

Relation as the core of reality: The cultural conditionality of comprehension and Chinese epistemology

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, it has become clear to most people that ‘Western epistemology’ represents only one of many different forms of historically-transmitted social models for the perception and interpretation of reality. Unfortunately, in current intercultural research, it is still common to project elements of the contents and forms of discourses that have been overshadowed by the dominant political (and thus also economic) power, upon the research object. Thus, the present article introduces some specific ancient Chinese epistemological approaches to comprehension and tries to explain them in the context of traditional Chinese paradigms of relational epistemology. These specific Chinese theories of knowledge were based upon structural connections between language and perception, the external and internal world, as well as between men, nature and society. An approach such as this also proposes some alternative ways of perception and comprehension of reality beyond the limitations of individual modes of comprehension that prevailed in traditional European epistemologies.

KEYWORDS: classical epistemology, methodology of intercultural research, Orientalism, traditional and modern Chinese thought

Introduction

The comparison and understanding of so-called foreign cultures is always linked to the issue of differences in language, tradition, history and socialisation processes. The interpretation of various aspects and elements of non-European cultures always involves the geographic, political and economic position of the interpreter, as well as that of the object being interpreted.

Sinology as an academic discipline was established within the context of discussions of Orientalism, which laid the foundations of and conditioned the colonialist approach to the study of cultures that do not derive from the so-called Western tradition. This is why the criticism of elements of Orientalism in sinology is also the criticism of the violent nature of the classic relation between knowledge and authority. Within this

framework, every comparison is also inevitably an interpretation based on a values system whose contents are determined by the ideology of material progress, and whose methodology is that of European formal logic. The a-critical use of scientific analysis, which is, in itself, the result of specific historical processes and their related social organisations and structures, can prove to be a perilous and misleading exercise.

In spite of the complexity of these problems, the most important methodological condition for arriving at some reasonably valid conclusions will undoubtedly be satisfied if we consciously endeavour to preserve the characteristic structural blocks and observe the specific categorical laws of the cultural contexts being discussed.

In recent decades, the theoretical streams of contemporary sinology and modern Chinese philosophy have devoted increasing attention to investigating and comparing the substantial and methodological assumptions of the so-called 'Eastern' and 'Western' traditions.¹ In the present article, I shall try to clarify some of these approaches concerning the epistemological foundations of such investigations and to introduce some specific features of Chinese epistemological thought, which have been widely unknown to the European and American academic circles until now.

Chinese Epistemology: Fact or Fiction?

Whenever sinologists speak of Chinese epistemology, they must inevitably consider the appropriateness of this term. Due to the fact that the general theory and genuine abstract aspects of Chinese thought have only rarely been treated by Western scholars, they continue to remain quite obscure for the majority of them.

In current research, the debate on the epistemological dimensions of classical and contemporary Chinese texts and their role in the context of traditional and modern Chinese thought has been developed increasingly successfully under the aegis of rediscovering and applying specific traditional Chinese methodological approaches and traditional categories. We shall therefore begin our own investigations into this field by attempting to lift the veil of mystery which covers the face of cognition in the area of Chinese antiquity, in order to peer into the complexities of its development.

The formal method that determined most of the dominant theories found in the Chinese classics was based on a holistic world view; the basic contents of these theories were rooted in the premises of pragmatic and utilitarian ethics. According to prevailing

¹ In the present work, the terms 'Eastern' and 'Western' as categorical interpretative models are not used in a rigidly political or geographical sense, but as notions that stem from a reflection on the distinction between transcendental and immanent metaphysics. The concept 'Western' means the area of culture and civilisation which has been defined by the three Abrahamic-Semitic religions, i.e. Judaism, Islam and Christianity. The most important characteristics which these religions have in common are: transcendentalism, monotheism (or the Trinity in Christianity), singularity (the monopoly of validity), universality (universality of validity), individuality (which has been constituted by a separate and independent existence of the Self, inhabited by the soul) and the idea of immortality. None of these elements can be found in discourses of immanent metaphysics, which are prevalent in so-called 'Eastern' civilisations (Galtung 1994: 7). When the term 'Western' is applied to language, it indicates the languages of the Indo-European group.

classical theories, the process of cognition was therefore not only of a rational, but also of a moral nature.

