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Čínsky znak na obálke znamenajúci 'východ', pochádzajúci od Liu Xie 劉泚 (1781–1840), bol vyrytý do nefritu podľa vzoru zo začiatku nášho letopočtu. · The Chinese character with the meaning 'east' employed on the cover is cut as a seal by Liu Xie, on the basis of models from the beginning of our era.

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# Cang Jie, *Shuowen jiezi*, and the Origin and Structure of Chinese Characters

YE Rong and Jana BENICKÁ

*Abstract* In Chinese tradition, the creation of the Chinese script is attributed to the legendary hero Cang Jie, a Scribe of the Yellow Emperor. This story has been recorded by men of letters across centuries and it was also itemized in the first major Chinese dictionary and monumental grammarology book, *Shuowen jiezi*, compiled around 100 AD by Xu Shen. *Shuowen jiezi* was the first systematic linguistic elaboration of the relationship between the internal organization of graphemes and their linguistic realizations. Xu Shen intended to communicate the meanings of newly discovered old Confucian texts written in orthographically different characters than those in use in his times, and to make a radical categorization and standardization of the script and writing. He grouped Chinese characters into a system of 540 determinatives (radicals), on the basis of criteria he considered useful for the purpose of organizing the characters, and not strictly according to their meanings. Xu Shen also provided a more detailed elaboration of an older classification system of six categories of Chinese characters (*liu shu*), based on the method of their creation. In Chinese tradition, *Shuowen jiezi* has always served as a prominently authoritative source of reference when seeking the etymologies of Chinese characters. However, *Shuowen jiezi*, in many cases, is not a text that provides genuine etymologies, but rather gives us what we may label as “orthographic” etymologies of Chinese characters.

*Keywords* Chinese characters, Cang Jie 倉頡, *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 · six categories of characters (*liu shu* 六書)

## 1 Introduction: When Did the Earliest Chinese Characters Appear?

The most significant discovery related to the origin of Chinese characters are oracle bone inscriptions (*jiaguwen* 甲骨文)—inscriptions on animal bones or tortoiseshells of the late Shang Dynasty (16–11 centuries BC). They were buried

underground for more than 3,000 years and were first discovered in 1899 at the Yinxu 殷墟 site located in Xiaotun 小屯 village, Anyang 安陽, Henan province. After nearly a hundred years of research, most of the oracle bone inscriptions were decoded.<sup>1</sup>

However, oracle bone inscriptions are definitely not the earliest known forms of Chinese characters. *Dawenkou* 大汶口 culture, which was dated to 4100 to 2600 BC and discovered in 1959 in Baotou 堡頭 village, Ningyang 甯陽, Shandong province, shows even earlier glyphs of Chinese characters. For example, among pictographic symbols used in the *Dawenkou* Culture, we can see images like the sun above the clouds or the sun above the clouds and high mountains with five peaks—which appear to indicate the sun rising in the clouds or above the top of the mountain:



The glyphs of the character “旦” in oracle bone inscriptions and bronzeware inscriptions (*jīnwén* 金文) look very similar to the above-mentioned forms and seem to have been evolved from them. The characters indicating the meaning “sunrise” or “sun above ...” in oracle bone and bronzeware inscriptions look like these:



The glyphs of *Dawenkou* culture were carved on the pottery and their strokes were more subtle than oracle bone inscriptions engraved on tortoise shells and animal bones, or bronzeware inscriptions cast in moulds.

Some Chinese characters originated from pictures; however, the fundamental difference between characters and simple pictures is that characters can be pictures, but they can also express combined meanings. The hieroglyphic symbols of *Dabankou* culture mentioned earlier were not just ordinary pictures, they were

1 Li Fan 2001, 37.

2 Ibid., 49.

3 The text image is from Li Leyi 1992, 55.

also composed characters, like “旦”, as well as associative compounds (*huiyi zi* 會意字) as defined by later philologists.

Later archaeological discoveries proved that there are ancient Chinese characters even older than that of *Dawenkou* culture.

## 2 Who Created Chinese Characters?

According to a most popular legend, Chinese characters were invented by a single person, Cang Jie 倉頡, a legendary figure of ancient China (c. 2650 BC), allegedly a scribe of the Yellow Emperor (*Huangdi* 黃帝, one of the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors of Chinese legends).<sup>4</sup> The story of “Cang Jie creating Chinese characters” widely circulated in ancient China, also in the works written by or attributed to most prominent men of letters since the Warring States period (c. 475–221 BC), though the story seems to be just a legend as expressed in *Xunzi* 荀子:

好書者眾矣，而倉頡獨傳者，壹也。<sup>5</sup> (*Xunzi* 荀子: *Jiebi* 解蔽)

Those who liked writings were many, but the fact that [the name of] Cang Jie alone has been handed down, is because he was single-minded about it.

*Xunzi* 荀子 was an ancient Chinese collection of philosophical writings attributed to (and named after) Xun Kuang 荀況, a 3rd-century BC philosopher, mainly associated with the Confucian tradition. Many scholars believe that *Xunzi* is best known for its emphasis on education and propriety.<sup>6</sup>

*Hanfeizi* 韓非子, a text attributed to a philosopher-politician Han Fei 韓非 (c. 280–233 BC), puts the issue as follows:

昔者倉頡之作書也，自環者謂之私，背私謂之公。

In ancient times, when Cang Jie invented writing, he signified that which turns around itself by [the character] *si* 私 “selfish, personal”, and turning one’s back against

4 Zhang Shudong 2005. The association of Cang Jie with the Yellow Emperor can be traced back only to the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD).

5 Knoblock (1994, vol 3: 107) translates the sentence as: “Thus, those who have been fond of writing have been many, yet that Cang Jie alone has been remembered is due to his unity of purpose.”

6 Ebrey 2006, 45–49.

“selfishness”, he designated with [the character] *gong* 公 “public”.

(*Hanfeizi* 韓非子: *Wudu* 五蠹)

*Lüshi Chunqiu* 呂氏春秋, a chronicle and encyclopaedia compiled around 239 BC under the patronage of the Qin Dynasty Chancellor Lü Buwei 呂不韋 (291–235 BC), states:

奚仲作車，倉頡作書。

Xi Zhong invented the chariot, Cang Jie invented writing.

(*Lüshi Chunqiu* 呂氏春秋: *Junshou* 君守)

In *Huainanzi* 淮南子<sup>7</sup> (*Benjingxun* 本經訓) we read:

昔者倉頡作書，而天雨粟，鬼夜哭。

In ancient times, Cang Jie created writing, the rain fell like millets, and ghosts wailed at night.

Another mention of Cang Jie in the *Huainanzi* advocates the role of writing:

蒼頡之初作書，以辯治百官，領理萬事，愚者得以不忘，智者得以志遠。

When Cang Jie first invented writing, it was used to govern the officials, to lead and to organize all undertakings. With it the simple-minded were able not to forget, and wise men were able to record distant history. (*Huainanzi*, *Taizuxun* 泰族訓).

The legends recorded in *Huainanzi* show that the creation/invention of writing (*zuoshu* 作書) was an earth-shattering event in the minds of the ancients. However, of course, the creation/formation/invention of Chinese characters was not an act of just a single person. And accordingly, there were also numerous men of letters who examined characters in use and provided explanations of their meanings, structure, or hints of their etymologies. The most prominent among them—Xu Shen 許慎 (c. 58–c. 148)—in his *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 (Structure Analysis of Primary Characters and Meaning Explanation of Secondary Characters), detects the following “itinerary” of the process of creation of Chinese characters:<sup>8</sup>

7 *Huainanzi* is a collection of essays that resulted from a series of scholarly debates held at the court of Liu An 劉安 (c. 179–122 BC), a Han dynasty prince, ruling the Huainan Kingdom, and an advisor to his nephew, Emperor Wu 武帝 of Han (r. 141–87 BC).

8 *Shuowen Jiezi* 說文解字 was the first substantial dictionary and study on grammatology written around 100 AD. It is also the first book to analyze, in more detail, the structure of Chinese characters and the graphic arrangement of characters written in the small seal script (the unified

古者庖羲氏之王天下也，仰則觀象於天，俯則觀法於地，視鳥獸之文與地之宜，近取諸身，遠取諸物；於是始作《易》八卦，以垂憲象。

及神農氏，結繩為治，而統其事。庶業其繁，飾偽萌生。

黃帝史官倉頡，見鳥獸蹄迹之跡，知分理之可相別異也，初造書契。

百工以乂，萬品以察，蓋取諸夬。「夬，揚於王庭」。

言文者，宣教明化於王者朝廷，「君子所以施祿及下，居德則忌」也。

(《說文解字·序》)

In ancient times, Fu Xi<sup>9</sup> ruled the world; he looked up to observe heavenly bodies, and looked down to observe the forms of the land; he saw suitable matches between the earth and the marking-patterns on birds and wild animals;<sup>10</sup> he used [symbols] of his own body to name close things and [symbols] of other things to name distant objects. On the basis of this, he created “eight trigrams” of *The Book of Changes* in order to convey normative patterns.<sup>11</sup>

Shennong<sup>12</sup> ruled by knotted cords for recording affairs; by keeping records this way, various enterprises flourished, and various refinements sprouted.

Cang Jie, the historian of the Yellow Emperor, observed the footprints of birds and beasts, and found that the patterns were different, thus he could distinguish between shapes of the things. Then he began to create characters. After that, a hundred officials became regulated, and ten thousand things became differentiated.

script of the Qin dynasty / 221-206 BC). As Ban (1998, 36-37) argues, this work was created in response to the rediscovery of Confucian Canon texts written in the Great Seal script (*da zhuan* 大篆), and was intended to help scholars who actively used the “official script” (*li shu* 隸書) to study classical texts.

- 9 Fuxi (伏羲 or 庖牺), a prominent hero in Chinese legends, the first of the Three Sovereigns at the beginning of the Chinese dynastic period.
- 10 English translation according to O'Neill 2013, 430.
- 11 Xu Shen adheres to the idea that the *Book of Changes* was at the origin of all the inventions that are fundamental to the culture. The trigrams served as the basis of the symbolic equipment of the *Book of Changes* and represent different ratios of yin and yang energy. They are explicated as regular and unchanging patterns that govern the world and that people have to follow. According to legends, Fu Xi formulated them by observing how the footprints of animals and birds correspond to the environment in which they live. Based on those observations, he created these normative schemes.
- 12 Shennong 神農, a mythological Chinese ruler, one of the legendary Three Sovereigns.

[Probably Cang Jie] took this from the hexagram *guai* 夬. One of the meanings of 夬 is “to announce to the ruler’s court.” This means that writing disseminates education and culture in the courts of the rulers. “Through writing the ruler can gain loyalty of his officials and bestow emoluments upon his subjects; through writing virtue can be recorded and prohibitions can be communicated.”

(*Shuowen Jiezi* · Postscript).

In his passage from the Postscript (序) to *Shuowen Jiezi*,<sup>13</sup> Xu Shen declares that the process of formation of Chinese characters went through various stages before the era of Cang Jie—and that the milestones in this process were personified by legendary heroes: at first, the legendary ruler Fu Xi created the “Eight Diagrams” in order to convey the meanings of all different phenomena of the human world *via* hexagrams; later, Shennong ruled the country by using knotted ropes in order to keep records; however, none of these ways of *writing* could have been sufficient for the increasingly complex social life, thus finally, Cang Jie, the historian of the Yellow Emperor, created written glyphs, also based on the inventions of his predecessors. This invention caused “writing to disseminate education and spell out culture in the courts of the rulers”, and proved the fact that “through writing the ruler could gain loyalty of his officials and subjects, and prohibitions can be communicated.” This is how Xu Shen “documented” the general line of the evolution of Chinese writing.

It is, of course, beyond question that the process of invention/creation of Chinese writing must have been much more complex than as featured by Xu Shen. And, moreover, numerous variants of script existed in ancient China, varying locally or diachronically. In this respect, the Postscript also states:

以迄五帝三王之世，改易殊體。封于泰山者，七十有二代，靡有同焉。

In the times of Five Emperors and Three Kings, [the writing] changed into various styles. Six Dozen generations sacrificed at Mountain Tai, but the styles of their inscriptions differ from one another.<sup>14</sup>

Boltz (1994, 154) in this respect argues that Xu Shen’s lexicographical aims were twofold: the systematic analysis of the graphic structure of characters on the one

13 Postscript to *Shuowen Jiezi* is believed to be a manifesto of ancient Chinese grammatology.

14 English translation according to Uher 2012, 115.

hand, and the identification of alternative graphic forms of the same characters on the other. The work takes the *xiao zhuān* 小篆 “small seal” script of the Qin standardization as basic, and gives graphic alternatives, those that were known to Xu, in *da zhuān* 大篆 “large seal” script (also known as *zhou wen* 籀文), in *gu wen* 古文 script,<sup>15</sup> and occasionally in other recognized variants.

The important event of the first great unification of Chinese script ordered by the first Emperor, Qin Shi Huangdi 秦始皇帝 (259–210 BC), is highlighted in the Postscript as well and also features Cang Jie:

秦始皇帝初兼天下，丞相李斯乃奏同之，罷其不與秦文合者。

斯作《倉頡篇》。中車府令趙高作《爰歷篇》。大史令胡毋敬作《博學篇》。

皆取史籀《大篆》，或頗省改，所謂小篆也。

When for the first time [in history] the First Emperor of Qin united the sub-celestial world, Li Si, his Grand Councillor<sup>16</sup> presented a proposal to unify them (i.e. the scripts or character forms) and discard what was not in accord with the Qin script.

Li Si wrote the *Cangjie pian* 倉頡篇, Zhao Gao, the Keeper of Carriages, wrote the *Yuanli pian* 爰歷篇, and Humu Jing, the Grand Historian, wrote the *Boxue pian* 博學篇. All of them borrowed [characters] from the Historian Zhou’s *dazhuan* 大篆, although they sometimes altered and abbreviated those. This was what they called the small seal script 小篆.<sup>17</sup>

15 For *guwen* see note 29.

16 Boltz (1994, 156) argues that the *Shuowen Jiezi* is the end product of the process of orthographic reformation that began with the well-known efforts of Li Si (ca. 280–208 BC) to standardize the script, just after the political unification of the empire in 221 BC under Qin Shi Huang Di.

17 English translation according to Galambos 2006, 34. Galambos (2006, 52) further argues that it is not exactly known why there were three books with the new standard script. Since all of them were in the same small seal script, the creation of three separate works seems redundant. A possible explanation for the necessity of three books is that they contained characters of different degrees of difficulty and frequency of usage. The *Cangjie pian* was probably the first in order. This is implied by the fact that even after the fall of the Qin Empire, the book had been used as an elementary textbook for teaching children to write. The title points to the same direction: since Cangjie was the inventor of writing, his name was an obvious choice for the title of the beginner’s textbook. The title of the second book was *Yuanli*, where *yuan* meant “to lead on to” and *li* means “to pass through” or “successive”. The two characters together could have designated an intermediate level textbook. The third book, compiled by the Grand Historian himself, was the

The Postscript to *Shuowen jiezi* maps the milestones in the development of Chinese script, and Cang Jie figures as a legendary creator of writing. Xu Shen also especially emphasizes the importance of the first great unification/standardization of Chinese script during the Qin dynasty (small seal script). On the other hand (as we will see in the following text), he seems to have believed that the state of writing of his times was not a standard to be imitated—and that the condition of writing (and of the human world as such) must return to their true state (that of the times of the rule of the legendary ancient sages). Following “old patterns” was an often repeated motif in the works of the Han dynasty authors—a return to a time when harmony and true order reigned on earth.

### 3 *Eight Trigrams, Knotted Cords and Counting Chips*

In the above-listed examples extracted from various prominent ancient books, for what we translated into English as “writing”, Chinese sources used a term *shu* 書. The Postscript to *Shuowen jiezi* explains the term quite clearly as “[what is] written on bamboo and silk is called *shu* (*writing*). *Writing* means to resemble [what it depicts].” (著於竹帛謂之書。書者，如也). But of course, the etymologies of Chinese characters were much more complex than just “resembling what it depicts”. In this respect, for example Françoise Bottéro (2007, 151) also claims that the author of *Shuowen jiezi* goes much further than his predecessors and describes the historical process of the creation of written words:

倉頡之初作書，蓋依類象形，故謂之文。其後形聲相益，即謂之字。

When Cang Jie first invented writing, it was presumably because he copied the forms according to their resemblances that they were called *wen* “patterns”. Then forms and pronunciations were added to each other, so they were called *zi* “written words”. (*Shuowen jiezi*: Postscript).<sup>18</sup>

*Boxue pian*, or the *Book of Wide Learning*. Both the author and the title of the book suggest that it might have contained the difficult and uncommon characters of the small seal script.

18 English translation according to Bottéro 2007, 151.

Thus, “writings”, according to Xu Shen were basically of two types: primary “patterns” (*wen* 文) and secondary characters (*zi* 字, combining form and pronunciation).<sup>19</sup>

However, we believe that though the references to ancient sages were made by Xu Shen in order to be in line with the Chinese tradition of glorifying legendary sages, his references to Fu Xi’s Eight Diagrams or Shennong’s knotted ropes are not completely unsubstantiated. While tracking the evolution of Chinese characters, traces of “Eight Diagrams” symbols and the tying knots can be found in them. For example, judging from the oracle bone inscriptions’ figures, numbers up to eight seem to have been made up of one to four counting chips:<sup>20</sup>



“Eight Diagrams/Trigrams” were created on the basis of the use of counting chips, and the counting chips, such as small bamboo sticks, were common counting tools in ancient China. We can find early known records related to the counting, for example, in the *Book of Laozi* 老子:

善數不用籌策。

Those who are good at arithmetic, do not need to use counting chips.

(*Daode jing* 道德經, Chapter 27).

Modern Chinese characters still retain the writing of “一” (one), “二” (two), “三” (three) and “八” (eight); we can also see the traces of the other four glyphs in modern characters.

In addition to counting chips becoming characters, there are also examples of knotted ropes turned into Chinese characters. For example, among modern Chinese characters, there are still characters (originated in counting chips) representing “十” (*shi*, ten) or multiples of ten, such as: “廿” (*nian*, twenty), “卅” (*sa*, thirty), “卌” (*xi*, forty); their glyphs in oracle bone inscriptions are as follows:<sup>21</sup>

19 Unlike Bottéro, we prefer the translation of *wen* as “primary characters”.

20 The text image below is from Li Fan 2001, 30.

21 The text images below are from: Li Fan 2001, 32.

十 廿 卅 卌

And their glyphs in bronze inscriptions are:



Today's fonts are:

十 廿 卅 卌

In the glyphs of bronze inscriptions, we can very clearly see that ten is tied with one knot, twenty is tied with two knots, thirty is tied with three knots, and forty is tied with four knots. Tying knots as a method of counting was commonly used by ancient peoples. There are also written records about these methods of counting in ancient works. Such as:

上古結繩而治。

In ancient times, people ruled by tying knots. (*The Book of Changes, Xi ci II*; 易·繫辭下). 當是時也，民結繩而用之。

That time, people tied the knots and used them [for counting]. (*Zhuangzi* 莊子: *Qu qie* 胠篋).<sup>22</sup>

使民復結繩而用之。

Make people to return to tying knots and use them [as a script]. (*Laozi* 老子, Chap. 80)

In addition, cutting notches into wood was another method used by ancient people to record or count things. There are many such records in ancient works:

契，刻也，刻識其數也。

Making notches, is carving, is recording the number by carving.

(*Shiming* 釋名: *Sbi Shuqi* 釋書契).<sup>23</sup>

Or,

宋人有游於道，得人遺契者，歸而藏之。密數其齒。告鄰人曰：吾富可待矣。

<sup>22</sup> *Zhuanzi* is a Daoist text from the late Warring States period (c. 475–221 BC), named after its author Zhuang Zhou 莊周 (c. 369–286 BC).

<sup>23</sup> *Shiming* 釋名 (Explanation of Names) is a classic that discusses the names of objects from the late Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220). The author is Liu Xu 刘煦, who lived from approximately 147–189.

A man from the State of Song was wandering on the road and picked up a piece of wood with notches that was lost by someone else; he took it home and hid it. Silently counted the numbers on the piece of wood with notches, and then said to his neighbour: “I am going to make a fortune”.

(*Liezi* 列子: *Shuofu* 說符).<sup>24</sup>

The method of carving notches into wooden or bamboo chips to sign a contract existed before the invention of writing characters in early ancient times. Those simple engravings on the chips served for recording bills, and of course, they cannot be regarded as “characters”. However, this form of carving notches is probably one of the earliest forms of writing. The ancients carved numerical symbols or hieroglyphs on bamboo, wood, or pottery to convey certain information, and they may have gradually evolved into tribal emblems; these patterns on bronzes, bamboo slips, and wooden boards gradually formed early characters. From this point of view, we can say that engraving had better potential for the creation of Chinese characters than the “Eight Trigrams” or tying knots.

Who and when then invented Chinese characters? According to a most known legend, Chinese characters were invented by the legendary sage Cang Jie—but, definitely, “Cang Jie” is just a cover name for all ancients who were instrumental in creation and innovations of Chinese characters. Lu Xun (魯迅, 1881–1936, a prominent writer and literary critic, in his *Outline of the History of Chinese Literature* (*Han wenxueshi gangyao* 漢文學史綱要), grasps the issue in a very lapidary way:

要之文字成就，所當綿曆歲時，且由眾手，全群共喻，乃得流行，誰為作者，殊難確指，歸功一聖，亦憑臆之說也。<sup>25</sup>

When we talk about the achievement of creating Chinese characters, they must be created by the public and recognized by everyone in the long history before they can be popular. It is difficult to determine who the creator is. The legend attributed to a saint is just a speculation.

