granted and verifiable in communities.

2.2 The expedient approach inherent in logographic characters

The character orthography for character forms or graphic layouts is based on two factual presumptions, which character users are aware of: the basic writing units or strokes carry nothing intrinsic (i.e., meaningless and soundless except for 一) other than extrinsic graphic shapes, and the graphic designs to coordinate strokes are *expedient* as long as the resulting layouts of strokes appear effective to represent the intended meanings. Like strokes, graphic layouts standing alone have nothing intrinsic (i.e., meaningless and

soundless) other than extrinsic appearance. Therefore, they are free to be associated with any meanings/sounds to be legitimate character forms.

A legitimate character is a conjunction of meaning, sound, and form. A graphic layout of strokes standing alone is not a character form with nothing intrinsic, so it must be associated with meaning/sound to be a legitimate character form. In that sense, character meaning/sound is externally assigned by its creator and has nothing intrinsically linked to the character form. The traditional practice is: given any intended meaning, regardless of its cause or speech sound, a graphic layout can be created with an expedient design and then associated with the intended meaning/sound to be a legitimate character. The character meanings vary, including the meanings of preexisting spoken words and other thoughts. All characters are specified with graphic layouts to represent the intended meanings/sounds. Both character orthography and semantics are expedient (Zhou, 2024).

2.3 Theoretical approaches established and available in the West

Theoretical approaches to explanation are part of human nature, likely familiar since the dawn of civilization, and vary in qualities and origins. Some may argue that formal theoretical approaches can be witnessed in the earlier Phoenician scripts, the predecessor of the Greek alphabet. Other phonographies, like abjad, abugida, or syllabary, are also theoretical to a certain extent and formally structured but not as rigorously as true alphabets. The reasons are that atomization is overlooked in abjad and syllabary, and writing order or orderly utterance is not observed in abugida and Korean hangul (Zhou, 2024). The theoretical approach inherent in the true alphabet is unique, strictly explicable, and arguably superior to others.

Theoretical approaches prototyped by the Greek alphabet have been exemplified, well-preserved, and increased ever since—first in the West and later worldwide. They are easily comprehended, widely adopted, and extended wherever applicable. The approaches have been highly developed and specialized across various disciplines, playing crucial roles in advancing the human world, and remain resilient as long as true alphabets continue to be used. Notably, the *confirmation* in this theoretical approach means the strict explanation, mainly by facts or rules, consistently and systematically.

All individuals exhibit practicality and occasionally expediency, striving by any means for wealth, fame, and longevity, sometimes resorting to deception or foul play. However, since ancient Greece, Western societies have cultivated theoretical conventions on top of practical considerations. While few Westerners adhere to theoretical pursuits in the real world, with most leaning towards practicality, pursuing theoretical development remains a viable choice for leading elites. Although a few are creative in their theories, the majority with the same education in true alphabets would appreciate and follow their achievements.

2.4 Expedient approaches predominant in Chinese tradition as the only option

The Chinese logographic character writing system is expedient in both orthography and semantics, in contrast to phonographic systems like the English alphabet and the Japanese syllabary, which are theoretical. Characters have demonstrated the effectiveness of practical approaches throughout Chinese history. Like all others, Chinese people are practical by instinct, and particularly, learning and using characters reinforces their tendency to be expedient (§2.2).

There needs to be more evidence of theoretical approaches in characters: arbitrary thoughts, regardless of the causes, could be character meanings, and character forms could be in any shape as long as they are seemingly effective in representing the intended meanings/sounds. Chinese explanations for writing forms and meanings are never

mechanical and consistent with rules or facts. Without the illustrations of true alphabets or other phonographies, Chinese people are unaware of Western theoretical approaches; instead, they have expedient approaches as the only options. Chinese convention of expediency remains strong as long as characters are still in use.

2.5 Western vs. Chinese theory and their integrations in the modern era

Western and Chinese theories differ substantially due to their respective expedient or theoretical conventions. Chinese people also inquire into the reasons behind phenomena and develop theories based on practical experience. Under the dominance of expediency, the preset goal or intended proposition is primary, while understanding and rational arguments are secondary; the Chinese theoretical approaches are destined to support the intended proposition by all means. Consequently, Chinese conventional theory is not theoretical by Western standards. The best example of Chinese theory is traditional medicine, which is incompatible with modern medicine. Although ancient China discovered gunpowder, the compass, and vaccination, these innovations failed to be further developed as in the West due to the need for more theoretical understanding.

