Jana S. Rošker[*]

Structuralism and its Chinese ancestors: Traditional Chinese perception theories and the concept of structure (li)

ABSTRACT

Before the impact of Western thought which became increasingly strong after the 18th century, Chinese epistemologies were, in essence, structural or relational systems of comprehension. In such a view, the objet of perception are relations, forming a relative fixed structure. In China, the structural approach to comprehension had already been elaborated in ancient times. It has been developed as an abstract model conditioned by the supposition of an existing compatibility between the structures of the external world and those of the human mind. In such view, structural compatibility of the subject and the object of comprehension was the basic precondition of human perception. The structural link between human consciousness on the one, and the external reality on the other side, has been expressed by the term li 理, which was seen as a basic concept of dynamic and all-encompassing structure.

Keywords: Structure, the concept li, Chinese philosophy, structural compatibility, Chinese perception theories.

Strukturalizem in njegovi kitajski predniki: tradicionalne kitajske teorije percepcije in koncept strukture (li)

POVZETEK

Pred vplivom zahodne miselnosti, ki se je vse močneje kazal po 18. stoletju, so bile kitajske epistemologije po svojem bistvu strukturalistični oziroma relacijski spoznavni sistemi. V tovrstnem modelu so spoznavni objekt relacije, ki formirajo razmeroma fiksno strukturo. Na Kitajskem je bil strukturni pristop do spoznanja izdelan že v obdobju antike. Formiran je bil kot abstraktni model, opredeljen s predpostavko o obstoju združljivosti (kompatibilnosti) med strukturami zunanjega sveta na eni, ter strukturami človeške zavesti na drugi strani. V takšnem videnju je strukturna kompatibilnost spoznavnega subjekta in objekta osnovni predpogoj človeškega zaznavanja in dojemanja sveta. Strukturna zveza med človeško zavestjo in zunanjo resničnostjo se je izražala v pojmu li 理, ki je predstavljal temeljni koncept dinamične in vseobsegajoče strukture.

Ključne besede: Struktura, koncept li, kitajska filozofija, strukturna kompatibilnost, kitajske teorije percepcije.

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[*] Oddelek za azijske in afriške študije, FF UL, Aškerčeva 2, Ljubljana.
e-naslov: jana.rosker@ff.uni-lj.si

1. The structure of cognition

The majority of traditional Chinese discourses on human perception (with the exception of Nomenalist, Moist, and Dialectical theories and certain representatives of the Neo-Confucian School of Principles), did not presuppose a naturalistic separation or mutual independence between the subject of comprehension on the one side, and the external world (or objective reality) on the other. On the contrary, they were, in essence structural or relational, since the subjects and the object they referred to were relations, forming a relative fixed, but dynamic structure.

Their focus upon relations was linked to the view of an existing unity of the subject and object of comprehension. If we posit that the structure of relations 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. Traditional Chinese epistemologies were not based upon a strict static division between these entities, nor upon a strict (or necessary) demarcation of what, with respect to the subject of comprehension, we habitually view as the external and the internal world respectively. Therefore, the methods used by philosophers in the dominant currents of the Chinese epistemological tradition, were by no means decisive for defining the (primary or secondary) positions of the subject and object of comprehension. The methods of exploring (external) reality (ge wu 格物) and of introspective recognition (fansheng 反省) were both important as perceptive tools which 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 dismembering and changing of positions is in the nature of comprehension.[1] (Zhang Yaonan 2002, p. 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 or concepts and actualities (ming - shi). Traditional Chinese epistemologists have also thoroughly been focused upon questions concerning the basic epistemological definition of priorities (or totality) in the relations between knowledge and action or theory and praxis (zhi - xing). Among others, both issues refer to interpersonal relations. In the tradition of Chinese thought, these relations have always been seen (at the axiological level) as being connected with the external world (or nature, tian), 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 human beings and nature (tianren heyi). The complexity and integrity of relations in nature and society therefore represent a basic aspect of Chinese epistemology. Due primarily to the impact of Buddhist thought, the ancient holistic approach to essence (ti) and function (yong) as both crucial aspects of

