

The Origin of Language in Chinese Thought

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Pursuing questions of Generative Anthropology in the Chinese context presents both practical and ontological problems. In this paper, I give examples to show where direct parallels to the question of the origin of language may be found in the Chinese context. After briefly pointing to problems one such example raises, I then outline the more general problems to which pursuing questions in this form may lead. By drawing inferences from these problems, I hope to point to alternative research avenues that may prove more fruitful. Searching for such avenues is an informative endeavor in itself, since the very reasons that make it difficult to translate GA questions directly into the Chinese context have important implications for our understanding of Chinese language, ontology, and society.

Developing a Research Question

An obvious initial step in an investigation of how Generative Anthropology might be fruitfully applied in various fields of sinology might be to pose the question, “How have Chinese philosophers dealt with the question of the origin of language?”

Even this simple initial step mires one in several complex ontological puzzles. Translation of both “origin” and “language” entails a number of difficult choices, each with significant implications for the scope and nature of research which would follow. To a speaker of modern Chinese, the “question of the origin of language” might be paraphrased as *yuyan qiyuan wenti*, since *yuyan* means language, *qiyuan* means origin and *wenti* means question or problem.

The question in nearly these terms (*yuyan yuanqi*) is in fact found in late Qing works examining language, such as Zhang Binglin’s *Guogu Lunheng* (*Discussion and Evaluation of China’s Intrinsic Culture*).⁽¹⁾ Zhang (1868-1936; also known as Zhang Tai Yan) wrote the work between 1906-10 while in Japan and actively involved in nationalist, anti-Manchu politics. Before he fled to Japan, Zhang’s views as editor of

the newspaper *The People* had landed him in jail under the Qing. When he undertook the *Guogu* project, Zhang had joined the T'ung Meng Hui, a party comprised of anti-government exiles (one of the most famous of whom was Sun Yatsen) and was ardently seeking both cultural and political regeneration for China.⁽²⁾ In a period of intense political turmoil and involvement, Zhang persisted in his linguistic pursuits. He worked on the commission convened by the new Nationalist government's Ministry of Education in 1913 to establish a national language and helped develop the Chinese phonetic symbol system still used today in Taiwan, among other places.⁽³⁾ The political background of Zhang's investigation resonates with Western Enlightenment thinkers who have taken up the similar questions in different cultural contexts. It is difficult to tell, however, whether language became linked with politics for Zhang through his own perception of the Chinese situation, or whether that linkage was suggested by materials he encountered in Japan. As Zhu Xing points out, Zhang may have been influenced by Hu Yilu or Shen Buzhou, students of Zhang's who studied at the Japanese Imperial University and who very likely came into contact with translations of Western works on linguistics in the course of their studies.⁽⁴⁾

Whether or not Zhang's phraseology derived from Western sources he or his students became familiar with in Japan, the fact remains that this terminology is not common in earlier Chinese philosophical discussions of language, symbol, or the sacred. These earlier debates offer nothing so directly analogous to the terms of GA. One practical reason for this is simply the development and usage of the Chinese language. Before the twentieth century, Chinese philosophical writings were almost entirely in *wenyanwen*, or a classical Chinese, which utilizes a spare monosyllabic style. Compound words such as *yuyan* are only rarely if ever used in *wenyanwen*. Zhang Binglin, though not an advocate of the vernacular himself—he was, in fact, a master of classical poetry and prose—wrote in a period of radical linguistic change. In the era leading up to the 1919 May 4th Movement, in response to both exogenous and endogenous forces, the vernacular, or *baihua*, overtook *wenyanwen*. Though this does not address whether *yuyan* was a common term in the vernacular (and perhaps the topic of lively oral debates) prior to this century, it nevertheless curtails our ability to pursue a direct translation of the “question of the origin of language” in Chinese philosophical texts.

Instead, we are faced with a confusing array of less exact translations employing various terms which were used in *wenyanwen* but whose connotations differ from that of the modern term *yuyan* and therefore complicate the issue we are attempting to delineate. Examining these terms may prove a valuable means of refining our research question and mapping the ontological terrain of Chinese

philosophy in the fields we will investigate. Wang Feng Yang's analysis in *Gu Ci Bian* (*Differentiation of Ancient Terms*) is useful in this regard. Wang analyzes nineteen classical works, including the *Shi Jing* (*Book of Odes*), *Shang Shu* (*Book of Documents*), *Zhou Yi* (*Zhou Book of Changes*), *Lun Yu* (*Analects of Confucius*), *Mengzi* (*Works of Mencius*), *Mozi* (*Works of Mozi*), *Zhuangzi* (*Works of Zhuangzi*), *Xunzi* (*Works of Xunzi*), *ChunQiu Jingzhuan* (*Spring and Autumn Annals*), and the *Li Ji* (*Book of Rites*), to develop a concordance of the most commonly used classical terms and their meanings.[\(5\)](#)

As mentioned above, *yuyan* is a compound word. Wang discusses its constituent elements *yu* and *yan*, as well as several other related terms under his entry for *yan*, a verb. Of the first two words, he says:

Today, “yanyu” and “yuyan” are each one word; in ancient times, “yu” and “yan” had different meanings. As a verb, “yan” meant to express oneself or state one’s opinion; “yu” meant to discuss with someone or tell someone something.

