

Sense of Emptiness

Sense of Emptiness:
An Interdisciplinary Approach

Edited by

Junichi Toyota, Pernilla Hallonsten
and Marina Shchepetunina

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

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THE EDITORS WISH TO THANK RIMA, KESTUTIS AND BITĖ
FOR PROVIDING US WITH A WONDERFUL ENVIRONMENT
FOR EDITING THIS VOLUME IN KAUNAS

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PREFACE

PRESENCE OF ABSENCE

JUNICHI TOYOTA, PERNILLA HALLONSTEN
AND MARINA SHCHEPETUNINA

Sense of emptiness

The presence of a sign normally indicates some message, and lack of sign or ‘absence’ should not, by contrast, alert people to anything in particular. Predatory animals try to hide their presence when approaching prey and a murderer tries to hide his traces from a murder scene. Nonetheless, when one expects the presence of a sign in a certain place, its absence can signal something. We can argue then that the absence as well as the presence of something can have a significant impact on how we perceive the world.

Human perception normally works based on binary pairs of information, i.e. common or shared information and a new piece of information (cf. Toyota 2009). This binary system can be found consistently, regardless of the type of perception involved. What is interesting concerning these binary pairs is that a new piece of information almost always gets higher prominence over a previously shared one. The opposite pattern is possible, but not very likely. The two types of information can be examined in terms of increasing or decreasing prominence, and there are four possibilities, as demonstrated in Table 1. The plus sign signals an increase in prominence, or an item with higher prominence, and the minus sign correspondingly indicates a decrease in prominence or an item with low prominence. Among these types, the most unlikely is type (ii) since something has to receive prominence in our perception and it is practically impossible to perceive something without receiving any prominence. The other three patterns are all possible, but type (i) is the most likely pattern. Giving prominence to both types of information is also possible, as represented in type iv. Type iii, where common information is given prominence and new information is suppressed is unlikely in perception,

but it is still possible. What determines these variations is relative prominence.

Table 1. Types of information in relation to prominence

| | Shared information | New information | Likelihood |
|-----------|--------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Type i. | – | + | Most likely |
| Type ii. | – | – | Most unlikely |
| Type iii. | + | – | Possible |
| Type iv. | + | + | Highly possible |

Relative prominence can naturally be difficult to measure, since this is gradient. For instance, imagine a small pond, where one keeps throwing in small stones. Considering the relative proportions of water and stones, we see that the water occupies a high proportion initially, but as one keeps adding stones, there will be a point where the relative proportion between water and stone is more or less the same, and finally, the proportion of stones will prevail over that of the water. This shift is schematically presented in Figure 1. Black dots represent stones. States a and c in Figure 1 are easier to analyse, whereas state b is rather difficult to determine in terms of higher prominence.

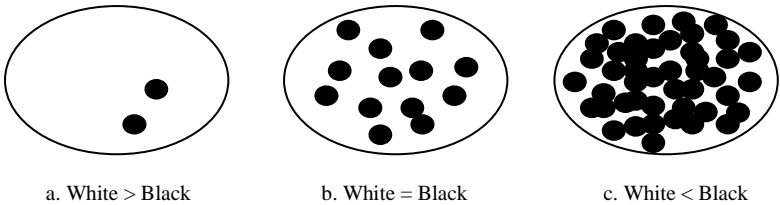


Figure 1. Geographic distribution of the future tense (Dahl and Velupillai 2008)

The concept of emptiness used in this volume refers to less prominent proportions, which tends to form a background in our perception. In most cases, we are dealing with how we perceive this background. As demonstrated by Nisbett (2003), Nisbett and Masuda (2007), there seem to be some differences in how we perceive the background according to our cultural backgrounds. Such differences will be discussed in this volume.

Scope of research and approaches

This volume consists of contributions from different fields covering a wide range of topics. Due to the range covered in this volume, studies presented here are highly interdisciplinary, but all chapters deal with the sense of emptiness, which suggest that the underlying idea of the significance of emptiness is pervasive. Yet, this topic has not previously been systematically compared across different disciplines. It is hoped that this volume will offer a first overview of the pervasiveness and integration of disciplines concerning the sense of emptiness.

