

# Distinguishing Emptiness from Nothingness: A Comparative Analysis Using Zhang Dongsun's Panstructural Epistemology

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## Abstract

The philosophical definition of the relationship between nothingness and emptiness continues to spark academic debates and controversies. In this article, we aim to clarify this relationship by examining some Chinese discourses relevant to the topic. The concept of absolute nothingness, as it was established in the Neo-Daoist philosophy of the Wei-Jin period in China—and reaching perhaps its most sophisticated form in the philosophy of Nishida Kitarō within the Kyoto School—must be distinguished from emptiness in the sense of the absence of substance, which forms the basis of various philosophical discussions in Sinicized Buddhism and continues to resonate in certain epistemological theories of contemporary Chinese scholars. In this paper, I will first provide a brief introduction to these theories of knowledge, with a particular focus on the contributions of the modern Chinese philosopher Zhang Dongsun, whose work was shaped by the classical Chinese paradigm of structural interrelations on the one hand, and the principles of Sinicized Buddhism on the other. In conclusion, I will juxtapose the theoretical foundations of these epistemologies with the aforementioned conceptualizations of nothingness, thereby attempting to elucidate the relationship between these two seemingly related concepts.

**Keywords:** nothingness, emptiness, Zhang Dongsun, relational structure, coherence

## Razlikovanje med praznino in ničem: primerjalna analiza na podlagi pan-strukturalne epistemologije Zhang Dongsuna

### Izvilleček

Filozofska opredelitev razmerja med ničem in praznino še vedno sproža akademske razprave in polemike. V tem članku bom poskušala razjasniti to razmerje na primeru izbranih kitajskih diskurzov, ki so relevantni za to temo. Pojem absolutnega ničča, kakršen se je vzpostavil v neodaistični filozofiji obdobja Wei-Jin na Kitajskem (in morda dosegel najbolj sofisticirano obliko v filozofiji Nishida Kitarōja v kjotski šoli), je treba

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razlikovati od praznine v smislu odsotnosti substance, ki tvori temelj različnih filozofskih razprav v siniziranem budizmu in še vedno predstavlja metafizično osnovo nekaterih epistemoloških teorij sodobnih kitajskih teoretikov. V prispevku bom najprej na kratko predstavila dva tradicionalna temelja epistemološke teorije modernega kitajskega filozofa Zhang Dongsuna, in sicer klasični kitajski diskurz relacijske strukture na eni in budistični koncept izpraznjene strukture na drugi strani. V zaključku bom teoretske osnove teh epistemologij postavila ob bok prej omenjenim konceptualizacijam nič in s tem poskušala razjasniti odnos med tema na videz sorodnima pojmomoma.

**Ključne besede:** nič, praznina, Zhang Dongsun, relacijska struktura, koherenca

## The Concept of *Li* 理 as a Relational Network of Coherence

From the perspective of traditional Chinese philosophies, which are grounded in processual paradigms, any notion of substance is absent or, at most, illusory. Consequently, the world can be perceived as ultimately empty. This approach was articulated in a particularly clear and unambiguous manner by Zhang Dongsun 張東孫 (1902–1973), one of the leading modern Chinese philosophers. In the early decades of the 20th century, he developed a distinctive epistemological system known as “panstructuralism”. This was built upon two fundamental models, which he integrated in an exceptionally creative way. The first was rooted in the classical Chinese relational worldview of structural coherence (*li* 理), while the second drew from the Sinicized Buddhist conceptualization of emptiness. For Zhang, the external world was devoid of inherent substance, and what existed was nothing more than a structural network of relations.

Before analysing this notion of an empty world, let us first briefly examine its origins, which are deeply intertwined with the concept of the relational structure of coherence (*li*) on the one hand and the Sinicized notion of Buddhist emptiness as formulated by the earliest representatives of Chinese Buddhism on the other.

The Chinese notion of *li* has traditionally been translated as reason or a (rational) principle. However, this interpretation captures only certain aspects of the term, which is one of the fundamental concepts in Chinese philosophy.

In his fascinating book *Ironies of Oneness and Difference: Coherence in Early Chinese Thought; Prolegomena to the Study of Li*, Brook Ziporyn interpreted the term *li* as coherence (Ziporyn 2012), and this understanding marked a qualitative shift in the way this concept was perceived in the Western academic world. The perspective of coherence offered a distinct and more autochthonous image of what traditional Chinese thinkers may have understood by *li*.

Around the same time, I also wrote a book on the concept of *li*, titled *Traditional Chinese Philosophy and the Paradigm of Structure (li 理)* (Rošker 2013), in which I interpreted it as a relational structure. When we wrote these books, Brook

and I were unaware of each other's ideas. A few years later, we met at a mutual friend's house in Gaoxiong and discussed our perspectives on the issue. We concluded that both translations were correct and, indeed, coherent (*sic!*). As a relational structure, *li* represents a network encompassing everything that exists (and even everything that does not). Ancient Chinese worldviews were founded on patterns that facilitated human perception, comprehension, and mediation of the world. Such foundational patterns were seen as *li*, a term whose etymology traces back to the character 理, composed of the phonetic element 里 and the radical 玉, which denotes jade. Originally, it referred to the lines or coloured stripes in jade. Wolfgang Bauer (2000, 256–57) notes that when this character was used figuratively in classical Chinese, it also denoted structure—for instance, in the crystalline net that represents the immaterial principle of ordered matter—and that it already appeared in this sense in the Confucian commentary on the *Book of Changes* (*Yi jing* 易經).