Wang quotes a passage in the *Shi Jing* which says “*Zhi yan yue yan, lun nan yue yu*” or “Straightforward speaking is called *yan*, discussing difficult (matters) is called *yu*.” Similarly, a passage from the *Zhou Li* draws this distinction, saying “*Fa duan yue yan, da shu yue yu*,” (Giving an evaluation is called “*yan*”; responding to a narrative is called “*yu*”); and another passage from the *Li Ji* states, “*San nian zhi sang, yan er bu yu, dui er bu da*” (In the three years of mourning, [he] speaks without talking to anyone, in conversing [he] does not reply [or possibly, replies but does not express an opinion]). In the notes, the text goes on to point out that “*Yan, yan ziji shi ye, wei ren shuo wei yu*.” (*Yan* is speaking of one’s own matters, while *yu* is saying things for others.) A passage from the *Fa Yan* says, “*Yan, xin sheng ye*.”[\(6\)](#) (*Yan* is the sound of the heart-mind[\(7\)](#)).

These passages may seem far removed from our original question but they illustrate facets of language that are crucial to GA. First, there are distinct elements of both public and private in the compound that comprises language, *yuyan*. The private element is an expression of self through speech (*yan*); the public element (*yu*) is communication with others and, more precisely, a negotiating of meaning that takes place when “difficult matters” are discussed. These are key elements of the “aborted gesture of appropriation” as well: mimetic desire spurs an initial grasping for the object (an expression of self), while aborting the grasp calls for a negotiated understanding of how the object will be distributed among members of the group.

These two words have clearly differentiated meanings in ancient Chinese philosophy, as is underscored by the nature of the grammatical constructions in which they are used. As a verb, *yan* can take as an object only a thing, not a person. It is content, not conversation between people that is emphasized in verbal constructions using *yan*. *Yu*, on the other hand, not only takes people as objects but, even if it stands alone and a matter discussed is appended with a prepositional particle, the implication is that this matter was discussed *with someone*.[\(8\)](#)

Though these grammatical distinctions have interesting implications for the underlying ontological structures of Chinese language, pursuing *yan* and *yu* in ancient texts to understand the Chinese view of the origin of language would lead one down a blind alley. Classical Chinese philosophers neither employed these contrasts in key debates nor explored their ramifications at length in philosophic treatises. Nevertheless, keeping these distinctions in mind while examining some of the debates that *did* take place may provide a useful perspective, and one relevant to our goals.

Some Ontological Issues

Before proceeding from our original translation to an examination of relevant debates and the terms employed in them, one more stumbling block remains. This is a more subtle and unexpected difficulty, since the translation of origin as *qiyuan* seems straightforward enough. Like *yuan*, this compound is not frequently used in literary Chinese, but unlike *yan* and *yu* the individual words joined in the compound *qiyuan*, *qi* or “to arise” and *yuan* or “source, origin,” are often found as key terms in philosophic arguments. In fact, under *yuan* in the *Gu Hanyu Changyong Zi Zidian*, (Dictionary of Frequently Used Classical Chinese Characters), a particular meaning of *yuan* is given as “*Shi wu de kaishi, qiyuan*” (Something’s beginning or origin) and this is illustrated with a quote from the *Han Fei Zi*, a work attributed to the legalist philosopher Han Fei (d. 233 BC) “*Zhi wanwu zhi yuan*”[\(9\)](#) or “Knowing the origin of the 10,000 things,” a renowned statement of what understanding the origin of the universe entails.

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However, the prevalence of these terms bodes less well for finding a Chinese depiction of the origin of language than one might hope. Even a cursory familiarity with the classics in which this or other similar quotes are found (Laozi’s *[Daoist Classic],[\(10\)](#) for instance) shows that the heart of the arguments in which such statements are made lies in concepts of mutual contingency and causality, particularly the inarticulable problem of the identity, yet difference, of existence and non-existence. Exploring these issues lies well outside the scope of this paper.*

The relevant point is that looking for an origin or beginning of something in Chinese philosophy is complicated because *qiyuan* also entails “arising from a source or cause,” “cause” being another meaning of *yuan*, so when *yuan* appears in a philosophic text, it is often in the context of discussing causal linkages and chains of contingency. This complication cannot be avoided by simply substituting a translation with less baggage. There are less loaded terms for “start” or “beginning,” for example, *shi* and *chu*, but though these words are indeed used in classical Chinese philosophic texts([11](#)) and even occasionally used to question origins in endeavors analogous to the aims of GA,[\(12\)](#) more commonly, they occur incidentally in narrative histories and texts of moral instruction, not as the centerpiece of a philosophic investigation. In short, it is not that we have picked the wrong terms, instead, the *kind* of argument we are looking for simply does not figure prominently in classical debates. Looking for the beginnings of things in the sense of an originary scene simply isn’t the endeavor of choice for most Chinese philosophers. Instead, mainstream thinkers leave this minefield of intertwined concepts to cryptic works such as the *Dao De Jing*, and focus instead upon how one thing leads to another for good or ill. Thus, originary scenes are hard to come by in classical Chinese philosophy and instead, linked causalities predominate.