This holistic approach to the perception and interpretation of reality, which represents one of the main peculiarities of traditional Chinese thought, was based on a union of natural (cosmic) and human (social) elements while, in formal terms, it was founded on the complementarities of bipolar conceptual oppositions. These complementary concepts were seen as basic driving force behind the continual, eternal changes and transformations which condition existence, understood as the unity of all existing differences. This ancient Chinese concept of cosmogony – as expressed, for example, in the *Book of Changes* (Zhou yi 2002) – also had a great impact on the development of the ontological and epistemological theories of the Chinese tradition. In this framework, human beings are viewed as integral parts of cosmic and social unity. All human activity is reflected within the variegated conglomerate of this all-embracing unity of being, which incorporates and assimilates every individual difference. In this worldview and understanding of human existence, knowledge has always been linked *a priori* to its concrete application; there can be no theory without practise. At the same time, cognition is always modified by the tangible consequences of any (inter)action. The holistic view of the wholeness of human beings and Nature is of fundamental importance for understanding the inextricable link between knowledge and action. Therefore, in ancient Chinese tradition, no (socially influential) comprehension is limited to the level of understanding and transmitting universal laws, or of formulating abstract concepts. Every cognitive element is placed into this framework, which is constructed upon a clear insight into the nature of the structural relations that condition every interaction between individuals and the external world, i.e. their natural and social environment.

Specific features of classical Chinese epistemology

During the period that saw the creation of the most influential philosophical discourses in ancient China, i.e. the period of the Warring States, harmonization² represented the primary goal of any form of comprehension. The formation of such a crucial epistemological aim was doubtless conditioned by the specific circumstances of the economic and political transition taking place, and the resulting social instability of the China of that time. Due to these very specific circumstances, the majority of the most influential theories identified the imperative for the realization of harmony with the need to unify basic social conventions including, of course, language. Although the basis of any process of comprehension was seen primarily in terms of the adjusted and formalized regulation of social interactions, most epistemological approaches³ grew out of the methodological premise of individual self-awareness. In the context of the ancient Chinese worldview, individual self-awareness was not in contradiction with the structural mechanisms regulating the relations between human beings and nature or society.

² Or – in less poetic terms – law and order.

³ These basic approaches could also be called proto-epistemologies

In this context, knowledge (zhi) was primarily understood as recognition (shi) of the structural principles of the all-embracing way (dao). As with any culturally determined approach, knowledge and the way in which it is obtained (method of comprehension), was viewed as an important element of human existence. In the context of the holistic worldview that prevailed in ancient Chinese culture, the recognition of reality was necessarily linked to the active involvement of men in their interactive relationship with their social and natural environment. Knowledge (zhi) was thus seen as a valuable factor, necessarily and inextricably linked to human activities and the implementation of social praxis (xing). Some of the 'realist' currents within ancient Chinese theoretical discourses (as were developed, for example, within the Moist (Mo jia) and Nomenalist⁴ (Ming jia) schools formulated additional epistemological questions related to binary oppositional concepts of the identity and difference (tong/yi), or the consistency and quality (jian/bai) of the objects of comprehension.

In ancient China, harmonic regulation of natural and social relations, which constituted the main goal of most *a-priori* pragmatic theories of knowledge, was necessarily linked to questions of language and its relation to reality. However, such disputes were not confined to abstract principles. Because of the intrinsic connection between comprehension and social practise, the most significant discussions on the relationship between language and reality focused upon more concrete matters. The urgent need to unify the main conventions also included the demand for a generalization of structures which could function as a formal framework for human interactions, confirming once again that the need to unify and standardize language and its structures was at the heart of (proto) epistemological concerns. However, the realization of a regulation which could provide a framework for social understanding was necessarily preconditioned by a standardization of language and linguistic structures, which is why the problem of the relation between actualities (shi) and their proper naming (ming) became the basic epistemological question in ancient China. Naturally, at a very outset of this approach, there arose the question of the normative criteria for such a relational structure. The standardisation or continuation (chang) of language had to be carried out in accordance with the formal premises of a binary structured (shi:fei) valuation (bian), which also defined the similarly structured principle (dao) of any being (cosmic, as well as social and individual). Only when these conditions were met, was it possible to achieve the ultimate goal of pragmatically-oriented epistemology in classical Chinese discourses: every linguistic expression, every name (ming) could (and should) therefore be applied in accordance with principles that determined actuality (shi).⁵

