

Epistemological Theory in Classical Chinese Philosophy

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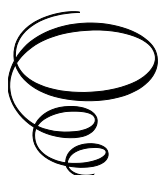
In Search of the Way

By

Jana S. Rošker

Translated by Marko Ogrizek

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To my beloved father, Andrej Rošker, whose wisdom and kindness will guide me forever. Your spirit lives on in every word of this book, and your memory continues to inspire me each day. This is for you.

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INTRODUCTION

EPISTEMOLOGY AND ITS COLONIES – ON THE CULTURAL CONDITIONING OF KNOWLEDGE

This book was originally written in 2000 as a handbook for my students in the Department of Asian Studies at Ljubljana University and published in 2005 by Ljubljana University Press in my native Slovenian. Since it was completed a quarter of a century ago, it relies on many sources that are now outdated, and it does not account for newer works published in the intervening years. Nevertheless, the publication remains valuable, particularly because the traditional Chinese theory of knowledge continues to be a relatively unexplored area. I believe this book will be both intriguing and beneficial to those studying this field. Additionally, it provides an overview and analysis of China's intellectual history, spanning from ancient texts to the early modern period. This aspect should appeal not only to academics but also to non-academic audiences newly engaging with Chinese philosophy and the history of ideas.

We are seeing in the theoretical currents of present-day sinology and modern Chinese philosophy more and more discussions whose subject is the comparison of the suppositions of the content and methodology of the “Eastern” and “Western”¹ traditions. Regardless of where this interest in “clarifying” and “defining” the common points and differences in the epistemological systems² originates from, the search for this kind of dialogue always runs under the banner of constant transcending and reestablishing of the limits of knowledge, on the narrow footbridge between revealing and accepting, narration and interpretation.³ This entire constantly developing multitude of discussions derives from, among other things, the ever more clearly expressed unavoidability of the clarification of the methodological foundations of the contemporary theory of science, which has to follow and remain compatible with the technological and political developments of today's societies.

In recent decades something that was unimaginable to most Western theoreticians less than a century ago has become clearer. What before⁴ had

been an absurd assumption, namely that Western epistemology is not the only generally valid epistemological discourse, is now becoming a commonly accepted fact that we encounter in the thought of the manifold cultural communities that now exist and interact. It is now clear to nearly everyone that Western epistemology represents (merely) one of the many forms of the historically transmitted social models of perception and interpretation of reality. However, the resulting enrichment – such as we hope to find in the processes of cognition of those category and content-defined premises of comprehension, analysis, and transmission of reality, which had formed on the basis of the differently structured sociopolitical contexts – cannot make us completely turn away from the question of what the reasons for this new tolerance are, which in the academic circles of the “developed world” is an issue that now seems to be coming back into fashion.

Why has a constantly “new” and every so often conjunctural debate, based on cross-cultural research, become once more involved in this series of “postmodern” and “transitional” crises of the Western world? Where does all this sudden and new-found enthusiasm to look for some new, this time “Asian-conditioned”,⁵ renaissance come from? If we try to follow the internal logic of the Western renaissances then we could think that this new “Asiamania”⁶ has its causes in the structurally conditioned specifics of the Western “*Zeitgeists*”: the creative drives of a post-Christian civilization are trying to find within it possibilities for the dynamic self-reflection needed to bridge the musty spaces of our postmodern era.

A way out of this cul-de-sac of a mechanistic-dualist perception of reality, the power to break out of this cast of already determined currents of thought, is again being looked for in antiquity. However, this time it is not being sought in our “own” antiquity, namely, the ideational construct of a kind of “cradle of European civilization”, but rather a classical culture in “foreign garb”. It is thus not so much about an illusion of a kind of “memory” of our former spiritual belongings, but rather the “essence of antiquity” as such.⁷

The de(con)struction of our own traditions with the help of “modern” analytics has chewed so-called Western culture down to the bone, and has left us alone in the midst of an awareness of the anonymity of the world, into which we are thrown and which appears to us as simultaneously as our own and as foreign. This awareness of our being again thrown into this world of outlines and conceptualizations is thus searching for a new vitality, with the help of which it could face its own, quite uneasy position. In this it does not matter whether it learns the Buddha’s or Plato’s language, since in

the process of the atomization of social reality every language has long ago become foreign.

Out of the anonymity of this anarchic existence the way leading to Laozi and Zhuangzi is no longer that the one leading to Parmenides and Augustin. The climb towards the peaks of Plotinus and Hegel is no steeper than the one leading to Nagarjuna and Shankara. Wading through the works of Aristotle is no less dry than through the works of Ptanjali, and entering the way of being of Master Eckhart is no less mysterious than breaking into the mystical world of Dogen. Regardless of whether these old names and doctrines are of Eastern or Western origin, over them hovers in equal measure a tireless sense of the incredible and captivating astonishment. Because modernization has in the process of progressive mobilization drawn most of our ancient European traditions and identities into itself, what is furthest and most ancient seems to us no more foreign than what was even a short while ago still native to us.⁸

In this light, the function of an Asian renaissance for the modern West is becoming much clearer: it brings us face to face with the question of the ancient-classical preconditions of a new world in a way that is impossible to avoid. In the process of this confrontation we can still underestimate the question, misunderstand it, fight against it or misuse it – but we can no longer simply ignore it.