During the modern era, theoretical approaches, especially those grounded in facts and rules, alongside Western sciences and technologies, have increased worldwide, including in Chinese society. Although there might be sporadic evidence of theoretical approaches in Chinese history, they have not been formally developed and methodologically significant at a foundational level, not applied to characters. Traditional expedient approaches, reinforced by cultural practices, have remained resilient and predominant despite foreign influences.

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Chinese people have exhibited exceptional intelligence, capability, and accomplishment, especially in practical matters. However, their theories are less reliable, and there is generally less enthusiasm for theoretical approaches. Whenever there is doubt about Western theories, especially in the humanities, full of unknowns and uncertainties, Chinese conventional theories come to the forefront, and people often turn to practical approaches. For instance, when a disease becomes untreatable with modern medicine, many turn to alternative treatments, such as Chinese traditional medicine.

3. Characteristics of Theoretical vs Expedient Approaches

The theoretical approaches inherent in true alphabets and practical approaches in Chinese characters are contrasting; some differences are examined, illustrated, and compared. Those conventional approaches can be extended to all human activities; however, sample spellings and characters are often used for illustrations. In theoretical approaches, foundational presumptions, especially undisputable facts, hold primary importance as the starting point in bottom-up development, and the processes are traceable and algorithmic with long-term systematic prospects. In typical expedient approaches, intended goals or ideas hold primary importance as the starting point in top-down searches for the support of these goals, and the processes can be flexible and heuristic as long as they appear effective

for here and now. Theoretical approaches prioritize explanations and rationalities, whereas expedient ones prioritize intended goals or ideas and effective means for the goals.

3.1 Primary importance of presumptions or facts vs. of intention or ideas

Presumptions refer to ideas or beliefs accepted as accurate without having conclusive evidence. Assumptions may not be factual, such as in non-Euclidean geometry; however, commonly verifiable facts, especially natural phenomena, are universally explicable as the most trustworthy factual presumptions. Intellectual approaches are theoretical if the processes are further explained, such as by rules, on the grounds of presumptions. The other key factor in theoretical approaches is whether the processes or rules are traceable and explicable by facts. Consistently and systematically following rules provides the best explanations under all circumstances. All elements of true alphabets, such as phonemes, spoken words (meanings and sounds), and spelling rules, are presumed to be self-evidenced facts in a natural language. Presumptions, especially by facts, are of primary importance to theoretical approaches.

Intentions or ideas are of primary importance to practical approaches. By definition, the expedient ways of thinking or doing aim at the preset intentions or goals by all means. Preset goals are inseparable from intentions: goals are intended and entail intentions. *Intention* reflects the mental state of wanting or intending to do something, and it is idealistic and usually motivated by personal desires, social values, and historical conventions. Basic strokes, graphic layouts, and intended meanings of the character writing system are created for the intended goals regardless of the reasons or explanations. There are no specific regulations for graphic designs and intended meanings in Chinese history, although conventions are being observed flexibly.

3.2 Bottom-up mechanical vs. top-down heuristic process with opposite starting points

As theoretical approaches focus on explanation, presumptions or facts are the starting points in the bottom-up process, wherein the bottom is the foundation of essential elements, and the up is to assemble a structure with those elements. A *mechanical* process that follows the rules is orderly, and the bottom-up mechanical process is traceable, entirely explicable, and theoretical. Indefinite spellings are created in theoretical processes by the spelling rule, which is mechanical on the grounds of phonemes and spoken words of natural language. At the same time, their meanings are reduced to those of spoken words being denoted.

In contrast, expedient approaches focus on intentions, goals, or ideas, which are prioritized as the starting points in the top-down process, with the top representing the intended goals and the bottom representing the supporting means to achieve those goals. Traceable presumptions are optional, and orderly procedures, especially mechanical rules, are negligible when the intended goals matter more than the explanations. Expedient processes seek plausible means that effectively support the goals through heuristic ways. *Heuristic* routines entail flexible and intuitive approaches that involve using practical strategies or rules of thumb to navigate complex problems, often relying on trial-and-error solutions and adaptation to different situations. If normal means are not available, endless manipulations could be tried anyhow. In Chinese characters, expedient approaches have entailed that indefinite characters (writing forms and intended meanings) are created in practical processes.