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1　其實凡對於面前的對象加以辨別先不是發覺其中的關係，且其關係有可斷性，可連性；
　　于是便可使原來甲與乙相關的而變為甲與丙相關。這種配置與換置乃是知識的本性

every existing phenomena was later replaced by the concepts of the subject (neng) and the object (suo) of comprehension. This kind of demarcation that derived from the Indian tradition of thought has later, in the 19th and especially the 20th Century, help Chinese philosophers to gain a better understanding of Western theories of knowledge, that were based on ontology of dividing substance from phenomena.

Irrespectively of these later developments, the concept of relational structure, which was expressed by the term li[2], was crucial for the forming and development of classical Chinese theories of perception.

2. The basic structural pattern

The theoretical foundations of such structural model of comprehension were developed in ancient times already. This basic model was constructed upon the presumption of an existing compatibility between the structures of the external world and those of the human mind (Rošker 2008:305ff), forming the basic precondition of human perception. The structural nature of mind on the one, and external world (objective reality) on the other side, has been expressed by the term li, which functioned as the traditional Chinese concept of an all-encompassing, dynamic relational structure.

Although interpreting the notion li to mean 'structure' might seem rather unusual, there are several good reasons for doing so[3]. Although in traditional Sinology, the notion li has mostly been translated as principle or idea, such translations were products of misunderstandings that were grounded upon a deficient understanding of the problems and epistemological consequences of cultural incommensurability[4].

In essence, li is a notion, expressing structure, a structural pattern and the structural order of things respectively. These connotations are apparent already in the original etymological meaning of the character li[5], which is composed of the phonetic element[6] and the radical[7] that designates jade. Li is the patterned arrangement of parts in a structured whole, of things in an ordered cosmos, and also the structure of thought in rational discourse. Originally it denoted the lines or colored stripes in jade (Bauer 2000: 256–257). Its emergence in the Song Dynasty (A.D. 960 – 1279) as one of the central concepts of neo-Confucianism was the culmination of a long development (Graham 1978: 191-2).

In the earliest sources, li has been understood as a visual perceivable structure, as it becomes visible in the course of lines in jade[8]. In the pre-Han philosophy it attracts

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2 理

3 In the complex, multilayered and long lasting development of Chinese philosophy, this term naturally underwent numerous semantic alternations. In spite of these modifications that included many different semantic connotations of the term, this paper aims to draw attention to the basic, i.e. structural or relational aspect of this semantic scope, because the consideration of this fundamental approach could contribute to new possibilities of the understanding and re-interpreting classical Chinese thought.

4 This term refers to the inability of transferring certain theoretical concepts from one cultural t radition (or from one socio-cultural context) into the other.

5 理

6 里

7 玉

8 Xunzi 荀子 defines it in a following way: Form, color and structure (li) can be distinguished with our eyes (Xunzi, Zhengming, DC 2008: 9). (形體色理以目異)

attention especially in the *Interpreting Laozi* of Han Feizi, who uses it to mean the specific configuration of properties in each kind of thing:

> We call li that which is long or short, square or round, hard or soft, heavy or light, white or black[9] (Han Feizi, Jie Lao, CTP IV/1).

In this context, the structure seems to be understood as something, which is composed by the integrity of all sensually perceivable features (length, color, consistency, weight, form) together. Whenever the character li appears in verbal function, it means the process of ordering of certain things or phenomena. In the developmental process, and through several semantic elaborations, this term has first appeared as an expression of the cosmic, then of the social structure; later on, its semantic connotations also implied the structure of language and meaning and finally, the structure of mind and consciousness respectively. In Chinese tradition – especially from the Song Dynasty (960 – 1279) on, these specific, particular kinds of structural patterns have been unified into a single, general and basic rational structure, which has been distinguished by its fundamental compatibility with innumerous kinds of different structural patterns. This unification of particular, specific structural patterns into one single, general and fundamental structure, has become possible through the gradual process of semantic abstraction of the term li. This abstraction process lasted several centuries and has to be seen in the broader context of general changes of Chinese society and culture. In the practical sense, it was defined by the political and economic development of traditional China, and in the ideological sense by formalization of Confucianism in its role of the state doctrine, by new approaches, established in Neo-Confucian philosophies, as well as by certain elements of Buddhist philosophy. We can shortly summarize this gradual abstraction of the concept li in three phases: *****