⁴ The pre-Qin school Ming jia (School of Names) has often been translated as the 'Nominalist School' by western sinologists. I think 'Nominalism' is not a suitable word to indicate this school. Firstly, the word *nominalism* has its specific meaning. In the West, the word indicates a kind of philosophical theory, which is in contrast to realism. Secondly, the theories of this pre-Qin school and Western nominalism are not the same. So in order not to induce unnecessary confusion, I will use the word 'Nomenalism' instead of 'Nominalism'.

⁵ The formal basis of the following analysis has been resumed according to the main criteria of Chan Hansen's sociolinguistic analyses (1989: 112). However, in the present passage, the interpretative patterns and the epistemological categorisations of certain discourses in this framework differ in many aspects from the results of Hansen's research.

Relations, language and comprehension in ancient China

In the pre-Han era, the most influential epistemological debates on this issue⁶ were conditioned by the conflict between classical Confucianism and orthodox Moism, with the representatives of the former advocating traditionalist positions, while the Moists argued for more utilitarian approaches. The Confucian glorification of the perfect, harmonious and utopian society of the past was also reflected in Confucius' (i.e. Kongzi, 551–479 B.C.) *Theory of correct names*⁷ (Zheng ming lun), which envisioned a society in which everyone lived in accordance with the original meaning of that which expressed their social position. The ideal conditions for society could therefore only be established when everyone acted in accordance with their (social) name (Lun yu 2001: 94).

In contrast to Confucius, Mo Di (around 650–200 B.C.), the founder of the so-called Moist school, questioned the existence of an ideal language (the essence of the concept *ming*) to which (external) reality and society had to adapt. Instead of shaping social interactions according to the standards of language, which Confucians viewed as incorporating the essential structure of natural order and humanity, the early Moists adopted the opposite approach, arguing that since language was a means for transmitting realities, it was language which had to adjust to such realities and not vice-versa. According to Mo Di, the criteria for such adjustment had to be based on actual social needs and not on the idealized and alien models of a bygone era (Mo Di, in Sun 2001: 5–7).

The reaction to these traditionalistic and utilitarian positions within ancient Chinese epistemology expressed itself in two different epistemological viewpoints, represented by the Confucian Xunzi (around 300–230 B.C.) and by his legalist disciple Han Fei (280–233). Xunzi's theory was based upon relativistic approaches. As opposed to Confucius, he did not believe in the primary mission of some ideal language that incorporated the essence of existing realities, but considered names and linguistic concepts as merely arbitrary means for expressing concrete (objective) social realities. Despite this fundamental difference, for purely pragmatic reasons he continued to advocate the Confucian Theory of correct names, convinced as he was that names (*ming*) also transmitted values, thus serving the social Order, and therefore had to be adequately standardized (Xunzi, in Wang and Tang 2001: 317).

Xunzi also argued that the classification and categorization of names were not necessarily as difficult as first appeared, for the human senses perceived different realities in a structurally very similar way; this physiologically conditioned similarity therefore provided a basis for the formation of common linguistic conventions (*ibid.*: 318). These

⁶ While the following analysis is based on the main criteria of Chad Hansen's socio-linguistic analyses (1989: 112), the interpretative patterns and epistemological categorisations of certain discourses differ in many respects from Hansen's own findings.

⁷ This phrase has generally been translated into Indo-European languages as the 'Theory of Rectifying Names', with the word 'zheng' taken in its verbal acceptance. However, I believe this translation to be inadequate for, according to Confucius, names had to adapt to reality and not vice-versa. For him, names were *a priori* 'correct'. The sphere to be 'rectified' was the sphere of social realities and not the names that denoted certain positions within them.

standardized agreements make a functioning social coordination, including the connection between human acts and moral postulates.