Contributions in this volume do not focus on one specific theoretical framework, but are in principle descriptive. This is because of the interdisciplinary nature of the volume, so that different contributions can complement each other in order to form a comprehensive understanding on emptiness without any constraints of certain theoretical frameworks.

Organisation

This volume consists of three major sections: socio-cultural studies, cognitive-semiotic studies, and anthropological and linguistic studies. These are merely rough divisions and some topics may appear in several chapters. This is unavoidable due to the nature of the volume.

Within socio-cultural studies, we find historical studies of Chinese philosophy, Japanese religion and myth, Japanese literature, Russian film studies, as well as European medieval literature. Cognitive-semiotic studies consist of gesture studies, architecture, and counting systems. Anthropological and linguistic studies cover information structure of Asian languages and future tense in relation to the concept of death.

Apart from these contributions, there is also a final chapter suggesting further studies concerning the sense of emptiness.

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CHAPTER ONE

EXPLORING SENSE OF EMPTINESS: A COGNITIVE OVERVIEW

JUNICHI TOYOTA

Abstract. This chapter introduces a subject matter of emptiness in the entire volume from a cognitive perspective. What is presented here is aided by the use of figure and ground, terms borrowed from cognitive linguistics, to highlight how people from different parts of the world conceptualise their surroundings differently. This type of difference can be found in various aspects of human cultural activities. The basic underlying principle in understanding the world is the same regardless of where a speaker is from or brought up, but the way each speaker gives prominence to either figure or ground differs, and this is what makes emptiness prominent in the Eastern countries, but not in the West.

Introduction

Comparing the European and East Asian tradition in the domain of literature and art, one feature is really striking, namely, a sense of emptiness, or in other words, how the concept of void or nothingness is appreciated. It may sound a contradiction to appreciate something that does not exist, since it implies seeing something that is not visible or hearing something that is not audible. However, the concept of nothingness can vary significantly from culture to culture. There is a clear difference found in different aspects of cultures and even in linguistic structures. This paper discusses the importance of emptiness in the East Asian culture, paying particular attention to Japan. In addition, since this concept seems to be absent in Europe, the comparison is made in order to highlight the difference. The comparison is made using a basic principle often employed in cognitive linguistics or cognitive poetics, e.g. figure and ground. The figure-ground distinction proves to be useful and this can be

used pervasively across different kinds of comparisons, whether they are cultural or linguistic.

This paper starts with a basic distinction between figure and ground. This serves as a background for the rest of the paper. Then the sense of emptiness is explained, drawing evidence from various aspects of culture, such as flower arrangement and literature. Once the interpretation of emptiness in this work is established, we analyse it in terms of figure and ground, and provide a coherent pattern across cultures. Finally, some linguistic characteristics between Europe and East Asia that follow the concept of emptiness are shown, namely counting system. Also, suggestions are made for further research in this section concerning this concept involving different parts of the world.

Figure and ground

The grammar of languages may vary dramatically from one language to another when comparison is made involving the world languages. However, in spite of this diversity, there is also a general tendency commonly found in human beings regardless of their ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. When we conceptualise the world, we tend to view it in a binary pair of a certain object in focus and a background in which this focused object is located (Toyota 2009). In cognitive linguistics, the former is termed figure or trajectory, and the latter, ground or landmark (see, among others, Langacker 1987; Lee 2001). Let us take a simple example. How can the location of the vase in Figure 1 be described in relation to the table? Speakers of English or other European languages strongly tend to consider that a vase is on the table, i.e. (1a). This suggests that the vase is considered as figure, and the table, ground. This is how we see the world, but this is not a Eurocentric world view: it is a human nature that we tend to view something large and stable as ground and something small and movable as a figure. However, this does not necessarily mean that this is the only way of viewing the world, it is theoretically possible to view the vase as ground and the table, figure as in (1b) in less studied languages and cultures, although it is not likely.

- (1)
 - a. *A vase is on the table.*
 - b. *The table is under the vase.*



Figure 1. Conceptualisation of figure and ground: relationship between a vase and a table

The case of a vase and a table is very straightforward and there seems to be consensus among speakers of different languages due to the general human nature. However, consider the pictures in Figure 2. They are very well-known optical illusions, and the problem here is that it is difficult to decide what to consider figure and ground. In case of Figure 2a, the problem lies in deciding where to draw a boundary for figure, i.e. interpretation of two faces depends on where the jaw line is, and in Figure 2b, when the dark parts are considered as figure, two faces emerge and the white part as figure yields a vase. These illusions show that it is possible to have some cases that trick our decision concerning figure and ground.