As long as times remain modern, the question of the possibility of uniting the processes of human life and modernity will also remain relevant. Since it has been proven that human culture is fairly ancient, while the modern era is very new and unproven, we can say that it is of no secondary importance to make sure whether modernity has with new means surpassed the old, or if its newness simply means that the old world is over. This question has become so necessary and essential that telling apart what is our own and what is foreign no longer plays any special role here.⁹

In spite of this growing urgency in the search for the cultural identity of the “West”, every “Western” study in the field of sinology remains in its essence comparative. Every cross-cultural study is based on thoughtful reflection with regard to a certain object, which is expressed in connection with the related language and culture. Both these factors in cross-cultural research – and therefore also in sinological research – mostly differ from the language and culture of the researcher, though the latter may become rather watered down and postmodernized.

Not taking into account the specific conditions that are dictated by different social, historical, linguistic and cultural contexts can lead us to the wrong interpretations. In cross-cultural research it is also unfortunately still

common that the content-defined and formal criteria of these discourses, in which (in the given moment) there is accumulated the greatest amount of political (and therefore also economic) power, get projected onto the material in question, even in examining and interpreting content, which has been created under different circumstances, within the frame of the differently structured socio-cultural contexts. This danger has been overlooked even by some contemporary Chinese theoreticians, educated in the Western way, who in their works dedicate their attention to studying and rediscovering traditional Chinese philosophical thought. In the foreword to his book on the traditional Chinese logic, Professor Cui Qingtian 崔清田 wrote:

比較，是把中、西邏輯視為各自獨立的文化現象，顧及他們各自所由生成的文化背景，看到其中相同的東西，更要注意其中諸多因素的巨大差異，以及由此所帶來的不同邏輯傳統之間的共同性和特殊性。比較要求同，更要在求同的基礎上求異。注意求異，我們才能認識邏輯的多樣性，才能認識邏輯的歷史，也才能進一步探求邏輯的發展規律。

To compare Chinese and Western logic means that we must look at each of them as an independent phenomenon, conditioned by their respective cultures. Taking into account their cultural backgrounds, we will see they have many things in common, but we also have to pay attention to the great number of elements which make them different. Only on this basis can we notice those common features and specific characteristics of the individual traditional types of logic. To compare means to look for the common features, but it is even more important on the basis of these features to also find the differences. Only when we pay attention to the differences will we be able to know the diversity of logic, its history and the laws of its development.¹⁰

Confronting and understanding so-called “foreign cultures” is of course always tied to the issue of the different languages, traditions, histories and socializations involved. Moreover, interpretations of the different aspects and elements of “non-European” cultures are also always grounded on the geographical, political and economic positions of the interpreting subject, as well as those of the interpreted object.

Despite their tendencies toward openness and inter-disciplinarity, the discourses of modern science still preserve the core of that network of paradigms, which serves the interests of the “new world”. Cui continues his criticism of the paternalistic discourses that appear within comparative, even Chinese research, as the only valid criteria of valuation (the logical method that serves here as the obligatory guidepost of valuation is of course the

method of Western formal logic, even though the author never explicitly¹¹ says so):

比附,是把一種邏輯視為另一種邏輯的類似物,或等同物,置中,外社會及文化背景的巨大差異,也很少注意甚至無視不同邏輯傳統之間的特殊性,而是一味求同。一味求同,就會使人們以一種文化下的邏輯傳統為標準,搜尋其他文化中的相似物,並建構符合這唯一標準的邏輯。其結果是,使邏輯的比較研究走向了一種邏輯的復制或再版,而不是對不同歷史時期和不同文化背景下的不同邏輯傳統的深刻認識與剖析。

However, if we look at a certain kind of logic primarily as something, which ought to be similar or even identical to a different kind of logic, then this is not comparison, it is copying. In such procedures major differences between the methods of Chinese and Western logic are not taken into account, and neither are the specific peculiarities that define them. Such procedures want to find the common strokes of both methods come what may, and they are derived from the criteria of only one tradition of logic, to which then all other forms of traditional logic must correspond, including the development of new methods. Comparative analysis in the field of logic thus cannot bring about any positive results in the sense of new knowledge and fruitful analysis of the multilayered nature of the different, culturally conditioned traditions of logic, but rather can only produce plagiarism and bad copies of the existing methods.¹²

Sinology as a scientific discipline was also first constituted within the combined discourses of orientalism, which establishes and conditions the colonialist makeup of examining cultures that are not a result of the Western tradition. That is why criticism of the orientalist elements of sinology is at the same time a criticism of the relations of violence, which appear in the classical relation between knowledge and power. Within this frame any confrontation necessarily also becomes an interpretation on the basis of the system of values that is in its contents defined by the ideology of material progress, while in its methods it is defined by Western formal logic.