If we wish to apply Generative Anthropology to Chinese texts, another relevant ontological issue to consider is how mimesis figures in the Chinese schema. This topic has been addressed by Pauline Yu with regard to poetic imagery. As Yu says in her discussion of the story of Fu Xi.

Mimesis is predicated on a fundamental disjunction between two realms of being, one of which is replicated in the verbal product, regarded by Plato, for example, as but a pale shadow of some timeless truth. In contrast, implicit in the Great Commentary [*Hsi-tz'u chuan*] (*Xizi Zhuan*), as in the Great Preface to the *Classic of Poetry*, is the assumption of a seamless connection if not virtual identity between an object, its perception, and its representation, aided by the semantic multivalence of the term *hsiang* (*xiang*) [image].[\(13\)](#)

Yu’s discussion of differences between Chinese and Western philosophical premises suggests that a searching examination of the assumptions on which we ground our understanding of the mimetic is necessary before we embark on an endeavor based on such concepts in the Chinese context. Further, Yu’s argument supports the claim I have made that depicting origins, insofar as this entails the assumption of a disjunction between the prior and subsequent conditions described, is not the habitual purview of Chinese philosophy. I would suggest that the “semantic

multivalence" Yu describes is found, not only in the term *xiang*, but throughout classical Chinese and is indicative of an underlying ontological structure which does not predicate change upon disjunction.

A practical consequence of this ontology is that philosophers are not apt to establish the sort of scenic, narrative framework of beginning-event-progression that an originary scene entails, even when illustrating how one set of conditions gives way to or engenders another. Further, they do not necessarily write in terms of the diachronic progression through which Western conceptions of causality are often expressed. Instead, classical Chinese ontology builds logical edifices that function in the parallel or wind with Escher-like complexity upon themselves, rather than delineating a "beginning" or "end." This is not to say that there is no sense of progression in classical Chinese philosophy. The famous passage on good government in the *Da Xue* (Great Learning), a Confucian classic traditionally dated to the fifth century BC,[\(14\)](#) illustrates both such a progression and the use of the terms *shi* (beginning) and *zhong* (end):

What the Great Learning teaches, is-to illustrate illustrious virtue; to renovate the people; and to rest in the highest excellence. The point where to rest being known, the object of pursuit is then determined; and, that being determined, a calm unperturbedness may be attained to. To that calmness will then succeed a tranquil repose. In that repose there may be careful deliberation, and that deliberation will be followed by the attainment of the desired end.

Things have their root and their branches. Affairs have their end and their beginning. To know what is first and what is last will lead near to what is taught in the Great Learning. The Ancients who wished to illustrate illustrious virtue throughout the kingdom first ordered well their own States. Wishing to order well their States, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their persons. Wishing to cultivate their persons, they first rectified their hearts. Wishing to rectify their hearts, they first sought to be sincere in their thoughts. Wishing to be sincere in their thoughts, they first extended to the utmost their knowledge. Such extension of knowledge lay in the investigation of things. Things being investigated, knowledge became complete. Their knowledge being complete, their thoughts were sincere. Their thoughts being sincere, their hearts were then rectified. Their hearts being rectified, their persons were cultivated. Their persons being cultivated, their families were regulated. Their families being regulated, their States were rightly governed. Their States being rightly governed,

the whole kingdom was made tranquil and happy.

From the Son of Heaven (Emperor) down to the mass of the people, all must consider the cultivation of the person the root of everything besides. It cannot be, when the root is neglected, that what should spring from it will be well ordered. It has never been the case that what was of great importance has been slightly cared for and at the same time that what was of slight importance has been greatly cared for.[\(15\)](#)

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I quote the passage in its entirety because it illustrates a sense of progression and concepts of beginnings and ends, yet is *not* comprised of a teleological progression from beginning to end, either in narrative form or content. Brought in as we are *post factum* and drawn backward through the string of linked causalities which already brought about good government by the ancients, the implication is that we are being instructed *after* a cycle has elapsed and good government has decayed. We are intended to travel back toward the condition of the past to recover it in the future. On a parallel plane, the conditions which make this movement possible exist timelessly and universally: *all* things have roots and branches; knowing the resting points which bring calm and deliberation is the essential base from which to reach for *any* desired end. Yet, as the “root and branch” analogy indicates, beginnings and ends are conceived of simultaneously and in connection with each other, thus “progress” toward an “end” involves an understanding of the whole of which it is inherently a part.