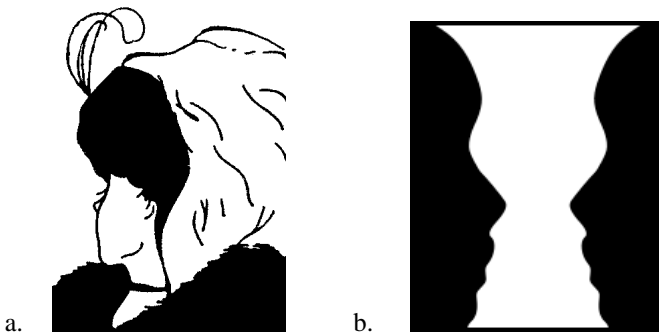


Figure 2. Optical illusion: (a) a young lay and an old woman and (b) two faces and a vase

Apart from these ambiguous cases, it is worth mentioning that nurture and the world view are closely connected and this connection can influence how we choose figure and ground. Subirá (2006) demonstrates that different geographic regions for upbringing can have a significant impact on spatial conception. Consider a picture in Figure 3, where there is a lake situated around a mountain top. His research reveals that those who are brought up in a mountain region consider a range of surrounding large hills (as in Highland of Scotland) as simply hills, but those who are raised in a flat region tend to see the same landscape as high mountains. This difference is shown in an English description of location concerning the lake, e.g. those who are brought up in the mountain region tend to use a preposition *on* (e.g. (2a)), specifying a surface element of a mountain and implying the flatness, while those who are from a flat region use *in* (e.g. (2b)), signifying an element of container in the scene and meaning that this is more three dimensional. There are some exceptions, but this can be considered a general tendency. This is related to the figure and ground setting in a sense that ground can be adjusted according to one's familiar environment through upbringing.



Figure 3. Position of lakes in relation to surrounding mountains

- (2)
 - a. *The lake is on the mountain.*
 - b. *The lake is in the mountain.*

Figure and ground may be considered a cognitive foundation in human understanding of their surroundings, but it can be implemented to various different kinds of understanding concerning our surroundings.

Sense of nothingness

As hinted in the previous section, various factors can influence the choice of figure and ground. Naturally, cultural differences can also affect the choice. What is striking between the European and East Asian culture is often seen in the sense of nothingness. This concept refers to understanding of absence or void. Human perception, whether it is feeling, hearing, seeing, etc., needs stimuli against which our cognitive sensory reacts. Sense of nothingness refers to the lack of stimuli, and this naturally entails that there is no sensation perceived. However, this is a very important element in the field of art and literature in Japan and other East Asian countries. In order to highlight the basic difference, let us take a look at a typical style of flower arrangement in two different cultures. Consider two different styles in Figure 4. 0a represent a typical European style, while Figure 4b, a typical Japanese style. There is much cultural integration between these two cultures in the past couple of centuries, if not longer, and it may be rather difficult to see a typical example nowadays. However, what matters here is the tradition, not the current form.

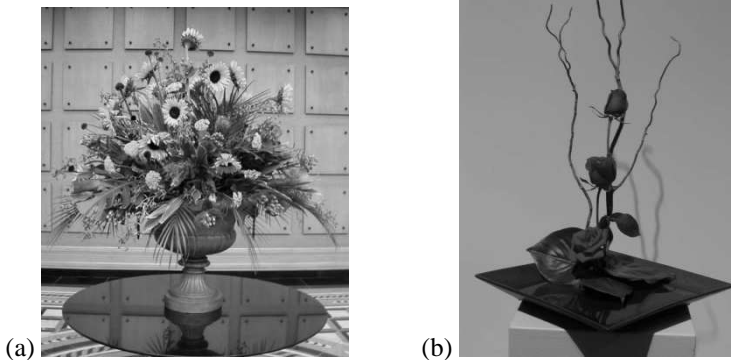


Figure 4. Flower arrangements: (a) an European /Western style;
(b) a Japanese style