The orderly procedures and consistent rules are irrelevant in heuristic ways. They are often taken for granted in the West, starting with true alphabets, but are optional in Chinese culture. Here are some examples. In character forms, any writing order of strokes is acceptable, just like in abstract paintings or traffic signs, such as writing order “ | , —”

or “一, |” for 十 (Chinese ten or crossroad sign); there is no intrinsic order-in-itself but only extrinsic order-by-others. Characters and words cannot be intrinsically ordered but artificially or extrinsically arranged, such as in Chinese dictionaries or computers. Making and enforcing rules are common in human societies. However, rules are not created equally. When people become accustomed to the notion that rules are extrinsic, they often seek opportunities to circumvent them under certain circumstances. Rules are made for honest people to obey and insidious ones to evade; they do not apply to the rule-makers.

3.3 Long-term systematic vs. short-term fragmented consideration

Theoretical approaches vary; the more accurate and thorough the explanations they provide, the more predictive power and higher quality they have. Meanwhile, people must convince themselves and endure the test of time before convincing others. Theoretical approaches require comprehensive and quality understanding first, and the results are supposedly systematic and consistent in the long term. The *system starts* with a few presumptions, based on which theoretical developments in bottom-up mechanical processes are potentially infinite, just like spellings in true alphabets. Being *systematic* means following organized, methodical, and orderly structures in all processes within the system. Western theories are destined to be systematic, persistent, and widely applicable.

While prioritizing immediate intended outcomes, expedient approaches focus on the effectiveness of the means under the circumstances and have a short-term orientation. The means can be varied, fragmented, and sporadic—occurring at irregular intervals and lacking consistent patterns—as long as the intended results are effectively achieved. The long-term systematic considerations crucial to theoretical approaches do not matter in practical approaches and have been generally overlooked, starting with Chinese characters. Chinese theories are less reliable than Western ones because of the conventional methods (§2.5). One example is Chinese mythology: deities and gods are not organized nor related as in the Greek Pantheon or Christian Bible; instead, they are fragmented and scattered across historical periods.

3.4 More reliance on rationalities for articulation vs. on effective means for intended goals

Theoretical approaches focusing on explanations rely more on rationality for understanding and communication. Presumptions and processes for theoretical approaches are supposedly rational and explicable. From a theoretical perspective, rationalities and articulations are inseparable. In daily life, the reasons used for persuasion are primarily common and defeasible, such as relying on ethics (ethos) and emotions (pathos) rather than logic (logos). Common defeasible reasoning is primarily concerned with artificial intelligence. Speakers make extra efforts to understand and articulate in communication, while listeners can grasp the messages using the same approaches. When issues arise, participants must consolidate their presumptions and ways of thinking to resolve differences through rational discussion.

Expedient approaches focusing on intended goals rely on any seemingly effective means available. From an expedient perspective, effective means and intended goals are inseparable: if the intended goals are achieved, then the means are proven effective; without intention, there would be no reference to measure effectiveness against. There are potentially endless practical means, legitimate tools and procedures, deceptive tactics, manipulative tricks, etc. All can be tried and adopted if proven effective and are primarily concerned with their utility. The more effective the means appear for achieving the same intended goals, the more desirable they become. Understanding and rational discussion

about the foundational presumptions and traceable processes are secondary to the effectiveness of the expedient approaches.

4. Conventional Attention to the Features of Instances

The conventional approaches inherent in writing systems have enormous implications, and one is the traditional attention to the features of instances. People get to know the external world through instances of all kinds. Anyone can tell the features associated with every instance to be distinct, formally or unconsciously. Starting with true alphabets, Westerners emphasize intrinsic more than extrinsic features due to the theoretical convention; the former is valued more for its steadiness. Starting with characters, Chinese people emphasize extrinsic more than intrinsic features due to the expedient convention, regardless of the causes of the features. Such conventional attentions apply to all instances, like individuals or traffic signs; however, English spellings and Chinese characters are often used for illustrations.

4.1 Western attention to intrinsic features more than extrinsic ones

In theoretical approaches, people are compelled to provide rational explanations, such as by facts or rules (§4.3). In dealing with perceivable features, Westerners are concerned with their explanations—some features are inherently associated with the instances—intrinsic features are best explicable. All people, including Westerners, are inevitably impressed with the cases' extrinsic features or appearances. Particularly since ancient Greece or the alphabet, Western attention to intrinsic features has been exemplified by the instances (tokens) of alphabetic letters (types) and indefinite spellings on top of their graphic shapes. Recall that writing scripts are purely artificial and so specified are all their features, extrinsic or intrinsic.