The Political in the Context of Chinese Philosophy and the Origin of Language

The other notable point about the *Da Xue* is its overtly political nature. This is the rule, not the exception in Chinese philosophy. The Warring States Period (403-221 BC), during which the *Da Xue* is believed to have been written,[\(16\)](#) was a period of division and continuous strife in the area that later would be unified into the Chinese empire. Amazingly, this was also a period of unprecedented and perhaps unmatched philosophical achievement. The myriad of schools and scholars who traveled from state to state seeking patronage were, not surprisingly, overwhelmingly concerned with political issues. The tendency of philosophy to overtly address political issues, often explicitly marking rulers as members of the intended audience, if not actually structuring the narrative as dialogues between rulers and scholars as many pre-Han texts do, persisted long after unification. Given the linkage of the literati to the government through the state-run examination system (through which scholars attained recognition and status which conferred tax

and corvée exemptions, among other benefits, and by which they obtained official posts and related emoluments), their preoccupation with the political is no more surprising than that of their Warring States era antecedents.

The linkage of the political and philosophical is of particular interest when approaching the Chinese corpus from the context of Western philosophic debates on the origin of language. Even when overtly non-political, many of the Western texts of interest to GA for their origin of language theories arose out of fervent political debates as well. The question of what language is and where it came from is inextricably intertwined with the issues of what is human, and thus, what is a valid social contract or form of social organization. This is relevant not only to texts such as Hobbes's and Rousseau's, but also to those of the post-Darwinian period, since the nature of the human, as differentiated from the animal, is a critical question in an era when massive social reorganization was taking place as a consequence of radical changes in labor relations. On a more basic level, the combination of private and public elements of self-expression and negotiation of meaning of which "language" is comprised make it inevitably political. As we will see below, this point will be a valuable first step toward broadening our scope of exploration to encompass those avenues most likely to yield information relevant to GA.

After Yuyan: Regrouping and Redirecting Research Efforts

An eye for the political may open doors for GA, but how will we structure our inquiry to address the ontological issues outlined above? Peter Bol's argument in taking up the issue of mimesis addressed by Yu, is instructive:

In this regard some scholars of Chinese literary thought have made a point of signal importance to the understanding of medieval culture: that culture rested on the assumption that there is no necessary disjunction between the human realm and the realm of heaven-and-earth; the pattern of human cultural creations can thus be identical to the patterns of the cosmos. In contrast, traditional Western theories see literature in terms of mimesis, as an always imperfect attempt to represent and imitate the truths of a separate realm. Greek views of literature thus begin from a conviction that it is fiction. T'ang (and earlier) attempts to understand the nature of *wen* begin from the assumption that it is veracious.[\(17\)](#)

Bol's analysis not only clarifies the ontological issues raised above, he also provides a way out of the impasse that we come to if our search for philosophical material on

language focuses on *yan* and *yu*. As this passage suggests, seeking out debates centered around terms such as *wen* which have a conglomerate of cultural, political, and linguistic meanings will yield much that illuminates not only Chinese views of the origin of language, but Chinese conceptions of what language is. But which terms and in which texts will we find them?

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There are a plethora of Chinese terms related to speech, word, writing, and language. The organization of Zhu's and others' twentieth century works on linguistics provides a useful mapping of language-related topics found in earlier Chinese texts and may help narrow the investigative field. While my examination of these sources has been cursory, I would suggest the following categories as a preliminary breakdown of language related topics:

1. Philosophy of language and culture: a rough generalization for debates such as those Bol addresses, key terms being those such as *wen* (culture, writing, pattern) and *ming* (name), and, as will be discussed below, those encompassing linguistic and cultural elements, such as *li* (ritual).
2. Study of philology: examining, verifying, and correcting ancient texts involved intensive, close readings and comparisons of linguistic forms. An area of study throughout Chinese history, this field becomes a major focus of literati attention in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries during the *kaozheng*, or evidentiary research movement;
3. Study of rhyme: the effort to facilitate understanding of ancient texts (and music) by investigating and recreating their original rhyme schemes or to create references (such as the *Pei Wen Yun Fu*) which would allow one to write new rhymes in accordance with older patterns even when these patterns were no longer reflected in vernacular speech has been a well-developed research field throughout Chinese history, though diminishing significantly in the Qing. While a somewhat clumsy grouping, I will lump the study of tone and thus music here, because several key texts in the history of this field deal with both poetry and songs.[\(18\)](#)
4. Study of words[\(19\)](#): investigation of either current or ancient vocabulary's etymology and semantics was a field in which scholars could often garner imperial patronage. The results were often compendiums of enormous scope, such as the *Kangxi Zidia* (the Kangxi Emperor's Dictionary).
5. Study of dialects: A far more ancient branch of Chinese language studies than one might suppose; during the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BC), the emperor is said to have requested a survey of dialects of the regions of his empire in order to understand what the people were saying about his rule. A key work in this area, and one which apparently also involved actual field work phonetically

recording speech of different regions, was Yang Xiong's (53-18 BC) *Fang Yan* (Dialects), written during the Han Dynasty (206 BC – 219 AD). This was a fairly unique text in the corpus of dialectical study before the late Qing, however, in that the author's purpose seems to have been understanding existing language rather than elucidating ancient texts⁽²⁰⁾ (written or influenced by present or past dialects differing from mainstream *wenyanwen*).⁽²¹⁾