a) the phase of ontologization (li as the cosmic structure or as the structure of nature and society),
b) the phase of structural semantic (li as the structure of language and meaning) and
c) the phase of epistemologization (li as the mutual compatible structure of external word and mind).

3. The structure of cosmos and society

Already the earliest comments to the *Book of Changes (Zhou Yi 周易)* describe this book as a work, which helps people to understand and to make use of the basic cosmic structure.

> The Book of Changes is simple, and yet it embraces the structure of everything that exists. (Zhou Yi, v: Yi jing, Xi Ci, 2006: 34)
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> (易簡而天下之理得唉).

Let us quote two further examples of such interpretation of the concept li from ancient Chinese sources:

> Sun and moon are connected by the same light, and heaven and earth by the same

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9   短長, 方圓, 堅脆, 輕重, 白黑之謂理

structure (Guanzi, Xinshu xia, CTP IV/6).

(日月之與同光，天地之與同理).

When things come into being, their structure is born. This is what we call form. (Zhuangzi, Tian di pian, CTP III/1)

(物成生理謂之形).

The majority of ancient and middle age Confucians applied the term li in social order or in the sense of ordering the society.

As a rule, from antiquity to the present day, what the world has called good is what is correct, in accord with the structure, peaceful, and well-ordered. (Xunzi, Xing e, 12, CTP I/4)

(凡古今天下之所謂善者，正理平治也)

In verbal function, li in this sense could also mean "to order" (in accordance with the right structure). Here an example from Gongsun Long:

Let's assume a ruler who wants to order his state (in accordance with the correct social structure). He punishes people who committed crimes, but also those who didn't commit crimes. He rewards people who deserved a reward, but also those who didn't deserve any reward. And then he complains that the society is not ordered (in accordance with the right structure). Is this right? (Gongsun Long, Yifu, CTP V/1, 2009)

(今有人君，將理其國，人有非，則非之。無非，則亦非之。有功，則賞之。無功，則亦賞之。而怨人之不理也，可乎 ?)

4. The structure of language and meaning

First interpretations, in which the term li was perceived as an abstract structure of language, can be found in the works of later Moists. In chapter Daqu of the Moist canon, which is mainly investigating definitions of various central notions, we come across the following note:

Phrases originate from reasons, they grow in accordance with structure and move in accordance with categories (Mo Di, 11. Daqu 44, 2000: 172).

(夫辭以故生，以理長，以類行也者).

The viewpoint, according to which the relation between reality and its naming or its conceptual perception was defined by an unified structure has already been advocated by some earlier philosophers, as for example by the representative of the School of Names Deng Xizi from the 6th Century BC, who wrote:

First we have to look at the appearance of an object, and to perceive its external form. The correct concept of the object can be defined by following its structure. (Deng Xi, Wu hou pian, 1976: 35)

(故見其象，致其形，循其理，正其名).

According to him, this unified structure represented the natural linkage between concept or names and realities. This pressumption is celarly visible in his definition of the dialectics (bianzhe 辯者):

> The dialectics explain the lines of demarcation between true and false, they define the borders between order and chaos, they explain the points of identity and difference and they explore the structure of concepts and realities. (ibid, 45, 1976: 173)
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> (夫辯者，將以明是非之分，審治亂之紀，明同異之處，察名實之理).