Despite his insight into the complex nature of the relation between linguistic concepts and reality (or perhaps because of it), Xunzi elaborated his epistemological relativism with formally traditionalist arguments. But because these arguments were founded upon consistent demands for a strict hierarchy of linguistic concepts (and, thus, of society), they went far beyond the ‘soft’ conservatism espoused by Confucius. It was precisely these arguments that, in the works of his followers, would come to form the basis for the legalistic epistemology that shaped the doctrine of the one of the most totalitarian governments in Chinese history. Xunzi’s disciple Han Fei, who was already one of the main representatives of the Legalist school, developed a philosophy which combined basic concepts of the traditionalistic and utilitarian approaches. His epistemology, which was based upon the concepts of authority (*wei*) and advantage (*li*), represented a unified system founded on the idea of political absolutism (Han Fei 1975: 82).

The second basic approach derived from the negation of both of the positions we have just described, or their common features and, in fact, denied the positivistic functions of language. This approach also contained two different epistemological currents: the first was pre-linguistic and had its main representative in Laozi (around 6th century B.C.), while the second current, which found its most famous exponent in the Confucian Mengzi (Mencius, around 372–289 B.C.), argued that linguistic structures were not innate.

However, while Laozi represented a current which could be defined as prelinguistic, and though the Daoist School differed from many of the basic premises of Mengzi’s teachings, Laozi’s negation of language closely resembles that of Mengzi (Hansen 1989: 111). Laozi’s *Dao* has not been caught in any kind of linguistic structure and yet it represents the basic cosmic and also moral principle of all that exists (Laozi 2001: 62). According to him, the social conventions which we use to differentiate and classify reality have been preconditioned by names (*ming*), i.e. by the conceptual structure of language. Therefore, the acquisition (learning) of names necessarily also influences our natural tendencies to distinguish different patterns of behaviour. Laozi thus viewed knowledge (in the sense of learning virtues) as a kind of social pressure which impeded our natural spontaneity and distanced us from the primary cosmic principle (*Dao*), which, in itself, was morally accomplished (Laozi 2001: 16). Hence, Laozi’s concept of knowledge (*zhi*) cannot be understood as a descriptive comprehension of things as they are, but as an internalization of the process of normalisation, which has been conditioned by society and politics. In this process, language functions as a kind of mechanism that controls and commands our behaviour. In Laozi’s view, every linguistic concept is determined by time and space, and can therefore represent only a partial, incomplete expression of reality, which he saw as integral, dynamic and holistically structured. Consequently, in order to preserve the naturalness of our existence, we must withdraw from all conventions, including that of language itself. Laozi thus sought a radically different process of comprehension: one of non-linguistic introspection (*ibid.*: 40–41).

Mencius (Mengzi) formulated the first anti-linguistic version of Confucian epistemology. With his theory, he wanted both to refute one of the central tenets of Moist

theory, while also resolving (or avoiding) the central problem of Confucian epistemology, i.e. the insertion of moral principles into patterns of behaviour through linguistic interpretations (1989: 110). Mengzi argued that language did not represent an innate system which contained the essence of proper social norms that enabled people to live in a harmonic society. This position allowed him to formulate a series of well-grounded arguments against the challenges of the Moist school.

Analytical approaches

The next position that decisively influenced the further development of epistemological debates was derived from certain analytical approaches based either upon isomorphic assumptions, as advocated by representatives of the Nomenalist school (especially Gongsun Long, around 284–259 B.C.), or upon linguistic relativism. The latter was elaborated by followers of the so-called Neo-Moist school⁸ through a purely formal analytical method, while other philosophers who were closer to the essential foundations of Daoism, such as Hui Shi (around 370–310 B.C.), tried to connect such analytical approaches with certain suppositions of holistic relativism.

While only a few fragments of the works of the Neo-Moist school have survived, they provide a coherent elaboration and development of Mo Di's basic tenet that reality represents a foundation of denomination. Gongsun Long argued that the ideal construct of an language was still of crucial importance, and that language and social reality were inseparably linked and semantically equivalent (Shiling 2000: 52), while Hui Shi believed names (*ming*) provided a basis for categorizing reality (*ibid.*: 51), a position which placed him in direct opposition to Moist theories.