A. C. Graham, a modern pioneer in the study of ancient Chinese logic, is one of the very few sinologists who considers the concept of *li* as the expression of both a structural pattern and a structure:

*Li* is the patterned arrangement of parts in a structured whole, of things in an ordered cosmos, of thought in rational discourse, and in Names and Objects, of words in a completed sentence. Its emergence in the Sung Dynasty (AD 960–1279) as one of the central concepts of Neo-Confucianism was the culmination of a long development. In pre-Han philosophy it attracts attention especially in the *Interpreting Lao-tzu* of Han Fei tzu, who uses it to mean the specific configuration of properties (“square or round, long or short, coarse or fine, hard or soft”) in each kind of thing. (Graham 1978, 191–92)

So, what does *li* have to do with coherence? Actually, a great deal. The structural patterns of *li* are numerous, varying in size and constitution. What unites them, however, is their dynamic, ever-changing nature and their continuous tendency to harmonize with the overarching, universal structure of the cosmos. This gravitational pull toward coherence is not merely a characteristic feature of all patterns; it is an essential aspect of their inner constitution. It manifests itself across ethics, epistemology, aesthetics, and all other domains of philosophical thought.

In Confucian ethics, the universal structure is embodied in humaneness (*ren* 仁); in Daoism, it is reflected in the all-encompassing relational pattern of the natural *Dao* 道. To live ethically and meaningfully, our actions and relationships must align coherently with this fundamental relational structure.

In epistemology, the structural network of the universe finds its counterpart in the structure of the human mind. The coherence between these two patterns enables

human beings to perceive and comprehend the external world. Knowledge is possible precisely because the mind and reality share an intrinsic structural compatibility.

Similarly, the axiology of aesthetics follows the principles of coherence, reflecting the relations between the universal and the particular, the macrocosm and the microcosm. Aesthetic experience arises from the recognition of relational harmony, whether in nature, art, or human creativity. Just as the beauty of jade lies in its intricate patterns—spontaneous yet structured—the beauty of the world emerges from the coherence of its interwoven relational patterns. *Li* thus serves as the fundamental principle that binds ethics, knowledge, and aesthetics into a unified vision of existence.

This unification of particular, specific structural patterns into one single, general and basic structure, only became possible through a progressive semantic abstraction of the term *li*. This process lasted several centuries, and must be viewed within the context of the more general changes in Chinese culture and society during this time. In practical terms, it was defined by the political and economic development of traditional China, while ideologically it was the result of factors as varied as the formalization of Confucianism as a state doctrine, the new approaches formulated by Neo-Confucian scholars, and specific elements of Buddhist philosophy.<sup>1</sup>

In this context, we can—once again—reconsider the fundamental paradigms of traditional Chinese cosmology, which is not grounded in an ontology of substance-based Being but rather in a metaphysics of relations. Despite the hybrid nature of modern Chinese philosophies, which was shaped through a dialogue between classical Chinese thought and Western philosophical systems, this foundational worldview of a dynamic, ever-changing, and relational universe, devoid of fixed substance, remains deeply embedded in many theories developed by modern and contemporary Chinese thinkers.

On this basis, let us examine the development of the Buddhist notion of emptiness in the framework of Chinese philosophy.

### The Empty Structure of Chinese Buddhism (*kong li* 空理)

This Sinicization of emptiness was based on specific elaborations of the structural semantics developed by philosophers of the Six Dynasties era, who focused primarily on the structural relationships among concepts, words, and meaning.

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1 We can reduce this process of abstraction somewhat schematically to three phases: the phase of ontologization (*li* as the cosmic structure or as the structure of nature and society), the phase of structural semantics (*li* as the structure of language and meaning) and the phase of epistemologization (*li* as the mutually compatible structure of the external world and mind).

Tang Junyi (1955, 80) outlines the theoretical foundations of their thesis, which introduced a semantic shift in classical Chinese epistemologies, as follows: “As soon as a certain concept is established, a structure that expresses its meaning is also established. And as soon as this is established, it cannot be eliminated”.<sup>2</sup>

The impossibility of eliminating conceptual structures, of course, derives from the fact that these were abstract structures existing in the human mind. Once formed, these structures contained meanings that could not simply be eliminated. An important aspect here, with respect to the future development of Chinese thought, is that this position is clearly antithetical to the notion of empty (or depleted) structure (*kong li* 空理), as it would be developed in the theoretical discourses of Sinicized Buddhism during the periods of the Northern and Southern dynasties 南北朝 (420–581) and the Sui 隋 (581–618) and Tang 唐 (618–907) dynasties (Tang 1955, 80).

The Chinese Buddhists also often applied the character *li* 理 in their writings, especially those of the *Faxiang zong* 法相宗<sup>3</sup>, *Tiantai zong* 天台宗 and *Huayan zong* 華嚴宗<sup>4</sup> Schools. Although following the semantic scope of the structure and structural pattern, the comprehension of the term *li* in these texts differs considerably from the understanding of the same character among the exponents of the School of Mystery and the Pure Conversations.