In comparing them, it is obvious that there are several striking differences. The Western style certainly has the larger number of flowers

in a vase, and they are arranged in a near-symmetry. The Japanese style has the considerably less number of flowers, and their layout is asymmetric. The artistic distinction may vary from person to person, but it may be easier to prepare the Western style as long as there is enough supply of flowers. The Japanese style may take some training to learn a certain style of arrangement. This difference is not restricted to the flower arrangement, but can be found elsewhere in aesthetical orderings. The garden is a good example. Consider two types of garden in Figure 5. Figure 5a is a traditional English style and Figure 5b, a traditional, or rather archaic, Japanese style. In this case again, it is obvious that the Japanese style is much simpler and does not involve much material to make an artistic impression. In this case, what is involved are rocks and moss. A typical English garden normally contains a number of trees and plants, and occasionally ornamental objects, such as statues. These two kinds of comparison may yield a general tendency, as far as horticulture is concerned, that the Japanese style involves less material to make it aesthetic.

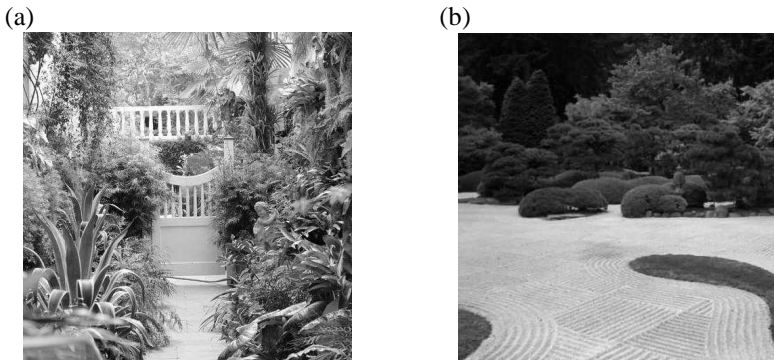


Figure 5. Gardens: (a) a traditional English style; (b) a traditional Japanese style

What underlies in this difference can be attributed to the concept of emptiness. By emptiness, it is meant that a space does not necessary have to be filled and it can be left untouched. Instead, small changes made should be understood in conjunction with what is left untouched. Emptiness here refers to spaces without any additional changes. In the Japanese flower arrangement or garden, there are many untouched spaces and they are left untouched on purpose. The European style has to have everything on display and an empty space normally indicates that a job is not yet completed. These empty spaces can actually ‘speak loud’ in Japan,

perhaps louder than possible objects that could occupy these empty spaces. In the flower arrangement in 0b, an asymmetrical design perhaps forces viewers to imagine that there is something in an empty space that can form complementary features to make the overall (imaginary) shape symmetrical, because the human mind tends to prefer symmetry (cf. Jablan 1995; Toyota 2009). The European style has to present itself in full and it does not leave any space for viewers to imagine anything. The Japanese and East Asian cultures find an exquisite pleasure in this imagination, and this is the fundamental difference in appreciation of arts in these two cultures.

It is also important to note that Neibett (2003) and Nisbett and Masuda (2007) argue a basic difference in perception between East Asia and Europe along the same line of argument presented here concerning emptiness. With their psychological analysis, Europeans are claimed to have more focus in perception of a scene, while East Asian are more likely to attend to a broad perceptual and conceptual field. It is also argued that this difference comes from social factors, i.e. “East Asians live in complex social networks with prescribed role relations. Attention to context is important to effective functioning” (Nisbett and Masuda 2007: 153). Their argument reconfirms that the sense of emptiness stems from different aspects of human life in different cultures.

One may consider the presence of emptiness in the Japanese style is a typical case of horticulture in East Asia. However, this principle is surprisingly pervasive and it can be extended to other kinds of arts. Literature, for instance, provides a large amount of examples to illustrate this point. In Europe, there has been an environment that gave birth to a movement called realism in the late 18th century and the 19th century. The motif for artistic work is often taken from our common daily life, perhaps for the purpose of detailed description. In French literature, for instance, several authors are considered to represent this movement, e.g. Honoré de Balzac (*Le père Goriot* ‘Old father Goriot’ 1835; *Le lys dans le vallée* ‘The lily of the valley’ 1835), Gustave Flaubert (*L’éducation sentimentale* ‘Sentimental education’ 1869) and Émile Zole (*Germinal* 1885). For instance, de Balzac’s *Le père Goriot* has a scene where a room of Goriot is described in every fine detail. It is often claimed that following this description, everyone can draw a more or less same picture. This proves the extent of preciseness and details in his description. Why are details so important in Europe? In modern times, this idea stems from the Renaissance period, especially a landmark work for modern analytic thinking, *Discours de la method* ‘Discourse of the method’ by René Descartes (1637) can be said to have set a standard. This book states that