Dong Zhongshu also dealt with the question of the structure of names or concepts. He wrote:

> Concepts are the crucial element of the great structure. If we apply the meaning of this crucial element in dealing with corresponding matters, we will be able to seize (the difference between) true and false. The difference between congruency and discordancy will become obvious. All this will enable us to comprehend their connection with heaven and earth... If we deal with all matters in accordance with their concepts, which are congruent with nature, the borderline between men and nature will dissapear. So men will unite with nature and so they will be congruent with the structure. (Dong Zhongshu, Chunqiu fan lu, Shencha minghao, CTP VIII/2)
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> (名者，大理之首章也，錄其首章之意，以窺其中之事，則是非可知，逆順自著，其幾通於天地矣。... 是故事各順於名，名各順於天，天人之際，合而為一，同而通理).

In their disputes on names (concepts) and realities[10], the classical philosophers from the pre-Qin and the early Han era still arose from the realist understanding of reality as objective external world or external form of things. This form was perceived as a direct part of the structure of things, as has been manifested in the ancient concept li. The structure (li) of meaning, which cannot be encountered before the period of the Six Dynasties, however, was not anymore something directly connected with things or something, forming a part of them. In this concept, we can already witness a first result of a certain abstraction grade of the notion structure (li). The representatives of the School of Mystery (玄学) modified the ancient disputes on the relation between names (concepts) and realities into investigations of the relation between language (yan 言) and meaning (yi 意). They were primarily interested in the research in the structure of concepts or names (ming li 名理). This was one of the most important theoretical shifts in the history of traditional Chinese thought (Tang Junyi 1955: 65). It can be asserted, that their treatises on the structure of names or concepts (名理), i.e. their studies on the relation between language and meaning represent the basis of the specific Chinese structural semantics and at the same time the theoretical elaboration of ancient disputes

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10 名 - 实

on the relation between names (concepts) and realities. As a matter of fact, the central issues of the philosophers from this period, who mostly belonged to the before mentioned School of Mystery or to the group of Pure Conversations (清談), i.e. the debates on the structure of concepts (名理) and on the structure of meaning (意理) can be seen as germs of a structural semantic, as has been developed by Western linguistic discourses more than one and half millenniums later.

These discourses arose from the presumption, according to which the meaning of a particular word was formed with regard to its relations to other words. In this sense, they have theoretically elaborated the tradition of ancient Chinese writings, which were based upon semantic parallelisms and upon the specific Chinese structure of analogous thought. In this way, traditional Chinese discourses were determined by a specific textual style, in which the structure of meaning was based upon contents and mutual relations of word fields.

This basic presumption of structural connections between language and reality can also be observed in the works of the early Neo-Confucians:

> Nature is structured[11]; its spirit impregnates in a mysterious way everything that exists and can express it with language. (Cheng Hao/Yi, Er Cheng ji IV, Sui Yan, 1981: 1179)
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> (天者理也,神者妙萬物,而為言者也).

5. Compatibility of internal and external structures as the precondition of perception

The discourses of conceptual structure, as have been investigated by members of the School of Mystery and especially by the members of the group Pure Conversations (清谈), were not limited exclusively to the semantic structure of language or human speech in the narrow sense; they have also been focused upon other questions, regarding the problems of transmission and communication between the external and the internal word. In this context, we have to mention Ji Kang[12] who followed the presumtion, according to which

> mind and structure are mutually congruent. (Ji Kang, CTP 2009).
>
> (心與理相順).

Ji Kang has namely already presupposed a kind of compatibility between human awareness and the structure of external word. This basic presumtion is also clear in his treatise on the sounds *(Sheng wu aile lun 聲無哀樂論),* in which he argues that sounds as such don't imply any feelings, although by listening to them, people can feel sadness or joy. Several contemporaries of this philosopher have advocated the opposite position and argued that feelings might be latently present already in the very sounds or in the structure of music. As Tang Junyi points out, the central issue in both cases was the

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11 For a detailed explanation of the proposed adjectival translation (li = structured) see Rošker, 2011: 59
12 221 - 262

connection (or relation) of two structures (li), namely the structure of the external world and the structure of human inwardness. Irrespective of the diametrical contrariety of their concrete theses, the advocates, as well as the opponents of Ji Kang's theory, arose from the supposition, according to which certain successions or patterns of sounds (the rhythmical and tonal structure of music) could awoke certain feelings in human consciousness. This becomes possible, because not only music, but also feelings (as a part of mind or consciousness) are structured.