Intrinsic features remain stable and predictable as they are inherent characteristics of an instance, irrespective of its surroundings or measurement method. Conversely, extrinsic features are contingent upon external factors such as the environment and observation method, rendering them less predictable. While extrinsic features may catch the eye initially, they are inherently less reliable. Despite the challenge of identifying them, intrinsic features hold undeniable advantages due to their steadiness with the instances, and they tend to be favored and receive greater attention in Western contexts.

The precise origins of the formal differentiation between intrinsic and extrinsic features and the systematic focus on intrinsic attributes remain obscure. Such distinctions emerged sporadically across various cultures long before being formally delineated. However, their roots can be traced back to the Greek alphabet, at least in recorded history, or perhaps further to its predecessors, the writing systems of the Phoenicians, Egyptians, and Mesopotamians. It is worth noting that those ancient writing systems are no longer used today.

4.2 Chinese attention to extrinsic features more than intrinsic ones

In expedient approaches, people focus more on effective means than explanations (§4.3). When assessing an instance's features, people notice superficial characteristics like shape and size from initial impressions, emphasizing utility over understanding. Extrinsic features, essential and intuitive, appear in every instance regardless, often distracting attention to intrinsic characteristics, which may not be obvious. Chinese people are not compelled to explain but to achieve their goals by all means and as effectively as possible, paying more attention to which feature is helpful rather than where it comes from.

Chinese characters are perhaps the best examples of how intrinsic features could be optional while extrinsic ones are inescapable. Artificial objects may have no intrinsic features by their human creators, beginning with meaningless, soundless character strokes and then graphic layouts of strokes standing alone. Helping achieve expedient goals for graphic designs is the best explanation for those character strokes and layouts. While strokes have no intrinsic values, individual characters are indeed associated with intended meanings/sounds as their intrinsic values.

The distinction between natural and artificial objects can be subtle, notably when excluding the influence of external creators or an almighty Creator. When both types of objects are treated similarly, the conventional belief that artificial objects may lack intrinsic features could also extend to natural objects. People inherently recognize intrinsic features in natural objects, such as the two legs of a human from birth. Artificial objects might have no intrinsic feature depending on their creations, but they always possess extrinsic features that make them distinct. Intrinsic features in natural objects could be more challenging to detect and may be considered optional or secondary, similar to artificial objects, whereas extrinsic features are primary. That has contributed to the traditional Chinese emphasis on extrinsic features.

5. Realistic vs. Idealistic Essences of Instances

The conventional approaches derived from writing systems inevitably influence how people perceive and rationalize the external world, beginning with individual instances. More specifically, theoretical approaches inherent in true alphabets lead to realistic accounts of essences—determined by factual features, free from baseless speculations, and open to updates. Conversely, expedient approaches inherent in Chinese characters result in idealistic accounts of essences—defined by known (observed or speculated) ideas about features and enclosed. Expedient approaches and idealistic essences are intuitive, elementary, and universally shared across societies. In contrast, theoretical approaches and realistic essences have been documented in the Greek alphabet, initially being Western-specific. Realistic accounts by facts are grounded in external instances, while opinions about those instances determine idealistic accounts by attributes. These accounts represent two extremes, as people confront reality while simultaneously harboring boundless imaginations. Both approaches are compared and blended across the globe in the modern era.

5.1 Realistic essence determined by facts only while open to change

Realistically, humans are limited in life and cognition, while the unknown is everywhere. Natural phenomena or instances are known partially regarding their features at best but never entirely, as human are excluded from their creations. In theoretic approaches, presumed facts and bottom-up mechanical processes by rules are entirely explicable and accountable in *realistic accounts*. At the same time, baseless speculations are unacceptable, and unknowns are potentially accounted for when they become known. Purely artificial instances are fully known in precise specifications, which become their *attributes* or artificial features because of human creations. Unknowable human minds may never work forever in the original biological settings, unlike fully known computers that can work forever if broken parts are replaced. The realistic accounts of natural instances are approximations, while those of artificial instances are exact.

For every instance, the *essence* is the collection of all its features and is approximately equivalent to the instance. Perception and consideration of an instance are

the same for all its features. More precisely, the realistic account results in the *realistic essence* of an instance—the collection of all its confirmed features, explicable by facts or rules (observed or derived), while open to update with more. Unfounded speculations or dubious ideas are excluded from the realistic account or essence. Because intrinsic features are valued more than extrinsic ones, realistic essence with no intrinsic feature included could be questionable (§4.1). As natural and artificial objects are ontologically different, the realistic essence of the former is an approximation at best, and that of the latter is exact. The realistic essence of a person remains open to be updated forever, while that of a computer is exactly documented in its manual.