As is well known, a fundamental tenet of Chinese Buddhism is that the phenomenal world is illusory: as such, it is not only abstract and empty, but does not even exist in reality. The Buddhist scholars from the early Middle Ages in China did not occupy themselves with meta-theoretical abstractions of conceptual structures. The “depleted” structure which concerned them was, in its essence, profoundly different from the structure of concepts and meaning that formed such a crucial subject of debate for the exponents of early Chinese structural semantics: “In the treatises of conceptual structure words appear only as words. In the treatises of depleted structure, however, words can help attain the ideal state, in which there are no words” (Tang 1955, 80).<sup>5</sup>

Understanding as such is not a basic aim of Buddhism. Buddhist theory does not seek to comprehend the world and its mechanisms of existence (Hashi 2015, 108). And while explications of Buddhist theory also represent a kind of knowledge, attaining such knowledge is not of central importance in Buddhist discourses, as this would merely signify an ideology, a theory that we could denote, for example, with the expression T and which in order to exist would again necessarily require

2 一名即立, 則其意所表之理即立, 立即不能取消。

3 Madhyama-yāna.

4 Avatamsaka.

5 在名理之論中, 言只是言, 而在空理之論中, 則可...以言達無言的理想。

its own negation, namely T. Therefore, Buddhists do not regard their teachings as a form of precious knowledge or theory; instead, their fundamental concern is the gradual elimination of all words and the cognitive scopes they imply (Chen and Rošker 2004, 36). Based upon the unique supposition of the nature of vacancy, Buddhism has developed a special methodology for escaping the closed structures of awareness, in which all living beings are imprisoned.

Buddhism thus seeks to break through the illusory sphere of phenomena: in order to do this, one must gain insight into the real contradictions that determine meanings and their structures, thereby making it possible to eliminate or deplete them (*kong* 空). Although the notion of *kong* has generally been translated as “emptiness” in Indo-European languages, the etymological meaning of the Chinese word *kong* actually differs from the words *xu* 虛 or *wu* 無 which—especially in Daoist contexts—denote two kinds of emptiness. While the latter generally signifies the absence of any (or of a certain) object or entity, the term *xu* refers to an empty space and/or time, i.e. to a certain state of emptiness. The terms *wu* and *xu* were mostly applied by the Daoists, while *kong* was used to denote emptiness in Chinese Buddhist discourses. This notion of emptiness referred primarily to a process of depletion or emptying, and to the result of this process, namely the process of becoming (or being) empty.

The concept of *kong* as applied by the School of Emptiness [*kong zong*] differed significantly from the term *wu*. This concept cannot be equated with the presence or absence of phenomena. The term *wu* means absence in the sense that there is nothing which might be present (although this term also implies a latent presence). The term *kong*, however, means the elimination of all presence contained in the phenomenal world. The Chinese character *kong* was originally compounded from the characters that denote earth and hole. A hole came into being when workers removed earth from it. Thus, a hole became a hole when earth was eliminated, which meant that it involved an action.<sup>6</sup> (Ibid.)

This action, however, referred only to the elimination of earth. After the earth was removed, the very act of removing (depleting or vacating) was removed (depleted) as well. Thus, even in Buddhism, the word *kong* referred to the depletion or elimination of phenomena which constituted an obstacle to the process of enlightenment. After the phenomenal obstacles were eliminated, the very act of eliminating or depleting was eliminated as well. But as long as we are not completely

6 至於空宗之說空，一名不同於說無。執有執無，都不是空。無是莫有。（無又近乎一潛有）。空是要去掉我們所執之有。中國的空字，原從土從穴。當時由工掘土成穴之意。穴之成，由於去土。去土是一活動。

freed from the yoke of *samsāric* actuality, even after the elimination of these (external) phenomena our awareness still retains certain teachings, convictions and thoughts. Even during the process of trying to break through the sphere of illusion by eliminating these teachings, convictions and thoughts, they still remain latently present. Once the breakthrough has occurred, however, all the teachings, convictions and thoughts that led to it, are eliminated as well. This distinction was stressed by the School of Emptiness, which compared the process of eliminating or depleting thoughts by means of other thoughts with a flame in which something is burning (Tang 1955, 80). After this object has been completely consumed by flame, the flame dies as well and is no longer present.

When we speak about the depletion of emptiness, this depletion of emptiness also must be depleted. The more we speak about the depletion of emptiness, the more depletion exists and the further removed we are from real emptiness (depletion). Thus, in the context of pure conceptual structure, it is not possible to speak about it.<sup>7</sup> (Ibid.)

In the discourses of Sinicized Buddhism, the meanings and their structures that form a part of our everyday awareness are null and void in their very essence; in order to eliminate them, it is sufficient to gain insight into the empty nature of the structure which defines them. This negation of structure in the sense of phenomena was constantly stressed by the Faxiang School, which repeatedly argued that “phenomena are not structured”<sup>8</sup> (*Cheng Weishi lun juan yi* n.d.).

Before gaining this insight, however, we believe that meanings, as well as their structures within our consciousness, really exist: the meanings of particular events or objects are situated in the conceptual relational structure that corresponds to the things and events of the external world. But this is only a false, deceptive image that has been transmitted to us by our senses. The senses thus lead us to the presence (of the phenomenal world), while the structure denotes (its) absence: “The senses are present, but the structure is absent”<sup>9</sup> (*Dacheng guang bai lun shi lun* n.d.).

This state in which we are victims of our senses can be compared to a rope that we mistake for a snake.