Gongsun Long's arguments were founded upon Confucius' premise that the ideal application of language was based upon a complete mutual congruency of the name and the object to which it referred (Gongsun Long, in Pu 1998: 76–78). Despite his idealistic stance, he believed language was not only a consecrated structure that embraced the essence of all existence, but that the crucial function of language remained that of denominating actualities. This is the hypothesis that underpins his main arguments on this topic, entitled *The Dispute on Names and Actualities* (*ibid.*: 90).

With respect to the concrete situation to which language has been applied, each single thing could have only one single meaning. For Gongsun Long, this means that the mutual covering of meanings could only exist at an abstract level (*ibid.*: 78). He also stressed the fact that when we standardize language we cannot choose mutually contradictory words. We must choose either one or another. There is no third possibility (Huang and Duan 2001: 151). Such a projection of the 'Excluded Middle' is, of course, in contrast with the usual application of language, for people tend to use different names for the same objects. In everyday language, the meanings of words usually overlap. Gongsun Long

⁸ After Mo Di's death, his followers split into various groups that each dealt with different, very specialized areas of inquiry. Among the best known of these groups were the so-called Neo-Moists (see Graham 1978: 3). A survey of their most important conclusions can be found in the Moist canon *Mozi*.

was attempting to eliminate such a semantic overlapping, or at least to reduce it to a level where language could still be overseen and controlled.

The principle of the Excluded Third was also postulated by the representatives of the Neo-Moist school, despite their opposition to Gongsun Long's tendency to construct an ideal language. In their view, the semantic overlapping of different terms was a natural quality of human language and, consequently, they saw no need to eliminate it. They were far more interested in the question of language as a means for categorizing society (*ibid.*: 71). Furthermore, their disputes were primarily directed against negations of language (Mo Di, in Sun 2001: 285).

However, given that the diverse complexity of language could not be moulded into any reliable regulatory structures within linguistic conventions⁹, they acknowledged the *de facto* unreliability of language, concluding that a general, valid standardization of language was impossible. In their view, the formal indefinableness of language was, to a certain degree, a part of its intrinsic structure.¹⁰

Instead of the search for definitions of the semantic extensions of terms, the Neo-Moists preferred to deal with questions regarding causal connections. However, in many respects, their approach to these questions differed greatly from that of formal logic. The Neo-Moists were therefore uninterested in attempts to construct an ideal language, as expressed in the theory of names; instead, they focussed on linguistic analyses, which led them to conclusions that were diametrically opposed to Gongsun Long's ideas and early Confucian views on the relation between names and actualities.

More specifically, their analyses led them to conclude that the connections between certain individual names (*ming*), which were simply understood as arbitrary entities of language (and therefore of comprehension), were multilayered and incoherent. While some compound terms could embrace semantic scopes that extended beyond all the partial meanings of the individual names (*mings*, i.e. the linguistic entities of which they were compounded), in other instances the exact opposite was true (*ibid.*: 282).

However, the fragments of their analyses that have survived do not contain any substantial discovery that goes beyond the recognition or acknowledgment of the inconsistent nature of linguistic structures. Thus, as opposed to Gongsun Long, their investigations were not aimed at establishing some form of universal linguistic epistemology that could unify divergent models of linguistic understanding of reality. The only Neo-Moist attempt to establish a formal linguistic basis for comprehension can be found in their analysis of the classical distinction between identity and difference (*yi*) (*ibid.*: 293).

At issue here is the problem of the essential relativity of this distinction with respect to different contexts, for the difference between the two antipodes is by no means more constant than, for example, the difference between the notions of largeness and smallness, or length and shortness. From a realistic viewpoint, this can appear as paradoxical, and this paradox would be formulated and analyzed by Hui Shi, a Nomenalist

⁹ See, for example, their discussion on dogs and curs (Mo Di, in Sun 2001:302).