The Greek alphabet has exemplified, preserved, and proliferated the realistic accounts for realistic essences: all elements like phonemes, spoken words, and spellings can be confirmed by facts or derived by rules, entirely explicable, open to frequent changes in the language, with no distraction of baseless interference. True alphabets are best for preserving natural speech sounds of any kind, are versatile for other languages in natural conditions, have abundant varieties of speech sounds and minimal homophones, and have proliferated worldwide. Such realistic accounts and essences could be extended for other natural or artificial instances. Notably, the known and unknown can be perplexing in practical lives, and the unknown is often omitted from rational accounts.

5.2 Idealistic essence specified by known (observed and speculated) ideas and enclosed
 Idealistically, humans could be superior, with uncontainable imaginations beyond physical constraints. Some individuals, if not all, have the potential to be gods (in spiritual or mental worlds). Utterly unknown, such as absolute nothingness, can be mentally associated with some ideas or attributes so that the unknown becomes known partially. In human societies, the so-called knowns are not imperative to be explicable or confirmable by facts or rules, and there are plenty of plausible knowns, like legends and conventional wisdom, full of mysteries. In the expedient approach, known is primarily concerned with utility rather than explanation (§3.4), and any known (observed or speculated) ideas can be attributed to an instance and incorporated into its *idealistic account*. Notably, the unknown cannot be specified and hence is excluded from the idealistic account by attributes. Simply, no ideas, no account. Ideas not specified are irrelevant. Those ideas fully enclose the idealistic account in its specification.

The idealistic account gives rise to the idealistic essence of an instance—the collection of all its known (observed and speculated) features attributed. More precisely, an idealistic *essence* of an instance is fully specified by known ideas or opinions about it or all its features, wherein the known ideas arise from observation or speculation, and the unknown is not concerned. Speculated ideas account for the idealistic essence, whether they can be confirmed or rejected later or are uncontestable forever.

Chinese characters have persistently exemplified and strengthened expedient approaches, idealistic accounts, and essences. Given any intended meaning/sound or any set of known ideas, regardless of its explanation or foundational cause, a graphic layout of strokes can be designed as long as seemingly effective to represent the intended meaning/sound; a legitimate character (meaning/sound, form) is created in the expedient process. The idealistic essence of a meaningless and soundless stroke comprises its extrinsic graph only for its utility. In contrast, that of a character comprises extrinsic graphic layouts and intrinsic meaning/sound attributed. Strokes and characters have shown that the intrinsic features of artificial objects are optional to be considered in their idealistic essences at the creators' discretion (§4.2).

When their ontological causes or creations are disregarded, all instances, natural or artificial, could be treated in the same ways with attributes of ideas and have the exact

specification of idealistic essence. From the conventional practices with characters, idealistic essence can be extended to any natural or artificial instance, and Chinese conventional essence may contain opinions reflecting cultural and social background. It is acceptable that intrinsic features may or may not be included in the idealistic essence entirely determined by human opinions (mind) about the instance (§4.2). That is contrary to the primary role of intrinsic features confirmed by facts or rules in the realistic essence based on the instance (§5.1).

Human minds or opinions about an instance determine its idealistic account or essence rather than the instance itself. Only if people think a man has two legs or a particular soul does his essence include those features regardless of evidence. The Chinese essence of a person comprises two legs, breathing air *qi* (气, also *chi*), social status, morality, and endless other assessments. People are healthy or ethical with positive *qi* inside their body and sick or evil with negative *qi*; that is the foundation of Chinese medicine. Likewise, as vital energy, *qi* plausibly exists in all instances, such as mountains, while holistic *Qi* is immanent throughout the universe. The speculative attributes of *qi* and *Qi* were never subjected to bottom-up mechanical confirmation. Chinese theories of *qi*, comparable to Thales' water of ancient Greece, are not intellectual exercises but foundational to Chinese medicine, metaphysics, and Neo-Confucianist ethics.

5.3 Preliminary comparisons of realistic and idealistic accounts

Expedient approaches, idealistic accounts, and essences are intuitive, straightforward, and common. People have ideas and associate all kinds of speculation with anything; divine characteristics are attributed to sacred individuals like prophets. Mathematical objects are purely artificial, and their essences are precisely defined and idealistic; for example, a *square* is defined as a two-dimensional figure with four equal sides and four right angles. If any specification is modified, such as in three-dimensional space, it is no longer a square. Also idealistic is Plato's ideal form, a perfect, unchanging archetype of which instances in the material world are imperfect copies. Some absolute idealists, such as G.W.F. Hegel, believe that reality is essentially mental or spiritual, defying all realistic accounts.