If we see a rope and think it is a snake, then the presence of this snake is conditioned by the senses. But if we return to reality, or if we think about it from the viewpoint of the (rational) structure, we will perceive

7 如說空空，則空空還要空才對。然如此說，愈說空，而空愈多，愈不成空。這種問題，純在名理上，亦可說是無法將的。

8 執非理。

9 情有理無。

that there is no snake. Thus, the snake is the “structure of absence” or the “depleted structure”.<sup>10</sup> (Tang 1955, 81)

If we mistake a rope for a snake, the conceptual structure of this snake is empty. If we consider the snake in terms of this structure, then we cannot establish its actual concept. The snake is thus a metaphor for a world of countless illusory phenomena in the sphere of *samsāra*. The existence of any concepts of such illusory phenomena is likewise impossible, since the structure that defines them is also depleted. The depleted structure that exists beyond all illusory phenomena eliminates (depletes) them each time we perceive it. In this sense, the conceptual structure of vacancies differs from conceptual structures as defined by the Neo-Daoists, for while the latter enable us to perceive and comprehend things which exist, the depleted structure of the Buddhists was a means to become aware of their non-existence. It thus resembles a black hole which absorbs everything with which it comes into contact. The structure that, whenever it appears, depletes all phenomena, certainly cannot be considered a condition of their existence. On the contrary, this structure is the cause of their elimination. Hence, it can neither be part of the phenomena, nor of the concepts defined by them. What, therefore, is the real nature of this depleted structure?

When a person depletes all phenomena and when their awareness is capable of transcending the sphere of language, thought and meaning, they become wise. We cannot say that the wise have no awareness. However, in this awareness there are no phenomena left that can be eliminated (depleted). Nor is there any idea of depleting or any idea of depleted structure. And yet, it still contains a structure that can potentially deplete all phenomena.<sup>11</sup> (Tang 1955, 80)

A person whose awareness is empty while still including this black hole of depleted structure, is a *bodhisattva*. That is, they are an enlightened being who remains in the eternal circuit of lives and deaths in order to help others reach enlightenment, those individuals who, due to their desires and attachments, are still ensnared in the illusion of phenomena and the suffering that results from this. As stated in the principal work of the Faxiang School, *The Completion of Pure Recognition* 成唯識論, the enlightened awareness of *bodhisattvas* cannot be joined to *nirvāṇa*: “When all obstacles of (common) knowledge are eliminated

10 如我們誤繩為蛇時，蛇是‘情有’，然如落到實際，或如理而思，則並無此蛇，則此蛇是‘理無’，‘空理’。

11 人空一切妄執後，能證得超一般意言境思議境之心，或具般若智之心，此心並非莫有。如有此心，則此心縱無妄執可空，亦不復再有空之觀念或空理之觀念橫互於心，仍不能說其即不具有此能空妄執之理。

(broken) the depleted structure appears; but this depleted structure is not situated in *nirvāṇa*.”<sup>12</sup> (*Cheng Weishi lun juan shi* n.d.)

The contents of the depleted structure are therefore an essential part of enlightened awareness.

If the (awareness of enlightened people) did not contain this structure, it would be unable to exist and live within the world of false phenomena, nor could it proclaim dharmic teachings and methods in order to help others to break through this world of false phenomena. Since this (enlightened) awareness, as such, does not contain any illusory phenomena, it can deplete, one by one, all the phenomena that form part of the awareness of others.<sup>13</sup> (Tang 1955, 81)

If we consider depleted structure (or the structure of depletion) from the viewpoint of awareness, it is clearly a structure which, unlike phenomena, is real (*zhen li* 真理): “When all obstacles of suffering have been eliminated, the real structure appears”<sup>14</sup> (*Cheng Weishi lun juan shi* n.d.).

This insight, of course, is not conditioned by any kind of sensory perception, but by its elimination; and this in turn leads to the pure, real awareness that transcends all the mental (emotional) fluctuations caused by earthly joys and woes:

The real, actual awareness amalgamates with the structure; the awareness which still contains emotional fluctuations, however, belongs to (earthly) matters.<sup>15</sup> (*Wujiao Zhiguan Yicheng Shixuanmen Hexing Xu* n.d.)

This structure cannot be perceived by the senses, because it does not pertain to the perceptible phenomena of the external world: “The structure does not have any phenomenal form”<sup>16</sup> (*Huayan fajie xuanjing juan shang* n.d.).

The real structure can thus only appear through the depletion of our sensory perceptions. Our senses, which are part of the illusory world, are also eliminated (depleted) by this very structure of depletion. The real structure does not appear upon the depletion of all false phenomena and sensations that falsely convey to us the illusory existence of these phenomena, but only after the depletion (elimination)

12 斷彼時顯法空理，此理即無住涅槃。

13 因如其不具此理，此心即不能常住於無妄執之境界，亦不能說法以破他人之妄執。因而其自己之無妄執可空，對他人之妄執之起，能一一空之。

14 煩惱障盡所顯真理。

15 心真如門者是理，心生滅門是事。

16 理無形相。

of the structures of sensory perception that make these processes possible. The structure of depletion thus eliminates the perceptive structures of our senses or, if one prefers, their “essential nature” through the process of depletion (Tang 1955, 81). Hence, this is a structure which is real, and which gradually removes the layers of sensation and awareness of the illusory phenomenal world. Because this structure can only be revealed to us through our insight into the empty nature of reality, the Buddhists named it the depleted structure or the structure of emptiness.

### Panstructuralism (*Fanjiagouzhuayi* 泛架構主義)

By taking into account this structural nature of emptiness, which through his early Buddhist education doubtless influenced Zhang Dongsun, it will be easier to explore his structural epistemology of “panstructuralism”, which is based upon an ontology of relational emptiness.