24 *Liezi* is a mainly Daoist oriented work written by Lie Yukou 列御寇 or 列圉寇 (c. 450–375 BC), who was born in the State of *Zheng* during the Warring States Period (c. 475–221 BC).

25 Lu Xun 2017, 2.

#### 4 Rules for Formation of Chinese Characters

In a previous text we examined the possible origins of Chinese characters in pictograms and the appearance of first primitive characters. To be sure, the number of original characters created by one of the above-mentioned methods was rather limited at the beginning. So, how did such a huge number of Chinese characters come into being?

##### 4.1 The six categories of characters

A number of men of letters in the pre-Qin period (before 221 BC), the Qin, and the Han Dynasty (202 BC–220 AD) analysed the structure of existing or ancient characters in order to identify the rules of character formation or to trace their etymologies. The system of the so called “liushu” 六書 “six [categories] of characters” was adopted, which divided Chinese characters into six categories. The term “liushu” first appears in the *Rites of Zhou* (*Zhou li* 周禮), a text compiled by Confucian scholars during the Warring States Period (c. 475–221 BC):

保氏養國子以道，乃教之六藝：一曰五禮，二曰六樂，三曰五射，四曰五馭，五曰六書，六曰九數。

[Master Bao] educated the sons of the state in the six arts (*liu yi* 六藝): the first was the five [forms] of ritual behavior, the second was the six [styles] of music; the third was the five styles of archery; the fourth was the five styles of chariot riding, the fifth was the “six [categories of] characters (*liu shi* 六書); the sixth was the nine [methods] of calculating.

(*Rites of Zhou · Diguan · Baoshi* 周禮·地官·保氏)

But the text does not provide more detailed explanation of the term.

Later, Liu Xin 劉歆 (c. 50 BC–23 AD), a prominent man of letters and linguist from Western Han Dynasty (206 BC–9 AD), itemised the issue of the “six [categories of] characters in his work *Qilue* 七略 (Seven Catalogues), the first known official catalogue and the first bibliographic work in China.

In the Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220), Xu Shen described the “six [categories] of characters”—more clearly and in more detail—in his above-mentioned *Shuowen Jiezi*, thus the first systematic categorization of Chinese characters was introduced around 100 AD. Xu Shen analyzed the graphics of a total of 9353 characters in a

small seal script and arranged them into a system of 540 determinatives (*bushou* 部首, “group heads”) from graphically simpler to graphically more complex, so that the determinatives with similar graphics were arranged side by side.<sup>26</sup> And more importantly, the author provides semantic and phonological information about Chinese characters, although questionable in many cases.<sup>27</sup>

In Chinese intellectual history, *Shuowen Jiezi* has always been seen as a prominent authoritative dictionary explaining the etymologies of Chinese characters. Here is an example of the entry of the character *fa* 法 (law; standard), ranked among the category “麀” (beast, unicorn), chapter 10:

𧈧<sup>28</sup> 刑也。平之如水，從水；麀，所以觸不直者；去之，從去。法(法)今文省。金古文。

26 Galambos (2006, 67-68) argues that Xu Shen himself selected 540 components which he thought useful for the purpose of organizing the characters. And, as Atsuji Tetsuji (1985, 135-172) argues, the number 540 was the product of a symbolic number multiplication for yin and yang (6 x 9=54), and that in order to acquire a solid number of determinatives for his classification, Xu Shen multiplied 54 by 10, and came to his number 540.

27 Bottéro and Harbsmaier (2008, 252) describe the structure of the dictionary lexical entries as follows:

The entries of the *Shuowen* follow an invariant scheme:

1. Head Graph. (Obligatory, always in seal script.)
2. Semantic gloss as relevant to the graphological analysis. (Obligatory. This often provides a marginal, by no means basic, meaning of the word glossed. Optionally, the gloss may be followed by alternative glosses Xu Shen has found in the literature and wishes to record.)
3. Graphological analysis into semantic and phonetic constituents. (Obligatory. Only optionally attention is paid to the dual semantico-phonetic function of phonetic constituents: many obvious cases go unidentified.)
4. Note on graphemically distinct allographs. (Optional.)
5. Supplementary/encyclopaedic sundry material. (Optional.)
6. Subsumption formula. (Obligatory in “radicals”, even when no other characters are in fact subsumed under them, but never present any-where else.)
7. Notes on pronunciation. (Optional. These are present in approximately 10% of the characters and are regularly at the end of the entry).

28 The head graph in Xu Shen’s dictionary is not the standard and predominant lishu 隸書 “clerical script” character as used on the bamboo strips of his time, but another, older style, that of the

“灋” means punishment. It is even like a water. It follows “water”. A unicorn touches those who are not in the right and drives them away. It follows “unicorn” and “drive away”. Nowadays the character is simplified as 法 (法). The old character<sup>29</sup> is 灋.

On the example of this character, which means law or standard in modern Chinese, we can see that here, just like in many other cases, Xu Shen records two different etymologies related to the given character. One is related to the explanation that the character *fa* is composed of three elements, representing the connotations that law (punishment) like the surface of water is equal for all and that the unicorn drives away all those who are not right (in their behaviour). This variant prevails in bronzeware inscriptions and the texts of classical Chinese, the “nowadays” (Qin, Han) Dynasty form is simplified, omitting the unicorn. The second variant (“the old form”) 灋 consists of two components 合 (to join) and 正 (right), thus the suggested etymology reads “to join with the right” or “to be in line with the true standard”.

As we stated above, this immense work was probably created in response to the rediscovery of Confucian canon texts written in the great seal script (*da zhuān* 大篆) and was presumably intended to help scholars who actively used the “official (clerical) script” (*lishu* 隸書) to study classical (mainly Confucian) texts. Moreover, as some scholars argue,<sup>30</sup> the ambition of the dictionary was not to describe the actual state of writing and characters, but rather to provide their idealized standard.<sup>31</sup> As Galambos (2006, 53) in this respect further argues, Xu Shen believed

*xiaozhuān* 小篆, the “small-seal script”. This small-seal script, though widely used on seals as well as other precious artefacts, was certainly not the standard way of writing Chinese in most other contexts. Literally hundreds of thousands of bamboo strips bear witness to current everyday scribal practice since late Warring States times down to Xu Shen’s own times. Nonetheless Xu Shen decided to disregard this current scribal practice. Instead, he entered the seal-script graphs as head graphs (Bottéro and Harsbmeier 2008, 255).

29 “Old characters” (*guwen* 古文), as Xu Shen seems to understand it, were characters used in ancient times outside the state of Qin.

30 For example, Galambos 2006.

31 O’Neill (2013, 419) argues that in the Postface and also throughout the macrostructure and microstructures of the *Shuowen*, Xu Shen postulates three basic writing systems: *guwen* 古文, the

that regularity and constancy was the original state of writing and by establishing a standard he was reinstating this original condition.<sup>32</sup> Thus, the chief ambition behind *Shuowen Jiezi* was to standardize the writing system and compile a reference book for writing, much less an etymological dictionary.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, regardless of the motivation and intent behind compiling this work, it is indeed an extensive study of the semantics and phonology of Chinese characters that categorizes Chinese characters into a scheme of 540 determinants and six categories. Also, as Tereza Slaměňíková (2017, 14) argues, it is the first systematic linguistic analysis of the relationship between the internal organization of graphemes and their linguistic realization, which, on the basis of sound or semantic contexts on the principle of analogy, arranges characters with the same characteristics into a common group.

oldest and original writing system crafted by Cangjie (the source of all original written words and their original meanings); *zhouwen* 籀文 (a.k.a. *dazhuan* 大篆), the modified system created by Scribe Zhou at the end of the Western Zhou; and *zhuanwen* 篆文 (a.k.a. *xiaozhuan* 小篆), the even more modified (and perhaps somewhat corrupted) writing system codified by Li Si. Because Xu Shen is most concerned with unearthing the oldest meaning; “therefore he uses the graphic structure of the *guwen* to explicate the *xiaozhuan*.” (故以古文之形釋小篆).

32 “Now I arranged the [dictionary] based on the seal forms, and supplemented them with *guwen* and *zhouwen* forms.” (今敘篆文，合以古籀)—Postscript. Xu Shen did not believe that the contemporary way of writing filled with inconsistencies represented the true nature of the script. Instead, he claimed that the authentic state of the script lay in the past, prior to the moral decline of the world. Hence the ability or will to write “correctly” or “in a standard way” (*zheng* 正) reflected the moral standpoint of the scribe (Galambos 2006, 62). Moreover, in the course of its development, the Chinese script and writing went through many changes. On the one hand, these changes led to a simplification of its graphics, but on the other hand, it also led to corruption of its graphic structure as well as demotivation of the originally semantically or phonetically motivated components.

33 During the Han dynasty, an office of Corrector (*zheng zi* 正字) was established and punishments for deviations from the correct forms of the characters were enacted for those who worked in the state administration.

Let us come back to the six categories of characters which were presented as follows:

周禮八歲入小學。保氏教國子，先以六書：  
 一曰指事，指事者，視而可識，察而見意，上下是也；  
 二曰象形，象形者，畫成其物，隨體詰詘，日月是也；  
 三曰形聲，形聲者，以事為名，取譬相成，江河是也；  
 四曰會意，會意者，比類合誼，以見指搆，武信是也；  
 五曰轉注，轉注者，建類一首，同意相受，考老是也；  
 六曰假借，假借者，本無其字，依聲託事，令長是也。

According to the *Rites of Zhou*, [boys] entered elementary school at the age of 8. [Teacher] Protector educated the sons of the state, starting with the “six [categories] of characters”:

The first [category] is called “*zhishi*” 指事 [“pointing to a phenomenon”; simple indicative; symbol]. We can recognize [what it is pointing to] at the first sight, but its specific meaning can only be grasped after a careful investigation; e.g. “上” (up) and “下” (down).

The second is called “*xiangxing*” 象形 [pictogram], which means that the character imitates a certain object with an image whose lines correspond to the shape of that object; e.g. “日” (the sun) and “月” (the moon).

The third is called “*xingsheng*” 形聲 (“picto-phonetic compounds”), which means that [characters] are created by combining the [element representing] meaning and the [element representing] the sound. E.g.: “江” (Yangtze River) and “河” (Yellow River).

The fourth is called “*huiyi*” 會意 (“associative compounds” or “compound ideographs”), which means: choosing and combining certain grapheme-elements related to the phenomena to form a [new] character; by combining the meanings of the grapheme-elements, one can know the meaning of the new character; such as “武” (valiant) and “信” (truthful).

The fifth is called “*zhuanzhu*” 轉注 (“derivative cognates” or “mutually explanatory”),<sup>34</sup> which means: choosing a character as the root character, creating a

34 Literary meaning: [the characters which] explain each other mutually.

generic character, and [then the two characters] borrow their analogous meanings from each other. E.g. “老” (aged) and “考” (original meaning: aged).

The sixth is called “*jiajie*” 假借 (“phonetic loan characters”), which means that if originally there was no character for a certain matter, a homophone character was borrowed to represent it, such as “令” (command) and “長” (adult).

(*Shuowen Jiezi*: Postscript)

This is how the author of *Shuowen jiezi* with examples explains the six ways in which Chinese characters were formed. But, as Imre Galambos argues, a number of traditional philologists had already observed that the *liushu* was a problematic system. Not only were some of Xu Shen’s examples of the *liushu* categories etymologically incorrect but also entire categories were meaningless from a historical point of view. Besides, many characters, depending on the point of view, could be grouped into more than one category. And, the discovery of oracle bone inscriptions at the turn of the twentieth century confirmed former suspicions regarding the incorrect etymology of some characters (Galambos 2006, 54).

Later, a number of men of letters re-examined the system set by the ancients and re-arranged the order of the “six categories of characters” as follows:

1. “*xiangxing*” 象形 (“pictograms”),
2. “*zhishi*” 指事 (“simple ideograms” or “simple indicatives”),
3. “*huiyi*” 會意 (“associative compounds” or “compound ideographs”),
4. “*xingsheng*” 形聲 (“phono-semantic compounds” or “picto-phonetic compounds”),
5. “*zhuanzhu*” 轉注 (“derivative cognates” or “mutually explanatory”),
6. “*jiajie*” 假借 (“phonetic loan characters”).

Let us now explain the various categories in more detail, also from the point of view of the later development of Chinese characters.

#### 4.1.1 Pictograms (*xiangxing zi* 象形字)

As we saw in a previous text, *Shuowen Jiezi* uses “日” (the sun) and “月” (the moon) as examples to illustrate what pictograms are. Their modern fonts and ancient glyphs from bronzeware inscriptions are as follows:

日 rì ☉ 月 yuè 𠄎<sup>35</sup>

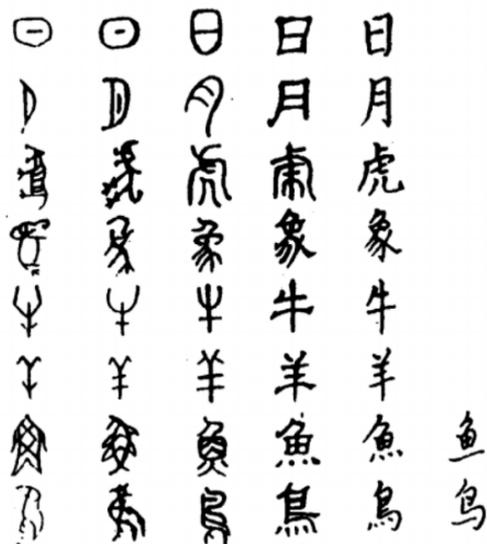
35 The text images of the bronzeware inscriptions are from Li Leyi 1992, 27 and 451.

These two pictograms are highly imitative and rather simplified images of the sun and the moon. Pictograms not only resemble the shape of things but also describe the appearance of things.

For example, in *Shuowen Jiezi* the character “鳥” (bird) is written as , and the character “烏” (crow) is written as ;<sup>36</sup> the difference between them is that “烏” does not have the point of the eye on the head of “鳥” because as the crow is covered with black feathers, the black eyes are invisible. When Xu Shen was studying Chinese characters, oracle bone inscriptions had not yet been discovered, so he could only have referred to bronzeware inscriptions or Seal scripts.<sup>37</sup>

Over the millennia of evolution, pictograms have undergone changes, but after a careful examination we can see that their original forms can be still detected, like in the following image:<sup>38</sup>

Oracle Bronze S.-seal Official Regular Simplified



<sup>36</sup> The text images of the bronzeware inscriptions are from Li Fan 2001, 58.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 62.

There are not many pictograms among Chinese characters; Xu Shen only recorded 364 of them in his *Shuowen Jiezi*. After the Han Dynasty, for nearly two thousand years, only a few new pictograms such as “傘” (umbrella), “凹” (concave) and “凸” (convex) appeared; and this method is no longer used to form characters.<sup>39</sup>

Although the number of pictograms is small, they form the basis for the creation of Chinese characters, and a considerable part of the later combined characters are composed of pictograms.<sup>40</sup> For example, “人” (person) is the constituent element of the characters “你” (you), “他” (him), “侄” (nephew), “作” (work), “做” (do), “仙” (celestial being), and “認” (recognition;—a phonetic symbol); “貝” (money cowrie) is the constituent element of the characters “財” (finance), “貨” (goods), “購” (purchase), “貿” (trade), “貶” (embarrassment;—a phonetic symbol), “敗” (defeat;—a phonetic symbol), etc.; “馬” (horse) is the constituent element of the characters “驢” (donkey), “馱” (carry), “駛” (drive), “駕” (vehicle), “馭” (control), “媽” (mother;—a phonetic symbol), “罵” (curse;—a phonetic symbol), and so on. Therefore, understanding the shape, meaning, and pronunciation of pictograms from their origin can help us grasp the meaning or pronunciation of a large number of modern Chinese characters.

#### 4.1.2 Simple indicatives (*zhishi zi* 指事字)

*Shuowen Jiezi* uses “上” (up) and “下” (down) as examples to illustrate what the simple indicatives are; their modern fonts and ancient glyphs from the oracle bone inscriptions are as follows:

上 shang  下 xia <sup>41</sup>

The indicative symbol (a short horizontal) of “上” indicates the meaning “above the ground”, which designates the meaning of “上” as “up”; the structure of “下” is just the opposite of “上”, its indicative symbol is “under the ground”, so the meaning of “下” is “down”.

Since it is difficult to express abstract, complex, and non-pictographic meanings with simple symbols, there are even fewer simple indicatives in Chinese characters than pictograms. In *Shuowen Jiezi*, there are only 129 simple

39 Ibid., p. 60.

40 However, on the other hand, their concentration in ancient texts is much higher than in modern Chinese.

41 The text images are from Li Fan 2001, 63.

indicatives<sup>42</sup>. After the Han Dynasty, basically no new characters created by this method have emerged. Here are some examples of the simple indicatives listed in Li Fan's book:<sup>43</sup>

| Oracle | Bronze | S.-seal | Official | Regular |
|--------|--------|---------|----------|---------|
| 二      | 二      | 上       | 上        | 上       |
| 下      | 下      | 下       | 下        | 下       |
| 亦      | 亦      | 亦       | 亦        | 亦       |
| 日      | 日      | 日       | 日        | 日       |
| 甘      | 甘      | 甘       | 甘        | 甘       |
| 朱      | 朱      | 朱       | 朱        | 朱       |
| 本      | 本      | 本       | 本        | 本       |

#### 4.1.3 Associative compounds (*buiyi zi* 會意字)

*Shuowen Jiezi* uses “武” (warrior; martial) and “信” (trustful) as examples to illustrate what the associative compounds are. Their modern forms and ancient glyphs from oracle bone inscriptions (武) and Small seal scripts (信) are as follows:<sup>44</sup>

 武 *wu*     
  信 *xin*<sup>45</sup>

The upper part of “武” is “戈” which represents a weapon, and the lower part is “止”, a foot of a person, referring to a person walking out. Taken together, it means an armed person going into battle, which corresponds to the original meaning warrior.

42 According to Wang Yun's statistics, it is 1.4 % of all characters.

43 The picture below is from Li Fan 2001, 65.

44 The text image of the oracle bone inscription of “武” below is from Li Leyi 1992, 355.

45 The text image of the bronzeware inscription of “信” is from Li Leyi 1999, 396.

The left side of “信” is a human figure, and the right side is “言”, which refers to words spoken by the tongue in a person’s mouth. Taken together, it means what a person says. In ancient times, this character was used to refer to oral messages, but now it is used for letters (mails).

An associative compound is a combination of two or more physical objects that express a new, usually abstract meaning. For example, combining “日” (the sun) and “月” (the moon) creates “明” (bright); combining “口” (mouth) and “鳥” (bird) creates “鳴” (warble); combining “刀” (knife), “牛” (cattle), and “角” (horn) creates “解” (to dismember).

The method of creating associative compounds was used as a solid compensation for the very limited number of pictograms and simple indicatives—it created more Chinese characters than the previous two. Xu Shen recorded 1167 associative compounds in *Shuowen Jiezi*.<sup>46</sup> Below are some examples of the evolution of associative compounds as listed in Li Fan’s book:<sup>47</sup>

Oracle Bronze S.-seal Official Regular Simplified



#### 4.1.4 Picto-phonetic compounds (*xingshengzi* 形聲字)

*Shuowen Jiezi* uses “江” (Yangtze River) and “河” (Yellow River) as examples to illustrate what the picto-phonetic compounds are. Their modern fonts and

<sup>46</sup> Li Fan 2001, 68.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 72.

ancient glyphs from the small seal script are as follows: <sup>48</sup>

江 jiang 江 河 he 河

The left side of these two characters is “水” (water), which is a radical related to rivers or water; “工” and “可” on the right are the phonetic parts, indicating that in ancient times the pronunciation of “工” and “江”, as well as “可” and “河” was similar.

Choosing a homophonic or near-sounding character as the phonetic side, and adding a suitable radical, a new character can be easily created. Different radicals are added to the same phonetic part, or the same radical is added to different phonetic parts, all producing different characters. For example:

“方” (fang) as a phonetic part accompanied by different radicals, forms “訪” (visit), “防” (defence), “芳” (fragrant), “房” (room), “放” (release), etc; “木” as a radical accompanied by different phonetic parts, forms “椅” (chair), “桌” (table), “松” (pine tree), “柏” (cypress), “楓” (maple), “機” (machine), “架” (shelf), etc.

In oracle bone inscriptions, the picto-phonetic compounds accounted for only 20% of the total, while in the *Shuowen Jiezi*, the picto-phonetic compounds accounted for 82%, i.e. a total of 7670 picto-phonetic characters were recorded by Xu Shen. In the *Kangxi Dictionary* (Kangxi Zidian 康熙字典—a normative dictionary compiled during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries), the picto-phonetic characters amounted to about 90% of the total number of characters, whereas in modern Chinese characters, they also constitute more than 90% of the total.<sup>49</sup> It can be seen that in Chinese characters, picto-phonetic compounds have strong vitality and reproduction potential. Below are some examples of the evolution of picto-phonetic compounds listed in Li Fan’s book:<sup>50</sup>

48 The text images of the Small seal scripts are from Li Leyi 1999, 165 (江) and 124 (河).

49 Li Fan 2001, 74.

50 Ibid., 82.

| Oracle  | Bronze  | S.-seal   | Official  | Regular   | Simplified |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|
|  |  |  |  |  | 鸡          |
|  |  |  |  |  |            |
|  |  |  |  |  |            |
|  |  |  |  |  |            |
|  |   |  |  |  | 丑          |
|  |  |  |  |  |            |
|  |  |  |  |  |            |

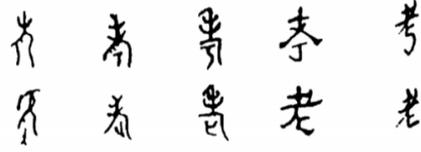
4.1.5 Derivative cognates (*zhuanzhu zi* 轉注字)—the characters which provide mutual explanation.