Later philsophers, for example Lu Jiuyuan, also followed the same presumtion. He wrote:

> The mind is structure(d)[13]. (Lu Jiuyuan, in Xia Zhentao, 1996: 157)
> (心即理也).

The question of compatibility beween the structure of mind and the external world has also been emphasized by Zhu Xi:

> Mind is that, which is guiding, but this guidance is structured. There is no structure outside the mind, nor a mind outside the structure. (Zhu Xi, 2000:214)
> (心固是主宰底意，然所謂主宰者，即是理也，不是心外別有箇理，理外別有箇心).

In the Neo-Confucian discourses, the comprehension of objects through their structural relation with human mind has already represented an important epistemological method. With regard to human mind and the theory of knowledge, liang zhi 良知 (inborn, original knowledge) was seen as an element of the inborn mind, which was already ordered in accordance with the structure of nature. This concept was especially strongly emphasized by represents of the idealistic current within Neo-Confucianism, namely by the members of the School of mind (心學)[14].

> The original knowledge of my mind is (congruent with) the so-called structure of nature. (Wang Shouren Chuanxi lu zhong, Da Lu Yuanjing shu, 1933: 57)
> (吾心之良知，即所謂天理).

The structural determination of our mind has also been presupposed by most of the later Chinese philosophers. The compatibility of inner and external world was emphasized even by epistemologists as Dai Zhen[15], one of the most important, very realistically oriented philosophers from the 18th Century, who belonged to the last representatives of relatively autochthonous[16] Chinese epistemology.

The physical appearances arise from nature and are therefore always congruent

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13 For a detailled explanation of the proposed adjectival translation (li = structur_ed_) see Rošker, 2011: 59, 113

14 Ibd.

15 1724 - 1777

16 In this context, »relatively autochthonous« refers to Chinese philosophy before the impact of Western thought. Because Buddhist ideas have been integrated into Chinese philosophy almost one and half centuries before, its implicit and explicit impacts can be regarded as parts of traditional Chinese thought.

with it. What is surrounding us, are sounds, colors, scents and tastes. Sounds, colors, scents and tastes are perceived by everyone. What makes this mutual congruency between outside and inside possible, are the receptors, known as ears, eyes, nose and mouth (Dai Zhen, Mengzi ziyi, 1991: 157 - 158).

(人物受形於天地，故恒與之相通。盈天地之間，有聲也，有色也，有臭也，有味也，舉聲色臭味，則於天地間者無或遺矣。外內相通，其開竅也，是為耳目鼻口)。

This structural overlapping, however, is not only reflected in human sense organs, but also in human mind. The subject here is by no means a concept of holistic identity, as has been much too often ascribed to classical Chinese world view, but a structural connection between human inwardness and the external world, which, according to Dai Zhen, exists separately and independently of our consciousness.

6. A gradual revival of a forgotten knowledge: The concept of structure and modern China

Already during the first half of the previous century Chinese theoreticians strove for a renewed unity of the subject and the object of comprehension. Here, we shall recall Tan Sitong's concept of circulation, (tong 通), which preconditions the interaction between the 'external' and the 'internal' reality, and which has been defined by humanity (or interhuman mutuality). Here, also, we are encountering an elaboration of certain Neoconfucian epistemological approaches. Already Cheng Hao has namely placed emphasis to his presumption, that a man could not recognize his unity with heaven (and with all that exists respectively), if he was not virtuous. The structural nature of human virtue manifested itself in the harmony with dao (Buljan 2009, p. 496) that was seen as the highest principle of social ethics. Hence, the recognition of heaven and of the structure of cosmos respectively was necessarily connected to the recognition of men and of the structure of society.