Epistemology represents the core of Zhang’s philosophical system. He called his theory “pluralistic”, because the various elements that enable comprehension and reasoning were mutually exclusive and irreducible (*wu huanyuanxing* 無還元性), meaning that no one of them could be reduced to any of the others. These basic elements for the comprehension of reality and its external structure (*tiaoli* 條理), which correlates with the mind through sensory perception (*zhiguan, ganjue* 直觀, 感覺) and sensations (*ganxiang* 感相), were *a priori* transcendental forms (*geshi* 格式) and logical postulates (*shezhun* 設準); these in turn were divided into categories (*fanchou* 範疇), relations with semantic logical implications (*xiang hande guanxi* 相涵的關係), and concepts or ideas (*gainian* 概念).

Zhang’s pluralism is derived from a revised version of Kantian philosophy. To justify such an epistemology, he proposed a new cosmology: panstructuralism.

An important assumption of his theory of knowledge is the neo-realistic view that the external world exists independently of our consciousness, and that there is no exact correlation between external phenomena and our comprehension of them. Hence, we are unable to perceive these phenomena as they really are.

We should know that what we commonly call “a thing” is a colour that we see, and a form that we touch. These are the “qualities” of a thing. If we do not consider the qualities, then (for us) there are no things. Things possess particular qualities, like colours, scents, etc., which change according to the human senses; therefore, some people claim that they do not belong to things ... There are also some other particular qualities, like the largeness, angularity, or roundness of things. These qualities are

considered by some people as similar to those mentioned before, and therefore cannot define the original thing as such, either.<sup>17</sup> (Zhang 1929, 23–24)

To explain his own view of cosmic order and its relation to our consciousness, Zhang often used examples drawn from the discoveries of early 20th century physics, such as the difference between our perception of a colour and its “actual” substance, or light waves. He argued that colour was something other than light waves: while colour was the product of the interaction between waves and our senses, waves belonged to the “objective” qualities of being (Zhang 1995, 166). Zhang therefore divides reality into the “original state of things” (*wude benxiang* 物的本相) and “things for us” (*women suowei wu* 我們所謂物) (Liu 2002, Part 2, 866).

According to Zhang, the external cause for our sensation is not a substance, but the order or structure of the external world. What is transmitted to us through our sensory impressions is a modification of this external order (Jiang 2002, 59).

As regards the external reality, we cannot know its internal nature (essence), but we can recognize its relations. These relations form a relatively fixed structure. If we presuppose that the qualities of things do not possess any inner nature (essence), and that things only exist as a structure, we have already recognized the external reality.<sup>18</sup> (Zhang 1929, 32)

In interpreting the basic structure of reality, he also referred to scientific discoveries regarding atoms and their most elementary structures, which transcend the categorical boundary between particles of matter and non-substantial electromagnetic waves. Here, his critique of substance was quite radical, and he denied the real existence not only of the smallest particles of matter, but also of quanta, electrons and electromagnetic waves.

In fact, I do not believe that atoms really exist in the external world. We should understand that the atomic theory in physics is the same as sensory theory in psychology. Both theories are based on the assumption that the whole consists of the sum of its parts. I call advocates of such theories representatives of the mosaic theory of particularism. This [view] can be compared to [the view of] a pile of sand, in which each grain is both a

17 須知，我們普通所謂物，即是我們所看見的是顏色，所觸摸的是形樣。這些都是物的‘性質’。可見離了性質就沒有所謂物。物有一類的性質如顏色與味道等，是倚著感覺的人的主觀而變的，所以有人主張是不屬於物的本身...還有一類的性質如大小與方圓，有人亦說與前一類差不多，不能即斷定事物的本相。

18 關於外物，我們不能知其內性，但能知其關係，而此關係卻是一種比較固定的架構。若我們暫假定物質並無內性，而只是架構，則我們已可謂知道外物了。

solid substance and an unchangeable entity. I personally do not acknowledge any independent existence of so-called sensory impressions in psychology; hence there is no reason to acknowledge the existence of atoms as pieces of substance in physics. Since there is no need to talk about atoms, why should we bother to divide them into electrons, or to divide electrons into wave particles? In my view, all this merely expresses the atomizing nature of external reality, and not the actual existence of atoms as real things. Not only are there no atoms, but there are no electrons or wave particles either. All this merely means that the structure has the possibility of forming certain entities.<sup>19</sup> (Zhang 1995, 168–69)

Similarly, for Zhang the discovery of the Theory of Relativity was important only in terms of recognizing structural laws, and not in terms of recognizing any new essences in nature or the cosmos:

The discovery of the Theory of Relativity only provides some knowledge about the structural modes of the external world; it does not provide us with any knowledge about its content.<sup>20</sup> (Ibid., 170)

The denial of substance also refers to the sphere of ideas. As in Chan Buddhism, all that we perceive is not only empty in the sense of substantial absence, but also illusory. Therefore, Zhang's cosmology is neither materialistic, nor idealistic:

Pluralistic epistemology ... rejects “substance” and is of the opinion that the dualistic theories of idealism and materialism are completely wrong.<sup>21</sup> (Ibid., 214)

In this respect, his approaches recall classical Chinese (especially Daoist and Chan Buddhist) cosmologies, but also certain recent Western ontological systems based on the Theory of Relativity and Quantum Theory.