This category remains a puzzle. *Shuowen Jiezi* uses “老” (aged) and “考” (original meaning: aged) as examples to illustrate what the derivative cognates are. The oracle bone inscription form of “老” is written as ; which looks like an old man with a cane in his hand. The original meaning is also aged. Later, the pronunciation of this character changed. To reflect this change, the sound symbol “考” (*kao*) was added to it, thus the font became “考”. “老” and “考” have the same radical “耂”; they were synonymous at first, but later evolved into two Chinese characters with different meanings.

Many scholars believe that the derivative cognates and phonetic loan characters are both methods of using characters, not methods of creating characters. Even Xu Shen himself in his *Shuowen Jiezi* did not indicate which characters belong to the derivative cognates. He only gave the example of “老” and “考” to illustrate how they can mutually explain one another. The evolution of these two characters is as below:<sup>51</sup>

51 Li Fan 2001, 84.

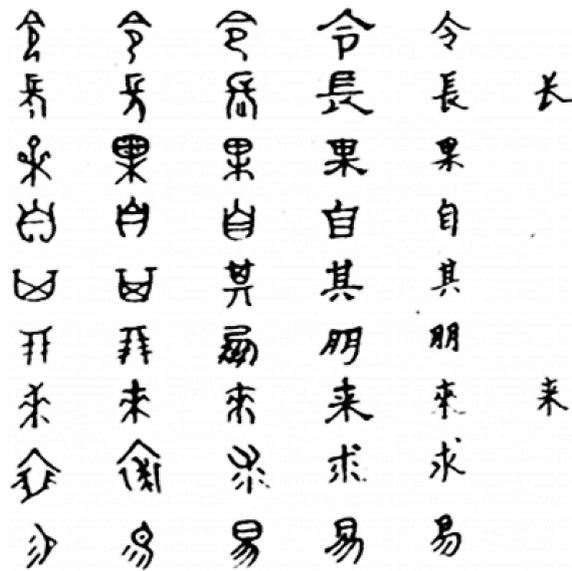
Oracle Bronze S.-seal Official Regular



#### 4.1.6 Phonetic loan characters (*jiàjiè zì* 假借字)

*Shuowen Jiezi* uses “令” (order) and “長” (long) as examples to illustrate what the phonetic loan characters are. We can see the evolution of these two characters from the picture below (the first line is “令”, and the second is “長”):<sup>52</sup>

Oracle Bronze S.-seal Official Regular Simplified



New words were eventually generated in the language, and they had to be documented. In order not to add too many new characters, selecting certain

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 88.

characters with the same sound from the existing words to record a new word was preferred—and the phonetic loan characters appeared.

There were basically two types of phonetic borrowings in Chinese palaeography. The first type were the characters used for recording the phenomena for which characters “originally did not exist” (*ben wu qi zi* 本無其字)—most phonetic loan characters belonged to this type. The second type was called “the character originally existed” (*ben you qi zi* 本有其字)—phonetic borrowings were used though a character for writing a given word already existed. In the common practice of scribes, a phonetic loan was preferred.

The oracle bone inscription shape of “令” in the above picture looks like this: on the top is a pictogram of a large roof, and on the bottom is a man sitting on his knees (ancient manner of sitting), who seems to be giving orders to others in the house; thus the original meaning of “令” is to issue an order. Later, it was borrowed and used in words with the same pronunciation, such as “縣令” (county magistrate) and “太史令” (court historian); it was also used as “to make people to do something”, such as in “令人憤怒” (make one feel angry), “令人愉快” (make sb. pleased), “令人敬佩” (admirable), etc.; further it was borrowed as a respectful word, such as in “令尊” (your respected father), “令堂” (your respected mother), “令兄” (your respected elder brother), “令妹” (your respected younger sister), “令郎” (your respected son), “令愛” (your respected daughter), and so on.

The oracle bone inscription and the bronzeware inscription image of “長” in the picture above is like a person with long hair holding a cane. The original meaning is long-distance or long-term; for example: “山高路長” (mountain high and road long), “細水長流” (long flowing water), “長途汽車” (long distance bus-coach), where it is pronounced as “*chang*”. Later “長” was borrowed as a designation for people whose status is higher than that of ordinary people, such as: “縣長” (county mayor), “市長” (mayor), “家長” (parents), “兄長” (elder brother), where it is then pronounced as “*zhang*”.

There were numerous phonetic loan characters in the history of the evolution of Chinese characters, such as the following examples. “我”, which was shaped in oracle bone inscriptions as  with an original meaning of “weapon”, was later borrowed as the first-person pronoun “I”. “自”, which was shaped in oracle bone inscriptions as  with the original meaning of “nose”, was later borrowed to mean “從” (from). And “北”, which was shaped in Oracle Bone inscriptions as 

with the original meaning of “people turn their backs to each other”, was later borrowed to mean “北方” (north).<sup>53</sup>

As seen in the previous text, the ancients did not create the categorization of “six [categories] of characters” (*liu shu* 六書) first to afterward create characters to adapt to these categories, rather later generations analysed the structure of existing Chinese characters and outlined the six methods of creation of characters.

#### 4.2 The determinatives (*bu shou* 部首) of Chinese characters

The concept of determinatives was first proposed by Xu Shen in *Shuowen Jiezi*, and he recorded a total of 540 radicals and named them *bu* 部 (the category).<sup>54</sup> Since then, Chinese dictionaries have generally used radicals to compile Chinese character categories. The number of radicals was reduced to 214 in *Zibui* 字彙 (*Collection of Characters*)<sup>55</sup>—a dictionary edited by a Ming Dynasty scholar Mei Yingzuo 梅膺祚 in 1615. *Zibui* used the “radical-and-stroke-count” method to arrange characters under each radical in an increasing order of their number of additional strokes. This method was also adopted by the prestigious *Kangxi zidian* 康熙字典 (*Kangxi Dictionary*); the compilation was ordered by the Kangxi Emperor of the Qing dynasty in 1710 and was published in 1716. The 214 radicals were named as “*bu shou* 部首” in *Kangxi Dictionary* for the first time, therefore, “部首” is also known as Kangxi radicals today.<sup>56</sup> The term *bu shou* can also be translated as “indexing component” or “meaning part” because it always represents the meaning indicator part of the character.

Mastering radicals is the knack for memorizing Chinese characters. This is also a very logical way to learn Chinese characters because Chinese characters in the same radical are usually related by some common features; for example, *jian* “建” (build or establish), *ting* 廷 (the court of a feudal ruler), and *yan* 延 (stretch or

53 The text images of the oracle bone inscriptions above are from Li Leyi 1992, 352 (我), 492 (自) and 9 (北).

54 Wilkinson 2013, 74.

55 See Zhou Youguang 2003.

56 Wilkinson 2013, 74.

extend) belong to the same radical “廴”, which is a pictographic font of the winding corridor of an ancient building, thus the characters with “廴” are always related to “building”, “twisted (or zigzag) road”, “long term”, and so on. In another example, “過” (*guo*, to pass), “達” (*da*, to arrive), “進” (*jin*, to enter), and “邁” (*mai*, step or stride) are made of the same radical “辵”, which is like the shape of a walking person, therefore, the characters with “辵” are usually related to “go”, “walk”, and “come”.

Most of the radicals came from pictograms. Pictograms have a strong potential in deriving new characters.

### *Conclusion*

In Chinese tradition, the creation of the Chinese script was rooted in the legendary hero Cang Jie, a Scribe of the Yellow Emperor. In the eyes of men of letters of the later generations, this legendary figure represented the golden age of Chinese civilization and the era when words (characters) had the right meanings and truly corresponded with what they denoted. Later, in the course of time, the shapes and meanings of Chinese characters became corrupted, and the script and characters as such gradually lost their original truthfulness.

This story was recorded by many prominent scholars, philosophers, historians or linguists across the centuries, and it was also particularized in the first major dictionary and monumental grammarology book *Shuowen jiezi* compiled around 100 AD. This work was the first systematic linguistic elaboration of the relationship between the internal organization of graphemes and their linguistic realizations. However, as various modern scholars believe, the main and most important ambition of this *opus magnum* was not to spot and describe the possible etymologies of Chinese characters, but rather the standardization of the writing system (Xu Shen, the author, seems to have primarily intended to communicate the meanings of newly discovered old Confucian texts written in orthographically different characters). Other important motivations were the compilation of a reference book for writing and a teaching tool for the study of the Chinese characters that people had to master in order to become scholars, scribes, or historians.

Probably with this in mind, Xu Shen made the first radical categorization of Chinese characters and grouped them into a system of 540 determinatives (radicals), components of characters indicating meaning, and his criteria seemed to be based primarily on what he thought was useful for the purpose of organizing characters, and not strictly that of their meanings. Also, for the first time (as far as we know), he provided a more detailed and comprehensive elaboration of an older classification system of six categories of Chinese characters according to the method of their creation (*Jiu shu*). However, as later linguists showed, the six categories of characters were a problematic system, since many examples provided in the dictionary representing the given six categories were proved etymologically incorrect.

In Chinese tradition, *Shuowen jiezi* has always served as a prominently authoritative source of reference when seeking the etymologies of Chinese characters. Countless generations of Chinese men of letters referred to it in order to provide the true meaning of characters. However, as modern scholarship has shown us, *Shuowen Jiezi* was not a text that provided genuine etymologies, but rather gave us what we may label as “orthographic” etymologies of Chinese characters.

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# “Family Precepts” (*jia xun* 家訓) as the Instructions of Early Tang Emperors

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*Abstract* The time of the Tang dynasty (618–907) gave a number of significant works devoted to the ideology and practice of the administration of the state. Among them are writings on the problems of rulership attributed to the early Tang Emperors Taizong (627–649), Gaozong (650–683), and Empress Wu Zetian (684–704). The treaties written in the name of them—*Golden Mirror* (*Jin jing* 金鏡), *Rulers for Emperors* (*Di fan* 帝範), *Heavenly Instructions* (*Tian xun* 天訓), and *Rules for Subordinates* (*Chen gui* 臣軌)—represent the “family precepts” (*jia xun* 家訓) or the distinctive genre of the “imperial family precepts” (*huangdi xun jie* 皇帝訓誡), which came into being specifically during the early Tang era. The main purpose of writing of these works was to pass on to the descendants on throne the principles of a new style of imperial rule. It was of utmost importance for the rulers of recently reunified country to consolidate political elite and to rethink the political and social role of that in power—emperor, his heir and kin, dignitaries and functionaries. Alongside with classics and historical writings the “family precepts” were also used as teaching materials in China in antiquity and the Middle Ages.

*Keywords* China, early Tang Dynasty, Tang Taizong, Tang Gaozong, Empress Wu Zetian, emperor’s instructions, family precepts (*jia xun* 家訓)

## *Introduction*

The time of the Tang dynasty (618–907) was a period when Chinese civilization flourished and shone as never before. Highly important testimony to the splendour of the era has come down to us in the form of unique and inimitable works of scholarship, art, and thought. Among the last are significant writings devoted to the ideology and practice of the administration of the state (*zhi guo* 治國) and the “pacification of the Celestial Empire” (*ping Tianxia* 平天下), a topic

that occupied a major place in Chinese social thinking. The early Tang emperors sponsored large programs of canonical scholarship to produce standardized texts of and commentaries on the Confucian classics. They had also supported a massive translation program to produce Chinese versions of Buddhist literature, Nestorian (Jingjiao 景教) scriptures,<sup>1</sup> and the compilation of a series of literary anthologies and encyclopaedias. At the start of the Tang era, celebrated social and political instructional works were produced by Wei Zheng 魏徵 (580–643), Yu Shinan 虞世南 (558–638), Yao Silian 姚思廉 (557–637), Kong Yingda 孔穎達 (574–648) and others, while dynastic histories were compiled on the rulers' orders. In 705, Wu Jing 吳兢 (670–749) presented to the throne his work the *Essentials of Government of Zhen-guan Period* (*Zhen-guan zheng yao* 貞觀正要) with a presentation of “exemplary” conversations between Emperor Taizong (627–649) / Li Shimin 李世民, 599–649) with officials on a broad range of matters in domestic and foreign policy.

#### *The Early Tang Emperors' Instructions*

It was specifically during the early Tang era that the distinctive genre of imperial family precepts (*buangdi xun jie* 皇帝訓誡) came into being. The authors of these works are considered to have been Tang monarchs who sought to pass on to their descendants and preserve for the sake of the dynasty's “eternal rule” (*wan sui* 萬歲) the principles of administration that they had introduced. In 628, Taizong expounded his political agenda in the work entitled *Golden Mirror* (*Jin jing* 金鏡). In 648, he presented his son, the future Emperor Gaozong (650–683) with the manual *Rules for Emperors* (*Di fan* 帝範). In imitation of *Di fan*, in 675 Empress Wu Zetian (684–704) composed the treatise *Rules for Subjects* (*Chen gui* 臣軌) directed at senior officials. The subsequent history of *Di fan* and *Chen gui* was not straightforward. *Chen gui* was believed lost from the time of the Southern Song (1127–1279), before a complete version of it was discovered in Japan (Twitchett 2003, 36; Franke 1982, 180). *Di fan* was also lost in part during the Song era, and

1 For Nestorians in China see Ye 2008a and 2008b.

only recovered in 1326 by the scholar and commentator Wu Lai 吳萊 (1297–1340), who discovered a complete text of the work in Yunnan province (*Si ku quan shu jianming mulu*, 343). While working in the *Bibliothèque Nationale de France* with the collection that Paul Pelliot (1878–1945) had brought from Dunhuang, the outstanding Chinese scholar Wang Zhongmin 王重民 (1903–1975) discovered an extensive fragment containing a text of a didactic nature that he identified as part of the lost family manual of another Tang emperor, Gaozong—*Heavenly Instructions* (*Tian xun* 天訓), compiled in 657 (Wang Zhongmin 2010, 188–190).

The early Tang imperial precepts that have come down to us display similarity in terms of style, categories and genre. Taizong's *Jin jing* and *Di fan*, Gaozong's *Tian xun*, and Wu Zetian's *Chen gui* are written in the *pianwen* 駢文 prose style of rhythmic couplets with lines of either four or six syllables (characters). The chapter titles within them also conformed to the paired structure of the genre, consisting of two syllables.

The *Golden Mirror* was written and distributed among the court dignitaries soon after Taizong ascended the throne in 626. In a still tense political atmosphere after the Xuanwu Gate Incident, when he killed the rightful heir, his elder brother Li Jiancheng 李建成 (589–626) by his own hand, young Taizong set out his ideas about the mission of an ideal emperor, his relationship with the ministers and subordinators. In fact, the *Golden Mirror* represented Taizong's political program, and looked as a prescription he addressed to himself. The heroic military commander, Taizong in his treatise pointed on the importance of the civil way (*wen* 文) and tried to assure his surroundings that the *wen*-way would soon predominate over the military (*wu* 武) way in his governing of the empire.<sup>2</sup>

The *Rules for Emperors*, the second of Taizong's main writings on the role of the emperor was produced twenty years after the *Golden Mirror*, summarized his experience on successful reign and was addressed to that time heir-apparent Li Zhi 李治, future Gaozong. Twelve sections (*pian* 篇) of four chapters (*juan* 卷) of the *Rules for Emperors* represented the main principles, which Taizong viewed as the key-stones for the supreme authority: chapter I: (1.1) The Entity of the Ruler

2 Emperor Tang Taizong's *Jin jing* was first translated into the Russian language by Anton Vladykin (1757–1812) in 1805 (see: Archive of Orientalists of the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences, fund 88, unit 6, ff. 19r–26v). For the English translation see Twitchett 1996: 18–33.

(*Jun ti* 君體); (1.2) Enfeoff Relatives (*Jian qin* 建親); (1.3) Seek for Sage-Worthies (*Qiu xian* 求賢); chapter II: (2.4) Examine Carefully Candidates for Offices (*Shen guan* 審官); (2.5) Accept Remonstrances (*Na jian* 納諫); (2.6) Dismiss Flatterers (*Qu chan* 去讒); chapter III: (3.7) Guide against Excess (*Jie ying* 誠盈); (3.8) Esteem Frugality (*Chong jian* 崇儉); (3.9) Rewards and Punishments (*Shang fa* 賞罰); chapter IV: (4.10) Give Due Attention to Agriculture (*Wu nong* 務農); (4.11) Review Preparation for the War (*Yue wu* 閱武); (4.12) Honor Civil Culture (*Chong wen* 崇文).<sup>3</sup>

The full title of Gaozong's *Tian xun* is *Yuan shou, qian xing, wei cheng, gugong lun* 元首前星維城股肱論 (The Discourse about the Ruler, His Heir, Ruling Clan and Counselors). This text was obviously lost after the Song period (960–1279) and was subsequently discovered only among the manuscripts of the Dunhuang Cave Library. From this apparently large work only four sections (*pian*) survive: sections 20–23, but of these sections 20 and 23 are incomplete. Section 20 is devoted to the virtuous conduct of rulers towards their families, it states that the harmony in the ruler's family is a condition for harmony and peace in the country. Section 21 entitled “The Genuine Rectitude” (*Zhen zheng* 真正) says that the essence of true rectitude manifests in different ways in the conduct of the ruler, the official and the ordinary man. Section 22 “The Pure Caution” (*Qing shen* 清慎) is devoted to the principle moral qualities of the official, i.e. unselfishness and disinterestedness. Section 23 “To Look into Responses” (*Zheng gan* 徵感) has come down to us incomplete. It states that the monarch's actions cause immediate response of natural forces. Virtuous rule causes favourable phenomena while cruelty and tyranny result in natural calamities. As “all disasters come from human race”, the harmonious state of natural forces, a condition of orderly labour, depends on the ruler's deeds.<sup>4</sup>

The *Rules for the Subordinates* by Wu Zetian became a part of her program of writing of the prescriptive texts providing models of appropriate conduct for various groups in Tang society: the ruler, the heir-apparent, royal princes, women

3 For the Russian translation of *Di fan* see Popova 1995: 42-73; for the English translation see Twitchett 1996, 50-92.

4 For the English translation of *Tian xun* see Popova 2013, 64-75.

within the Inner Palace, the agrarian population and women at large. *Chen gui* was related to the conduct of officials. The major preoccupation of its' ten sections (*pian*) concerns the nature of the relationship between sovereign and his ministers within the common body of the politic. The *Chen gui* reinforces this relationship on a very personal level by stressing the amalgamation of the concept of "loyalty" toward the ruler with that of "filial piety", or "filial obedience" within the family (Twitchett 2003, 73).

The significance of relations between the ruler and his dignitaries increased significantly in the political ideology of the Tang dynasty. The dialog between the emperor and his enlighten and high intellectual councillors became a major impetus for the government of the state. At the same time government began to be seen as a morally motivated, but a rational activity aimed at the achievement not of abstract peaceful stability (*taiping* 太平, *anding* 安定), but definite specific results. Tang ideology expended great efforts in the search for logical means of understanding politics, on the development of categories and concepts that might correspond in full measure to the new level of understanding of power and the administration of the state. The tendency, inherent in Chinese ideology since ancient times, to find a rationale for current political decisions in the events of past history acquired a more definite pragmatic character. The status-related tasks of those in power—the emperor himself, his relatives, senior officials and functionaries—were concretized considerably. The propagation of "imperial family precepts" under the early Tang was also bound up with a new style of imperial rule.

#### *The Tradition of Writing "Family Precepts" (jia xun 家訓) in China*

The tradition of writing "family precepts" or "domestic homilies" (*jia xun* 家訓, *jia jiao* 家教) has a long history in China.<sup>5</sup> Chinese researchers date its appearance

5 One of the earliest uses of the expression *jia xun* 家訓 come in the "exemplary" biography of Bian Rang 邊讓 (died 193 AD), section "Examples in literary composing" (*wen fan* 文範) in the *Hou Han shu* 後漢書 (*Book of the Later Han*) which contains this passage: "The official conducting the debate (*yilang* 議郎) Cai Yong 蔡邕 (132–192) greatly respected [Bian Rang], contending that [he] deserved

back to deep antiquity, to the period from the mythical emperors to the Qin 秦 dynasty (221–207 BC) and identify it with the didactic pronouncements of ancient rulers and sages regarding relations within the clan and the narrower family that are scattered through canonical works. The very earliest of the “family precepts”—*Ji Dan jia xun* 姬旦家訓—is attributed to Zhougong 周公 (Duke of Zhou) Shu Dan 叔旦, a younger brother of Wenwang 文王 (1112–1050BC). While “family precepts” (*jia jiao*) could not have been an established “genre” at that time, the rich seam of Chinese philosophy and social thinking from the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (8th–3rd centuries BC) provided them with moralizing maxims

a position higher and recommending [him] to He Jin 何進 (died 189AD) stated: ‘I know that as soon as [your] military headquarters was established, [you] started to gather selfless and brave, grey-haired and meritorious men from everywhere that they might serve as a mirror [for you]. Yet, although talents have already been assembled in the Western Imperial School (Xi yong 西雍), [they] exist in large numbers in the state offices as well. They are in plenty. Still, I, unwise, see that the lingshi 令史 of Chenlü County Bian Rang 邊讓 is an exceptional talent, perspicacious and wise, [he was] orphaned at a young age and did not [as yet] fulfil the family precepts (bu jin jia xun 不盡家訓).’ (Hou Han shu, ch. 110.70, 11a–11b).