¹⁰ See, for example, their discussion on oxen and horses (*ibid.*: 303).

philosopher who was the closest to Daoist discourses. One of his most significant contributions to the classical epistemology of linguistic analysis is his comment on the general problem of identity and difference, which, as we have seen, the representatives of the Neo-Moist school were unable to develop to a concise conclusion (Hui Shi, in Zhuangzi 2001: 277). Hui Shi's 'constant' relativism was, of course, a response to Neo-Moist realism, which was founded upon formal distinctions as a necessary precondition for comprehension. As his 11th paradox indicates, the Neo-Moist obsession with definitions was likewise redundant (*ibid.*). His categorization of identity and difference, or of the absolute relativity of objects, was thus based upon the impossibility of conceptual definitions of reality, since every linguistic comprehension was necessarily limited to a contextually determined meaning which was incapable of embracing all dimensions of the object of comprehension.

Zhuangzi's egalitarian epistemology

Although the Neo-Moists were never able to formulate an exhaustive response to Hui Shi's radical relativism, his contemporary Zhuangzi clearly found it to be an important stimulus for his own thought and was definitely influenced by him when elaborating his own epistemological system. For Zhuangzi, because knowledge was infinite, the human capacity for comprehension was too limited to enable us to gain any real knowledge (Zhuangzi 2001: 101). For him knowledge has no limits, comprehension is always something relative (*ibid.*: 95).

As a result, we are lost in a labyrinth of real and false recognitions. But this apparently tragic situation is mitigated by the fact that we do not have to face it alone; we are always accompanied by other people who are no less blind than we are. All of us are busy dealing with questions of mastering our reality and thus with questions of the indefinite nature of our existence (*ibid.*: 85). Since we are determined by the limitations of our senses, we naturally tend to acknowledge the truth of those kinds of recognitions that happen to match our own values systems (*ibid.*: 236).

Ultimately, it is human subjectivity that determines what should be regarded as (true and universally valid) knowledge. The apparent objectivity and independence of the human mind has repeatedly been proven to be a false, illusory chimera, which only leads to self-deception. The quality, the features and the extent of our perception are always determined by the actual conditions of our existence. Hence, our perceptions – and the actions resulting from them – are always dependent upon external factors, even though ultimately, every form of dependence is actually a form of -dependence. Such a dependence and determination are, of course, connected to our ignorance, to our incapacity to recognize our essence and the essence of our surroundings. Zhuangzi tried to illustrate this interdependence with his dialogue between a penumbra and a shadow (*ibid.*: 101). He believed that acknowledging the relative nature of all existence was still not sufficient in order to define equivalents and distinctions (*ibid.*: 93).

In each concrete case, the structure of our cognition enables us to identify at least one common or different quality, which then allows us to make a distinction, no matter atypical it might be.

This position of radical relativism was common to both Hui Shi and Zhuangzi. They also shared a scepticism concerning the idea that the categorical mechanism of identity and difference (tong/yi) could provide an adequate basis for a universal, permanently valid (chang) standardization of concepts or names (ming) (ibid.: 92).

Following the tradition of classical Daoism, Zhuangzi also believed in the inherent inexpressibility of the holistic essence of all being. This led him to espouse the classical Daoist method of comprehension, i.e. introspection (ibid.: 86).

Although he did not offer any instant solution to the eternal issues that form the heart of his philosophical discourse, he tried to create a new approach to the complex problem of human interactions (ibid.: 92). For Zhuangzi, the internalization of language is a process inherent to human nature, just like eating, drinking and breathing, or anything else that conditions our survival (ibid.: 85–86).

However, the uncertain connection between language and thought is not a one-way street (Allinson 1989: 11) and, in fact, the communicative potential of language was trapped on the narrow footbridge between speaker and hearer, between transmitter and receptor. For him, language is inseparably connected to comprehension; in essence, their qualities are the same (ibid.). As a result, all linguistically determined boundaries within holistically structured reality are, in fact, false, since language cannot express itself (ibid.: 93).

Just like Dao in its original function of the fundamental, all-embracing essence of all beings, and just like our recognition of this original path, language itself is also absolute in the sense of the unity of all of the relative contradictions of which it is composed (ibid.: 98).