19 其實我並不主張外界有如實存在的原子。須知之在物理學等於感覺論之在心理學。他們都以為全體是由部分而推誠的。我名此為零屑論 (mosaic theory of particularism) 派。好像一堆散沙，每個沙粒是硬的實體，是不變的單位。我們于心理方面即不承有所謂感相的獨立存在，則我們在物理方面當然亦用不著把原子認為散屑的實質 (pieces of substance)。姑不論原子尚可分為電子，電子尚可分為‘波子’ (wave particle)，然而這些只可視為表示外界有原子性而已。須知所謂原子性只是在構造 (structure) 上有‘原子的’ (atomic) 性質而已。並非說外界確有原子其物。不但沒有原子，並且亦沒有電子，沒有波子。所有的只是外界的構造上有分為若干單位的可能性罷了。

20 相對論出來以後只給了我們一些關於物理界的構造方式之知識，而不關於其‘內容’ (content)。

21 認識的多元論...勢必根本上否認‘本質’ (substance)，以為本體論上的唯心論唯物論兩元論全是不對的。

The constitution of time and space is also structural. The Theory of Relativity assumes that time and space are not absolute and unchangeable. On this basis, Zhang Dongsun developed his view that time and space were also a kind of structure, and not a form of matter.<sup>22</sup> (Liu 2002, 867)

One reason for our inability to recognize the essence of external things “as such” is thus to be found in the very nature of their existence; for Zhang, who did not acknowledge the existence of substance, reality was a process of constant changes that manifests itself in the inter-relations of particular entities (Kapetan 2012, 67). His cosmology is not metaphysical. In his view, this constituted another difference between Kantian philosophy and his own. In Kant, metaphysics is not abandoned, even though the priority given to epistemology radically alters its role. Zhang’s revision of Kant is, in fact, limited to the Kantian theory of knowledge. The impact of Chan Buddhism is much stronger in his ontology:

In his early youth, his reading of Buddhist sacred texts got him interested in philosophy. Although he would criticize Buddhism severely later on, he always seemed to have accepted much of Buddhist cosmology, especially certain ideas from the Great Vehicle School (Mahayana). (Jiang 2002, 63)

If we reject the existence of substance, clearly the objects perceived by us cannot possess any “ontological status”:

Plural epistemology advocates the view that sense impressions are non-being. Therefore, they are without a position in the ontological sense; they do not possess any “ontological status”.<sup>23</sup> (Zhang 1995, 215)

## The Processual Nature of Emptiness and Reality

All beings exist in a process of constant change that manifests itself in a never-ending modification of structural connections, and the growth and decline of the qualities of the “essence” of particular entities. According to Zhang, our consciousness can only recognize certain aspects of these manifest changes. However, this refers not only to the level of our perception and comprehension, as

22 時空的性質也說明了架構的性質。相對論認為，時空並不是絕對不變的，張東蓀由此也得出時空也是一種架構而非物質的存在形式的看法。

23 認識的多元論把感相認為非存在者，勢必謂感相在本體上無地位，即沒有‘本體的地位’ (ontological status)。

according to Zhang the structured order of relations is all that really exists in the cosmos. This structural order can be divided into the three basic levels of matter (*wu* 物), life (*sheng* 生), and mind (*xin* 心).

Zhang argues that all these structures are empty, for they possess neither substance, nor its qualities. The level of material being (*wu*) is thus a merely physical substantial phenomenality which cannot be equated with material substance, but, at the most, with structural relations and the physical laws which determine its existence. For him, “matter” is a general concept comprising a total domain of many specific concepts about physical properties. There is nothing in matter itself which corresponds to our concept of matter. It is not the colour, fragrance, sound or size that we perceive through our senses, because they tend to be subjective. Therefore, by “matter” he understood an object’s volume, density, or speed. Thus, in his view, matter becomes little more than a set of physics formulas. Therefore, there are only physical laws, but no matter (Jiang 2002, 64).

In other words: things are physical laws. But we should know that these physical laws refer to relations (namely to the relations between a certain thing and other things); they do not refer directly to things as such. In other words: these physical laws refer to relations between things, and not to their essence. Therefore, attributes such as quality, speed, inertia or density are only different ways of expressing relations.<sup>24</sup> (Zhang 1995, 215)

For Zhang, life (or living) (*sheng*) is a category which includes everything, including biological phenomena.

What is life? According to biological theories, differences between living and non-living entities can be summarized by four characteristics: 1. community 2. organisation of work 3. growth ability and 4. adaptation ability. These four items cannot be completely explained by physics and chemistry. The physical and chemical treatment of inorganic things is based upon measurement. If we try to grasp living beings solely by subjecting them to physical measurement, it is somehow not enough. Thus, it is necessary to add some new concepts to the existing ones, for example, the concepts of “organicity”, “developmentality”, “autopoeticness”, etc. However, in addition to applying these

24 或換言之，即物是物理。但須知這些物理都是由‘關係’（即一物與他物的關係）而見，並不直接關於一個物的本身。換言之，即物理只講物的關係，不講物的實質。所以質量，速率惰性，密度等等都是表示關係的樣式之一種。

new concepts, we can also continue to use the previous ones. In other words, we can say that these new concepts actually organize the old ones.<sup>25</sup> (Ibid., 216)

Analogously, mind (*xin*) is a category that belongs to the overall concept of living, but also implies psychological phenomena, which are different from biological functions.

The same holds true for “mind”. The nature of mind differs from biological functions in certain respects. In other words: it is not enough to apply concepts which explain living, in order to explain mind. Let us take the notion of “consciousness” as an example. Consciousness is a unique feature, which can only be seized by applying some new concepts.<sup>26</sup> (Ibid.)

It is therefore better to replace “matter” with “psychic laws”, ‘life’ with “biological principles”, and “mind” with “psychology”. In other words, terms for substance as carriers of attributes should be replaced by terms for structures or orders (Jiang 2002, 64).