Cai Yong 蔡邕 (132–192)—a political figure, writer, calligrapher and musician of the Eastern Han era (25–220).

He Jin 何進 (died 189 AD)—a mighty military commander and official of the late Han period. He participated in putting down the Yellow Turban Rebellion (184–204) and in his final years served at court as a Grand Mentor (Taifu 太傅).

Western Imperial School (Xi yong 西雍)—a high school situated in the capital Chang’an under a number of Chinese dynasties in antiquity.

Chenlü County Chenlüjun 陳留郡—the name of a region in ancient China, located in present-day Henan province, around the city of Kaifeng; established under the Western Han (206BC–8 AD), existed through until the Sui (581–617) dynasty.

Bian Rang 邊讓 (died 193)—a senior official and Confucian in the Eastern Han period, famed for his talent as a polemicist.

and approaches to the interpretation of historical precedents for centuries to come.<sup>6</sup>

In recent times, *jia xun* have been studied very productively in China, with the publication of monographs, dissertations and papers examining such works with regard to their cultural influence on society, their content and structure (see Zhao Yufeng 2017; Yan Mengya 2018).<sup>7</sup>

The overwhelming majority of Chinese scholars identify five stages in the evolutionary history of "family precepts": (1) nascence (*faren* 發軔)—from earliest times to the Qin dynasty; (2) the period of development (*fazhan* 發展)—the time of Western and Eastern Han, the Wei (220–264) and the Six Dynasties (220–589); (3) the mature period (*chengshu* 成熟) under the Sui (581–617) and Tang; (4) heyday (*dingsheng* 鼎盛) under the Song (960–1279), Yuan (1271–1368), Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911); (5) the period of transformation (*zhuanxing* 轉型) covering modern times and the present day (Yan Mengya 2018, 235–236). The determination of the time frame for the nascence period does not as a rule arouse any doubts among researchers into the genre, although on the whole certain divergences do occur in the periodization. A number of Chinese scholars term the second stage as "the period of formation" (*chengxing* 成型) and confine it to the time of Han and the Three Kingdoms (220–280), while defining the third period of "maturity" (*chengshu* 成熟) as spanning the time from the Wei and Jin (265–420) and including the Sui and Tang. They reckon the "flourishing" (*fanrong* 繁榮) took place under the Song and Yuan, while the Ming and Qing eras are sometimes defined as the period of "the peak and decline" (*dingsheng shuailuo* 鼎盛衰落) (Zhao Yufeng 2017, 98).

- 6 The earliest mention of the "Dao-Way of the family" (*jia Dao* 家道) appears in a commentary on the "Household" (*jiaren* 家人), 37th hexagram of the *Book of Changes (Yijing)* (Xu, Shaojin and Chen, Yanbin 2011, 38): "People [living as one] family have a strict ruler and the father and mother are considered [to be such for them]. A father [should] be a father, a son [should] be a son, an elder brother [should] be an elder brother, a younger brother [should] be a younger brother, a husband [should] be a husband, a wife [should] be a wife. And then the Dao-Way of the family will be straight, and if [everything] is in order in the family, then the Celestial realm will flourish (Yijing tong zhu, ch. 2, 58).
- 7 This is being encouraged to no small extent by the course proclaimed by the present leader of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping towards nurturing traditional family values.

The dictionary compiled by the modern Chinese researcher Di Bo 翟博 gives information on 220 authors of “family precepts” with a total volume of 400 sections of text (*pian*).<sup>8</sup> Works assigned to the “family precepts” genre are those whose titles include the expressions *jia xun* 家訓, *jia jie* 假戒, *jia shu* 家書, *jia gui* 家規, *jia jiao* 家教, *jia fa* 家法 and the like.

Well known at different times were the *Treatise on Domestic Commandments* (*Jie zi shu* 誡子書), which is attributed to Zhuge Liang 諸葛亮 (181–234), and the *Family Instructions for the Yan Clan* (*Yan shi jia xun* 顏氏家訓) by the official and man of letters Yan Zhitui 顏之推 (531–591). This latter work was epoch-making in the formation of the “family precepts” genre, having a significant influence on its development and structure. It is made of 20 sections on separate topics (*zhuān zhu* 專著), among which two main lines can be identified—administration of the household (*zhi jia* 治家) and administration of people (*zhi ren* 治人).

Researchers date to the Tang era two works found in the Dunhuang Library—*Family Precepts of Taigong* (*Taigong jia jiao* 太公家教) and *Family Precepts of Wuwang* (*Wuwang jia jiao* 武王家教) that are both attributed to rulers of ancient times (Wang Zhongmin 2010, 219; Gao Guofan 1984, 64–75). In the period when the genre was in its prime, the great historian Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019–1086) wrote *Various Rituals for the Enlightenment of the Family* (*Qi jia za yi* 啓家雜儀), while the Qing-era Confucianist Sun Qifeng 孫奇逢 (1583–1675) drew up *Family Precepts from the Hall of Filial Respect and Amicability* (*Xiaoyutang jia xun* 孝友堂家訓).

Many important works of the “family precepts” genre were written under the Tang dynasty. Among them are Yuan Zhen’s 元稹 (779–831) *Book of Precepts for my Nephews* (*Hui zhi deng shu* 誨姪等書), Li Ao’s 李翱 (772–836) *Book of Direct Addresses to a Younger Cousin* (*Ji congdi zhengci shu* 寄從弟正辭書), Liu Pin’s 柳玘 (died 895) *Book of Warning to My Sons and Younger Brothers* (*Jie zidi shu* 誡子弟書), Li Shu’s 李恕 *The Lost Family Commandments* (*Jiezi shiyi*, 誡子拾遺) and Di Renjie’s 狄仁傑 (690–700) *Model for the Conducting of a Household* (*Jia fan* 家範).

The Tang period was marked by the flourishing of family precepts in verse (*jia xun shi* 家訓詩), with noted works being produced by celebrated poets of the

8 Zhongguo jia xun jingdian 2002 (digital resource: 中国家训经典\_百度百科 (baidu.com)).

time: *I Read to the South of the City Wall* (*Fu dusbu cheng nan* 符讀書城南) by Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824), *Again I learn the Art of War from Ancestors* (*You shi zong wu* 又示宗武) by Du Fu 杜甫 (712–770), and *I Am Sending My Nephew to Zhengzhou to Serve in the Army* (*Song waisheng zhengguan congjun* 送外甥鄭灌從軍) by Li Bo 李白 (701–762). The Tang era also saw the propagation of precepts directed at women (*nü xun* 女訓).

Family precepts acquired particular popularity in the Song era. They were translated into the languages of China's neighbours. A tradition of producing family precepts flourished in Japan and in the Jurchen and Tangut empires (Klimov 2022; Nie Hongyin 2020). Under the Ming and Qing dynasties, the so-called "divine precepts" (*sheng xun* 聖訓) by emperors circulated. In 1395, work was completed on *Precepts of the Founder of the Great Ming Dynasty* (*Huang Ming zu xun* 皇明祖訓), which reflected the basic political principles of the dynasty's founder Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 (1328–1398, r. 1368–1398). Subsequently, in the Qing era, almost every ruler left his descendants an extensive encyclopaedic manual for government, written in the "imperial precept" genre (*huangdi sheng xun* 皇帝聖訓). The emperors who wrote these instructions were concerned with specific aspects of administration: the principles of rulership, the daily routine of the imperial family, the organization of the palace guard service, legal proceedings, relations with neighbouring states, and so on.

### *Chinese "Family Precepts" as Teaching Materials*

Although addressed to members of nobility, young aristocrats, the family precepts were, nonetheless, used extensively as teaching materials throughout the Chinese empire in antiquity and Middle Ages. The inclusion of texts with demanding historical and political content in the curriculum of local schools was appropriate to the Chinese educational process, which aimed not only to teach literacy and basic knowledge, but also to cultivate moral qualities necessary to accord with the ideal of a noble man, a perfect functionary and statesman.

While in Europe the Greco-Roman approach has treated education mainly as a stage in preparing the young for integration into the adult community, the Chinese educational system has always focused on the concept of self-improvement, self-cultivation, i.e. *continuing education*, which knows no age limits,

so that the process of self-improvement, i.e. *learning*, can span the entire lifetime. The distinction introduced by Confucius between “learning for oneself” (*xue zhi wei ji* 學之為己) and “learning for others” (*xue zhi wei ren* 學之為人) (Lunyu, ch. 14 (14.24), 7b) reflected the self-sufficiency (personalism) and rigid social orientation that combined in the self-consciousness of a Chinese intellectual in ancient times. At the same time, both the nurturing of a personality conforming to the norms and preparation for a career in state service equally required mastering the principles of public administration. One result of the increasing complexity of the political system during the first centralized empires, was that education in China became the most important means of recruiting the functionary class. At the same time, education also retained a clear political dimension, being understood as personal self-improvement. Gaining an education was seen as an intermediate step towards performing an administrative function. “Perfect yourself so as to bring peace to the people (*xiu ji yi an baixing* 脩己以安百姓),” Confucius taught (Lunyu, ch. 14 (14.42), 15a). Education was treated as a prerequisite for governmental activity and was targeted also on upbringing in morals, which were necessary to encapsulate the ideal of sage (*sbeng* 聖), gentleman (*junzi* 君子), superior person viewed as a perfect official, statesman, chancellor, ruler. For Confucians, the highest goal for education was to prepare students to be internal sages and external rulers (*sbeng nei wai wang* 聖內外王). According famous statement by Mencius, “everyone can become Shun and Yao” (*ren jie keyi wei Yao Shun* 人皆可以為堯舜) (Menzi, ch. 12 (12.22), 2a). This means that anyone can through learning reach the state of sage.

Therefore, learning viewed as self-improvement had also a clear-cut political dimension. In this regard in the learning material in China together with manuals on writing (*sbizi fenlei* 識字分類) and basic knowledge (*zbishi fenlei* 知識分類) included didactic (*pingxing fenlei* 品行分類, *dexing fenlei* 德行分類) with historical and political texts (see Cheng A-tsai and Chu Feng-yu 2002; Lu Qingfu 2008; Ceng Zhimin 2011).

### *Conclusion*

As any of "family precept", the imperial instructions by the early Tang emperors were written as moral and practical guides for the family successors and taught them how to govern a family (*qi jia* 齊家) and to rule a country (*zhi guo* 治國). The same ideas were key stones for the majority of the Chinese precepts, which were usually addressed to members of the nobility, real or potential officials. The main principles for the life of the future generations were based upon the lessons drawn from history.

The early time of the Tang dynasty produced changes in imperial political ideology, which were connected with the general aim to consolidate the state, social elite, high ranking officials under the rule of the Li clan. For the first Tang emperors it was of utmost importance to set up a dialog between a sovereign and the aristocracy matured in time of disuniting under the Northern and South Dynasties (*Nan bei chao*, 420-589). Keeping in mind this aim Tang Taizong, Gaozong, Empress Wu Zetian all wrote treatises on the problem of rulership, four examples of which survive.

The content of the "family instructions" corresponded to the main target of the education in China, which became the most important tool for upbringing the functionary class. Therefore, the practice of using the "family precepts", including the family instructions of the Chinese emperors, alongside with classic works, historical and political treatises, as teaching materials with a didactic purpose became quite common in the time of the Tang dynasty when the examination system flourished, and even later. The use of Tang Gaozong's instructions, as teaching material in a remote locality of Dunhuang was evidence of the high standard of formal education in Chinese Empire during the Tang dynasty.

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# Social Credit System in the People's Republic of China

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*Abstract* This article examines the social credit system in the People's Republic of China. The purpose of this article is to introduce to the reader and explain in detail what is hidden under the general name of social credit system, the history of the system(s), its characteristics, the roots of the whole idea of the system, its implementation, and its impact on ordinary people in China. The social credit system is a complex issue that has multiple aspects. One of the important features of this problem is the fact that several minor or pilot systems, whether state-run or commercial, come under the same umbrella of social credits. The article also focuses on the implementation of pilot systems in certain Chinese cities and areas, as well as the controversial use of blacklists and redlists, which have become a major target of criticism. Behavior that does not meet the standards and rules set out in the system can result in significant deterioration in citizens' daily lives. Using specific examples, in this article, I will show how the social credit system can limit the citizen operating within the pilot system.

*Keywords* China, social credit system, pilot studies, blacklist, score system

Given the current situation with the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus pandemic, which was first reported in the southern Chinese city of Wuhan 武汉, many topics have been side-lined. One of these topics is the introduction of the Social Credit System (*Shehui xinyong tixi* 社会信用体系) in the People's Republic of China (PRC), which has become an object of criticism, particularly in Europe and the United States. The system was supposed to be introduced nationwide in China in 2020. However, the pandemic dramatically changed the original plan and the system could not be implemented in the planned time. To date, several pilot studies have been launched in some cities and areas in China to test a scoring system based on the behaviour, actions, or decisions of individuals. Individual cities have been

testing these pilot systems on their inhabitants since 2014, but as it turns out, the conditions are not the same everywhere, and although this is a trial use of the system, it is having a significant impact on people's lives, both positively and negatively. To date, the basic structure has been developed, as well as the mechanisms describing the use of the Social Credit System, how it should operate, and in what form it should enter its next phase in relation to the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021–2025). There is ongoing discussion on what the system should look like as it is intended to affect China for many years to come. Moreover, it will also have a direct impact on foreigners and foreign companies in China. So, what exactly is the Social Credit System?

The Social Credit System (SCS) is an initiative of the Communist Party of China (*Zhongguo gongchandang* 中国共产党), whose main objective is to radically transform the governance of society and the economy in the country. Under this system, individuals, companies, as well as government offices and agencies are assessed on the basis of their credibility. Currently, there is no single SCS system, but there are several different systems managed not only by the state but also by local governments and commercial companies (Kostka 2018, 2). These systems are often very different and at present there is no coherent standardized SCS. We can say that the current phase of SCS is a kind of system of systems. What all pilot systems under the SCS umbrella have in common is that they have introduced a system of rewards and penalties to guide the behaviour and conduct of individuals, businesses, and other organizations in China. The differences between the government and commercial systems lie mainly in the methods and objectives. The most important difference is public access, as the government-run system is mandatory. It focuses primarily on citizens, organizations, government offices, and businesses in key sectors. Its aim is to improve compliance with the law and to create a mechanism to motivate people not to violate regulations and laws. It contains so-called red and blacklists. The red list includes persons, organizations and others who are rewarded for their behaviour, activities, or actions. Conversely, the blacklist consists of individuals who violate the rules. Next to the name of the offender you can see the specific punishment and the reason why the offender has been added to the blacklist (Hoffman 2017). Using these lists, individual citizens

or companies can decide who is trustworthy and who is not, which of course implies certain advantages or disadvantages, which I will point out later.<sup>1</sup>

The schemes managed by commercial companies are voluntary compared to state-owned companies. Citizens can participate in them, and thus can obtain the character of a so-called loyalty system. Private technology companies are endeavouring to evaluate the financial credibility of customers and promote the use of commercial platforms and consumption. The difference between private and government systems can also be seen in their technological approach; while commercial systems are technologically advanced and incorporate a comprehensive assessment model, government-run systems often only list penalties and rewards (Creemers 2018). We can search for the history of the creation of the SCS in terms of trust, or rather how this word is perceived in China. Under the word “trust”, “seriousness”, or “honesty”, we can imagine the integrity of *chengxin* 诚信, the trust of *xinyong* 信用 or the reputation of *xinyu* 信誉. In the history of China, the *chengxin* 诚信 was used to describe moral principles, in particular, individual behaviour and ethics (Engelmann et al. 2019, 424). At present, credit has a wide range of meanings from social, financial, or legal aspects. During the process of creating the SCS, credit was conceived and understood exclusively as a financial credit. Efforts to create a credit system in China date back to the early 1990s, when problems emerged in the commercial and financial sectors. The rapid development of economic reforms in the PRC has, among other things, rendered many Chinese firms unable to repay their debts, prompting the government to adopt reforms to address the problem of loans. This move was directly related to the creation of a credit system for the evaluation of companies that would receive loans, and thus can be considered as the germ of the SCS. In 2002, at the 16<sup>th</sup> CPC meeting, President Jiang Zemin 江泽民 stressed that China must create a social credit system that is compatible with the modern market economy (Jiang, 2002). In the same year, the government stated that the creation

1 According to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (*Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan* 中国社会科学院), the creation of a social credit system is a necessary step in a society that has turned away from moral principles and is no longer bound by the norms of good reputation and good neighbourly relations. “When human behavior is no longer associated with morality, a system must be used to limit it,” claimed the Academy (Hamilton 2015).

of the social credit system represents an important structural adjustment in the conditions of the market economy system (Engelmann et al. 2019, 425).

During this period, the government primarily dealt with the implementation of the credit system from the financial perspective. The creation of the SCS was initially the responsibility of 18 central government departments. Later some local governments, such as of Jiangsu 江苏 province, Zhejiang 浙江 province, or Shanghai 上海, were added to build a credit system at the local level. Later, state-owned companies, which investigate businesses on the market, were also invited (Hvistendahl et al. 2018). Xi Jinping 习近平 in 2014 said that one of the most important priorities for the political development of the PRC is a law-based government, as his predecessors had declared. All components of society, such as companies, government bodies, or individuals, must abide by the rules in order to ensure economic, social, and political stability (Wang 2019). In this broader political context, the main objective of the SCS has changed into a tool to enforce existing laws and rules. Social credit has gradually become an integral part of Xi Jinping's ideas and visions.<sup>2</sup>

However, in 2014, the government issued a document entitled "Building a social credit system" (2014–2020), in which credit is already considered not only as an important tool of the socialist market economy, but also as a tool suitable for the system of socialist governance (State Council, 2014). The government has defined the SCS in three basic aspects. The first aspect determined that the complete nationwide system of SCS should be ready in 2020, which means that the government is planning to monitor and manage the whole society using data as well as traditional practices. Every resident of China, organization, company, as well as government authorities will receive a unique social credit number that will be directly linked to their credit results or number of credits. Compared to credit systems in other countries, such as the United States of America (USA), China's system goes beyond financial rating, as it is intended to include not only an assessment of financial and commercial activities, but also an assessment of social behaviour. Therefore, this system is considered as an extensive system of social

<sup>2</sup> In January, the Central Committee of the CCP presented a vision for building a society by 2025, in which the importance of using the SCS as a tool for law enforcement is emphasized.

credits (Han 2014).<sup>3</sup> The second aspect is the expansion of the number of entities who work together to set up the system. China's largest technology and financial companies, such as Sesame Credit (*Zhima xinyong* 芝麻信用) from Alibaba company (*Alibaba jituan kongku youxian gongsi* 阿里巴巴集团控股有限公司), Tencent Credit (*Tengxun konggu youxian gongsi* 腾讯控股有限公司), or Baidu 百度, are building their own parallel systems and have gradually been involved in the creation process.<sup>4</sup>

The third change or aspect that the government came up with in 2014 is the establishment of several national platforms to collect, store, share and use data from the entire population. Already in 2018, the government had more than 10.7 billion data records collected by national and commercial systems (Fan 2018). The central government seeks to manage, monitor and, above all, prevent problems in the political, economic, and social spheres through the collected data. According to the authors of an article published in the journal *Policy and Internet*, the SCS is intended to form a national comprehensive population tracking system that will enable the central government to make decisions based on the data in the three areas mentioned above (Hvistendahl et al. 2018). The creation of a new information system to monitor, manage, and control the population, based on an assessment of the entire population of China, soon became the subject of criticism from abroad. In particular, critics stressed the negative impact on civil society, human rights, or religion. Among the many who disagree with the existence of the SCS is, for example, former US Vice President Mike Pence, who has described the SCS as an Orwellian system that is supposed to control virtually every aspect of human life.<sup>5</sup>

- 3 Some form of credit system is also known to us in European countries. These include, for example, a bank credit register, also known as a "blacklist" or a rating of taxi drivers from Uber or Bolt, who can be rated after each ride and thus get better credit and more earning opportunities.
- 4 For example, Alibaba company, in collaboration with the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) *Zhongguo renmin gongheguo guojia fazhan he gaige weiyuanhui* 中华人民共和国国家发展和改革委员会, has set up a commercial credit system, under which Alibaba has to share information about companies with bad credit that are on the blacklist. Baidu has also provided technology support to the NDRC (Meissner 2017).
- 5 The US Vice President is referring to the dystopian 1984 novel by the author George Orwell, in which the author portrayed a society where human destiny, thinking, behaviour and almost every

Philanthropist and millionaire George Soros finds the credit system in China appalling and disgusting. He added that the initiative of the Chinese government is unprecedented in history, with one party in the state deciding the fate of individuals (Gan 2019).