Of course no sinological research, be it global or specific, is a procedure of pure objectivation, i.e. a procedure of valuation using the same criteria. After all, every concept used in it also contains a specific meaning within a specific cultural complex that is understandable within the frame of the corresponding society and its (value) norms. This is true even in cases where we come upon concepts with corresponding external, i.e. formal, content. That is why the unreflective use of scientific analysis, which is of course in itself already the result of the specific historical processes and correlated typical organizations of a certain society, can turn out to be a dangerous and misguided mechanism.

However, we will assuredly fulfil the most important methodological condition – on the basis of which we can arrive at more or less relevant new knowledge despite these complex issues – if we expand the conscious effort to preserve the characteristic structural systems and take into account the specific categorial laws of the cultural areas being discussed.

CHAPTER I

CHINESE PHILOSOPHY AND EPISTEMOLOGY: UNCOVERING THE SECRET RELATIONSHIP

Though the present book is dedicated primarily to central questions and themes in the field of ancient Chinese epistemology, in this first part we cannot avoid presenting the historical development of classical Chinese thought in general. Firstly, such a presentation is needed because in our cultural-linguistic space we still have no work which describes ancient Chinese philosophy on the basis of the structurally ordered trends of its chronological development. And secondly, of course, because only on such a basis of knowing the specifics of this development, which was in itself certainly very closely tied to the economic, political and cultural conditions of the various individual periods, can we understand the socio-cultural frames of classical Chinese epistemology.

In each discourse under examination we will of course, as demanded by the central subject of the present work, primarily focus on those questions that are mostly overlooked in the usual overviews of the history of Chinese philosophy,¹³ namely the epistemological elements of the individual theories.

Within the frame of this discussion, we will therefore for the time being leave the ideological and political aspects of this issue aside. We will focus on the fundamental problems which these categorial laws define, namely the issues of perception, understanding and the transmission of “reality”. In doing so we will try to listen to the “voices of the afflicted”, namely those philosophical positions of the most influential classical Chinese epistemological theories.

Debates on the epistemological dimensions of the classical and contemporary Chinese texts and their roles in the context of traditional Chinese thought are progressing more and more successfully in the spirit of renewed discovery and with the use of specific, traditionally Chinese methodological approaches and categories. Let us therefore try to lift the veil of secrecy which still covers the space of Chinese antiquity and peer into the labyrinths of its development.

1. Does “Chinese Philosophy” Even Exist?

Before we give our attention to the very interesting, and in Europe rarely examined and therefore unresolved question of the epistemological aspects of Chinese philosophy, we must first clear up the question of whether it is even possible to discuss our topic in this way – since, when sinologists speak about Chinese philosophy, we are often faced with the question of whether the use of this term is even appropriate.

1.1 Arguments and Counterarguments, the Problem of Terminology

Opponents of using the term “philosophy” when talking about the system of traditional Chinese thought mostly ground their opposition in three kinds of arguments, which we will (along with relevant counter-arguments) examine in the following paragraphs.

1.1.1 Philosophy as a “European Matter”?

The simplest and most facile argument, which is, oddly enough, still heard or read in this context incredibly often, is based on the assumption that philosophy is a system of thought which represents the exclusive result of the “European tradition”.¹⁴ Philosophy is therefore supposed to be a theoretical discipline, which is based on specific premises and methods of “Western” science. That is why systems of ideas which evolved within the folds of “other” traditions, are by necessity seen as unscientific and unphilosophical.

Methodologically speaking, the above argument is of course an example of Eurocentrism *par excellence*, especially when in naming philosophy we start with the etymological meaning of this term. Philosophy is, as every student of the subject learns on opening their first textbook, the love of wisdom. Of course, on a somewhat more complex level the supposition that in the European tradition philosophy denotes only the love of a certain specific kind of wisdom – namely the kind that deals with specific questions of metaphysics, ontology, phenomenology, epistemology, and logic – is also true. However, the cited argument still remains even on this, more differentiated level, without a rational grounding. First, we can always answer it by saying that Chinese philosophy is not a philosophy in the European tradition, and second, that within Chinese philosophy specific, clearly delimited disciplines were also formed, and it is only the categorization that is different from the one that is usually applied within European

discourses. If I were being a little mischievous, which on occasion I certainly am, we could go a step further and say that it is the other way around: European philosophy is in fact not philosophy in the proper sense of the word. If we stay with philosophy being the love of wisdom, the current almost technocratically delimited categorial and terminological apparatus (which is exactly what in Europe – or nowadays in the world in general – is termed as philosophy in the narrower sense) cannot even be philosophy, but at the most “philosophology” (the science of the love of wisdom).