He also uses the term “arrangement” to replace the term “structure”. Here, as well, he emphasizes the non-substantiality of the cosmos.<sup>27</sup> (Liu 2002, 867)

Hence, Zhang’s cosmos does not imply any substance or essence, but exists solely as a relational process of structural order. Nevertheless, even this order is not totally natural and objective, but also depends upon our cognitive activities.

However, these structural forms as such do not entirely belong to external things as such ... From the viewpoint of essence, there are no external things. But with respect to structure and form, most of the forms result

25 ‘生’是甚麼呢？據生物學家說，生物有生命，所以異於無生物之點有四：第一是組織；第二是職司；第三是生長的能力；第四是適應的能力。對於這四點卻不能完全用物理化學來解釋。原來我們用物理化學來對付無機物亦不過對於它的一種測量 (measurement)。我們拿了測量無生物的物理方法而測量生物必覺有些不夠用。於是必須於解釋物質的概念以外，再添一些新概念。例如‘有機性’，‘發展性’，‘自支性’，等等。就是密度，速率，質量，惰性等以外須再加有這些。不過這些新加的卻可左右他些已有的，換言之，即已有的居然為新加的所支配了。

26 至於‘心’亦是如此。心的性質確有和生理作用不同的地方。換言之，即拿了解釋生命的那些概念而用以解釋心意必是有些不夠用。例如‘覺’ (consciousness) 便是一個有一無二的特征。所以亦非加新概念不可。

27 他還用‘配列’ (Arrangement) 代替‘架構’ (Structure)，同樣是為了強調宇宙的非實體性。

from the process of comprehension. In other words, they belong to the domain of subjectivity.<sup>28</sup> (Zhang 1995, 171)

All external structures are manifested in our mind, which (re)-establishes them in the process of forming structural patterns of thought and comprehension. However, Zhang's theory is not solipsistic, since "at least some of these structural forms are not just a product of the laws of our recognition"<sup>29</sup> (ibid.).

The relation between the external world and our subjectivity is interactive and correlative.

Our cosmos does not possess any essence; it is only a structure. Its constitution is not entirely natural but inseparably connected with the function of our recognition. Without recognition we could get a glimpse of the original image of this structure. But it still cannot completely seize its essence. Therefore, we can still claim that the cosmos is a structure.<sup>30</sup> (Zhang 1995, 218)

Zhang often compared his ontology to Chan Buddhist cosmology. What he called "structure", reminded him of the Buddhist concept of (necessary or causal) connection (*yinyuan* 因緣), in which the cosmos was seen as a complex network, consisting of innumerable, interdependent relations that are linked and separated from one another in innumerable ways and upon innumerable levels. He compares this to cosmic emptiness, which, as in the Buddhist view, cannot be equated with "nothingness", but only with the absence of a substance, an unchangeable nature, or a self-contained, self-sufficient being (Ule 2016, 91). Since the cosmos only consists of relational connections, it does not imply any independent, autonomous entity. This is also one of the principal reasons why the existence of substance is impossible: the world is a series of functional relations. In Buddhist cosmology, the world, which is void in itself, is a universal, eternal and unchangeable law of causal relations (*yinyuan* 因緣). Zhang Dongsun equated this law with the real objectivity of being (Jiang 2002, 65).

Zhang connected this essentially Buddhist worldview with the idea of evolution, which implies the appearance of new species, as well as a hierarchy between lower and higher forms of being, with the higher forms controlling the lower ones.

28 但這些構造方式固然不是完全屬於外物本身的...以實質而言,本來就沒有外物.以構造與方式而言,大部分的方式仍是屬於認識作用本身的,換言之,即屬於主觀的。

29 這些構造方式...其中至少有若干是不由於我們的認識立法所造。

30 我們這個宇宙並無本質,只是一套架構.這個架構的構成不是完全自然的,而必須有我們的認識作用參加其中.因為我們不能撥開認識以窺這個架構的本來面目.然而亦決不十分大虧其本質.所以仍可以說宇宙是個架構。

Here, Zhang was probably influenced by the theory of evolution, developed by C. Lloyd Morgan (1852–1936) and Samuel Alexander (1859–1938). However, the new forms of being which appeared in this context were, in his view, a product of structural, and not of substantial changes.

Combining the Buddhist idea of non-substance with a similar theory of evolution, Zhang held that the structures of the universe, although empty, are in evolution, and new kinds of structure may emerge due to changes in the combination of various structures. (Ibid.)

But evolution, of course, cannot be equated with change as such. According to Zhang, evolution is a modification of simpler structures into more complex ones, and a joining of partial entities into more universal ones. While these structures still remain structures after their modification, they now differ from their previous forms not only quantitatively, but also qualitatively.

Each formation as such is already something new ... If we reject this essentialism, which functions with micro-particles, we naturally have to acknowledge that every change creates something new; otherwise, we could not speak about any changes at all.<sup>31</sup> (Zhang 1995, 173–74)

Zhang's theory thus remains consistent, even though it denies substance, while advocating the idea of evolution.