Although in respect to the internal level, Tan's circulation has directly represented a (merely) physiological connection between sensual organs, nerves and the brain, it has still been preconditioned by the functioning of an ethically permeated relational framework. A similar idea of circulation or decantation (liuxing 流行) can also be found in Feng Youlan's Modern Confucian unity of mechanical and axiological aspects of cognisance, which he named 'the incorporation of the Way' (daoti 道體). Zhang Dongsun also explicitly stated that the relation between beings and actualities was not to be seen as a one-dimensional relation between superficial phenomena and reality, which lied somewhere behind them. He saw this relation as a relation of an integral circulation (»a relation of source and course", yuanliu 源流) between roots and branches of a tree.

Even Feng Qi saw the process of perception and comprehension as a kind of inter-relational network, which connected the things as such (or the nature of nature 天之天) into a comprehendible structural order of facts and possibilities. On the one hand, this structural order revealed mutual connections or relations between particular facts (or possibilities), and, on the other, it also reflected principles, incorporated in them.

While the Marxist orientated epistemologists like Feng Qi tried to place the concept of the subject and the object of comprehension into a mutual dialectical relation, that might be able to surpass the boundaries between traditional ontology and epistemology, the representatives of the Modern Confucian theory of knowledge (especially Xiong Shili, but to a certain degree also Feng Youlan and Mou Zongsan) have mostly remained loyal to the complementary understanding of both elements of comprehension. They reproduced this complementary relation either by a revitalization of essence and function as a basic methodological pattern, (Xiong), or by developing a system of immanent metaphysics (Feng Youlan) and by the concept of a 'genuine', i.e. objective subjectivity respectively (Mou).

According to the recently established hypotheses, which are based upon the integration of traditional approaches into the actual philosophic currents of the 20th Century, the comprehensive process is based upon interactions between the subject and the object of comprehension. Both of them have no longer been seen as mutual excluding, absolute entities, but rather as two interactive, mutual supplemental poles of correlative relations, defining the multilayered nature of reality.

Here, we have to recall Zhang Dongsun's important statement, according to which the relation of these two poles is not a direct one; between them, there is a complex mean, which isn't a-priori part of any of both entities, but has been established through their mutual dynamic relations with the physical and the spiritual (ideal) aspects of being. In this context, all that exist is a part of the eternal change, which manifests itself in continuous alteration of structural connections and of the "essential" quality of particular entities. According to Zhang Dongsun, who denied the notion of substance and its qualities, all these structures were empty. For him, the dimension of material being (wu 物) is merely a physical substantial appearance, which can by no means be identified with material substance, but, at the utmost, with structural relations and physical laws, that determine its existence. The external reality is hence defined by the absence of any substance (shiti 實體); its existence manifests itself only through structural relations (jiagou guanxi 架構關係), representing the 'external order' (tiaoli 條理).

In such understanding, our mind can recognize only some aspects of these changes. But this refers not only to the level of our perception and comprehension respectively, because the very structural order of relations is all that really exists in cosmos. Hence, actuality has no 'inner nature' or 'essence'. It can only be recognized through its relations that form a relatively solid structure. All external structures are namely manifesting themselves in our mind, which re-constructs them by forming structural patterns of thought and comprehension. This view is, however, not a solipsist one, since the external reality is by no means a result of our comprehension, but has been formed in the interactive and correlative relation with our mind, which, on the other hand, has also been modified by the changing structures of external reality. Hence, the relation between the external world and our perception has been determined by integral structure(s) and has been established in accordance with particular principles.

In suchlike syntheses one can sense a strong influence of Chan Buddhist epistemology. The above mentioned 'structure' functions similar to the Chan Buddhist concept of the all embracing causal relation yinyuan 因緣. Here, cosmos represents a

complex, unsubstantial network, incorporating innumerable mutual dependent relations, uniting and parting from each other in innumerable manners and upon innumerable different levels. This view reflects the cosmic emptiness, which can by no means be understood as 'nothingness', but rather as insubstantiality, as the absence of any unchangeable nature or of any integral, self-sufficient being.