Whoever nowadays speaks of philosophy according to the division of subjects in present day universities, will by this mean a small department, which is mostly located in faculties of the humanities sciences. [...] We are then left with the question of what do these academic philosophers even do? The sociologically valid answer to this question is: philosophers deal with the history of philosophy (this is true of approximately 95% of philosophers, who on this spend approximately 95% of their time).¹⁵

1.1.2 The Stigma of Religion and Social Sciences

The second argument employed by the opponents of the use of the term “Chinese philosophy” is connected to the first, in that it is also based on the Europocentric perception and interpretation of “orientalist”¹⁶ discourses. It is therefore mostly grounded on the assumptions about how traditional Chinese thought is supposed to cover only a part of the content and conceptual spectre denoted or expressed by the term philosophy. Advocates of this view claim that what in sinology is taken as philosophy is either religion or a social science instead. The first sub-argument is mostly used by those who equate traditional Chinese thought with (a facile understanding of) Daoism or Chan-Buddhism, while the second is used by those who equate it with (a facile understanding of) Confucianism. Let us first stay briefly with the second argument, according to which the central works of traditional Chinese thought do not belong in the field of philosophy, but rather that of the social sciences. As already mentioned, this kind of argumentation is mostly derived from the supposition that to a large degree equates classical Chinese thought with what was for centuries the dominant state doctrine. This itself represents an unforgivable reduction of classical Chinese thought to an ideology, one which did indeed preserve and represent the interests of the ruling classes, but was for all the centuries of its dominance never the only system of ideas which influenced the social reality of traditional China. Moreover, it will become immediately clear, once we acquire a somewhat deeper understanding of the Confucian system of ideas, that Confucius’ School itself did not deal only with questions of

society, politics and ethics, but in some of its central starting points also examined numerous important problems in the field of phenomenology and epistemology.¹⁷

Concerning the first sub-argument, namely that in the traditional Chinese philosophical schools one sees primarily different systems of religion, I have to say that I myself work on the basis that the transmission of abstract terms from one cultural-linguistic circle into another is a difficult and dangerous undertaking.¹⁸ This is especially true of those linguistic-cultural fields in which traditions were formed that are based on structurally different economic and social conditions and use languages with a fundamentally different semantic structure. This supposition becomes especially important in cases where we are dealing with terms that denote abstract, complex ethical terms tied to generally valid systems of valuation, among which we can also count religion.¹⁹ An unreflected upon and ungrounded transmission of such concepts from one socio-cultural context to another in most cases leads to misunderstandings, which can be fatal for the understanding of the traditions in question. Thus even if we could reduce classical Chinese thought, for example, to the Confucian or Daoist systems of ideas, I myself would not be willing to state that either of these are a religion in the generally valid sense of this term.²⁰

In the classical philosophical discourses of traditional China, ethical-moral premises prevailed for political-ideological reasons. Nevertheless, this fact itself is not in itself enough to support the assumption that the ruling philosophical schools of classical China belong in the domain of religious systems. We cannot *a priori* equate ethics or morality with religion. Most socially relevant ancient Chinese thought argued for a pragmatic system of ethics, derived from completely utilitarian starting positions. The problematic or even mistaken assumption about the “religious character” of ancient Chinese social theories is therefore again partly based upon mistaken translations or Eurocentric interpretations of some of the key terms of traditional Chinese philosophy. Many of the pioneers of sinological sciences²¹ often translated the central concepts of classical thought with terms which in traditional Western discourses belong to the field of metaphysics or religion. Thus the concepts *Dao* 道 and *tian* 天 in early Western sinological works often appear as (sometimes anthropomorphous) deities, certainly as higher powers that shape human destiny. Because such early works represent the first presentations of the ancient Chinese culture and civilization to the West, they of course had a decisive influence on the formation of the interpretation of aforementioned concepts, and mostly did not become subjects of a critical examination. As we will see later, few classical philosophers – even when using them as an explanatory model for

their ethical systems – actually understood such concepts in this, religiously coloured way.

Both the aforementioned concepts – *Dao* 道 and *tian* 天 – include cosmic as well as social connotations.

一般而言,‘天’、‘道’等作為本體範疇,既可以是自然之‘天’;人事(社會)之‘天’;人之‘天’;也可以是自然之‘道’;人事(社會)之‘道’;人之‘道’。

...‘道’;作為對象同樣是一個普遍的客體範疇,它是哲學家們討論和求索的根本對象之一。在中國哲學中,‘道’;即是宇宙,人事和人性的本體,又是以仁義禮智信等為內容的道德實體。

We can in general claim that the concept of Heaven (*‘tian’*) as an ontological category refers both to nature as well as society and to each individual in turn. The same is true of the concept of ‘*Dao*’.

... ‘*Dao*’ also represents an objective category, one of the basic subjects of philosophical debates and philosophical thinking. In Chinese philosophy ‘*dao*’ represents both the essence of the universe, society and each person, as well as the moral substance that contains humaneness, appropriateness, rituality, loyalty and such similar value-carrying contents.²²

Against certain restraints we could say that from among the most influential of the philosophers of classical Chinese thought only the Confucian Mencius (Mengzi 孟子) and the founder of the Moist School, Mo Di 墨翟, also belong among such interpreters. The Moist School is otherwise better known for its logic and epistemology, while Mo Di’s “proto-Confucian” ethics had a more religious than rational character.