Linguistics: As previously mentioned, a field of study self-consciously focused upon language (as distinct from texts) and comprising a range of topics somewhat analogous to those found in Western linguistics was not discernible in China until at least the late Qing. By that point, studies such as Zhang Binglin's employed terminology and approaches which appear to be patterned after Western works to which he or his students were exposed while in Japan. Interestingly, rather than simply conforming to the scope and limits of the field as delineated by Western scholars, Chinese scholars who adopted the label "linguistics" for their endeavors nevertheless expanded and redefined the field to encompass many traditional branches of investigation. Thus we find, for instance, that the September 1969 volume of the *Zhongguo Yuyanxue Shi Hua* (Journal of Chinese Historical Linguistics) includes four out of ten articles on ancient rhyme studies and one on an explication of classical texts. This is not simply symptomatic of Cultural Revolutionary fervor for developing uniquely Chinese science and rejecting all things Western.⁽²²⁾ Zhu's work also includes studies of rhyme, philology, classical exegesis and the like as valid areas of linguistic study. He presents a cogent argument against the anti-textual bias of Western linguistics, as well as incisive commentary on the tendency of Western linguists to investigate obscure dialects rather than more mainstream language groups

Wen, Ming, and Originary Scenes

Looking at texts which fall under the first of the categories listed above, and sorting specifically for works which offer something in the way of an originary scene, we find that these scenes center around the terms *wen* or "writing," "pattern," "culture"; and, *ming*, "name" or "to name." Attempts to link language to a primal cry or to a system of calls, so frequently encountered Western works, are relatively rare in Chinese discussions of language origins. Why do *wen* and *ming*, writing and categorical sorting, rather than, for instance, *yan* and *yu*, appear as primary components in the Chinese conception of language, in many texts preceding or supplanting any discussion of what is intuitively more "originary" to the Western mind: the utterance? While we will see below in Dong Zhong Shu's work an example in which the utterance is depicted as the initial human cognitive interaction with nature, the fact that this sort of scenario is not frequently explored shows that other

concerns supersede the need to investigate verbal communication.

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One practical observation is that in a community of diverse and mutually unintelligible dialects, where the medium of communication is a shared writing system, privileging the written, particularly in texts which comprise the orthodoxy *and upon which both the political and educational systems are based* is a necessity. Any focus upon oral communication as the most basic link of human beings in such a context would be a potential source of explosive political divisiveness. The fact that less mainstream or non-Confucian texts (for example, Daoist works such as the *Zhuangzi* or Buddhist scriptures such as the *Writings of the Bodhisattva*[\(23\)](#)) often deride the ability of the word to convey meaning may lend support to this interpretation, though other more complex ontological factors certainly underlie the privileging of the written. Even amongst some neo-Daoist thinkers, we find acceptance of the written word as conveying meaning. Wang Bi (226-249) in his *Zhou Yi Lueli* writes:

Symbols serve to express ideas. Words serve to explain symbols. For the complete expression of ideas, there is nothing like symbols, and for the complete explanation of symbols there is nothing like words. The words are intended for the symbols. Hence by examining the words, one may perceive the symbols. The symbols are intended for the ideas. Hence, by examining the words one may perceive the ideas. The ideas are completely expressed by the symbols and the symbols are explained by words. Therefore the purpose of words is to explain the symbols, but once the symbols have been grasped, the words may be forgotten. The purpose of symbols is to preserve ideas, but once the ideas have been grasped the symbols may be forgotten . . . in keeping with the category, the symbol thereof may be made; in agreement with the concept, the graph thereof may be made. . .[\(24\)](#)

Besides a surprising acceptance of the written, Wang's work reveals a complex and sophisticated understanding of processes of signification, showing that, even in ancient China, privileging the written did not imply lack of perception of or glossing over the problems any system of signification entails. Ou Yangjian's (d. 300) writings on this topic, though no longer extant, are well known. He believed that without words, humans could not express themselves and that an objective knowledge of things could not be developed without names or categories with which to differentiate them.[\(25\)](#) Liu Xun summarized Ou's ideas on this topic as follows:

Principles are apprehended by the mind, but without words they cannot be communicated. Things hold their relation to other (things), but without names they cannot be distinguished. Names shift in accordance with things, and words change in accordance with principles. (In neither case) can they be dual (i.e., be divorced from the things and principles to which they pertain)[\(26\)](#) If this duality be avoided, there will be no case in which words do not completely express (the meaning).[\(27\)](#)

Though not addressing the essential moment in which words express the principles held in the mind, this passage testifies to the complex understanding of symbolic communication already prevalent in Chinese philosophy by the Jin Dynasty and bears striking resemblances to Terrence Deacon's indexical/symbolic system as presented in *The Symbolic Species* (Norton, 1997). It is interesting, though, that Ou implies that the naming process is essential to the cognitive, not just the communicative, process. This is not a step Deacon explicitly takes.

Wang Bi, in an originary scene of sorts, takes the importance of naming a step further, in his commentary on the *Daode Jing*:

All being originates from nonbeing. Therefore, the time before there were physical shapes and names is the beginning of the myriad things. When shapes and names are there, [the Tao (Dao)] raises them, educates them, adjusts them, and causes their end. It serves as their mother. The text (i.e., the text of the *Daode Jing*)[\(28\)](#) means that the Tao (Dao) produces and completes beings on the basis of the formless and the nameless.