Theoretical approaches, realistic accounts, and essences are also intuitive and common; in particular, they are formally developed only in societies historically overwhelmed by true alphabets and have become part of Western conventions. All people, including the Chinese, eat actual food and seek explanation and understanding. However, Westerners have gotten used to and applied those conventions whenever they engage in severe intellectual activities since antiquity. Western conventions are not fully available in non-Western cultures, dominated by other writing systems. Like all people, most Westerners are also practical and habitual in having expedient approaches and idealistic accounts.

Realistic accounts and essences differ from idealistic ones in that only those confirmed knowns explicable by facts or rules are considered while leaving room for the unknown. In contrast to idealistic accounts based on human minds, realistic ones are anchored in the external world and, therefore, more steady, traceable, and universal. If all unfounded ideas are removed while being open to update, idealistic accounts become realistic. When the known ideas or opinions change about the instance or its features, which happens often, the idealistic essence follows and, therefore, is less steady, explicable, and universal than the realistic essence.

5.4 Admixture of realistic and idealistic accounts under Western influences

Purely realistic accounts are usually limited in theoretical studies, especially modern sciences, for which most people care little but look for the benefits under any circumstances. All nations want advanced weapons and medicines. Purely idealistic accounts are also rare. Utopia is idealistic, but few people wholeheartedly believe it. Most people have mixed common accounts, observing facts while adding imagination and being idealistic, but not at the extreme. A person is born with two legs, no tail, and perhaps a mysterious soul. Human legs could be confirmed, and the tail rejected, while the soul is neither confirmable nor rejectable. The legs and soul are usually included in the common accounts for the essence of an individual, but not the tail. The standard accounts for the essences of instances in daily life, which are rarely realistic but blended with speculative attributes.

The Western conventions of theoretical approaches and realistic accounts have been applied in true alphabets and formally developed. Meanwhile, the Chinese conventions of expedient approaches and idealistic accounts are inherent throughout the characters. Western and Chinese conventions have been incoherent since the beginning of civilization, considering the fundamental difference in writing methodologies of true alphabets vs. Chinese characters. More importantly, Chinese conventions are basic and common, which all people are familiar with, while Western conventions are elevated from those basic ones and common approaches and accounts. That parallels the historical development of the Greek alphabet, which was innovated out of earlier phonographies and ancient logographies.

Western theoretical approaches and realistic accounts give rise to modern sciences, which are irresistible and have been adopted across the globe. Meanwhile, expedient approaches and idealistic accounts are the only choices in Chinese traditional societies, being resilient and predominant because of the roots in characters (§2.4). Despite the apparent incoherence in modern China, Western theoretical and realistic ones have been imported and blended with Chinese conventions. Actually, in all other societies, not just the Chinese, the indigenous conventions differ from and have been supplemented with the Western ones in the modern era. People prefer one over the other whenever they feel like it. For example, they usually choose Western ways in sciences and technologies and conventional ways in humanities.

Conclusion

All people are practical about what to do and how to get things done, sometimes *expedient* for intended goals by all means, and seldom *theoretical* about why. Based on confirmable facts in natural languages and structured by rules, theoretical approaches are inherent in true alphabets and have been well established, becoming part of the Western conventions. Meanwhile, regardless of causes and processes, expedient approaches are inherent to the characters and have been strengthened and extended as part of the Chinese conventions. Theoretical approaches are characterized by bottom-up mechanical processes, starting with the presumptions, with long-term systematic consideration and more reliance on rationalities for explanations. In contrast, expedient approaches are characterized by top-down heuristic processes, starting with the intended goals, with short-term fragmented consideration and more reliance on effective means to achieve the goals. Such disparities in the West-East conventional approaches have endless implications. The first is that intrinsic features of instances are emphasized more than extrinsic ones in the West, while the opposite happens in Chinese culture—extrinsic are valued more. The second is that realistic accounts or essences of instances by facts are well established in the West—determined by confirmed facts but not baseless opinions while open to update;

meanwhile, idealistic accounts or essences by attributes remain as the only option in Chinese tradition—specified by known (observed or speculated) ideas only. While all people are practical, expedient, and have idealistic accounts of external instances, Westerners, especially leading elites, have theoretical approaches and realistic accounts available. In the contemporary world, other non-Western societies, like the Chinese, have adopted and blended Western ways with indigenous ways and often prefer one over the other in cases where needed.

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