孟子的天不是自然,而是倫理的最高體現。

Mencius’ ‘Heaven’ is not nature, but represents the embodiment of morality.²³

...墨翟的‘天’一方面作為外在他律,稱為支配和決定人的命運的主宰,從而稱為人們敬畏並力圖認同的對象;另一方面,‘天’作為本體被賦予道德意義,正因為‘天’的道德屬性而決定了‘天’對人的主宰地位。

... To Mo Di *‘tian’* represents on the one hand an external law, which controls people and decides their fate; that is why it represents the object of people’s fearful respect and the human wish for identification. On the other hand this concept also has strong moral connotations. And it is precisely this moral nature of Heaven (*‘tian’*) which conditions its authority over people.²⁴

Many people understand ancient Chinese thought as religious simply on the basis of the fact that the translations of the central philosophical canon into Western languages are mostly superficial and imprecise. The makers of these often hastily penned translations (whose gastronomical analogy can

be found, for example, in the instantly produced food of Americanized fast food restaurants) generally did not have at their disposal enough knowledge of the semantic and grammatical makeup of classical Chinese, which is why their translations were made with too much “literary” or “artistic freedom”, without a proper insight into the inner systematics of the original works.²⁵ This has brought about a generalizing and widespread prejudice that traditional Chinese thought lacks a rational, analytical character, and has instead a rather intuitive, literary nature.²⁶

The second reason for traditional Chinese philosophy being too quickly put in the drawer marked “religion” is connected with the fact that people tend to categorize things according to those superficial qualities which are most easily observed. These can be of a merely formal character and have nothing to do with the concrete contents that represent the core of the observed or examined objects. Thus people who grew up in environments where Christianity or Islam are prevalent are likely to see any building in which there is the worship of idols, along with the corresponding ceremonies and rituals, as a kind of “house of god(s)”, a sacred place, where some sort of religious beliefs are practiced. And it should not be forgotten that China was once full of temples, and these were spaces which – precisely because unfamiliar rituals of worship took place within them – we are used to seeing as equivalent to Christian churches or Islamic mosques.²⁷ This is also the reason why both Confucianism and Daoism are often classified as religious beliefs. Here we have an argument that is based on a lack of knowledge of the socio-cultural context of the society that we are discussing. Let us therefore examine what the actual functions of Confucian and Daoist temples are in China, in order to avoid this basic misunderstanding.

Confucianism is a system of ideas which for many centuries had a strong influence on China’s social system, as it still does, especially in the following double function: first, as a value-defining framework of basic and generally valid ethical premises; and second, in the role of the only and exclusively valid state doctrine. Because the transmission of the principles of the hierarchical system of power from one generation to the next forms one of the central tenets that are common to both these functions, Confucianism is the foundation of classical Chinese socialization and the Chinese education system. That is why Confucius in Chinese culture is also an important symbol of the authority of the teacher. People who do not know the basic contexts of the ancient Chinese tradition will let the mere fact that we can find many Confucian temples and idols that are general objects of worship in China bring them to a superficial conclusion that Confucianism is a religion, and Confucius as the founder of this system of ideas being is metaphysically understood as a deity. However, on the basis of a somewhat

deeper understanding of the cultural – and also content-defined – background of Confucian ethics,²⁸ it quickly becomes clear that all these temples (together with the statues, holy objects and idols, which are securely²⁹ gathered under their roofs), are set up merely to honour the symbol of “the great teacher”, and are therefore an expression of the acceptance of the principle of authority within a clearly delimited system of social values. This in no way means worshipping a deity that has anything to do with “supernatural”, “otherworldly” or any other metaphysically conditioned powers.

Moreover, a few extra words on Daoist temples: in Chinese tradition there are two kinds of Daoism, namely, the so-called philosophical or classical (*Dao jia* 道家) and the so-called religious or folk Daoism (*Dao jiao* 道教).³⁰ As its name makes clear,³¹ the latter without a doubt belongs among religious beliefs, since the ideology on which it is based contains all the essential elements of such beliefs³². However, all this is in no way true of the classical, i.e. philosophical Daoism, which even according to the general Chinese categorizations belongs among the traditional ancient Chinese classical schools. Even though Laozi, the renowned (alleged) author of the classic *Book of the Way and Virtue* (*Dao de jing* 道德經), is raised to the status of a deity within the ideology of religious Daoism – an entity who can through prayer and other rituals and ceremonial procedures be petitioned for welfare and happiness in life or after death – no such elements are to be found in the work itself.³³

We can furthermore say the same for the other major representative of classical, i.e. philosophical, Daoism, Zhuangzi. In short, the examination of ancient Chinese thought necessarily demands that we draw a sharp line between Daoist theory on the one hand and Daoist religious practice on the other. While this dividing line is clear in Chinese terminology, as shown by the two different terms with which the two currents have been referred to since the 1st century CE, in the generally valid translation into Indo-European languages it has simply been lost, as both these divergent discourses are known in the West³⁴ under the generalizing name “Daoism”. Here we can find one of the reasons why the uninformed public still sees Daoism as a kind of religion rather than a philosophical discourse.