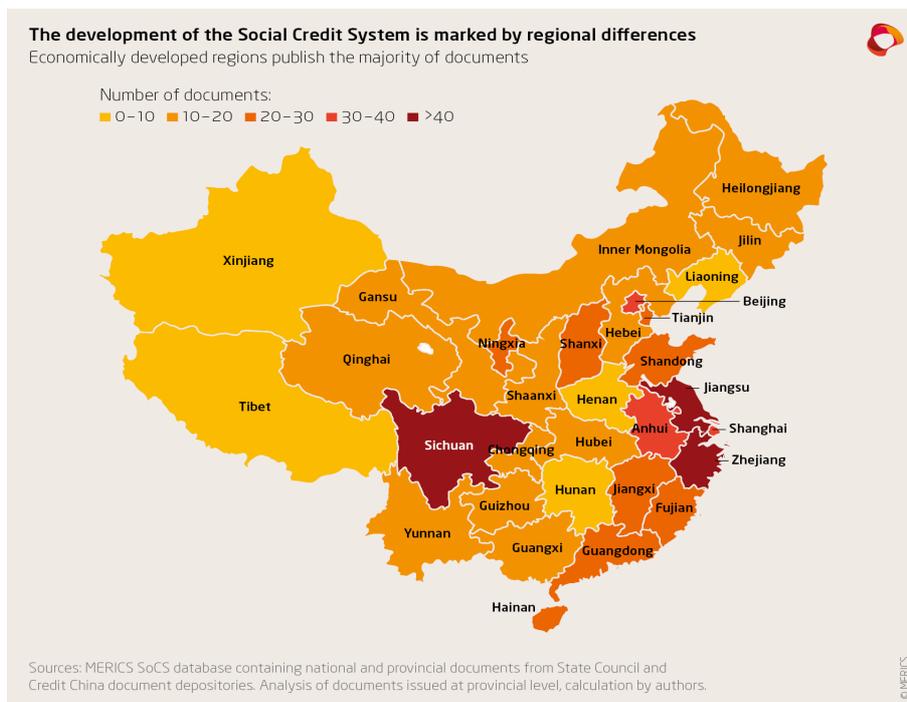
Of course, the cultural background of individual nations, as well as the political involvement on the other hand, may bring many critical voices to the creation of the SCS in China, as a similar social credit rating system does not yet exist in any country, specifically not in the form of scoring an individual based on their behaviour. However, it should be noted that China has historically used many methods and laws to control and monitor the population, such as the household registration *bukou* 户口 or the archival system *dang'an* 档案.<sup>6</sup> In particular, *bukou* aims to monitor the movement of residents, while the *dang'an* system registers personal information including ID card number, employment records, and education, and it is usually not accessible to the public. New technologies and the creation of SCS has made it easier for the central government to control and monitor individual activity.

Dozens of institutions are currently involved in shaping the social credit system. These include, for example, the government as an interdepartmental

step is controlled by the government. For violation of prescribed behavior, the citizen faces fines or imprisonment.

- 6 China's *bukou* system was introduced in 1958 as a modern way of registering the population. It was set up as part of the economic and social reforms of the early years of the communist regime. In 1985, the *bukou* system took a major step in manifesting itself in the fabric of everyday society through the provision of personal identity cards. In its current version, the Hukou fulfills three main functions: controlling internal migration, managing social protection, and preserving social stability (Boquen 2021). The second system *dang'an*, which involves compiling of the minutiae of one's work and personal information in an envelope that accompanies a person, was introduced in Mao's era. As a hallmark of Maoist socialism, *dang'an* reveals the inner, hidden bureaucratic workings of the state on the individual. It documents information about each employee's education (including reports from teachers), work history (including reports from employers), family background, political activities, achievements, mistakes, self-criticism, and so on (Yang 2011).

coordinator, the National Development and Reform Commission, or the People's Bank of China (Central Bank). Many of these institutions are responsible for implementing the social credit system in their respective policy circles and areas. These include, for example, financial regulators as well as supervisory authorities in the area of environmental protection, food safety or, more recently, prevention of epidemics and pandemics. However, despite the intensive drafting process for the SCS, there is currently no central repository of documents, which introduces chaos into the whole system. Thousands of documents can be found on the websites of individual ministries and local governments. The number of published regulations has risen since 2012, peaking in 2019, the year before the system was to be launched nationwide.



*Figure 1*

*Development of SCS in individual regions according to the number of regulations issued*

We have explained the background and the origins of Social Credit System (SCS), but the question remains, what does the Communist Party-led government mean by appropriate behaviour? Or how should an ordinary Chinese citizen, organization or bureau behave in order not to end up on the blacklist, or more precisely, to obtain sufficient credit and rating? How to gain points and, on the other hand, how can points be lost? Since the beginning of its operation, the social credit system has been aimed at individuals, companies, corporations, organizations, as well as government offices. Although the SCS is often presented in our geographical area as a system of punishing and rewarding individuals, the main target groups are businesses and the commercial sector. The aim of the system is to secure and enhance the credibility of services, production, retailers, and goods in China. This also applies to foreign companies doing business in China.

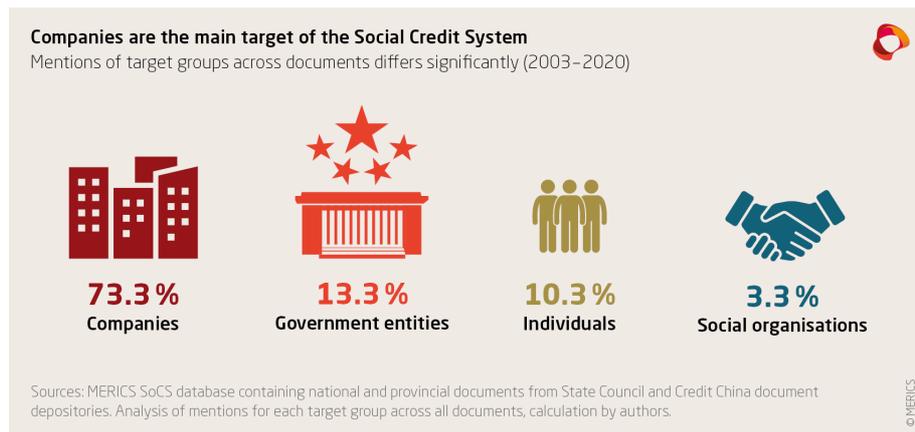


Figure 2

*Companies are the main target of the SCS (Brussee–Drinbausen 2021)*

One of the key components of the entire system is the identification number within the SCS. Each person, private company or organization will be given an identification number to be directly linked to the credit. This step in the development and building of the SCS has largely been achieved. The data that the

SCS collects on individuals and companies falls into four basic categories. These include basic information, information on administrative fines and permits, other violations of laws and regulations, and information on black and red lists. It is difficult to ascertain the exact criteria for how credits are distributed because there is no unified nationwide system of social credits. Currently, each existing system has different ratings.

In recent years, the government has started publishing information on a number of platforms about appropriate behaviour, activities that help companies and increase an individual's credit. We can also learn about these specific activities and deeds from the red and blacklists, where the names of those punished or rewarded are published, as well as their deeds. However, it should be mentioned that not all such lists are public, and it is often impossible to find out where the information and data about the citizens are located. Here are the examples of categories that will be included in the SCS after its widespread launching:

**Political activity and ideology.**

This category focuses mainly on monitoring negative attitudes and activities towards the central government. Criticism of the government or communist party on social media will result in a citizen or entity having their credit diminished. A citizen can lose or gain credits under this category depending on what books they read<sup>7</sup>.

**Participation in criminal, illegal, immoral activities and leading a perverted lifestyle.**

This category includes fraud, embezzlement, running red lights, selling contaminated food, smoking or playing loud music on the train, walking your dog without a leash, and more.

**Social commitment.**

Individuals can earn credits in this category for taking care of their parents, contributing to charity, or participating in volunteer activities. However, this

7 The government obtains the necessary information by monitoring the online space, collecting large amounts of data, and also using informants. These are mostly elderly people who are in charge of part of their city or village and survey their area to record positive or negative behaviour, activities and actions in their notebooks, which they then hand over to the authorities (Khsetri 2020).

category contains, among other things, a point that is often mentioned in the media as a tool of Orwellianization. It means meeting or maintaining friendships with untrustworthy people.

**The role of a productive citizen.**

According to the Communist Party, a productive citizen should participate in building socialist values and a modern economic society. For example, spending too much time playing computer games is considered negative behaviour in this category.

**Responsible consumer behaviour.**

The purpose of this category is to encourage positive economic behaviour of citizens to develop the right values. Spending money on unimportant products is seen as a negative aspect, and conversely, avoiding extravagant shopping will enable a person to earn credits.

**Responsible financial behaviour.**

This category is simply about paying bills on time.

The above categories form only part of the groups that evaluate and will be evaluating the entire population and organizations after launching the SCS nationwide. As I have already mentioned, the government will use information and data to use the SCS in four areas. These are government affairs (government officials and their activities), the judicial system (law enforcement), social activities (online space) and the commercial sphere. In addition, the SCS also applies to the environmental field, where the system evaluates the activities of companies and corporations towards the environment. According to official documents, it is assessed in four main categories, such as pollution prevention, environmental protection, environmental management, and social surveillance (Kshetri 2020). As mentioned above, different systems have different rules. This means that within some systems, companies may be automatically removed from the blacklist after a certain period of time. However, individuals or companies that have seriously infringed the regulations must either undergo redress, which often means paying up, or remain permanently blacklisted, and thus are unable to access certain advantages like other citizens or organizations.

It is important to say that not every entity will be included in the red or blacklist. If a company or individual demonstrates compliance with the party's

policy objectives and rules, has good credit records, and demonstrates good social responsibility, it does not need to be on the list. In fact, the government is building so-called green channels for these entities, which include benefits in terms of access to public services, optimization of administrative services, and reduction of transaction costs. In contrast, those who are blacklisted can expect penalties that will affect their daily lives in the social, political and financial spheres. Administrative measures in this case consist in restricting access to the public market, supervising management, restricting market interaction and purchasing luxury goods or services, or increasing rental prices etc. One example of how the social credit system can affect an individual's life in China is the experience of a mixed martial arts (MMA) wrestler Xu Xiaodong 徐晓冬 (Teon 2019). Xu came up with the initiative to challenge the masters of traditional Chinese martial arts to prove the dysfunctionality of their *wushu* 武术 styles. His idea was to reveal fake teachers and masters of Chinese *kungfu* 功夫. In his videos Xu defeats one master after another. These videos became very popular across China, and the response from the highest levels of the state was not long in coming. Xu began to openly challenge and question the abilities of prominent masters and teachers who were spreading *wushu* not only in China but also abroad. In May 2019, the court banned Xu from traveling around China by express train, and he was not allowed to buy tickets or book a hotel. The reason was that he refused to apologize to Chen Xiaowang 陈小旺, who is a highly respected master of the *taijiquan* 太极拳 style, known to us as tai chi. A few years ago, Chen Xiaowang won a duel with another fighter that was also broadcast on state television. After watching the match, Xu publicly called Chen a cheater. It must be acknowledged that Xu never lacked courage, but he was powerless against the stronger adversary. The court found Xu guilty of insulting Grandmaster Chen as a cheater, and he had to publicly apologize to him and pay a fine (in conversion) of 60,000 dollars. Xu refused to do all of this, so the authorities lowered his social credit, which, among other things, caused Xu to become virtually a prisoner in his own city. Besides other things, the lack of social credits means that a person cannot go shopping in a store, rent an apartment, or travel. These restrictions eventually forced Xu to publicly apologize (Atkin 2019).

During the creation of the SCS, pilot credit systems were created in several large and smaller cities. Of note are certainly the systems launched in Beijing 北京, Shanghai 上海, Guangzhou 广州, Shenzhen 深圳, as well as in Hangzhou 杭州,

Suzhou 苏州, Nanjing 南京 or Jinan 济南. Already in early 2018, some places in Beijing posted concrete information on traffic lights about people who had violated traffic regulations, such as that they had run a red light. In November of the same year, they drew up a plan for 2018–2020 that included, among other things, blacklists of people who are banned from travelling on public transport.

In January 2019, the Beijing municipality announced that it would begin testing a social credits system, which in practice means that people can receive negative credits, for example, for inappropriate behaviour on public transport (Zheng, 2018). In Shanghai, under the credit system, parents who already have adult children and have entered retirement age can sue their children in court for not taking care of them. The court can order them to take care of their parents, or they will be blacklisted. In 2019, Shanghai also implemented a credit system for dog owners. A similar system for dogs has been introduced in Jinan, where the dog owner loses points if, for example, the dog is not on a leash, the dog harasses other people, or the owner does not clean up the dog's excrement (Yan 2018).

In Guangzhou, South China, they focused, among other things, on the assessment and punishment of fraud. Anyone who cheats on national, provincial, or other school exams will receive a negative record (their credits will be reduced) in their profile. Also, those who misuse other people's public transport subscriptions or use fake IDs will receive a negative rating in the system. Since 2016, Suzhou has been registering credit system penalties for those who cheat at online computer games, make hotel or restaurant reservations and do not show up, don't pay mobile phone bills on time, or do not pick up a food order. Volunteering or donating blood, on the other hand, can improve a person's credit (Qian 2021).

An interesting example of the operation of the credit system is how it is used in Jiakuangmajia village 甲芥马家村 in Rongcheng 荣成市 district in Shandong province 山东. Each city has a different social credit system, different ways of evaluating or collecting data. Some pilot systems do not even use evaluation. In Jiakuangmajia village, no artificial intelligence system, no algorithms or other advanced technologies are used to record credits. All work is done manually using informants, which I have mentioned earlier in the text. The informant, usually an

elderly person, walks around the village every day and records the activities and behaviour of his fellow citizens on paper.

In the Rongcheng area or Jiakuangmajia village, residents receive grades ranging from the highest AAA to the lowest D. The grade depends on the number of credits earned. Every adult citizen, including workers who have come from other parts of China to work in the area, starts with 1000 credits. There are more than 200 ways to gain or lose credits. The highest AAA rating provides citizens benefits such as free medical check-ups, thirty cubic meters of free water a year, a 300-yuan discount on heating, and advantages when applying for bank loans. Those with a D rating may lose access to government subsidies. They also cannot apply for public administration jobs or face restrictions on applying for a bank loan.<sup>8</sup> Residents receive positive points for activities that contribute to the development of the community, such as building a new basketball hoop, buying a new TV and donating it to the village meeting room, or people can also get credits for their sons serving in the army and thus working for the country. Other activities for which residents can earn points include volunteering, donating blood, reporting counterfeit items, or attracting investment to a village or city. Each month, points are added based on the data collected by the informant to the personal credit score of the resident, who is involved in programs designed to improve life in the locality. The high credit score will allow residents to get more rice, cooking oil, and cash rewards, but their names will also be posted on a public board to serve as role model for other villagers (Gan 2019). On the other hand, credit scores of residents are reduced because of bad activities, behaviours such as throwing garbage on the ground, violating traffic laws, avoiding paying taxes, or refusing to take care of parents who no longer work<sup>9</sup>. The lack of uniformity and standardisation of SCS was also visible in some recent cases during the new coronavirus pandemic, when rewards and penalties varied from city to city, though the systems went by the same name. For example, in Zhengzhou, 郑州, all hospitals that treated patients for Covid-19 were placed on a red list, while in other

9 In a nationwide system, low social credit can cause unexpected difficulties, for example when someone wants to buy train or flight tickets. Statistics from the end of 2018 show that the purchase of a total of 17 million flight tickets and 5.4 million fast train tickets was blocked.

cities citizens were blacklisted for not wearing a mask (Brussee and Drinhausen 2021).

The establishment of a comprehensive system of social credits in the PRC is perceived negatively outside China, especially in the Western world. As mentioned above, the criticism from former US Vice-President or philanthropist George Soros is not unique. In addition to promoting law enforcement and ethical behaviour in Chinese society and economy, the researchers believe that the SCS is a powerful authoritarian tool as well (Hoffman 2017). According to Hoffman, the SCS is part of the CCP's broader plan to automate social management through new technologies. Using this mechanism of positive and negative evaluation, the government wants to create a citizenry that automatically participates in monitoring and assessing its own behaviour. If the CCP succeeds in implementing this system, it may use it as a powerful tool to control and combat dissidents (Kostka 2018, 4).

Nir Kshetri of the University of North Carolina believes that the SCS can be used by the Party to punish activities, behaviours, or actions that run counter to the ideology of the Communist Party of China. He goes so far in his allegations as to liken the SCS to the former Stasi secret intelligence service in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), which may be a harsh claim because we do not know how, to what extent and with what mechanisms the government will implement this system. It is specifically modern technologies that will enable authoritarian governments and dictatorial regimes to do things that, for example, were not possible during the period of operation of the secret services and police in the past. That is also why Kshetri thinks that the SCS can be used to track dissidents, religious groups, or individuals and organisations that do not suit the regime in the PRC (Kshetri 2019, 3).

What is the reaction of the Chinese people to the SCS and its use? According to an anonymous survey using a questionnaire, citizens of the PRC between the ages of 30 and 50 are most concerned about the data collection carried out by commercial companies in order to monitor the economic activities of the person concerned. People of these ages have saved a certain amount of money and therefore are sensitive to invasion of their privacy, as are those with higher education (Wang and Yu 2015, 786). What is remarkable, however, is that the SCS

has strong support among these higher-income, higher-educated populations living in urban areas. One reason for the high level of support may be the openness of these population groups to technological advances, which is seen at every turn in China, especially in large cities. Another important factor may be the benefits system, which is more accessible to residents of large cities than in the countryside. Less support for the credit system is expressed by citizens in rural areas (Kostka 2018, 19). One possible explanation for the lower support is the lower awareness of the rural population about the SCS, which derives from poorer access to the internet.

The PRC's social credit system can be criticized from several angles. It is indisputable that the system of rewards and punishments forces people to follow the model set by the government, and non-compliance is punished. The question is, why is it necessary to educate and grade adults who have already been educated in primary and secondary schools and in their own families? If this system is to be seen as a way of educating the population, of teaching them the correct behaviour, habits and punishments, so that they learn to behave as dictated by the society, or by the rules set by the ruling party, then it is a testament to the government itself, also to the governance of the state, and above all, to the school and education system, which is simply failing; it can also be taken as a self-criticism in its own right and a confirmation that the system that currently exists in China has cracks in it. Of course, it can be argued that prisons are full of educated and well-educated people. Breaking the law could happen to anyone, knowingly or unknowingly. But for that, there is a legal system in place that deals with adult offenses and misdeeds. Why then make a different system? If the PRC declares that their society functions harmoniously, then it seems to me that this whole social credit system with its overall lack of clarity is simply to keep an eye on the people and to have absolute control over the thinking of ordinary Chinese, so as to nip in the bud any criticism or attempt to disagree with or undermine the party's leadership. However, Samantha Hoffman of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute disagrees with this point of view. According to Hoffman, the central government is not interested in solving and controlling problems in society, but the real goal is to consolidate and expand the power of communist party of China (Kobie, 2019).

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# Experience, Imagination, and Explanation: What Is Special about Buddhist Soteriology?

Miloš HUBINA

*Abstract* In this paper, we want to offer arguments in support of the view that Buddhist soteriology is based on a set of culturally independent forms of alternate states of consciousness which are interpreted, however, in a unique way. The interpretation denies the substance-attribute structure of the world, the structure which informs our perception, thinking and oral expression concerning the world, and which all other religious traditions take for granted.

*Keywords* Buddhist meditation, experience, alternate states of consciousness, soteriology

## *Introduction*

As any other cultural phenomenon, Buddhist meditation, whether in its actual or prescriptive forms, is a product of historical events unfolding within the frameworks, described by psychologists, cognitive scientists, and other social scientists, which constrain their production, stabilization, spread, and variation. Unlike their technological and theoretical counterparts, religious products are not stabilized by their efficacy but by their intuitive and emotional appeal and, institutional support, rehearsal, and various secondary effects unrelated to their proclaimed primary function.

While this is accepted unequivocally about religious rituals, institutions, and doctrines, meditation, the Buddhist primary soteriological means doesn't always follow the suit. The historical motley of Buddhist spiritual techniques, their normative presentations and ontological justifications are being sieved for the

elements of true “liberating qualities and values” (Arbel 2016, 45) in the search for the liberating ur-experience produced, as those who pursue this search would like us to believe, by a unique mental practice, discovered by the Buddha, which, if properly replicated, will produce the same results, psychological, if not theological, everywhere.

The problem remains the same whether we speak of an individual living over two thousand years ago or an aggregate early Buddhist meditation. If we cannot say that the normative Buddhist texts actually capture the state of religious beliefs and monastic practices of any particular historical period, then why should we treat the Buddhist meditation manuals differently, as their disconnect from the actual practices and subjective experiences is much easier to envisage?

I am not arguing in favor of the constructivist/relativist position which identifies diverse cultural backgrounds with incommensurably diverse experiences, discounting the importance of the universal, bottom-up biological processes in forming experience (See Taves 2009, 56-87, 94, 99; also Forman 1990, 1999). Instead, I am taking seriously the perennialists’<sup>1</sup> (Forman 1990, 1999) idea that certain meditative practices lead to the progressive elimination or de-automatization “of the psychological structures that organize, limit, select, and interpret perceptual stimuli” (Deikman 1966, 329) and culminate in a “structureless”, i.e., “ineffable” experience of “pure consciousness”.<sup>2</sup> These structures include the cultural concepts as well as the unconscious cognitive processes representing the basic level of embodied consciousness. For instance, the image schemata (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 1989, Johnson 1987; see Taves 2009, 65), ontological categories (Boyer 1994, 2001; Boyer and Ramble 2001), or various neurophysiological structures responsible for perceiving the subject-object distinction (see, e.g., Austin 2000; Newberg and d’Aquili 2000).