Conclusion

Although since the impact of the Western thought upon China the Chinese term li as well as most of the compound words, resulting from it, have been most commonly associated with the notion of an ideal principle or law, this modern semantic complex can not be mixed up with the traditional semantic connotations of the word li.

As we have seen, the concept li traditionally manifested a notion of structure, of a structural pattern and the structural order of things respectively. As a whole, li represents a cosmic pattern, defining lines of movement or dynamics of men and nature. These structural lines are seen as relations, defining the sphere of ideas and the sphere of phenomena. Simultaneously, they make possible the mutual adjustment of binary oppositions with complementary functions and also their well ordered fusion with the cosmic unity.

The li is not obeyed or defied like a law, one goes either with or against the grain of it, as in chopping wood. Le Gall translated it by *forme*, thus by the choice of two words remolding the whole neo-Confucian cosmology after the analogy of Aristotelian form and matter. J. Percy Bruce chose for his equivalent 'law', and so incorporated into the neo-Confucian terminology itself the wrong answer to the question 'Are there laws of nature in China?' (Graham 1992: 61).

In the context of traditional Chinese theory of knowledge, this structural compatibility represents the very potential, which enables us to perceive and to comprehend the external world. The omnipresence of li means that the universe is structured and ordered. The very same structural order, however, is simultaneously also a quality of our mind and body (e.g. of our perception organs). Our thoughts, also, can follow the same structured order (especially when we try to achieve any real insight into the actual nature of reality). In this sense, it could be – considering various multifarious translations of the term li in Indo-European languages – presupposed, that the translation of this term in the sense of the ancient Greek term *logos* (Ladstätter 1983: 34) might be the closest to the meaning of what li is actual referring to, since it means a structure, ordered in accordance to cosmic rationality, which is also reflected in human mind as reason. This notion, however, still cannot by far cover the entire semantic specter of the term li, which, beside epistemological and ontological aspects, also contains a variety of other (physical, naturalistic, metaphysical, artistic, cultural, medical etc.) connotations. Even presently, the concept li has still mostly been translated into Indo-European languages as reason, principle or law, although such connotations, as we have seen before, are far beyond the original meaning of this notion. The tradition of such an understanding of the concept li has been preserved in sinology till the present day. Such understanding has not only decisively influenced the "Western" comprehension of the basic nature of Chinese theoretical discourses, but has – through modernization processes - also formed the way, through which Chinese tradition of thought has been understood by most of the modern Chinese theoreticians.

The understanding of the term li as a basic structural pattern, which enables human perception, is also quite interesting in the light of comparative epistemology. From the mid-20th Century onwards, structuralism has become a leading theoretical current in "Western" theories. This holds true for natural sciences as well as for humanities and social sciences. Structuralism represents a complex category, which spans a wide range of different programs and methods that enable us to perceive and interpret patterns of relations as a basic paradigm of reality. The majority of structuralist theories (including post-structuralism, de-constructivism, post-modernity etc), is focused upon the structural approach to recognition, perception and interpretation of reality, in which no object can appear in isolation from the others. In this sense, objects can only exist as parts of structures that connect them to other entities. Such discourses are always concentrated upon a structure, which therefore determines every objective status and – in its last consequence – also every being as such.

Naturally, these discourses could not avoid investigating certain epistemological questions, such as that of the relation between subject and object (or the Self and the Other), or the relation between perception, comprehension and interpretation or transmission. The Euro-American theoretical production of the 20th Century has generated a number of elements which, based especially on new, fundamental theoretical approaches to the philosophy of language, led to some important cognitive shifts in the humanities, and in the cultural and social sciences. However, such recognitions notwithstanding, Western discourses have yet to produce an integral and coherent structural model for epistemology.

In this context, etymological studies and studies of semantic development of the Chinese concept of structure, together with contrastive analyses of traditional Chinese and Euro-American theories can (despite of the general questionableness of such intercultural comparisons) prove itself to be a reasonable tool for clarifying some basic questions on the nature of human perception and recognition of reality.

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