Returning to the more orthodox texts of the Confucian mainstream, we find the concepts of naming linked in the most primal moment with the authority to rule, even in works by thinkers who emphasized accountability of the ruler to the people, such as Dong Zhong Shu (179-104 BC). A "dominant figure among Confucians of the Western Han"[\(29\)](#) Dynasty (206 BC - 8 AD), in his *Chun Qiu Fan Lu* (*Luxuriant Dew of the Spring and Autumn Annals*) Dong depicts an originary scene in which we find all of these elements.

Ordering well, the state commences with rectifying names. The standard of correctness for names and [other] appellations is found in heaven and earth; heaven and earth provide the ultimate rightness for names and appellations. When the sages of old uttered cries to correspond to [elements observed in] heaven and earth, those utterances are what we

call appellations [*hao*]; when they called out in giving designations, those are what we call names. . . . ‘Name’ and ‘appellation’ differ in sound but share the same basis, for both are cries and calls made to express [the sages’ awareness of] heaven’s intent. Heaven does not speak, but causes men to express its intent; it does not act, but causes men to carry out its principles. Names thus are that by which the sages expressed heaven’s intent, and therefore must be profoundly scrutinized. . . . Inasmuch as names and appellations are the expression of heaven’s intent, the rectification of names in fact is no different from the taking of heaven as a model. That, then, is precisely the reason why [the rectification of names] is where the Way of governing commences.[\(30\)](#)

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Here, we see both the primacy of naming to cognitive function and the linking of language to the authority to rule mentioned above, as well as the linked concepts of patterning (*wen*) of principle (*li*) made manifest in earth by heaven (*tian*) as identically replicated in the application of correct names.

This mapping of *tian* \bowtie *li* \bowtie *wen* \bowtie *ming*, is a basic ontological structure underlying the conceptions of language found in Chinese philosophy and one which links the ontological issues raised in the previous section together into a coherent system. Peter Bol’s discussion of these issues is particularly illuminating, and, without recounting his entire argument here, his selection and translation of an originary passage from one of the earliest classics, the *Zhou Li* (*Zhou Book of Rites*) may serve to illustrate how these concepts fit together: “The two forces [i.e., *yin* and *yang*] were fixed, and the sun and moon flashed with light; the pattern [*wen*] of heaven was manifested. The eight trigrams were set forth and written records were created; the pattern [*wen*] of man was detailed.” As Bol comments, “Writing began with the schematic representation of the interaction of natural forces.” He notes describes how this process is said to have taken place, through the actions of the mythical Fu Xi, creator of the trigrams: “Fu Xi, contemplating the images [*xiang*] of heaven and their parallels on earth, observing the tracks [*wen*] left by birds and beasts, and drawing on his body and on things, created the eight trigrams ‘to bring into circulation [*tong*] the power of spirit illumination and categorize the actualities of the ten thousand things.’” Bol aptly summarizes the relations of these elements, noting that “whether *wen* was a human artifact or simply presented itself to human notice in a mysterious way, both versions suppose that *wen* manifested patterns of heaven-and-earth and things as an order that existed before human society.”[\(31\)](#) Bol’s insightful discussion may go a long way to show how our conception of what language is, of what it is comprised, and how it relates to human existence must be

expanded in order to see the ways in which an originary approach can be most fruitfully applied to sinological research.

In light of Bol's argument, the scope of the possible research categories listed above expands to include other than strictly language-related media. The concept of *wen* as both human creation and schematically manifesting human experience in the world suggests that, apart from the categories listed above, ritual will be a productive medium through which to explore concepts of the origin of language in the Chinese context. A full exploration of this issue is outside of the scope of this paper, but a brief sketch of two possible areas where examining ritual in relation to the origin of language should suffice to demonstrate that this would be a fruitful area for further research.

Archaeology & Ritual Wares

During the Shang, bronze work reached a height of technological sophistication and productive specialization that is indicative of a significant allotment of social resources. As such, these wares are crucial clues to early Chinese social forms. This fact has never been lost on Chinese scholars. Shang bronze wares have been a focus of collection and study in China since at least the Han Dynasty and, as early as 1092, they were catalogued and subdivided according to style in the *Kao Gu Tu* [Folio of Antiquities] by Lu Da Lin. Inscription played a key role in differentiating Shang from Zhou bronzes.⁽³²⁾ Two facets of these inscriptions are initially striking. First, in those with inscriptions (only a small portion of the known bronzes) the system of relationship indicated demonstrates a linkage of the demarcation of time, interpersonal relation, and ritual relation which is very suggestive for the questions of deferral of violence through ritual and symbolic communication. Second, the wares that do not have any characters and those that have only what Chang refers to as "emblem" or pictographic representations of clan or lineage significance give a unique insight into how symbolic representation developed in Shang society. A striking example of this, which seems to manifest in a concrete medium exactly the multi-faceted nature of *wen* Bol describes, is the development of decorative relief in the bronze wares over a five-stage period described by Max Loehr. As Loehr explains this progression, the early Style I wares have "thin relief lines," the Style II wares have "relief ribbons" with an "incised appearance," the Style III wares have "dense, fluent, more curvilinear figurations," the Style IV wares have the "first separation of motifs proper from spirals," which then become "small and function as ground pattern. Motifs and spirals are flush" in this style. And finally, in Style V wares, there is the "first appearance of motifs in relief; the motifs rise above the ground spirals, which may be eliminated altogether."⁽³³⁾ Other wares with inscribed passages offer fascinating insight into social relationships and ritual maintenance thereof through symbolic representation; later Chinese scholarship on