one has to dissect a problem into finer pieces and analyse them piece by piece. This work is very important in a sense that it clearly laid out various ideas and thoughts that have been circulating among intellectuals in Europe for at least several centuries. This book indeed suggests that the analytic thinking has been present in Europe, although not clearly defined. In a large extent, this tradition of analytic thinking can date back at least to Aristotle in the fourth century BC. It seems that European thinking has traditionally focused on details, and small details will make up the whole picture.

In Japanese literature, on the contrary to the European counterpart, authors try to make readers read 'between the lines.' In *Rashomon* 'Rashomon gate' (1915) by Ryunosuke Akutagawa, for instance, has a plot in describing the lapse of time in this story. In the opening scene, he mentions that there is a grasshopper on a date. At this point, it seems like an irrelevant note in the story. However, at the very end, when the author briefly describes the gate, he mentions that this insect has gone. This refers to the passing of time, implying that there was a significant amount of time involved in the story, although there was no specific mention of time. It is possible to say somewhere in the work that a certain amount of time has passed, but the author opts for a more subtle reference without directly mentioning it. In Europe, the use of certain objects or animals in this way can be a part of allegory and it can give a specific meaning without a direct mention (e.g. salamanders represent righteous people, who can withstand fire, as in Ingeborg Bachmann's *Erklaer mir, Liebe* 'Explain to me, dearest'). A grasshopper does not refer to time on its own in any sense of mythology or allegory in Japan, and its only reference is the season of summer. In Asia, allegories are not yet fully developed and still at the level of metaphors. Allegories are in a sense dead metaphors and they need to be fossilised as a generally understood concept in a speech community (see Heine et al. 1991; Levinson 1983 for metaphorisation). The Japanese literary style often leaves a space for readers to interpret on their own (see Višnjić Žižović and Toyota, this volume), and this space can be considered an empty space in the text, forming a parallel to cases in horticulture.

In the East Asian countries, what has been most influential in this region is Chinese philosophy, especially Confucianism (see Gledić, this volume). Since China developed their civilisation much earlier in this region, other countries also learned from the Chinese philosophy and it is not an understatement to say that this world view forms a base for the Asian thinking. The principle of Confucianism is to find a compromise between positive and negative points by combining the best of both. This

naturally forces us to think various matters in more general terms. In other words, Confucianism deprives us of a focal point in our thinking and makes us look at the outline of various matters but not details of their content. The overview does not have to be filled with every detail, but it should allow some space for unidentified concepts, which can be sometime interpreted as ambiguity. This ambiguous space is the origin of concept of emptiness, which came to be extended to different areas of culture, whether it is literature or fine arts. Another possible influence is religion. The goal of Buddhism, the main religion in East Asia, is to achieve religious enlightenment, *satori*. This is mainly achieved by meditation. The followers are required to remove anything from their mind in meditation to reach a state of salvation. Once the emptiness of mind is achieved, they are closer to the teaching of Buddhism. This emphasis of emptying their mind might have influenced the culture in general and therefore, people became highly sensitive to emptiness in their non-religious thinking.

It is worth mentioning that the Asian literary style also went through a period of realism, but this was a copy of European literary style. A promoter of the Japanese literary realism, Shyoyou Tsubouchi, for instance, was familiar with the European literature, and he in fact translated Shakespeare. Different styles can be copied through contacts, but what underlies in each culture cannot be easily altered or modified.

Emptiness in terms of figure and ground

The difference between Europe and Japan and other countries in Asia can be analysed in terms of figure and ground. Roughly speaking, the focus is on details in Europe, whereas in Asia, an overview is focused. However, the case of Asia needs a clarification: it is not common at all that ground is focused. Ground is background information in order for figure to be singled out, and even in the Asian culture, it is figure that gets most salience. What is meant by focus here is that ground is given unusual attention in Asian culture, especially in comparison with the European counterpart. Thus, a term focus is used in a relative term in this discussion.