## Conclusion

In the beginning of this study, we attempted to clarify the crucial distinction between nothingness and emptiness in three distinct East Asian contexts. This task is not as easy as it seems at a first glimpse, for these are two notions that, despite surface similarities, and their frequent intertwining, belong to very different philosophical paradigms (Nelson 2023, 27). On the one hand, nothingness—as developed in Neo-Daoist thought and in Nishida Kitarō's Kyoto School philosophy (see Priest 2025)—refers to an absolute non-being that ultimately eludes any conceptual grasp. As I demonstrated in my paper published in the first part of this double issue (Rošker 2025), in both Wang Bi's and Nishida's terms “absolute nothingness” transcends the duality of being and non-being and eludes capture by positive thought or language. It is a nothingness beyond all concepts and categories, an ineffable ground of reality rather than a describable entity or

31 每一個組織在本身必定就是一個新東西... 離開了這個微粒子的實質主義，當然使我們不能不承認凡是變化都是有所創新，否則我們勢必根本上就不承認有變化。

state. On the other hand, emptiness—as formulated in Sinicized Buddhism and echoed in Zhang Dongsun’s epistemology—denotes not a transcendent void but the absence of any inherent substance in things. Emptiness (*kong*) signifies that no phenomenon possesses an independent, self-sufficient essence, yet this does not negate the phenomenal world but instead allows it to emerge as a web of interdependent, mutually conditional relations. In other words, whereas nothingness points to a total negation beyond existence, emptiness points to the insubstantial nature of reality itself, wherein things are empty of fixed being but full of dynamic relationality.

The distinction between nothingness and emptiness proves pivotal in understanding Zhang Dongsun’s panstructuralism and its rejection of any static notion of substance. Zhang explicitly aligns his theory with the logic of emptiness rather than with some kind of inexpressible nothingness. In his panstructuralist epistemology, the cosmos does not contain any unchanging substratum or essence, and instead it consists of “nothing more than a structural network of relations”, with all entities defined by their functional interrelations. By denying the existence of any eternal substance behind phenomena, Zhang mirrors the Buddhist view that reality is empty of self-nature, but also the classical Chinese worldview, which is based on a processual philosophy of continuous change. Moreover, Zhang tries to carry these insights into the realm of those modern Western theories of physics, biology and psychology that were developed at his time. His pluralistic epistemology explicitly rejects the notion of substance and even dissolves the traditional dualism of mind and matter, holding that both idealist and materialist worldviews are fundamentally misguided. In place of substance, Zhang offers a relational structure of coherence: what we commonly take to be “things” are, in truth, configurations of relations without any immutable core. In this sense, Zhang’s entire approach can be described as an epistemology grounded in a cosmology of relational emptiness, wherein the only reality is the coherent pattern of interconnection and change.

Zhang Dongsun’s philosophical synthesis highlights the broader implications of this emptiness-based framework. He masterfully weaves together strands from Chinese cosmology, Buddhist metaphysics, and modern scientific thought of his time to articulate a comprehensive structural vision of reality. Drawing on the classical Chinese notion of *li* (理) as an underlying pattern or principle of coherence in the cosmos, Zhang emphasizes a universe governed by relational order rather than by any material or mental substance. At the same time, he incorporates the Mahāyāna Buddhist insight that the world is *śūnyatā*—void of intrinsic being—such that all forms arise only through dependent origination (Vojtíšková 2015, 134). This cross-cultural foundation is further enriched by those scientific ideas that were most fashionable at his time. Hence, his work resonates with

modern ontological frameworks like relativity and quantum theory, which likewise undermine the idea of absolute, self-subsistent entities.

Moreover, by integrating the concept of evolution in this theory, Zhang describes the universe as an ever-evolving structural continuum which unceasingly leads to the emergence of new qualities. Indeed, even though the structures of the universe are empty of any fixed essence, they are continually in flux—new forms and higher-level patterns emerge not from any new “substance” entering the world, but from novel combinations and reorganizations of the relations and laws by which they are guided. Hence, for Zhang, change is intrinsically creative: every transformation generates something qualitatively new without ever introducing a permanent substance. In this way, Zhang’s panstructuralism synthesizes ancient Chinese process-cosmology, Buddhist non-substantiality, and a modern scientific sense of an evolving cosmos, resulting in a structural cosmology devoid of any essence but sustained by an ongoing dynamic of relations.

The philosophical significance of these insights becomes apparent when we consider contemporary epistemological and metaphysical debates. Zhang Dongsun’s distinction between nothingness and emptiness—and his (somewhat bold) adoption of emptiness as the cornerstone of his epistemology—exemplifies a move beyond substance-centric conceptions of reality toward a truly relational paradigm. In a world where physics has shown space, time, and matter to be deeply interrelated, and where process-oriented philosophies are gaining ground, Zhang’s vision of an empty yet structurally coherent universe offers a prescient and relevant model. It challenges us to reconceive “what there is” not as individual things with fixed natures, but as interwoven events and relationships, much in line with current discussions in systems theory, process metaphysics, and cross-cultural philosophy. Moreover, by dissolving the rigid borderline between mind and matter (or subject and object) through a coherent structural network ontology, Zhang’s approach transcends classical Western dichotomies. His aforementioned rejection of both idealism and materialism does not remain confined to an in-between position, but instead presents a system in which matter and idea, observer and observed, are vivid potentialities within a network of structural correlations.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, the nuanced differentiation between an ineffable nothingness and a structural emptiness is more than a semantic point – it underpins a shift toward seeing reality as a coherent system of relations rather than an assortment of independent substances. Such a perspective enriches contemporary debates on knowledge and being by highlighting the possibility of an ontology that is empty of essence yet full of interconnection. In this regard, Zhang Dongsun’s philosophy provides an

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32 In this regard, Zhang’s approach can be connected to Chinese art, particularly through traditional aesthetics and practices such as landscape painting and calligraphy, where the boundaries between subject and object, material and immaterial, are deliberately blurred (Sernelj 2023, 335).

alternative, more dynamic, and relational understanding of reality—one that, in my view, still holds significant potential to inspire and inform contemporary philosophical inquiry.

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