1 From *philosophia perennis*. A perspective that some alternate states of consciousness can be independent of their cultural underpinning.

2 The so-called Pure Consciousness Event is “defined as a wakeful though contentless (nonintentional) consciousness” (Forman 1990, 8) and, as perennialists claim, reported by the mystics the world over. For constructivists, the notion of an experience unmediated by one’s cultural background is a contradictory notion.

In this context I will argue that to seek for the specifics of Buddhist soteriology on the level of experience is probably a misguided idea and that these should be discussed solely on the level of doctrinal discourse. Here the Buddha's teaching (P. *Dhamma*, Skt. *Dharma*) contests the framework which informs not only all known religious traditions but constrains the way we perceive, think, and speak about the world, namely, the substance-attribute structure.

There are two points to my argument. The first one, though not markedly original, draws on the fact that the Buddha described his liberating experience as “knowing and seeing” (P. *ñāṇa-dassana*) things “as they really are” (P. *yathā-bbūtaṃ*). He explicated this through the dictum of three characteristics of all existence (P. *tilakkhaṇa*): all things are without a discrete essence/substance, impermanent, and characterized by un-satisfactoriness (P. *anattā, anicca, dukkha*).

### 1 *Experience and Belief*

Though scholars may disagree on what counts as “experience” (Taves 2009, 58-59), it is clear that what is expressed by a universal proposition (*all* things are...) cannot be its direct object. We cannot “see” all things. A universal proposition can only be inferred in form of belief. This belief, to be sure, can then be “internalized” via connecting it with emotionally salient mental states.

Ilka Pyysiäinen, drawing on Damasio's notion of “somatic markers” (Damasio 1996) has elaborated this idea: somatic markers are emotions triggered by the notions they have been paired with, whether in the process of upbringing or through some accumulative or sudden, strong experience. Pyysiäinen proposes that various contemplative techniques manipulate the established cultural and cognitive structures (Pyysiäinen 2003, 131-133; see also Taves 2009, 64-66). This produces emotionally salient states, which encode any associated content, articulated or intuited, in episodic (related to one's personal past) memory as personal “experience”. Beliefs, on the other hand, are emotionally less salient and are encoded in semantic memory as objective facts about individuals or universals (Pyysiäinen 2003, 131-133). Any idea can be in principle associated with a somatic marker and borrow from it an “experiential” tone. I should also say that the associating process does not need to be intentional and conscious. And it is also viable to presume (*pace* constructivists) that no specific belief be attached to

emotionally salient “contentless” experience. The point I want to emphasize is that direct experience was not the source of the belief in the *anattā*, *anicca*, and *dukkha*. Rather, this idea was something contingent, attached to an alternate state of consciousness, discussed in more detail below, which, as a somatic marker, coded it in episodic memory as a form of personal “experience”.

How this particular idea came to be paired with a somatic marker is buried in the Buddha’s personal history. For all others who have experienced or seek to achieve this realization, the source is cultural learning. To re-enact the “liberating experience” thus doesn’t mean to follow some specific technique, but to attach, by whatever means, this particular general proposition to whatever affective state that makes it salient, internalized, “experienced”.

The second reason to avoid the “unique-path-to-experience” rhetoric is the very uniqueness of the Buddha’s teaching (P. *Dhamma*). The *Dhamma* is not an entirely unique meaning system. As a matter of fact, its soteriology follows the general pattern of ethical and knowledge-based liberation typical of the area of Magadha of that time (Baumard and Boyer 2017, Morris 2013). The Buddhist Dhamma is unique, however, in its ontological underpinning (i.e., *anattā*) which challenges not only the competing traditions, but the very structure that informs our perception, thinking and speaking about the world.

The uniqueness of the Buddhist soteriology consists in the fact that the Buddha’s teaching of *anattā* (substancelessness, no-Self), the cog of the Buddhist philosophy, denies the substance-attribute structure of the world, and instead asserts a network of interdependent phenomena (P. *paticca-samuppāda*, Skt. *pratītya-samutpāda*) none of which is ontologically prior to the other. This idea had posed a huge problem to the Buddhist thinkers, albeit never framed explicitly in this way, namely, how to communicate to the essentialist minds in the language with the subject-predicate structure that the world doesn’t have the corresponding substance-attribute structure.

The “essentialist mind” is the pre-conceptual expectation that all changing phenomena (attributes) are underlaid by something stable, even eternal (substance/essence), to which they belong and thanks to which they exist. Philosophical elaborations of this idea are based on the same intuition which makes even preschoolers believe that a disemboweled dog is not a dog even if it

still looks like one, but the innards removed of their outside cover, and looking nothing like a dog, still remain a dog and “do the doggy things” (Pinker 2009, 326).

The intuition also tells us, for instance, that despite all the changes, Peter is still the same person, even when he has “changed beyond recognition” or “is not himself.” And it also tells us that Peter is a human, despite all the differences that separate him from Michael and Laura. Philosopher Peter Strawson (2003, 22-34, 69-70) called the former a quantitative and the latter qualitative identity. In religious and philosophical traditions world over this “essentialist need” has been satisfied by concepts like soul, *ātman* (the true self, an ineffable appropriator of all perceptions, thoughts, sensations, attitudes); *brahman* (the universal self of the world); *prakṛti* (matter); *purīṣa* (soul); substance, essence, god(s); or atoms. They all point to the ultimate, irreducible, and unchangeable substrates and ultimate explanations of the world. In mystical traditions, they often represent the highest realities one seeks to realize and, if the theological dicta permit, to become one with. The Buddha vehemently denied such notions, as he attempted to invalidate the substance-attribute structure of the world, and declared that everything is *anatta*—“no-self” or empty “*śūnya*” (of substance, existence, inherent existence, etc.). The world is a painting without a wall.

Now, it is possible to presume that this unique view articulates the content of a special experience incommensurable with anything that humankind had experienced ever before, and that this experience had been brought about by a novel technique which in an utterly unique way (P. *ekayanamagga*) manipulates our cognitive architecture. But since a greater variation is to be expected on the level of words and narration than that of manipulation of unconscious cognitive structures, it will be prudent to take a view that a not utterly uncommon “ineffable” experience was paired with an original verbalized content. The similarities between Buddhist descriptions of the meditative attainments and their counterparts the world over as well as the ease with which meditative manuals assimilate, promote or discard once this then that element of the practice also support this conclusion.

To be sure, the Buddha might have expanded on the existing meditative techniques. As it seems, he suggested a practice of mindful observation (P. *sati*) to be applied to all human acts, including the profane ones which the mainstream practitioners wouldn’t consider proper for the lofty soteriological goals (Wynne 2007, 72). But this doesn’t imply that this novelty had an intrinsic quality leading

to a unique form of experience. And we shouldn't forget that imposing arbitrary distinctions, separations, and minute classification for solely sectarian or affective purposes is a standard religious strategy. It might have also motivated the exclusivist rhetoric separating the Buddhist meditative tradition from its contemporaries or distinguishing one Buddhist school from the other.<sup>3</sup>

## 2 *Shared Experiences, Contested Conclusions*

Before placing the Buddhist meditative experience in the context of general theory, let me address the criticism levied against the experimental studies of meditation and the attempts to produce trans-cultural models of alternate states of consciousness.

The problems start with the very definition of the term “meditation”. Meditation (P. *bhāvanā*) is not one thing but a complex training which involves a variety of techniques and accompanying proper contexts (Doctor and Tillemans 2013). The reproach for the neglect of such variables as prescribed ethical behavior, community support, controlled environment of monasteries and meditation centers, first-person exploration of the nature of the self and external perception (Lutz, Dunne, and Davidson 2007, 544) has often been justified. Treating specific practices, for instance, mindfulness, as “isolable from the social context” was “likely a mistake, because many of the experienced benefits of mindfulness practices, whether religious or secular, are inseparable from the social and

- 3 To give an illustration, Komarovski (2015, 31-32), discussing Robert Forman's concept of Pure Consciousness Event, for instance, writes, “Many Tibetan thinkers may also agree with Forman that such key experiences are free of ‘content’ in terms of having no objects, or that they ‘come from something inherent or prelinguistic in us.’ But those experiences are precisely the ones that those thinkers see as accessible only to their fellow Buddhists; their availability to anyone who did not undergo specific training and conditioning approved by them is simply out of the question. For example, were one to claim the possibility of realizing the lack of self/selflessness (*bdag med*, *nairātmya*) or the universal emptiness through such non-Buddhist techniques as contemplation of an eternal self or devotion to a creator God, such a claim would be dismissed as nonsensical.”

communal settings of the practice” (Thompson 2020, 121). Research on ordinary perception gives more legs to this criticism by showing how the seemingly negligible factors, such as active movement, or tacit thoughts and feelings affect our perception (Taves 2009, 109; Thompson 2020, 132; Wexler and Boxtel 2005)

The experimental studies, for their part, have been criticized for the “lack of statistical evidence, control populations, and rigor of many of the early studies. Further points were the heterogeneity of the studied meditative states, and the difficulty in controlling the degree of expertise of practitioner” (Lutz, Dunne, and Davidson 2007, 500). Some researchers might also be invested in the meditation communities’ spiritual claims (Andresen 2000, 19) and the research outcomes then become biased towards preferential reporting of the positive outcomes of the studied practices (Thompson 2020, 121; Coronado-Montoya et al. 2016)

These are serious issues that must be rectified in the subsequent research. But none of them, or their likes, have bearing on the broader methodological issues, namely, that the explanatory reductionism doesn’t imply the descriptive reductionism (Proudfoot 1985, 196-198; Taves 2007, 89-94), and, relatedly, that the importance of social, cultural, and various situational contexts for understanding meditation does not “mean to imply (and it doesn’t logically follow) that everything pertaining to awareness or consciousness is socially constituted (Thompson 2020, 138).<sup>4</sup>

Considering the morphology of the altered states of consciousness, probably the most influential model has been proposed by Robert K. C. Forman. Drawing on Roland Fischer’s cartography of meditative states (Fischer 1971) he elaborated on its “apophatic” side characterized by “emptying” the mind of the cultural and cognitive organizing structures. The process, according to Forman, culminates in Pure Consciousness Event (PCE) “defined as a wakeful though contentless (nonintentional) consciousness” (Forman 1990, 8). Repeated PCEs can bring

4 It should be noted that despite the discrepancy in results caused by the lack of standardized experimental design, the neurophysiological correlates of meditative states across traditions reveal certain shared patterns “primarily related to attention, absorption, and the reduction of stress and anxiety (Cahn and Polich 2006, 200-2001)” (Taves 2009, 82). Also, “With some important exceptions, most studies on Zazen or India yogic concentration practices have revealed an EEG signature similar to TM (Transcendental Meditation)” (Lutz, Dunne, and Davidson 2007, 536).

about a Dualistic Mystical State (DMS) in which the remnant of “pure consciousness” appears in one’s everyday consciousness as a “an unchanging interior silence that is maintained concurrently with intentional experience in a long-term or permanent way” (Forman 1999, 151). Forman says of his own experience of DMS that “It is as if what was me was now this emptiness” (1999, 150). Other traditions describe this interior silence as a disinterested “observer,” detached from one’s feelings, goals and intentions. Lastly, in the case of “extrovertive” mysticism, different from the “introvertive” traditions such as Buddhism, this silent core can eventually expand beyond one’s biological limits and lead to a Unitive Mystical State. (Forman 1999, 124-127, 194).

Each of these states brings about changes in our perception of the subject-object distinction. Importantly, this change can be equally well interpreted within or outside of the substance-attribute structure, i.e., either as the experience of no-Self (*anattā*) or as the realization of the true-Self. Here are some examples.

The Buddhist soteriological goal, *nirvāṇa*, is described as, or said to be immediately caused by “ceasing of conceptual proliferation” (P. *nippapañca*),<sup>5</sup> “attainment of cessation” (P. *nirodha-samāpatti*), cessation of conceptualization/perception and feeling (P. *saññā-vedayita-nirodha*), or non-discriminative knowledge (Skt. *nirvikalpa-jñāna*). This total cessation of discrimination (PCE) includes the distinction between Self and Other. And what Buddhists explain as an experience of *anattā* (see below), other traditions view as an experience of the undiscriminated Absolute underlying all worldly phenomena (for illustrations see Forman 1990; 1999, 11-30).

With regard to DMS, the Pāli canon distinguishes between “bodily” and “mental” feelings. Mental feelings pertain to the mind of ordinary people who are unable to distance themselves from bodily feelings and thus suffer twice (see SN. IV. 208, Bodhi 2000, 1264). The advanced practitioner, on the other hand, it says, “If he feels a painful feeling, he feels it detached. If he feels a neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling, he feels it detached (SN. IV. 208-209, Bodhi 2000, 1265). If Self is identified with the agency based on one’s own feelings, thoughts and attitudes

5 “But one who has abandoned proliferation, who finds delight in non-proliferation, has attained nibbana, the unsurpassed security from bondage” (AN. III, 294; Bodhi 2012, 870).

the detachment of DMS points, as Buddhists would claim, to *anattā*. Forman (1999, 149-151) notes that Meister Eckhart describes the silent core as “Nothing”, other traditions call it “self itself”, “non-localized sense of oneself”, “the true self” or “self-nature itself” as it is recognized by Zen Buddhists (Forman 1999, 150).

The experience can bear up to each of these arbitrary explanations, though the obvious tendency would be towards interpreting them in line with the substance-attribute structure.

### 3 *Substance-Attribute Structure and Buddhist Ontology*

Buddhist thinkers fought hard (not always with a success) the exigencies of our intuitions and language, to keep the substance-attribute structure at bay. They introduced various fundamental explanatory concepts which, as technical terms, explained their soteriology in the context of the substanceless world. Below, I have offered some illustrations or examples of this.

Space (Skt. *ākāśa*)

In the Sanskrit Abhidharmic tradition, space (*ākāśa*), is a concept which must be differentiated from the space of our ordinary experience, i.e., “element of space” (Skt. *ākāśa-dhātu*) or the geometrical space (Skt. *dis*). Together with the two forms of extinction: extinction without knowledge (Skt. *apratīsamkhyānirodha*) and extinction due to knowledge, (Skt. *pratīsamkhyānirodha*), i.e., *nirvāṇa* itself, this space is classified as an uncompounded (Skt. *asaṃskṛta*) reality. Our everyday world is compounded (Skt. *saṃskṛta*).

The association with *nirvāṇa* derives from the function of space. *Ākāśa* poses no obstacle to seeing things as they really are (Skt., P. *yathābhūtaṃ*), i.e., unhindered by the conceptual activity of the mind, parallel to empirical space which poses no obstacle to material objects: “Space is ‘that which does not hinder’” (AKB. I, 5c, La Vallée Poussin 1988, 59). And this unhindered discernment of reality is the primary soteriological goal:

Apart from the discernment of the dharmas, there is no means to extinguish the defilements (sic), and it is by reason of the defilements that the world wanders in the ocean of existence.

So it is with a view to this discernment that the Abhidharma has been, they say, spoken [by the Master]. (AKB. I, 3, La Vallée Poussin 1988, 57).

A contemporary author explains the nature of this discernment of reality, as follows,

For wisdom or insight to arise, the meditator must learn to suspend the normal constructive synthesizing activity of mind responsible for waving the reams of immediate sensory data into coherent narrative patterns revolving around persons, entities, and their attributes. Instead, the meditator must adopt a radically phenomenological stance, attending mindfully to each successive occasion of experience exactly as it presents itself in its sheer immediacy. When this technique of “bare attention” is assiduously applied the familiar world of everyday perception dissolves into dynamic stream of impersonal phenomena [P. *dhammas*, Skt. *dharma*s], flashes of actuality arising and perishing with incredible rapidity. (Bodhi 1998, xvii.)

Guenther explains that the three unconditioned realities are best understood as “inner factors of lived experience,” which “cannot simply be discussed or ignored as merely subjective, but play an important role in the individual's life-world” (Guenther 1976, 32). Alongside integrating PCE into the philosophical context, the concept of *ākāśa* thus safeguards against mistaking empty space (*ākāśa-dhātu*) for something existing independently of our experience—it is a part of our mistaken perception of the world. At the same time, *ākāśa*, being an “inner factor of lived experience” cannot be taken for a substance either.

#### Emptiness (Skt. *śūnyatā*)

Also the Mādhyamaka school explains *nirvāṇa* as “the thorough knowledge of existence” (YKT. 46; Lindtner 1990, 185), but the liberating knowledge amounts to the understanding of “emptiness” (*śūnyatā*): “Those who do not know (jñā-) emptiness will have no share in liberation (mokṣa)” (BV. 72, Lindtner 1990, 207).

Emptiness here is a technical term. It is what “emerges” in the place of substance when one realizes that all things are dependent for their existence on other things including the constructing, discriminating activity of our mind. They are “empty” of essence or “inherent existence” (Skt. *svabhāva*) and have only a “conventional” (Skt. *saṃvṛti*) existence. Since emptiness, space and pure mind are

phenomenologically indistinguishable, it is no surprise that we find them treated as synonyms:

Space (*ākāśa*), bodhicitta and enlightenment (*bodhi*) are without marks, without generation. They have no structure, they are beyond the path of words. Their mark [so to speak] is non-duality (*advaya*).

The magnanimous (*mahātman*) Buddhas who reside in the heart of enlightenment (*bodhimaṇḍa*) and all the compassionate [bodhisattvas] always know emptiness (*sūnyatā*) to be like space (*ākāśavat*) (BV. 46-47; Lindtner 1990, 199). Emptiness too had to be protected from being mistaken for substance or nihil. A famous example is the Heart Sutra's phrase which states that emptiness doesn't exist apart from form, it is not something that remains after form has disappeared: "form is emptiness; emptiness is form" (Lopez 1988, 19). More interesting, however, is the recursive concept of the "emptiness of emptiness," which strips emptiness of its own-existence (*svabhāva*) the way *ākāśa* does *ākāśa-dhātu*.

All phenomena's lack of inherent existence,  
Is explained as emptiness by the wise.  
That emptiness also,  
Is regarded as being empty of any essence.

The emptiness of that known as emptiness,  
Is known as emptiness of emptiness,  
And was taught to avert the fixation

Of those holding emptiness as real. (MVTR. VI, 185-186; Khyentse 1999, 298).

Operating, like space, on both empirical (*ākāśa-dhātu*) and meta-empirical (*ākāśa*) levels, emptiness is also an empirically observable fact that things are products of their causes and conditions, while, at the same time, this "fact", instead of being an intrinsic nature of inherently existing world, is itself "empty", i.e., it has a meaning only from our perspective; it is "conditioned" by our situation. And even more technical articulation of this recursiveness we find in the case of the last fundamental explanatory concept discussed here, consciousness (Skt. *vijñāna*).

Consciousness (*viññāna*)

The last of the schools representing the “three turnings of the Wheel of Dharma”, Yogācāra, explains *nirvāṇa* as “turning about of the basis” (Skt. *āśraya-parāvṛtti*), where the basis is the boundless, “unobscured and indeterminate” (TRM. 4, Anacker 2002, 186) consciousness (Skt. *viññāna*), called also “appropriating” or “store” consciousness” (Skt. *ālayaviññāna*).

Worried that their fundamental explanatory concept might be mistaken for an Absolute, specifically *ātman*,<sup>6</sup> the Yogācārins produced a sophisticated doctrine which explains *ālayaviññāna* as the source and, at the same time, the result of the world processes:<sup>7</sup> When the seeds (Skt. *bīja*) of all worldly phenomena stored in *ālayaviññāna* come to maturation, they produce the world of our everyday experience, i.e., as something existing out-there, independently of our mind. Acting on this presumption, we leave imprints (Skt. *vāsanā*) or seeds in *ālayaviññāna* from which the new illusions evolve.

This circular process is in more detail explained in the teaching of three “natures” or “aspects” of existence: 1. Things seeming to exist by themselves, independently of our mind, i.e., the imagined (Skt. *parikalpita*) aspect of existence. 2. Things understood to be dependent on the mind which produces everything, including the illusory subject-object distinction. This is the conditioned (Skt. *paratantra*) aspect of existence. 3. This knowledge of the conditioned nature of existence, however, cannot be the true nature of the world, because the concepts it employs—mind, causality, or dependence come from our everyday experience of the illusory (*parikalpita*) aspect of the world. Realizing this, one negates all constructs and schemata, and achieves the true grasping the reality (Skt. *Parinipanna*). This aspect is ineffable and, on the ontological level, it represents a recursive “turning about of the basis” (Skt. *āśrayaparāvṛtti*) brought about by

6 “The appropriating consciousness is profound and subtle indeed; all its seeds are like a rushing torrent. Fearing that they would imagine and cling to it as to a self, I have not revealed it to the foolish.” (*Samḍbinirmocana* Sūtra, III, 692c; Keenan 2000, 29).

7 See Vasubandhu’s *Triṃśikā* and *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa* (Anacker 2002).

internalization of the proposition that any concept or concept are “of this illusory world” and cannot represent its ultimate condition or source.