1.1.3 The Question of Universality and Necessity

Within the frame of Western philosophy – and especially according to Kant and Hegel – universality and necessity are supposed to be the basic postulates of philosophical thinking. And thus since traditional Chinese

philosophy is widely believed to always speak of the concrete and contingent, it does not deserve the title of philosophy in this context.

This assumption is once again based on a too superficial understanding of the subject. Concreteness and contingency can only be seen as the central premises of the content and methodology of Chinese philosophy in relation to the works of early Daoism and related disciplines, and even then only with certain limitations. Even in this sense the widespread prejudice about the normative-ethical direction of the most influential Chinese philosophical schools, including (of course) Daoism, has for many decades prevented Western theoreticians from achieving a more thorough and methodologically suitable analysis of their central works. Chad Hansen also points out the elements of certain linguistic theories – until recently almost completely overlooked – which form the basis of the classical, especially Daoist discourses:

Traditional neglect of the theory of language has led scholars to stereotype Chinese philosophy as strong in ethics and weak in analytic philosophy. This is misleading. Chinese normative ethics is embarrassingly weak. Its main strength lies in a novel moral psychology (novel, that is, from the western point of view) [...] The preoccupations of modern analytic philosophy are precisely where Chinese philosophers make some of their most interesting contributions. The results of their theory of language and mind, furthermore, profoundly influence Chinese normative ethical dialogue and their view of education. The Chinese theory of language is the key to understanding Chinese philosophy in general.³⁵

It is precisely the questions of universality (*pubianxing* 普遍性) and necessity (*biranxing* 必然性) that are among the key issues which classical Chinese epistemology has dealt with. The fact that in some ideologies other postulates prevailed is a question of politics, not a theoretical one. At different times in Europe various religious questions were also at the centre of philosophy, especially in the contexts of ontology and metaphysics, as well as the question of God in the Middle Ages.

Further indirect evidence for the existence of the principles of universality and necessity in classical Chinese philosophy can be found in the makeup of the Chinese language itself, which by its internal structure alone allows for the unproblematic and readily understandable translation of those notions, terms and concepts that belong to “European philosophy”.

1.1.4 The Term

At the end of our consideration as to whether Chinese philosophy is “real philosophy” or whether classical systems of thought in traditional China were simply an amalgamation of literary infused dogmas, it will be of value to point out that the understanding of the very notion of philosophy in China is – due to complex factors related to specific historical processes – naturally very different than in Europe. Thus until the 19th century there was no term in Chinese with which to refer to philosophy as a stand-alone discipline. Only when Chinese intellectuals started to get to know European and American ideologies – and within that frame the philosophical works of the Western tradition (via Japan, whose intellectuals had in the Meiji period already started to systematically study all Western ideologies³⁶ – did the term *zhexue* 哲學, whose etymological meaning is not wholly equivalent to the ancient Greek one (“the love of wisdom”), but actually better expresses the essence of philosophy as the study of a scientific discipline, since it literally means the “teaching of wisdom”, come into general use.

As a case in point, Lao Sze-kwang points out, the word ‘philosophy’ (and here I may add ‘religion’) is purely of ‘western’ origin and did not exist even in translated forms until as late as Meiji in Japan and thence from Japan into China. However, the equally important fact is that these terms have existed for the past hundred years as translated terms and are now used (in their translated forms) by some as terms to describe ways of thinking which previously were referred to as ‘schools of thought’ or ‘teachings’. For good or ill, the ‘East’ now uses Western labels to describe and thus to understand its own traditions. In these respects, cultural isolationism ended in the Far East over one century ago.³⁷

The same is true of the nominal derivative “philosopher”. Up until the 19th century in China, the original and general terms were used to denote such individuals, such as *xiansheng* 先生 (teacher), *fuzi* 夫子 or the short form *zi* 子 (master).³⁸ Terms such as *sheng ren* 聖人 or *xian ren* 仙人 (sage) were not suitable, since they have a religious connotation and denote ethical categories, similar to, for example, *junzi* 君子 (exemplary person).

1.2 Epistemology in Chinese Thought – in General

Theoreticians also differ regarding the question of whether there exists anything like the study of knowledge within traditional Chinese philosophy, i.e. an epistemology. In classical Chinese philosophy, as with every other

ancient intellectual discourse, we will of course not find any discipline by that name.

總之,中國古代哲學與歐洲古代哲學一樣,只具有認識論的萌芽。且這種萌芽由于中國偏重倫理道德而與西方的萌芽有一定的差異。近代以前認識論還沒有稱為一門獨立的哲學分支學課。歐洲近代由于自然科學的發展,哲學上更重視對認識主體的研究,於是形成了經驗論,唯理論,先驗論,反映論等認識論派別。中國古代哲學沒有這些認識論派別,也沒有這些派別相聯系的思維方式,如感性與理性,本體與現象,主體與客體的二分對立。