Zhuangzi showed little interest in the problems that occupied the majority of the philosophers of his time, i.e. problems of connecting different, individual minds into one comprehensible unity. He evidently believed that the problems of inter-subjectivity were not imposed upon us from outside; rather, he saw them as resulting from our being trapped in patterns of socially determined ambitions. We could never master our destinies by interventions into the integrity of everything that exists, neither by artificial and false distinctions nor by absolute valuations. The reason for this was that human existence was not subordinated to any external, higher powers that could be controlled through comprehension (ibid.: 88). Ultimately, this autonomy of every individual makes true communication – and true comprehension – impossible (ibid.: 98).

In such an egalitarian epistemology, each kind of understanding is equally possible and valuable. Zhuangzi's correlativity does not provide any absolute perspective that can overrule the judgments or valuations of any method of comprehension. In this correlative, sceptical holism of innumerable possibilities of conceptual demarcation of reality, Mengzi's theory of mind (xin) as a leading moral and spiritual entity of all interactions is equally legitimate, as, for instance, the theory of Buddha's nature (fo xing) or even the theory of the legalist notion of law (fa) as the basic concept of regulating social relationships (1989: 118). Implicit in this fundamental openness of existence, which carries Zhuangzi and his thought through fantastic worlds of countless possibilities, is the danger of an autocratic or dictatorial arrogation of power in human societies. Given that the

ideologies of absolute power are based upon exclusions, when one of them prevails in a society, this fundamental openness of existence is necessarily curtailed or eliminated; it is at such moments that people like Zhuangzi are usually sacrificed on the burning pyres of endangered rulers.

Later conceptual developments: Relation as the core of comprehension

Further developments, which lead from ancient to modern Chinese epistemology, have also been influenced by the implication of certain Buddhist and Neo-Confucian epistemological approaches, such as the division between subjective (*neng*) and objective (*suo*) comprehension, the method of exploring things (*ge wu*) to achieve 'ultimate knowledge' (*zhi zhi*), and, above all, in the elaboration of the concept *li* (*li*) as the main principle of comprehension. Because of space limitations, these approaches cannot be elaborated further in this paper. In the present context, however, it is important to expose the fact that general features of traditional Chinese epistemology, i.e. their focusing upon the relation between language and comprehension, as well as upon the structural connection between external and internal world (or nature and society), were not essentially modified by these approaches.

The subject of the naturalistic epistemologies that prevailed in Western discourses was the external world (or objective reality), which was to a great extent independent from the subject of comprehension. Chinese theories of knowledge can be called relational epistemologies, because the subject they refer to are relations. This applies not only to radical holistic epistemologies, which denied the notion of substance, but also to a number of contemporary theories that advocate a strict division between the subject and object of comprehension, as for instance to Xia Zhentao (2000: 4).

In the majority of traditional discourses (with the exception of Nomenalist, Moist, and Dialectical theories and certain representatives of the Neo-Confucian School of Principles), the focus upon relations was linked to the unity of the subject and the object of comprehension. If we posit that the relation represents the object of comprehension, we must also specify that this object is not automatically to be seen as a counter-pole to the subject of comprehension. Relational epistemologies are not based upon a strict division between these entities, nor upon a strict (or necessary) demarcation of what – with respect to the subject of comprehension – we are accustomed to see as the external or internal world. Therefore, the methods used by certain philosophers in specific currents of the Chinese tradition are by no means decisive for defining the positions of the subject and object of comprehension, or the nature of their mutual relations. It would be difficult (and completely redundant in the axiology of this discourse) to judge which of the two afore-mentioned methods of comprehension, or which of the intermediary, combinatory or synthetic methods was more relevant for the development of epistemological discourses in the history of Chinese thought. The methods for exploring (external) reality (*gewu*) and introspective recognition (*fansheng*) were both important as perceptive tools that primarily served to understand relations: the distinction within the object we are dealing with by no

means reveals relations within it. However, these relations can be either continuous or discontinuous. This means that the relation between A and B can be changed into the relation between A and C. Such a de-composition and changing of positions is in the nature of comprehension (Zhang Yaonan 2002: 78).