Behind all these technicalities and differences between them, each fundamental explanatory concept expresses the non-discriminative PCE. Linking this way the Buddhist philosophy with meditation, I don’t mean to imply that PCE has ever been anything close to a common experience among the monastics. Meditation has always been a concern of a minority, while most of the monastic community (P. *Samgha*) was preoccupied primarily with ritual, moral teaching, and perpetuating the tradition (Doctor and Tillemans 2013, 352; Schopen 1997, 81; Sharf 1995). Buddhist meditation manuals are neither individual auto-phenomenological reports nor collective products of dedicated “mind-scientists” spending their lives contemplating and sharing their experience in a controlled way with each other. Rather, they are well-intended attempts to make a sense of intricate ruptures in our everyday consciousness and the imagery they stimulate.

So called “formless attainments”, or steps toward the state of *saññāvedayitanirodha*, illustrate the point. These attainments traditionally constitute a fixed progression through the four “spheres”: the sphere of boundless space, consciousness, nothingness, and neither-perception nor non-perception (P. *ākāśānañc-āyatana*, *viññāṇañc-āyatana*, *ākīñcaññ-āyatana*, *nevasaññā-n’āsaññ-āyatana*). Each of these steps is considered to be more “sublime” than the previous one. It is, however, impossible to say how, for instance, nothingness differs from infinite empty space or how these states differ from the peak of the process, the state of *saññāvedayitanirodha*, nor do the Buddhist texts supply us with a list of mental factors (P. *cetasika*) constituting the attainments, as they do for the stages preceding them. The three of the four attainments (space, consciousness, and nothingness) also share nominal similarity with the three fundamental explanatory concepts (Skt. *ākāśa*, *viññāna*, *sūnyatā/ākīñca*) and, if we grant the Pāli canon historical credibility here, the last two of the four were by non-Buddhist traditions even “mistaken” for the ultimate goal.<sup>8</sup> The canon relates that the Buddha saw the insufficiency of these states and “transcended” them toward the truly liberating state. Scholars debate the historical origin of the attainments and the role they play in the Buddhist soteriology. Alexander Wynne (2007, 28), for instance, suggests that, “in early Buddhism the practice of element meditation was thought

8 See MN. I, 163-166.

to lead to states of abstract consciousness (the formless spheres) and finally liberation.” Richard Gombrich, on the other hand, says that the attainment of the formless states does not liberate at all and “seems to have no function” (Gombrich 2006, 103; for the discussion of the four attainments in relation to their preceding states see Arbel 2016, 174-180).

Taking into account the Forman’s model, it is not inconceivable to see the formless absorptions and the peak of the meditative experience as different articulations of identical experience PCE.

#### 4 *Conclusion*

It might seem incredibly daring of me, to squeeze the history of Buddhist ontology and its soteriology into a few pages and to cram the meticulously differentiated meditative states into one category. None of that was my intention.

Obviously, abundantly more philosophical topics have preoccupied Buddhist intellectuals, as they produced an immense collection of answers and approaches regarding these topics, a quantity much greater than could have been expounded upon here in this brief article. But I hope that my comments reveal something about the situation in which the Buddhist thinkers found themselves, namely, the extraordinary challenge to communicate, in a language with the subject-predicate structure, the message that the world does not have the corresponding substance-attribute structure. Recursion and the imagery revolving around the concept of empty space were two important shared motives.

And though Buddhist soteriology is unique in this respect, I also tried to offer some support to the perennialists’ view, arguing that there is no strong reason to presume that this idea had its source in a special experience incited by a unique practice. Indeed, since most of the research in meditation is still exploratory (Lutz, Dunne, and Davidson 2007, 539-540), these conclusions are also highly tentative. However, until the distinctions claimed by the Buddhist texts can be given more empirical support, it is at least viable to presume that many different states recognized by the Buddhist tradition might be just different elaborations of the same “contentless” experience.

*Abbreviations*

|       |                       |
|-------|-----------------------|
| AKB.  | Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam |
| AN.   | Aṅguttara Nikāya      |
| BV.   | Bodhicittavivaraṇa    |
| MN.   | Majjhima Nikāya       |
| MVTR. | Madhyamakāvātāra      |
| P.    | Pāli                  |
| Skt.  | Sanskrit              |
| SMD.  | Saṃdhanirmocana Sūtra |
| SN.   | Saṃyutta Nikāya       |
| TRM.  | Triṃśikā-kārikā       |
| YKT.  | Yuktiṣaṣṭikā-kārikā   |

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# Other Aspects of the Idea of Ethics in Liquid Modernity through the Theravāda Buddhist Context in Thailand

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*Abstract* Human individuals in Zygmunt Bauman's liquid modernity are insecure with overloaded choices of identities and responsibilities: they are surrounded by uncertainties and strangers and shift their focus to self-fulfillment. Also, human bonds become weak due to communication technology. Nevertheless, Bauman sees a chance of ethics over uncertainty, and yet, it has to be in the *immediacy of face-to-face interaction*. This immediacy allows *expressions of life* such as trust to arise and cultivates a moral individual to fulfill ethical demands. This work assumes a shift to the liquid modernity of Thailand by sharing Bauman's idea of ethical values derived from immediacy interaction. It proposes Theravāda Buddhist *wise reflection*, or *yonisomanasikāra*, to explain a moment when individuals immediately interact and contemplate their cognition and reaction activities with equanimity. In this way, individuals return to the compassion stage of mind, fulfilling a demand to care for others.

*Keywords* liquid modernity, consumerism, postmodern ethics, Theravāda Buddhist ethics, yonisomanasikāra

## *Introduction*

Zygmunt Bauman sees consumerism as the cultivation of a new type of human individuals, and these individuals move modern society from a solid stage to a liquid stage. Solid modernity refers to the society before the glory pace of globalization, free trade, privatization, and real-time interactive information & communication technology (ICT). Nation-states in solid modernity are

empowered by normative regulations from traditional public institutions that govern and control all resources within their boundaries. This authority includes controlling economic activities and other necessary strategic movements that fortify the power of states and manipulate members of society. Bauman calls this management “farmers of humans” (Bauman 2009, 196).

Liquid modernity, the term originated by Bauman, describes a turning point of the management in solid modernity that shifts to the seduction of consumer markets by commercial corporations (Bauman 2009, 203). Corporations see individual consumers as units that can be divided into segments and then manipulate these segments through commercial campaigns. Therefore, the individuals in this era become just commodities in the society of producers in Karl Marx’s terms (Bauman 2008, 14). However, for Bauman, it involves a parity of members who have their right to be: consumers’ subjectivity is made out by shopping choices (Bauman 2008, 15).

Bauman describes liquid society as a society of swarm in which each unit is moved synchronously by its desires and intentions. The synchronizing moves made by the significant number of individuals create difficulty in locating the headquarters where the command is appointed (Bauman 2009, 17). The solid precept, coercive patterning, supervision, and policing are turning into the realm of “individual life politics” (Bauman 2009, 49). The protection from solid institutions is subsidized to consumer markets (Bauman 2006, 4). Here a new constraint of having too much self-dependence of the individuals, including ethical thoughts, has arisen.<sup>1</sup>

The properties of this new type of human individual include self-reliance, struggling with uncertainty, constructing identity by shopping choices, and social-deskilling over the intensive uses of ICT, all of which cause social structural changes. Moreover, there are various comprehensive moral problems derived from technology and overconsumption. This circumstance alerts us to review our way

1 A similar comment can be found in various contemporary philosophers after the Karl Marx’s classic work made about alienation caused by capitalism (Marx [1844] 1990). The major works are such as Theodor W. Adorno 1991, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri 2001, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari 2008, Dany Robert Dufour 2008.

of living, including dealing with those contemporary moral issues (Bauman 2008, 16). Hence, the point of concern is how individuals take responsibility for their own choices and decide to what extent they will sacrifice their welfare to express responsibility to others (Bauman 2009, 51).

Bauman believes in the immediacy of face-to-face human contact that is a source of morality to develop; therefore, the social-deskilled individuals might put the ethical demand into difficulty (Bauman 1996, 2009). This consumerist phenomenon has stretched out its wings worldwide, including in Thailand and similar circumstances come into being; for example, the flows of shopping choices and the explosive applications of ICT. On the point that Thailand has Theravāda Buddhist ethics as its background, it would be worth examining the application of Bauman's ethical position to Thai society.

This article does not justify Bauman's argument about ethics in liquid society, and section 1 explains Bauman's ethics. Alternatively, it views his idea through the Theravāda Buddhist context in Thailand. Then, section 2.1 shows some observations of a shift to the liquid modernity of Thailand. Finally, the article proposes that Theravāda has the concept of *yonisomanasikāra*, or *wise reflection*, to explain when individuals immediately interact and contemplate their cognition and reaction activities with equanimity. This circumstance has some extended points to Bauman's life expression when moral agents will fulfil their demand to take care of others (see sections 2.2-2.3).

## 1 *The Ethical Demand and the Ethical thought of Sovereign Expression of Life in Liquid Modernity*

### 1.1 Bauman's concept of the ethical demand

For Bauman, responsibility for others is a demand. We are demanded to care for another person since our welfare is intertwined and interdependent (Bauman 2007, 116). However, this ethical demand must be silent, which means this demand is not prescribing to us what we should do in each situation. On the contrary, it demands that action be taken. This demand is not categorized as deontology; it is activated by *immediacy* or *proximity* and has its limit; otherwise, it would lead to encroachment on others. Bauman is influenced by Knud Eljer Løgstrup's idea that

by nature, human beings commonly encounter one another with natural trust, even with strangers (Løgstrup 1997, 8). This natural trust is a fundamental ethical phenomenon that fulfills a demand to act.

The ethical demand of Bauman and Løgstrup, individuals ought to act in each situation as supporters of the person whose life is in our hands. A study by Hans Fink (2007) describes that according to Kant's categorical imperatives, individuals ought to act in each situation as legislators for the whole of humankind. On the other hand, Løgstrup has no conception of a practical reason, and he is not concerned with the rationality, universalizability, or law-likeness of the ethical. Bregham Dalgliesh (2014) explains Bauman's ethics as the centrifugal self, which is an imperative due to the collateral damage of consumerism. Bauman's collateral damage of consumerism refers to "failed consumers" (Bauman 2008, 127). They fail to obtain the status from engaging in a fully-fledged consumer activity; who are the poor, who are the problems for the rest. Individuals interact with others and immediately see others' pain and vulnerability, and it challenges the individuals to care for and help others.

#### 1.2 The ethics of sovereign expression of life

Bauman argues that we should abandon the modern way of coercive regulation in political practice and the philosophical search for universals (Bauman 1996, 4). Human beings are morally ambivalent (Bauman 1996, 10). The modern moral ontology drives our moral responsibility away from ourselves toward regulations. Therefore, Liquid modernity's ethics needs to look back from the start.

The moment of impulsive interrelation is when we exercise our *sovereign expression of life* without any rational engagement. Hans Fink and Alasdair MacIntyre explain Løgstrup's sovereign expression of life as an ontological attribute of human beings, "I am not the cause of such sovereign expressions of my life. They are not my achievement, but through them, I can achieve what will be of genuine help to other people". (Løgstrup 1997, XXV). In short, human beings are things that are promptly expressed once they interact.

Apart from *trust*, the *sovereign expressions of life* embrace ethical phenomena such as compassion, mercy, and openness of speech (Andersen and Niekerk 2007, 2). Individuals misbehave toward each other since the exercise of ambivalent

spontaneity is not guaranteed for wholesome and unwholesome. Our distrust comes when we have an incident of distrustful manners from the other toward us. However, without interdependencies between individuals, they would be non-ethical beings (Bauman 2000, 83). Bauman believes uncertainty in this liquid world is a workable ground allowing us to exercise our morality from the spontaneity of our face-to-face encounter;

Without bracing oneself for the possibility of wrong choices, little can be done toward persevering in the search for the right choice. Far from being a major threat to morality (and so an abomination to ethical philosophers), uncertainty is the home ground of the moral person and the only soil in which morality can sprout and flourish (Bauman 2009, 63).

This exercising of our sovereignty of life expressions makes human being a moral person. Bauman mentions that Løgstrup's concept of immediacy is similar to Levinas's *proximity* (Bauman 2007, 127). Moreover, since the ethics of sovereign expression of life does not determine any right or wrong solutions, it seems to open for improvisation in our real life.

Obligatory choices provided in solid modernity, with dreams of freedom from responsibility, no longer help us stay in good shape in the era of fluid society. As Bregham Dalglish (2014) notes, Bauman gives an insight into the ethical consequences, yet it would be unreasonable to expect ready-made solutions. Dalglish proposes Foucault's aesthetics of existence to meet this challenge. Hence, consumerism has spread worldwide; it would be valuable to look at this phenomenon through various ethical conceptions, and the light shines on one main idea of Buddhist ethics.

## 2 *Examine Ethics in Liquid Modernity from Theravāda Buddhist Ethics' Perspective*

### 2.1 Taking a glance at liquid modernity and domination of Theravāda Buddhist teachings in Thais' life

This section indicates a circumstance of liquid modernity in Thailand, where Buddhist tradition exists as a background, by looking at socio-economic change, spirituality, and digital lifestyle.

### 2.1.1 Socio-economic change

In the Thai socio-economic landscape, several reports of the Thai economic outlook approve of Thailand's openness to the global economy.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the educational standard in Thailand seems not to support the theme and has been in a challenging stage.<sup>3</sup> The Thai government still has its regulative power; however, it depends on who is in power? James Taylor comments that a complex social formation in Thailand derives from globalization: "The Thai metropolis is a challenging ethnographic site where feudal, modern and postmodern systems of production and consumption co-exist, reflecting complex social formations" (Taylor 2008, 18). Individuals in Thailand have been struggling to climb up their socio-economic status ladders, so it is the central theme of every government to take responsibility for equalizing burdens such as education. Education in Thailand appears to be trouble for economic activity, social responsibility, and ethical standards, as stated in Thailand's Twelfth National Economic and Social Development Plan (2017-2021).<sup>4</sup> Niels Mulder writes about a civil culture in Thailand: "The main trend, however, seems to be toward a media-dominated consumer society, at least for those who have entered the modern sector" (Mulder 2000, 22).

Within the challenging, complex social formations and for the Bauman's failed consumers, perhaps, the sanctuary of spirituality is where Thais put their faith. As James Taylor observes the insecurity of Thais due to globalization and political and economic insecurities: "These concerns have accounted for a proliferation of religious practices, including urban mediums, supernaturalism and magic" (Taylor 2008, 22). Urbanization has transformed the appearance of the city and conceptions of Buddhism. A sense of urban-rural differentiation happens even in the domain of religion. Moreover, rapid change makes people miss the old-time and look for authenticity (Taylor 2008, 8-10).

2 See The Thai Economic Outlook: Southeast Asia Economic Review 2019. Also, Economic Overview Thailand Board of Investment.

3 See Uddin and Sarntisart 2019, 938-956. Also, Khoman 2005, 251-284.

4 See Summary: The Twelfth National Economic and Social Development Plan 2017-2021.

Thais returned to ethical roots the exact value counters the socio-cultural, political and economic changes. Ann Gleig (2019, 22-26) notes that, in Thailand, Buddhist modernism restores the Buddhist teachings, which used to be distorted and relied on topical interests, since the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century, particularly its meditation practice and the Buddhist disciplines. This can be seen from the arising of Thammayut sect. Moreover, there are new concepts of Buddhism resulting from this authentic value phenomenon; for example, Santi-asoke, Thammakaai, and other famous scholars and forest monks who reinstate the Buddhist discipline (vinaya).

### 2.1.2 Spirituality

Popular Buddhism has incorporated the animistic worldview and Brahmic-Hindu deities into the Thai spirituality landscape. Both of them are not advised concerning the wisdom of Buddha; however, vital Buddhist concepts are still directing their lives. Thais are cultured by the three themes: magico-animism, Bhraman-Hinduism, and Buddhism. Over 90 percent of Thais are Theravāda Buddhists mixed with those three themes. Thai Buddhism has its uniqueness resulting from historical and socio-economic reasons. Many scholars: for example, Barnard J. Terwiel (2012; first published 1975) and Julia Cassaniti (2015), divide Thai Buddhists into two types. The first type is a Buddhism of the abstract texts or a highly educated class; the second type is a popular Buddhism of the masses that mixed with animism and Brahmic-Hinduism.

Popular Buddhism reflects the uniqueness of its characteristics. They participate in rituals, believe in spirits, and embrace Buddhist teachings to orient their lives. For example, in ethnographic research of a rural village in northern Thailand on injuries and law, David M. Engel and Jaruwat S. Engel (2010, 151-156) find that the villagers are less likely to turn to a lawsuit when any wrongful acts happen. Instead, payments of the ritual and other forms of compensation are required, and injuries mean misdeeds to ancestral spirits and the karmic histories of the victim. In another ethnographic study of Julia Cassaniti at another rural village in northern Thailand, she finds that the key Buddhist concepts of Impermanence, Non-attachment, and Law of Karma orient the villager lives. Surrounded by the global economy and the political power of Bangkok, the rural farmers live their lives as she states: “The more one is able to let go of affective

attachments, the more one becomes in control of his or her life and surroundings". (Cassaniti 2015, 180).

In addition, having coped with a stressful life of capitalism over the past half-century, there has been the emergence of meditation centers in Thailand organized by laypeople, welcoming all laypeople and renunciators. There are two stages of mindfulness meditation: *tranquility meditation* and *insight meditation*. For *tranquility meditation*, mindfulness (*sati*) keeps attention focused on a single object, and then the mind becomes peaceful and still (Payutto 2017, 1356). It can temporarily contain defilements and calm the mind: without investigation of truth or wise reflection, it cannot help develop the right vision and enlightenment. In terms of *insight meditation*, there are four foundations of mindfulness: body, feeling, mind, and mind object. The only role of meditators is to observe the nature of any one of these four foundations, and this action is called *vipassanā* or insight. It helps develop wisdom (*paññā*).

This article sees the emergence of mediation centers in Thailand as a negation of the two phenomena: the urban-rural differentiation and the educated-popular Buddhists. Referring to Ann Gleig (2019),<sup>5</sup> this movement relocates old-style religious institutions to a secular sphere as personal choices. Meditation is one choice for all individuals disregarding typecasting.

### 2.1.3 Digital lifestyle

In terms of the digital lifestyles of Thais, one situation in the online communication platform worth mentioning is *hate speech*, which can be considered a symptom of life's hardship. Bangkok Post reports that Thais spend approximately ten hours a day with online social applications, the top three applications being YouTube, Line and Facebook (Leesa-Nguansuk 2018). With political and economic instability, the political clashes might have displayed an amount of violence and conflict. Hate speech in Thailand takes place in three

5 Ann Gleig (2019) explains the three major trends of religion in postmodernity to embrace of diversity, hybridity and pluralism: 1) the global growth of fundamentalism particularly Christian and Islamic fundamentalism. 2) the alternative of postmodern religions as a matter of personal choices. 3) the relocation of religion to secular spheres.

areas; political purposes, socio-economic stereotypes and religious ethnicities (Tonsakulrungruang n.d.). Thailand is a highly collectivist society. Thais are generally very compromising and modest; however, cyberspace anonymizes opinion sharing. Therefore, attention to ethics in the online social platform would be valuable to the situation.

## 2.2 The ethical demand of Theravāda Buddhism

Bauman sees human beings' nature of *trust* demands us to act. Individuals cannot control and cannot use reason to produce trust. Trust is the human nature of taking care of others and fulfilling ethical demands. This demand drives us to perform some actions wisely or unwisely. So now it comes to a question, does Theravāda Buddhism demand to care for the other?

By nature, a noble person in Buddhism is compassionate to all creatures. Hence, individuals are first required to take care of themselves to transform into a natural stage of compassion. It is similar to traveling by airplane; in case of an in-flight emergency that one needs an oxygen mask, one should properly wear the mask on first before helping others. In addition, this guarantees that once individuals live without mentors, they will be able to cope with all suffering they face independently. Therefore, individuals need the knowledge to do so.

Theravāda Buddhism posits that one takes care of oneself before taking care of others, as shown in the below discourse translated from the Pāli by Bhikkhu Thanissaro (1997).

158 First he'd settle himself in what is correct,  
only then teach others.

He wouldn't stain his name he is wise.

159 If you'd mold yourself the way you teach others,  
then, well-trained, go ahead & tame—  
for, as they say, what's hard to tame is you yourself.

160 Your own self is your own mainstay, for who else could your mainstay be?

With you yourself well-trained you obtain the mainstay hard to obtain.

(BhikkhuThanissaro 1997).

Nevertheless, many scholars in philosophy, such as Damien Keown (2017, 17-32), and Christopher W. Gowans (2017, 53-69), view the Buddhist moral code as not as systematic as the Western ethics tradition. For example, Christopher W. Gowans

comments: “It was supposed that someone who possesses Buddhist wisdom would have sufficient resources to deal with whatever cases might arise”. (Gowans 2017, 61). Hence, the pursuit of enlightenment does not need a diagram of a decision tree to follow. It is agreeable with Bauman’s idea mentioned in section 1.2 that the modern way of ethics and the philosophical search for universals should be abandoned since human beings are morally ambivalent.

So now, it comes to the roles of virtuous friends to help each other promote wholesomeness and prevent unwholesomeness.

Most people are endowed with a “starting capital” of both craving and wholesome enthusiasm (*chanda*: added by the author). Those leaders in society or those who act as mentors (*kalyāṇamitta*; “virtuous friends”) should understand this fact and help others to both promote wholesome desire and to regulate or subdue craving. At the very least, people should prevent the undercurrent of craving from becoming an overwhelming force. (Payutto 2017, 830).

### 2.3 How the immediate expression of life works in Theravāda Buddhism

This section explains how individuals develop their moral characteristics through the *expression of life* from the viewpoint of Theravāda Buddhism.