This relationship is schematically represented in Figure 6. The square frame represents ground, and the inner circle, figure. The entity highlighted in bold is in focus. So in Europe, figure is in focus and in Japan, it is ground that receives focus. Thus, in flower arrangements as in Figure 4, for instance, the European style starts with putting each flower (i.e. figure) together and an overall presentation (ground) is achieved. In the Japanese style, on the other hand, the overall picture (ground) is

initially imagined and each flower (figure) is arranged to achieve the initial picture in mind. It seems that the arrangement starts with a focused distinction between figure and ground and moves onto unfocused one. Thus, by schematically representing figure and ground in relation to focus in each culture, it is clear that there is a sharp contrast.

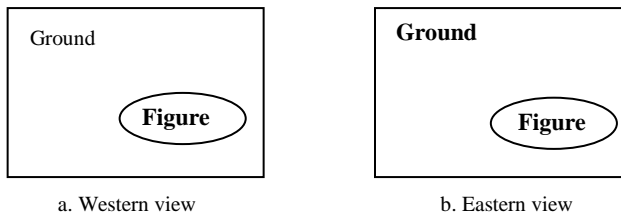


Figure 5. Schematic representation of figure-ground relationship:
(a) an European type; (b) a Japanese style

Conclusions

This chapter discussed the sense of emptiness using the figure and ground distinction in cognitive linguistics and cognitive poetry. Comparing the European and East Asian (particularly Japanese) traditional culture, the sense of emptiness turns out to be a really striking feature. It is much appreciated in Japan and East Asia, but not at all in Europe. We have seen the evidence from flower arrangement, gardening and literature (cf. Figure 4 and Figure 5). It turned out that the Japanese culture tends to focus on ground, but the European, on figure (cf. Figure 6). This is a striking difference that can be applied to different aspects of culture. One example used to illustrate this applicability is a linguistic feature of counting system. The difference between European and East Asian system, i.e., non-classifier and classifier, respectively, can be attributed to the difference in terms of figure and ground shown in Figure 6.

The emptiness, therefore, proves to be a very useful concept in understanding cultural and cognitive difference between Europe and East Asia, especially Japan. This concept can be extended to comparison involving different parts of the world and it can prove to be a very useful and powerful concept in future research.

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PART ONE:
SOCIO-CULTURAL STUDIES

CHAPTER TWO

EMPTINESS IN CONFUCIANISM

JELENA GLEDIĆ

Abstract. As an introduction to potential research on cultural characteristics in the perception of emptiness, this text deals with the case of Confucianism. Our aim is to give a basic introduction to the concept of emptiness in Confucian thought, but also to stress the problems of researching cultural and national differences. We provide an examination of the various views on Confucianism, and also its position in today's China, followed by an analysis of the place of emptiness in Confucian practices, source texts, and also its very methodology and discourse, with a brief overview of similar concepts in Daoism and Buddhism. Considering that even defining Confucianism is determined as problematic, and in view of the vast body of material, we emphasize that the given analyses should be viewed only as guidelines. This paper is not conceived as a complete or definitive answer to what emptiness is in the Confucian view, but rather a study of the possible approaches to the question. We challenge the idea of providing a single interpretation in favor of pointing out the possible directions in which particular research can be developed by choosing a specific approach, theory, and material that can be analyzed in detail. We conclude with an assessment of the possibilities of conducting empirical research in this field and the potential for advancements in theory.

Introduction

An attempt to thoroughly examine the question of emptiness, like any other phenomenon, as described and interpreted in Confucianism necessitates a precise definition of one's research scope, because the term 'Confucianism' practically has no indisputable definition. Researching Confucianism often leads to oversimplification (Tu 1979), and studies in the last few decades have shown that different authors can have very different opinions on what constitutes Confucian thought – there have been attempts to question the generalized view of Confucian tradition (Chow, Ng & Henderson 1999) and to summarize the existing scholarship

on the history and influence of Confucianism in China and China-influenced societies (Richey 2008).