The relation as a basis or a central object and goal of any recognition manifests itself at all levels of comprehension and transmission of being. The relational aspect permeates ancient Chinese differentiations in the sense of searching for a proper relation between names and actualities (*ming/shi*). Equally important here is a basic epistemological definition of priorities (or totality) in the relations between knowledge and action or theory and praxis (*zhi-xing*). Both issues regard interpersonal relations. In the tradition of Chinese thought, these relations have always been seen (at the axiological level) as being connected with nature, i.e., with the external world, which is not necessarily defined by human will. Therefore, the relational aspect as a core of comprehension was already apparent in the specific structure of Chinese cosmology, which was based upon the holistic unity of men and Nature (*tianren heyi*). The complexity and integrity of relations in nature and society, therefore, represent a basic aspect of Chinese epistemology. This aspect was expressed in all classical theories, which were based upon the elementary traditional epistemological categories of name (*ming*) and actualities (*shi*). Relations also formed the basic postulate of traditional thought that defined the nature of the central epistemological relation between knowledge (*zhi*) and action (*xing*). Due primarily to the impact of Buddhist thought, the ancient holistic approach to essence (*ti*) and function (*yong*) was later replaced by the subject (*neng*) and object (*suo*) of comprehension. The sort of categorical demarcation that derived from the Indian tradition of thought would subsequently, in the 19th and especially the 20th centuries, help Chinese philosophers to gain a better understanding of Western theories of knowledge, which were based on an ontology of dividing substance from phenomena. According to more recent hypotheses, which attempt to integrate traditional approaches with the philosophical currents of the 20th Century, the comprehensive process is based upon interactions between the subject and object of comprehension, in which they are no longer seen as mutually exclusive, absolute entities, but as two interactive, complementary poles of correlative relations, which define the multilayered nature of reality.

Conclusion

Since relational connections are all that exists in the cosmos, our world is nothing but a series of functional structures, which, however, are not without meaning. In other words, we as living beings have not been thrown into this cosmos only as the by-products of some 'higher' order and we are, therefore much more than merely determined pieces in the mosaic of the variegated relations that form reality. On the contrary, we *a priori* (and necessarily) possess the possibility and obligation to co-create and co-form the world in which we live; through our individual spirits, we are building bridges that represent a synthesis of the universal and specific components of the human mind, and these bridges connect ourselves with our natural and social environments. The recognition of the

possibility to co-create and to co-form our world is, as indicated indirectly by contemporary Chinese epistemologies, closely linked to the relations of which we form a part. This recognition has, however, not been conditioned only by the comprehension of these relations as such, but also by the conscious acceptance of the relations as a basis of cognition. The permanence and the transience of the relations in which we live can be accepted as a crucial axiological challenge of our existence. Their heterogeneity, multifariousness, reliability and questionableness can be comprehended as the core of our changing of the world, and thereby impart meaning to it.

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POVZETEK

V zadnjih letih večina ljudi začanja razumeti, da je 'zahodna epistemologija' le ena izmed mnogih različnih oblik zgodovinsko posredovanih družbenih modelov percepcije in interpretacije realnosti. Žal pa je v sodobnih medkulturnih raziskavah še vedno precej običajno prenašanje vsebin in oblik diskurzov dominantnega političnega (in s tem tudi iz ekonomskega) kroga na raziskovani objekt. Pričujoči članek izpostavlja določene tradicionalne kitajske epistemološke pristope razumevanja in jih poskuša razložiti v kontekstu tradicionalnih kitajskih paradigem relationalne epistemologije. Tovrstne kitajske teorije vednosti so temeljile na strukturnimi povezavami med jezikom in zaznavo, zunanjim in notranjim svetom, pa tudi med človekom, naravo in družbo. Takšen pristop predlaga nekatere alternativne načine zaznave in razumevanja realnosti, ki presegajo omejitve posameznih oblik razumevanja, ki prevladujejo v tradicionalnih evropskih epistemologijah.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: klasična kitajska epistemologija, metodologija medkulturnega raziskovanja, orientalizem, tradicionalna in sodobna kitajska misel

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