According to Bauman, the expression of life arises from the *immediacy of face-to-face interaction*, and it is a chance to cultivate a moral individual. However, Bauman does not elucidate the psychological phenomena of how this moral cultivation happens. This article sees the Theravāda Buddhist *wise reflection* or *yonisomanasikāra* able to explain moments when individuals develop their practical wisdom throughout immediacy interaction. Finally, individuals will yield to a stage of nature with compassion and fulfill the ethical demand of all creatures. The following are the explanation.

#### 2.3.1 Spiritual training

Ontologically, all Buddhist schools share the idea of the ability of human beings to improve themselves and complete their spiritual training. The spiritual training is divided into three sections, known as the threefold training. Bhikkhu P. A. Payutto (2017, 522-556) summarizes that this training is designed to develop; firstly, communication and interaction with the world, or *sīla*: moral code of conduct;

secondly, the mind or samādhi: the activity of the mind which has numerous attendant factors and properties such as volition, motivation, pleasure, discomfort: it is the domain of concentration; thirdly, wisdom or paññā: knowledge and understanding of nature including of self, community, and environment. These three sections are interdependent, and once completed, they will harmonize human beings with nature.

The higher stage of wisdom, the more individuals develop compassion for all creatures. One crucial attribute of arahants, or the noblemen who complete the spiritual training, is free of mental proliferation (papañca). Mental proliferation consists of three conditions; craving (taṇhā), speculation or dogma that one holds (tṭhiti), and conceit (māna). Without the mental proliferation, one can comprehend the universal characteristics of all existents - impermanence (anicca), disintegration (dukkha), and no-self (annattā). In other words, they can see things as they really are and make no attachment. A stage of no attachment is genuine happiness. The quotations from the Sutta Piṭaka below can explain:

A wise one whose heart is undisturbed is free of mental proliferation. He has stopped brooding; everywhere he sees peace. He does not praise himself among his equals, superiors, or those of lower standing  
 One who has cut all bonds of attachment,  
 Removed worry deep within the heart,  
 The peaceful one sleeps happily,  
 Attained to perfect peace of mind. (Payutto 2017, 562-563).

Qualification of the wise one incorporates loving all creatures since this noble person will *see things as they really are and comprehend suffering from the attachment to others*. Regardless of how long individuals will take to improve their stage of wisdom, this is to justify the existence of the ethical demand to care for others in Theravāda Buddhism.

In the matter of Buddhist laypeople, the threefold training transforms them from basic spiritual qualities to more refined ones. Bhikkhu P. A. Payutto provides an outlook of the threefold training for laypeople: “It begins with the training of body and speech, and then focuses on the training of the mind and wisdom.” (Payutto 2017, 1003).

### 2.3.2 The concept of the Buddhist architecture of mind

To understand how moral cultivation goes through the threefold training, let us begin with the concept of the Buddhist architecture of the mind, followed by the concept of Buddhist psychology and emotion.

The Buddhist architecture of mind engages the question of *what is a human being?* From a phenomenological viewpoint of human life, the answer is the interplay of the five aggregates. Human beings comprise five constituent elements, each of which is governed by the universal characteristics of all existents: *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *annattā*. Therefore, human beings exist in a state of flux and are composed of interdependent conditioning factors.

The five aggregates consist of the one corporeal body (*rūpa*) and the four mental aggregates. The four mental aggregates consist of perception and memory (*saññā*), consciousness (*viññāṇa*), feeling (*vedanā*), and mental formation and volitional activity (*saṅkhāra*).

The five aggregates are associated with a causality called *dependent origination* (*paṭiccasamuppāda*). Dependent origination describes the entire process of human existence under the cycle of origination and the sequence of twelve constituent factors,<sup>6</sup> including the existence of the five aggregates (Payutto 2017, 435). In other words, it explains a cycle of conditioned phenomena of human existence, which is the creation of human suffering. However, people do not engage with the five aggregates' phenomena in everyday life because their meaning of life centers around interactions with the world by ways of the six senses doors. These six doorways respond to the world through three channels of action. The three channels are physical actions (*kāya-kamma*), verbal actions (*vacī kamma*), and mental actions (*mano-kamma*) (Payutto 2017, 44). Nevertheless, ignorance (*avijjā*)

6 The origination cycle, i.e., the creation of suffering, begins with ignorance: ignorance (*avijjā*)→ volitional activities (*saṅkhāra*)→ consciousness (*viññāṇa*)→ mentality and corporeality (*nāmarūpa*)→ six senses bases (*saḷāyatana*)→ contact (*phassa*)→ feeling (*vedanā*)→ craving (*taṇhā*)→ clinging (*upādāna*)→ becoming (*bhava*)→ birth (*jāti*)→ aging and death (*jarāmaraṇa*), sorrow (*soka*), lamentation (*parideva*), pain (*dukkha*), grief (*domanassa*), and despair (*upāyāsa*) = origin of suffering (*dukkha-samudaya*) (P. A. Payutto 2017, 435).

blinds individuals from knowledge (*vijjā*) of the conditioned phenomena of the six sense doorways.

Cessation of suffering is to break the cycle chain by cultivating the knowledge of origination and sequence of the six senses. The cognition and experience of the world can occur through the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind. Whatever comes to contact (*phassa*), these six doorways are called the six sense objects (*ārammana*); tangible objects contact the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and intangible objects contact the mind. Note that the eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body are corporeal bodies. They are matters. These five doorways cannot feel, think, and cannot have any volitional activities without the incorporation of the four mental aggregates. The complexity of how the mind works is illustrated as a diagram by P. L. Walpola and others (2017, 140-164). It shows that the contacts from the objects (*ārammana*) to the six doorways play a central role in both the generation and continual reconstitution of perception and memory (*saññā*), feeling (*vedanā*), and thought (*saṅkhāra*). Moreover, the previous memory can distort the perception of what is experienced.

### 2.3.3 Contact and feeling: the concept of Buddhist psychology and emotion

This article focuses on *contact* because it causes an arising of feeling, and this feeling is one of the prominent places in the practice of insight meditation (*vipassanā*).

Regarding the law of dependent origination, every contact (*phassa*) creates a feeling (*vedanā*). Feeling in Buddhism can be categorized into two types: physical and mental. The *physical feeling* can be pleasure or pain; the mental feeling can be pleasure, pain, or indifference. Padmasiri De Silva (2017, 61-62) explains that feeling or *vedanā* of Buddhism is different from emotions. Feeling is one variable that makes emotions such as anger, fear, sadness, and pleasant. The other variables are desires, beliefs, and appraisals (idea and memory or *saññā*—by the authors). Pleasant feelings result in attachment to pleasant objects or can arouse greed and craving, while painful feelings can arouse hatred or aversion (*taṇhā*: craving and aversion). Hence, feeling is the gateway to more complex behaviors: bodily, mentally, and verbally, which can be wholesome or unwholesome.

Equanimity (*upekkhā*) is a necessary condition for insightful meditation. When any of the six sense objects (*ārammana*) comes to any of the six sense organs, and individuals only observe their physical or mental feelings with equanimous minds, the chain of an arising of craving and aversion will be interrupted. During the observation, individuals will gain insightful knowledge of the impermanent phenomena of those feelings arising and passing away. This mindful attentiveness is called *yonisomanasikāra* or *wisdom reflection*. The characteristic of *yonisomanasikāra* distinguishes insight meditation from tranquility meditation (Payutto 2017, 1357).

Hence, for individuals who practice insight meditation, their defilements will gradually be purified until they reach mental freedom from all defilements. This gradual purification tells how moral cultivation happens and how ethical demand for loving all creatures is possible.

Insight meditation does not require seclusion from society, and it is encouraged to integrate this practice into daily life (Payutto 2017, 1343). Imagine when any risky situation happens to an ordinary person. Usually, that person will *immediately express* by thinking, acting, or speaking out, and it can be wholesome or unwholesome. Unwholesome deeds can be harmful to others and create even more negative effects on that person's situation: it drives one away from a state of a peaceful mind. The training of body and speech requires mindfulness meditation at the first stage to tranquil the mind so that the mind becomes peaceful and still. Once the mind is tranquil, one can look at the mental phenomena insightfully and cultivate practical wisdom. It is to say that body and speech training work hand in hand with the training of the mind and wisdom.

From the Buddhist epistemology of cognition, all contacts to the six doorways are not only limited to the immediacy of face-to-face interaction but also all virtual space phenomena. For instance, a man walks on a downtown street and bumps into his enemy, who intentionally made him lose his job and house. His vision contact (*phassa*) coexistent with his memory (*saññā*) causes the arising of painful feelings. Then, this painful feeling arouses hatred (*saṅkhāra*) so much that he immediately punches his enemy's face. These describing phenomena happen in very split seconds. Suppose that the same man has been through mindfulness meditation regularly; once the hatred happens, the man will be at once aware of

his unpleasant feeling and then comprehend that this feeling arises and passes away.

In cyberspace, similarly, contents and interactions on digital screens are the sense objects (*ārammana*) that come to persons' contacts (*phassa*). The contacts coexistent with memories cause feelings and then arouses action. Regarding dependent origination, if one does not cling to and does not respond to one's feeling (either pleasant or unpleasant), that feeling will not further cause becoming and rebirth. Also, the intensity of that feeling will gradually diminish because one does not continue to add mental taints, which act as a basis for clinging. This practice might not be easy because the formation of self or ego becomes an autopilot mode of one's mundane life for so long; however, it is possible.

The mental formation is the *ultimate truth* (*paramattha dhamma*); it is universal. So Sujin Boriharnwanaket, a renowned Thai Buddhist layperson, a *vipassanā* and *Abhidhamma* teacher, explains.

If someone conceives that idea of *this person sees* or *that being hears*, it is due to the outward appearance and to his memory. If there were no outward appearance and no memory, one would not conceive the *citta* (the mind- the authors) that see as *this person see*, or the *citta* that hears as *that being hears*. *Citta* is *paramattha dhamma*. No matter which being or which person sees, the *citta* that arises and sees can only see what appears through the eyes. The *citta* that hears can only hear sound... It is not in anyone's power to alter the characteristic and the nature of a *paramattha dhamma*. (Boriharnwanaket 2005, 21).

Seeing things as they are means seeing the ultimate truth of things. This seeing is called *the right vision* (*sammaditthi*) in Buddhism, and it needs the practice of *wisdom reflection* persistently in everyday life. After people have freedom from their mental taints, their immediate expression of life will naturally express kindness and compassionate love to all creatures, as Bhikkhu P. A. Payutto (2017) states.

For people to find true happiness they must live their lives correctly and relate to things properly, including their own personal lives, their society, technology, and their natural environment. Those people who their lives correctly experience a personal happiness inherently conducive to the happiness of others (Payutto 2017, 1088).

### 3 Conclusion

Bauman views *uncertainty* in liquid society as a chance of getting back to a starting point of ethical nourishment. By nature, Human beings trust each other. The ethical demand exists with this *trust* that individuals surrender to each other since everyone shares the same resource and the same world. Therefore, the *ethical demand* is the demand to care for another person because human beings' welfare is interdependent.

Uncertain circumstance makes the *immediacy of face-to-face interaction* full of strangers and insecurity. In uncertainty, once individuals interact, it is open for their *sovereignty of life expression*, in which individuals see the others' vulnerability and then respond freely and spontaneously. These responses could be either wholesome or unwholesome, and it is not a point. The point is that the immediacy interaction gives a chance to fulfill the ethical demand. In other words, this demand does not prescribe how one should act. Contrarily, one act to fulfill the demand.

Bauman's view of individuals' ethical nourishment triggers a thought of the ethical circumstance in Thailand, influenced by liquid modernization in the Theravāda Buddhist context. Individuals in Buddhism can transform into noble persons, and noble persons are compassionate to all creatures. Nevertheless, ordinary human beings comprise moral and immoral mental factors. Therefore, like Bauman, face-to-face interaction creates a prompt response without guaranteeing wholesome and unwholesome. The difference is that the cognition from individuals' sense-perception includes the mind, not only limited to immediacy face-to-face interaction but also covers all sense objects (*ārammana*) that come to individuals. All sense-objects cause a particular type of feeling. The moment when any of the six senses arises is called contact (*phassa*). This contact is a cause of feeling (*vedanā*), and then feeling triggers craving or aversion. Individuals can purify their cravings and aversion by contemplating the law of dependent origination. This action is *yonisomanasikāra* which means wise reflection.

Everyone has the potential of developing one's *yonisomanasikāra* from elementary levels of contemplation, and it leads to a path of noble life. The path

of noble life will lead us to happiness and fulfill the ethical demand for others naturally.

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*Recenzie · Reviews*

Gajdoš, Ľuboš. *Praktická korpusová lingvistika—čínsky jazyk* [Practical Corpus Linguistics—Chinese language]. Bratislava: Univerzita Komenského, 2022—164 pp. ISBN 978-80-223-5363-2.

Jana Benická

Corpus linguistics is becoming an integral part of linguistic research. The results of corpus linguistics research are not intended to be used only by experts but are also available to students or the general public. Nowadays it is hard to imagine, for example, that dictionaries would be compiled without the use of computer technology and the results of corpus linguistics research. Another area in which corpus linguistics is making rapid progress is language pedagogy or second language acquisition (L2 acquisition). Today there are various kinds of electronic language corpora available to Internet users, e.g. via a web browser. The publication under review addresses the use of language corpora in second language acquisition, in particular the acquisition of Chinese. Therefore, I highly appreciate the relevancy of the publication.

The book is divided into 11 chapters. The first and second chapters give a briefly overview of part-of-speech and sentence constituents in Chinese with emphasis on the specifics of morphological annotation (tagging) and tokenization in Chinese. The aim of these chapters is to provide a comprehensive overview and they are elaborated rather briefly without any ambition to further explore or discuss these issues. On the other hand, the author himself draws attention to this fact (p. 1). It can be concluded that these chapters are a brief summary of approaches to morphology and syntax in Chinese language pedagogy.

Certain issues in corpus linguistics, specifically key terms, are explained in Chapter 3. In this chapter the author demonstrates the meaning and use of key terms of corpus linguistics using practical examples. Considering the fact that the book is intended for university students, it is adequately written.

In chapters 4, 5, and 6, three of the available corpora from People's Republic of China, namely the CCL (Beijing University), CNC (Institute of Applied Linguistic Ministry of Education), and BCC (Beijing Foreign Studies University) corpora are described in more detail. The author introduces the parameters of the corpora and describes differentiated approaches to e.g. part-of-speech issues or tokenization. Based on his own experience in linguistic research and language pedagogy, he illustrates, based on practical examples, possible scenarios of the use of the individual corpora. He points out both positive and negative aspects of the use of these corpora.

The circumstances of building the Sihanku and Hanku corpora at the Department of East Asian Studies, Comenius University and their parameters are discussed in the following two chapters. The chapters contain a briefly introduction of the graphical interface (GUI) of the NoSketch Engine, the statistical tools used and way of working with them. To my knowledge, these corpora are the only two corpora which are actively built at an academic institution in the EU.

The core of the book, in my opinion, are the chapters 9, 10, 11, where the author first explains the basics of CQL (Corpus Query Language) regular expressions (pp. 49–85), followed by advanced modes of using them (pp. 87–100) up to the use of regular expressions in searching for e.g. sentence constituents (pp. 100–134). I agree with the author that the division into these three chapters may correspond to the level of difficulty as regards the corpus use—basic, intermediate, advanced. The explanation of regular expressions is always demonstrated giving practical examples of searches, thus students may understand very clearly, for example, the function and meaning of the conditions MEET or WITHIN. In this regard, I positively evaluate the fact that all conditions are accompanied by figures.

Chapter 11 is certainly worth closer attention. It might be considered as pinnacle of regular expressions use not only in language pedagogy, but in linguistic research as such. Here, the author uses concrete searches for sentence constituents in Chinese to show the possibilities, but also the limits of CQL regular expressions or the limitations of corpus linguistics in general. He also explains the current limitations of natural language processing (NLP) of Chinese language, for example, the issues of part-of-speech annotation and the resulting ambiguity for polysemous words, different approaches to tokenization—text-to-word segmentation, etc. Using practical examples, the author presents the results of linguistic solution of some basic issues of Chinese linguistics or L2 acquisition. Although the chapter has a logical and clear structure, for some of the examples it would be, in my opinion, convenient to have access to the Hanku corpus.

A glossary of selected terms of Chinese corpus linguistics (pp. 136–141) and an index are added at the end. I highly appreciate the inclusion of these two parts.

The peer-reviewed university textbook is a very valuable contribution not only for students of Chinese language, but also for all of us who are interested in using language corpora in both research and linguistic practice. Among the negatives, one can include, on some place, perhaps not quite up-to-date data on e.g. corpora

and their parameters, as the whole publishing process, also due to the pandemic, has took almost 3 years.

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Čéplö, Slavomír and Jaroslav Drobný, eds. *Maltese Linguistics on the Danube*. Berlin, Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2020—321 pp. ISBN 978-3110672176.

Zuzana GAŽÁKOVÁ

The seventh and eighth of June 2017 became prominent in the history of the rather small Arabic Studies section at the Department of Classical and Semitic Philology, Faculty of Arts, Comenius University in Bratislava. At this time, the section welcomed more than forty academics and researchers from all over the world for the sixth international conference on Maltese linguistics. The conference marked the second decade of the existence of the International Association of Maltese Linguistics (*L-Għaqda Internazzjonali tal-Lingwistika Maltija*), which had been founded in 2007 at the inaugural conference on Maltese linguistics at the University of Bremen. It must also be said that this was the very first such symposium on an international level that was hosted by a section of Arabic Studies in Slovakia. The main organisers were Slavomír Čéplö, the first and currently only researcher of Maltese Studies in Slovakia, and Jaroslav Drobný, who supported the idea by making it possible for the conference to take place at the Faculty of Arts. The conference was held in a very friendly and almost family-like atmosphere. It was evident that all the participants knew each other very well, and during the event as well as in the papers there was a frequent expression of mutual gratitude for help and support.

The proceedings of this remarkable Bratislava symposium were published in 2020 by the Walter de Gruyter publishing house under the title *Maltese Linguistics on the Danube* in order to gently emphasise the location of the event. The publication was thoroughly edited by both conference organisers, who decided to divide the contributions into three principal parts: Historical Linguistics, Syntax, and Phonology.

This carefully reviewed and edited volume, which contains a dozen notable papers, opens with a brief preface where both editors introduce the circumstances and aims of the conference as well as the participants' main research areas and notable works.

The Historical Linguistics section starts with the chapter entitled "Maltese and North African Linguistics: Common Roots and Areal Divergence" (pp. 3-25), which is written by Lameen Souag—a well-known expert on Berber languages and historical linguistics from CNRS. He was also the key speaker at the conference. Souag offers an outline of North African linguistics and its considerable

contribution to Maltese linguistics. He then examines several features of Maltese and its relationship to North African equivalents. The second chapter is by Andrei A. Avram (pp. 27-55) and offers an attempt to reconstruct the diachrony of word-final obstruent devoicing in Maltese. He covers the period from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, taking into consideration many sources, including personal and place names. Sumikazu Yoda (pp. 91-110), on the other hand, focuses on the historical syntax of Maltese, and more precisely on the historical development of the Classical Arabic *ḥāl* construction, which in Maltese underwent a unique process of innovation into a particular construction for this phenomenon. Marijn van Putten (pp. 59-89) concentrates on the development of the short vowel system from Proto-Arabic up to its reflexes in modern Maltese, and the first section is concluded by a chapter by Kurstin Gatt (pp. 111-117) which introduces *Minsel* as an electronic etymological database for lexemes of Arabic origin in Maltese.

The second section of the volume is devoted to the syntax of Maltese. It offers a chapter by Mark Amaira and Albert Borg, who examine various constructions that trigger the suspension of formal agreement in Maltese (pp. 121-139). Ray Fabri (pp. 141-175) focuses on the use of pronominal clitics in argument/valency extension, especially in applicative constructions. Christopher Lucas and Slavomír Čéplö (pp. 177-196) analyse the four types (and various subtypes) of constructions where the focus particle *lanqas* interacts with negation. The final two chapters of the second section are devoted to the study of Maltese prepositions. In “From Variation Towards the Grammar of Maltese Prepositions—First Steps” (pp. 199-240), Thomas Stolz and Nataliya Levkovich try to provide a basis for a comprehensive synchronic grammar of Maltese prepositions. The extensive literature on the subject matter is reviewed in order to determine the size of the inventory of prepositions. In a thematically related chapter, Emeli Shmidt, Maike Vorholt, and Nele Witt (pp. 241-265) examined the etymology, forms, and frequencies of prepositions and their ability to fuse with the article and with personal suffixes.

The section on Maltese phonology opens with an interesting chapter by Marie Azzopardi-Alexander (pp. 273-305). She thoroughly studies the phonetics of Maltese affricated stops and notes some differences in the behaviour between them. The second chapter is written by Luke Galea and Leanne Ellul (pp. 307-313), who attempt to shed some light on the usage of the definite article in Maltese. While highlighting some exceptions, their research suggests that etymology plays no role in the choice of the article.

The volume concludes with several valuable and thoroughly prepared indexes of authors, languages, and subjects that appear in the volume. The publication of

proceedings from the sixth international conference on Maltese linguistics has to be celebrated. It is a significant contribution to the field of Maltese and North Arabic African linguistics and to Oriental Studies in Slovakia more generally.

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