Firstly, the nature of Confucianism is debatable – it originates from works of ancient Chinese philosophers and as such it is a philosophy (e.g. Chan 1977; Fung 1998), but considering that it played a significant role in the formation of the state and society in China one can hardly challenge the perception of Confucianism as a system of political ideas (e.g. He *et al* 1998). In addition, over the centuries many spiritual rituals have been included in Confucian practices, and Confucian temples are a common occurrence, so one could just as easily take into consideration whether it is in fact a religion (e.g. Ching 1986; Taylor 1990). In our assessment of emptiness, we will consider all relevant literature that claims to deal with Confucianism, as defined by the author(s), adopting a comprehensive view that allows the existence of a tradition of religious philosophy that can also have the form of a political ideology. This will enable us to estimate the meaning and significance of emptiness in Confucianism in general, still keeping in mind that each example is burdened with the implications and limitations of the approach of the primary author.

The second problem with researching Confucianism is defining which sources one is to hold referential – the writings of Confucius (or, rather, the texts attributed to him, Fung 1998) and Mengzi (Mencius, one of the most famous Confucians of ancient China) (Legge 1945), or perhaps the Song and Ming dynasty school of Neo-Confucian thought (Chan 1963; Huang 1999), the 20th century New Confucianism (Makeham 2003) or the recent 21st century writings of Yu Dan (Yu 2007). We will rely on both the source texts of philosophers and the interpretations of scholars. Considering that this is only an overview of the concept of emptiness in Confucianism, we will use the widely accepted interpretations of ancient texts, leaving a more thorough analysis of the accuracy of the existing translations for future research.

Another issue in approaching Confucianism is whether there is any practical significance in researching its teachings, i.e. whether Confucianism has any value and influence in today's China. This may seem redundant considering the recent scholarly works on the revival of Confucianism, both as a system of ethical and political ideas and as a religion (e.g. Bell 2008; Takahiro 2009; Billioud and Thoraval 2009; Chen 2009), but up to the 1980s arguments that Confucianism would disappear in the modern, globalized era seemed compelling, at least in Western studies (e.g. Levenson 1968). It may be claimed with relative certainty that Confucianism has restored its significance in modern Chinese society (Hu 2007; Makeham 2008), although certain authors claim its position was

never in question (e.g. Tu 1979; De Bary 1996). If we perceive Confucianism as a tradition of religious philosophy we might see it as an integral part of Chinese society, a “reservoir of humanistic insight” useful for tackling the vital issues of any historical period (Tu 1979), a good example of which is the popularity of Yu Dan’s reinterpretation of ancient Confucian texts at the dawn of the 21st century (Bell 2008). In our approach we will adopt the idea that Confucian thought “as the mainstream of Chinese thought in the last millennium...has deep economic, political, and social roots” (Tu 1979), and that it is a significant part of today’s China. Based on this notion, we assert that, with adequate caution and adaptation, the conclusions reached through the exploration of Confucianism may be reconfigured and applied to vital practical issues of Chinese society, therefore undeniably establishing the significance of the research question at hand.

The discussion is divided into three parts. In the first and most detailed section we will examine occurrences of the term emptiness in Confucian texts and aspects of Chinese culture that may be connected to Confucianism, while also examining in brief the respective terms in Daoism and Buddhism. The discussion is placed in the context of the difficulty of making a distinction between these three philosophies/ideologies when researching the Chinese civilization. The second part of the text deals with emptiness as background, i.e. as a metaphor for viewing all aspects of the perceived reality in a wider, more general context, always having in mind the future which is “empty” until it becomes reality. We will discuss how Confucian views on the individual and society can be interpreted as balancing one’s focus between dichotomies. The third section examines how emptiness can also be perceived as a narrative method, i.e. how “emptiness of content” or vagueness can be seen as a characteristic trait of Confucian texts. We will discuss how the manner in which the texts are written becomes a part of the philosophy one writes about. Thus, we will discuss concrete textual and practical examples, then ideas related to Confucian thought, and finally we will go beyond the content directly expressed in the body of Confucian literature and consider the meaning of its form.

To conclude with, we will discuss the possibilities of conducting empirical research of cultural characteristics in the perception of concepts. We will give a tentative assessment of research conducted to date, and discuss possible methodological and theoretical developments that would enable gaining reliable results with a satisfying level of predictability. We will also mention some significant aspects of examining the Chinese culture and civilization in light of the different influential schools of

thought present in China's society. Considering that this text is an introduction to the potential study of cultural differences in perception (either sensory or cognitive), we will try to stress the significance of proper observation, and also the possible insurmountable issues in seeing one's cultural or national origin as a defining characteristic.