Let us sum it up: classical Chinese philosophy, similar to classical European philosophy, knew only the beginnings of epistemology. Besides which these beginnings differed one from another, since Chinese philosophy was more focused on ethics and morality. Before the period of modernity nowhere within philosophy was formed a precisely delimited discipline of a theory of knowledge. In the period of modernity in Europe – in parallel with the development of natural sciences – philosophy was more focused on studying the knowing subject, which brought about the formation of different epistemological currents, like for example empiricism, rationalism, apriorism, reflexionism, etc. In classical Chinese philosophy we will find neither such currents nor the corresponding ways of thinking, among which are, for example, the dualist opposition between feelings and reason, being and phenomenon, subject and object, and so on.³⁹

However, this does not mean that the classical philosophers of Chinese antiquity were not also dealing with questions connected to the theory of knowledge. As we will see later, though theirs in many fundamental ways differed from the epistemological starting points that had been developed within the influential discourses of ancient Greece, it is certainly no coincidence that people on both sides of the world – at roughly the same time – arrived at similar points, those which are the conditions for any serious epistemology. Let us just consider Socrates' saying with which the renowned philosopher admits in a somewhat resigned fashion the immeasurable depth of his own ignorance, and with which he denies in an *a priori* way the possibility of any kind of "real" knowledge:

I only know that I know nothing.⁴⁰

China can also point to similarly oriented spirits, and thus both of the central masters of classical Daoism also arrived at the essence of real knowledge. Towards the end of his short volume, after he had already uttered much of deep wisdom, Laozi arrives at the following in the 71st chapter:

知不知, 尚矣.

To know that you do not know is the best.⁴¹

Zhuangzi, in his *The True Classic of the Southern Flowers*, reaches the same conclusion:

故知止其所不知, 至矣.

Greatest is the knowledge that stops at what it does not know.⁴²

In the second half of the last century, especially after the founding of the People's Republic, contemporary Chinese philosophers started to more intensely explore the question of epistemology within the Chinese philosophical tradition. Since most such research was the result of political directives, the findings cannot be taken completely seriously or sincerely, although these researchers did manage to “prove”⁴³ the existence of most of the modern epistemological starting points within ancient Chinese classical philosophy.⁴⁴ Despite the clear holistic starting points on which ancient Chinese thought is based, these studies first attributed to each individual philosopher – as a levy to Marxist ideological directives – either a “materialist” or an “idealist” worldview. Such basic albeit artificial and far-fetched divisions are of course permissible for the formation of other binary oppositions, specific to the perception within the frame of European formal logic.

In recent years the economic development of China has outgrown the need for such ideologies. New ideological directives coming from the market economy demand a more critical examination⁴⁵ and the discovery of new, specific factors within China's own tradition. Contemporary theoreticians therefore oppose certain discourses which were considered valid just a few decades ago:⁴⁶

當時學者在有一些地方受了蘇聯的極左影響, 例如侯外鹿編選的中國唯物主義認識論與唯心主義認識論鬥爭史的體系, 就深受了如此的影響.

Some theoreticians were at that time under a strong influence of the radical leftist ideas of the Soviet Union. This is true of the case of Mister Hou Wailu. In his book about the systemic history of the clash between idealist and materialist epistemology in China such an influence is certainly felt.⁴⁷

Beside this, such research was led by wanting to neutralize orientalist Western interpretations, which – at least in a latent form – emphasized the supposed inferiority of the Chinese culture and civilization:

另外,當時中國學者有一種心態,生怕西方人說,中國沒有哲學,瞧不起中國,所以西方哲學史上有的東西,中國學者在中國哲學史上也一定可以找到,並且在時間上往往早于西方,就是在這樣的心態支配下,中國也被認為有經驗論與唯理論的派別和鬥爭,有先驗論和反映論的鬥爭。這樣作表面上提高了中國哲學史的地位,實際上卻背離了中國哲學史自身的規律和獨特的價值。這樣作好像是克服了歐洲中心論,但實際上“中國哲學史”變成了歐洲哲學史的翻版,無形中反而強化了歐洲中心論。

Beside this the Chinese theoreticians of the time had another common characteristic: they were all deathly afraid that the Westerners would say, see, the Chinese have no philosophy, and would therefore belittle China. All the qualities of Western philosophy they therefore also found in Chinese philosophy, and all of them supposedly appeared in China even before they did in Europe. Under the influence of this psychological pressure an opinion gained steam that in China there also existed the clash between empiricism and rationalism, between apriorism and reflexionism. Such doings ostensibly raised the reputation of the history of Chinese philosophy, but in reality completely negated its true value and its specific laws. Such work was supposed to defeat Eurocentrism, but in reality degraded ‘the History of Chinese philosophy’ to a bad copy of ‘the History of European philosophy’, and therefore on an informal level only strengthened the Eurocentric position.⁴⁸

It is certainly clear that Chinese epistemology within the classical theories of traditional China, similar to that of ancient Europe, did not exist as a precisely delimited study of knowledge. However, we can hardly therefore claim that classical Chinese theoreticians never dealt with questions of cognitive processes or those that are linked to the inner essence of knowledge itself. Despite this, it is true that their approach to these questions and the methods they applied to such issues were in general quite different to those that prevailed in the discourses that would later shape the ideational construct of “European thought”. The formal method of all the theories of knowledge within the Chinese classical tradition was based on a holistic worldview, while the optics of their contents derived from the postulates of pragmatic and utilitarian ethics.