these inscriptions offers further insights into the nature of the Chinese understanding of these concepts. But even these uninscribed bronzes present a striking visual representation of symbolic development and a fascinating manifestation of the very concept the character *wen* embodies.

Literature

8

Finally, the trove of Chinese literature offers unexpected insights into Chinese perspectives on GA questions. Marston Anderson has masterfully demonstrated how Wu Jingzi's (1701-54) Qing era novel *Rulin Waishi* (The Scholars) uses a unique combination of subjective temporal scheme, contrasting thematic structures, and "flavorless" narrative style to portray the desperate yearning of Qing literati for a perfect ritual reenactment in times of social decay. Anderson finds in Wu's work an interest in and manifestation of Xunzi's (298-238 BC) ideas of ritual. As Anderson reads Wu, Wu is using the tools of his literary trade to portray the psychological effect Xunzi attributed to ritual. Xunzi believed that "the rites were designed above all to mediate the natural human emotions of desire and memory"[\(34\)](#) and this is exactly what Wu, writing in a period of intensely conflicted feelings amongst the literati, suggests through his portrayal that their unnamed, unspoken, but driving desire for ritual reenactment derives from. Though only briefly suggested here, Chinese archaeological evidence and literature clearly have much to offer the intrepid GA investigator.

Notes

1. Zhu Xing, *Zhongguo Yuyanxue Shi*, Taipei, Taiwan, Hongye Wenhua Shiye Limited Company, 1995, p. 647.[\(back\)](#)
2. Sun, Warren, *Chang Ping-lin and His Political Thought*, Papers from Eastern History No. 32, Sept. 1985, p. 57-69; For a more detailed study of Zhang, see also Young-tsu Wang, *The Search for Modern Nationalism: Zhang Binglin and Revolutionary China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).[\(back\)](#)
3. See (also a good general introduction to the Chinese language) <http://acc6.its.brooklyn.cuny.edu/phalsall/texts/chinIng2.html>; and Thomas Metzger, "Modern Chinese Utopianism," Proceedings of the Conference on the Theory of Statecraft in Modern China, Taipei; Institute of Modern History, Academica Sinica, 1984.[\(back\)](#)
4. Zhu, 647-48.[\(back\)](#)

5. Wang Feng Yang, *Houji* (Afterword) in *Gu Ci Bian*, Changchun, Guilin Cultural and Historical Publishing Company, 1993, pp. 1043-44.[\(back\)](#)

6. Wang, p. 753.[\(back\)](#)

7. Because *xin* may be translated as “heart” or “mind,” translators sometimes use a compound of both in order to preserve the meaning of the original. I reluctantly use this awkward phrase to avoid giving the impression that there is a dualism in which the heart or emotion is voiced by *yan* and the mind or reason by *yu* or vice versa. Chinese ontology does not support such a conclusion. Instead, the contrast between these two words seems to arise from their respective emphases on self-expression versus social interaction.[\(back\)](#)

8. Wang, p. 754.[\(back\)](#)

9. *Shangwu Yinshuguan* (Commercial Press), *Gu Hanyu Chang Yong Zi Zidian*, (Dictionary of Frequently Used Classical Chinese Characters) Beijing, 1995, p. 353.[\(back\)](#)

10. Dating and attribution of this Daoist classic is unreliable. In pre-Qing studies and commentaries, the work was said to precede the Analects of Confucius, i.e., sometime before 479 BC. The author is variously said to be Lao Tan or Li Er. Since the late Qing when Zui Shu attributed the work to the later Warring States period, roughly contemporaneous to the *Zhuangzi*, i.e., around 375-290 BC, this dating has been accepted by many Chinese scholars. For discussions of the dating and attribution of the *Dao De Jing* from differing points of view in English see Yu-lan Fung, Bodde, trans., *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, Vol. I, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 170-73; Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 136-40.[\(back\)](#)

11. As in “qianli zhi xing shi yu zuxia,” “a thousand mile journey begins with a footfall.” *Dao De Jing*.[\(back\)](#)

12. e.g., “Tiandi guozhen wuchu?” [Is there really no beginning to heaven and earth?], from Liu Zong Yuan (773-819), a Tang dynasty philosopher in his *Discussion of Feudalism*. It is interesting to note that Liu’s questioning of the originary comes in the context of his investigation of political organization. Liu investigated the sources of power of the earliest dynasties and asserted that the Shang and Zhou achieved supreme power by relying on feudal lords, but after attaining power couldn’t overcome the nobles they had relied upon; thus the feudal system of power sharing came about. See Hsiao Kung-chuan, trans. F.W. Mote, *A History of Chinese Political Thought*, vol. 1, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p.28 n.[\(back\)](#)