In this chapter we will by no means attempt to give a definitive answer to what emptiness is or what it might be in Confucianism, or in the Chinese worldview in general. This work should rather be seen as a contribution to the challenge of providing a single interpretation or theory of emptiness in the Chinese context.

Literal Emptiness

If one were to wonder about the concept of emptiness in Chinese culture, they would almost certainly turn towards Daoism or Buddhism, either on account of knowing the basic characteristics of each of the three worldviews, or because of the sheer abundance and availability of literature on the topic (e.g. De Bary, Chan & Watson 1960; Chan 1963; Innada 1997; Innada 2001; Zhang 2002; Pušić 2003; Tan 2008; Allen 2010; Yao 2010). Considering that this is a logical step, deeper reflection necessarily raises questions about the connections between Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Although often assessed individually (as will be the case in this work), these three schools of thought should be perceived as different sides of a single dynamic civilization in its several thousand year long process of ongoing development. All significant philosophical concepts have their counterparts, and the fundamental connection is apparent – either through direct similarities, or through the Chinese concept of the union and harmony of opposites. The Daoist concepts of non-existence or beingless (*wú*) and empty space or emptiness (*xū*) are formed as mirror images of existence and being (Zhang 2002), and the Chinese Buddhist idea is that emptiness (*kōng*) is actually form (Lusthaus 1998). Both these views can be interpreted as indications of a qualitative primacy of emptiness (e.g. the ideal of attaining emptiness in the Daodejing (Zia 1966), the vision of good life in the Zhuangzi (Fraser 2008), or the possibilities for detachment from difficulty in Buddhism (Sundararajan 2008)). On the other hand, Confucianism is known for a conservative view on the necessity for strict regulation of worldly affairs (by means of a well-established tradition and rituals). However, despite this contradiction, scholarly literature is not lacking in connections between the three schools of thought – from similarities in ethics (Jiang 2002) and epistemology (Shien 1953) to examinations of the metaphysical

basis of Confucianism (Étiemble 1966; Zhang 1985) and the practical aspects of Daoism and Buddhism (Faure 1993; Jørgensen 2005), to name a few. Based on certain readings, Confucius is a character in the dialogues of Zhuangzi (Watson 2003), and the prominent Confucian philosopher Xunzi attempted to interpret Daoist ideas (Yearley 1980). Accordingly, the concept of emptiness also has its place in Confucianism.

The basic Confucian documents, the Four Books, contain little literal mention of the term emptiness, but we must again note that we only provide a tentative, introductory review of the generally adopted canonical text without a deeper examination of all the versions discovered to date. In Legge's (1945) translation we find only three occurrences of the word 'empty', two of which are used to denote *xū*, in (1) and (2), and one to denote *kōng* (3) (all italics in quotes are added emphasys):

- (1) Having not and yet affecting to have, *empty* and yet affecting to be full, straitened and yet affecting to be at ease: it is difficult with such characteristics to have constancy. (Analects, Book VII, Ch. XXV, 3, 89)
- (2) The philosopher Tsang said, "Gifted with ability, and yet putting questions to those who were not so; possessed of much, and yet putting questions to those possessed of little; having, as though he had not; full, and yet counting himself as *empty*; offended against, and yet entering into no altercation; formerly I had a friend who pursued this style of conduct." (Analects, Book VIII, Ch. V, 98)
- (3) The Master said, "Am I indeed possessed of knowledge? I am not knowing. But if a mean person, who appears quite *empty*-like, ask anything of me, I set it forth from one end to the other, and exhaust it." (Analects, Book IX, Ch. VII, 111)

In all three examples emptiness is opposed to fullness, whether it is perceived literally, as physical void, or as metaphysical space. In example (3) the term *kōng* is duplicated as *kōng-kōng*, so certain authors claim that in this occurrence the term actually means 'sincerity' (Chen 1986), but examples (1) and (2) are confirmed mentions of emptiness. Finding true harmony between two opposites – emptiness and fullness, and not pretending to be on the preferred pole, seems to be the desired form of conduct.