認識論是從歐洲轉入中國的一個概念,他的內涵深受歐洲傳統文化和思維方式的影響。從中國傳統文化和思維方式來評價,它可以說是一個狹義的認識論。比如認識的來源問題,歐洲僅僅是從個體認識發生的角度,用心理學的方法來考察的,故有經驗論與唯理論的對立。一個中國人思考認識的來源問題時,他首先想到的是通過教育和學習獲得間接知識,其次才會想到通過感官和心思獲得直接知識。再比如對甚麼是知識的問題,歐洲人是狹義的理解。一般指理智的知識,科學的知識,而中國人

是廣義的理解,知識還包括(且更主要包括)道德倫理在內。從這個意義上說,所謂中國古代沒有認識論,這個‘認識論’是歐洲狹義的定義。

Epistemology is a concept that came to China from Europe; the connotations of its contents are closely tied to the European method of thinking. If we try to assign value to it from the point of view of traditional Chinese culture and specifically Chinese way of thinking, we could claim that it is a theory of knowledge, which is actually limited to very narrow frames. Regarding, for example, the question of the origin of knowledge, we have to admit that traditional European epistemology examines this only from the point of view of the knowing subject, using cognitive or psychological principles. Only on this foundation can there be an opposition between empiricism and rationalism. When the question of the origin of knowledge was posed in China, the studies were always primarily focused on indirect knowledge, that is, the kind which can be arrived at through education and learning. The study of knowledge, which is the result of sensory perception and thinking, was here of only secondary value. With regard to the question of what knowledge actually is, we have to admit that the European tradition also understood this in a very narrow sense; it usually understood knowledge as acquired through reasoning, that is, the kind of knowledge, which is the result of the scientific worldview. The Chinese tradition always posed this question in a wider sense, and thus as knowledge which is also (or even mostly) derived from moral contents. If we therefore say that traditional China did not know any theory of knowledge, we are speaking only about European epistemology; that is, epistemology in the narrower sense.⁴⁹

In his article “Key Conditions and Cognitive Methods in the Moral Epistemology of Classical Chinese Philosophy),”⁵⁰, the contemporary Chinese theoretician Liao Xiaoping 廖小平 tried to sum up the basic characteristics of a specifically Chinese kind of epistemology. In contrast to the Western kind, the latter is supposed to be based on the “removal” of the active knowing subject. The knowing “subject” should possess – and here all traditional epistemologies are supposedly more or less in agreement – the following qualities:

主體必須‘靜心’、‘虛心’、‘無私’、‘寡欲’。

The subject must be calm, empty and without personal interests and desires.⁵¹

According to classical theories, the process of acquiring knowledge – which is not of a rational but of a moral nature – must be based on the following three basic conditions:

1. The condition of humaneness (*ren*, 仁): The calmness and emptiness of the knowing subject is a characteristic that is in perfect harmony with the

basic ethical postulate of classical Confucian humanism. This postulate represents the calmness of the knowing subject, and not the activity.

2. The basic demand which has to be met if we wish to achieve this kind of calmness or emptiness of spirit is the removal of all personal interest and individual desire. The goal of the process of acquiring knowledge is not in gaining knowledge that would enable the change of the external world, but in the spiritual growth of the knowing subject, which can be seen in the harmony between people and nature, individuals and society.

3. The third condition for the process of acquiring knowledge within the frame of the classical theories of traditional China is in the clear state of the spirit, which has to be like a “clear mirror” (*xin ru ming jing* 心如明鏡), that is, freed from external, sensually conditioned and therefore illusory influences. This concept is different to the superficially similar European one of a *tabula rasa*, since it is based on perfect morality.⁵²

According to Liao, the classical Chinese approach to epistemology also differs from the classical European one. While the latter is supposedly based on the rational understanding of the external object of knowledge, analysis and strict separation of the subject and object, classical Chinese epistemological discourses supposedly use an irrational and intuitive epistemology, based on a holistic comprehension of the world.⁵³

This kind of holistic approach to comprehending and interpreting reality, which represents one of the central features of the Chinese tradition of ideas, was based on combining the natural (cosmic) and human (social) factors. In a formal view it was based on the complementarity of bipolar opposites. This was seen as the driving force of the constant, eternal changes and transformations which condition existence, which is again understood as a unity of all the existing differences. This ancient Chinese cosmogonic concept, which plays an important role in, for example, the *Book of Changes* (*Yi jing* 易經), had an important influence on the development of ontological and epistemological theories of the Chinese tradition. Within this frame humans are an inseparable part of the cosmic and social whole. Their every activity is always expressed within this colourful conglomerate of the all-encompassing unity of existence, which is comprised of any and all individual divergences. Within such a vision and feeling of the world and human existence, knowledge is always tied to concrete use in an *a priori* way, and no theory can exist separate from practice. On the other hand every (inter)action also brings as its necessary consequence a change in knowledge. A holistic comprehension of the unity of humans and the world is essential