13. Yu, Pauline, *The Reading of Imagery in the Chinese Poetic Tradition*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1987, pp. 39-40; cited in Peter K. Bol, *This Culture of Ours: Intellectual Transitions in T'ang and Sung China*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1992, p. 95. Yu transliterates Chinese using the Wade-Giles system. I have added the Pinyin transliterations, given in parentheses, for the sake of continuity and ease of reference, as I have used Pinyin throughout this paper.[\(back\)](#)

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14. The *Da Xue* was originally part of the *Li Ji* or Book of Rites and was not recognized as a separate classic until Zhu Xi (1130-1200) a highly influential Sung Neo-Confucian scholar, culled it from the *Li Ji*, edited and annotated it, and made it one of the “Four Books” or required classics and therefore the basis for both civil service exams and basic Chinese cultural literacy. Some controversy remains over the dating of the original to the 5th-3rd century BC. See Chan, p. 85, n.5 and note 16, *infra* regarding Zhu Xi’s “contribution” to the text.[\(back\)](#)

15. Legge, James, trans. *The Chinese Classics*, Volume I, Taipei, 1991 (reprint of 1893 edition), pp. 356-357.[\(back\)](#)

16. Authorship and dating of this text are uncertain. Two later scholars who would take up the issues in the text in a philosophic debate of signal importance were Zhu Xi (1130-1200) and Wang Bo (1197-1274). Zhu Xi attributed the text to Zeng Zi, while Wang Bo claimed it was written by Zi Si, the grandson of Confucius. In any case, following the Sung era when the *Da Xue* became one of the classical Compendium of the *Four Books* and received more critical attention, Chinese scholars have generally attributed the original work to the Warring States era. For a discussion in English of this attribution see Derek Bodde (trans.) Fung Yu-lan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, Volume I, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1983, pp. 361-362. Volume II of the same work details the Sung-Ming Neo-Confucianism debates between Zhu Xi’s and Cheng Yi’s schools on one side, and Wang Shou-ren’s, on the other. See, pp. 478-629.[\(back\)](#)

17. Bol, p. 95, italics added for clarity and consistency with previous Chinese language references.[\(back\)](#)

18. Often, music is also dealt with in key texts which discuss the nature *wen* and *ming*, mentioned in no. 1, above. In these cases, it is usually linked to issues of ritual and sacrificial propriety. Though considerations of time and space prevent me from undertaking a detailed analysis of this linkage, such an investigation would no doubt be a fruitful endeavor in a generative-anthropological approach to Chinese philosophy, particularly in light of linkages on the Western side, such as Rousseau’s overriding interest in music at the time he wrote on the origin of language. It may

also be of interest to note that forms of traditional Chinese musical notation used characters (i.e., ones which are also used for writing texts), rather than a separate notational system. Thus, certain characters in particular contexts may simultaneously have both literary and musical connotations.[\(back\)](#)

19. I refrain from employing the term “morphology” here to avoid implying that these projects involved analyses of tense, number, case and similar changes which comprise an important portion of the morphological investigations of Western languages but are not applicable to the study of Chinese words.[\(back\)](#)

20. Zhu, pp. 60-78.[\(back\)](#)

21. Ibid., pp. 599-600.[\(back\)](#)

22. Zhongguo Yuwenxue Shi (Chinese Language Society), eds., *Zhongguo Yuyanxue Shi Hua*, Beijing, September 1969.[\(back\)](#)

23. Attributed to Kumarajiva (344-413 AD).[\(back\)](#)

24. Bodde, trans., Fung, p. 185.[\(back\)](#)

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25. *Zhixue Baikeshu*, Beijing, 1992.[\(back\)](#)

26. I have included Bodde’s note on his translation in the body of the quote for ease of reference.[\(back\)](#)

27. Bodde, trans., Fung, p. 185.[\(back\)](#)

28. Chapter 1, paragraph 1, Wang Bi’s *Commentary*, [information and transliterations in parentheses added for ease of reference]; cited in translation in Lyvia Kohn, *Early Chinese Mysticism*, p. 61.[\(back\)](#)

29. Hsiao, Kung-chuan, (Frederick A. Mote, trans.) *A History of Chinese Political Thought, Volume I: From the Beginnings to the Sixth Century A.D.*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1979, p. 487.[\(back\)](#)

30. Ibid, p. 500-501.[\(back\)](#)

31. Bol, p. 94.[\(back\)](#)

32. Chang, Kwang-chih, *Shang Civilization*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), pp. 31, 20. [\(back\)](#)

33. Ibid, p. 29-30.[\(back\)](#)

34. Anderson, Marston, "The Scorpion in the Scholar's Cap: Ritual, Memory, and Desire in Rulin Waishi," in *Culture & State in Chinese History*, Theodore Huters, et al., eds, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997, p. 269.[\(back\)](#)