

*** very rough draft – not for quotation ***

‘Self-refutation’ (*bèi*) in Early Chinese argumentative prose:
sidelights on the linguistic prehistory of incipient epistemology

Wolfgang Behr (University of Zurich)

I.

At least since the 18th century, when philosophy in Europe conclusively superseded theology as the overarching metadiscipline of knowledge and wisdom on the one hand, and had to grapple with the competition of the emerging empirical sciences on the other, definitions of ‘philosophy’ took a decidedly epistemological bend.¹ This tension, still distinctively palpable in Wittgenstein, when he categorically states that “Philosophy is not one of the natural sciences” and that “The word ‘philosophy’ must mean something which stands above or below, but not beside the natural sciences” in 1913-14², led to the largescale demise of doctrinal definitions of philosophical knowledge in favour of its conceptualization as an “activity”, aiming at “the logical clarification of thoughts”.³ Definitions echoing Kant’s reification of philosophy as the absolute “science of the general principles of knowledge and of the ultimate objects attainable by knowledge” (“Wissenschaft von den letzten Zwecken der menschlichen Vernunft”)⁴ held sway throughout most of the 19th century and commonly – though by no means unanimously – built upon the diagnostic presence of ‘principled’, ‘systematic’, ‘rational’ and ‘critical’ modes of asking questions about knowledge, ontology, or ethics, and the presumably universal notions extrapolable from answers to them. Yet this consensus was soon to be shattered again by the many competing countercurrents in the 19th century, ushering in new definitions of philosophy, driven by aesthetic, historical, philological, or even political considerations, and, eventually, the reinstatement of *Lebensphilosophie*, with its abandonment of the enlightenment impetus and insistence on epistemological grounding, in favor of the polyvalency of hermeneutic interpretations of

1 Cf., e.g., for an array of competing definitions from this period Joachim Ritter, Karlfried Gründer et al., *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, Basel: Schwabe, vol. VII, 1989, Sp. 714-31. For brief historical overviews of the developments leading up and beyond the juncture of Kant, see also H.J. Schnädelbach, “Was ist Philosophie?”, *Studia philosophica* 66, 2007: 11-28 and Ori Sela, “Philosophy’s Ascendancy: The Genealogy of *Tetsugaku/Zhexue* in Japan and China, 1870-1930”, Ms., Princeton, 2010: 5-21.

2 L. Wittgenstein, *Notes on Logic*, Bergen online text edition of the original Ms., Ts-201a1, Ts-201a2 (1913-14), see <http://www.wittgensteinsource.org/texts/BTE/Ts-201a1> (accessed 11.XII.2010).

3 L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, § 4.112, (transl. Pears & McGuinness).

4 I. Kant, *Logik, Ein Handbuch zu Vorlesungen*, G.B. Jäsche ed., 1800, Akademie-Ausg., Berlin: de Gruyter, 1968, Bd.IX: 25.

philosophical problems. Another “escape” move was the renewed interest in perceptions, emotions and other instantiations of consciousness in the movement of phenomenology in the early, or, indeed, the radical jettisoning of any scientific or historical pretensions and the ensuing happy marriage of philosophy with literature during later phases of the 20th century. Thus, a non-historically contingent, “normatively” valid definition of philosophy obviously failed to stabilize, as it did during the centuries before Kant, largely due to the property that “philosophy” could never escape the questioning by itself without ending up in an infinite regress. On this “definitory loop” Bertrand Russell wrote in his 1959 booklet *The wisdom of the West*:⁵

“We may note one peculiar feature of philosophy. If someone asks the question what is mathematics, we can give him a dictionary definition, let us say the science of number, for the sake of argument. As far as it goes this is an uncontroversial statement ... Definitions may be given in this way of any field where a body of definite knowledge exists. But philosophy cannot be so defined. Any definition is controversial and already embodies a philosophic attitude. The only way to find out what philosophy is, is to do philosophy.”

This may strike one as a quite adequate and cautionary working description to begin with. All the more astonishing, then, that it gets tacitly subverted by the author’s insistence, a few pages later in the same book, that philosophy as a “tradition of scientific thinking” is found *exclusively* in the West. Less than a decade later, Horkheimer, who, for once, shares his approach with regard to the problem of definition with Russell, would reiterate that⁶

“There is no definition of philosophy. Its definition is identified with the explicit exposition of what it has to say” (“Es gibt keine Definition der Philosophie. Ihre Definition ist identifiziert mit der expliziten Darstellung dessen, was sie zu sagen hat.”)

Yet after the sobering disillusionment about of the state of affairs reached after some 2500 years of definition and redefinition it is almost heartening to see that he goes on to see the role of philosophy as “a corrective of history”, a reflective procedure to “save the way of humankind from becoming similar to the meaningless perambulations of the prison inmate during his relaxation hour”, and to at least call the “hex of the existing” (“den Bann des Bestehenden”) by its proper name.⁷

5 B. Russell, *The wisdom of the West*, ed. by P. Foulkes, Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1959: 7

6 M. Horkheimer, *Zur Kritik der instrumentellen Vernunft*, Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1967: 155.

7 *Ibid.*, 173, 175.

II.

Throughout most of the late 19th and the whole 20th century, it was the alleged lack of a broadly “epistemological” definiens for the assignment of ancient Chinese authors, texts or ‘schools of thought’ to the category of ‘philosophy’, which formed a recurrent debating ground for its respective sinological detractors and proponents. The very act of asking the question which forms the theme of this conference with respect to China has a long and fairly convoluted histori(ographi)cal and political prehistory, which might be traced back even beyond the Jesuit beginnings, from which Ori Sela’s highly recommendable recent outline of the conflicting Chinese, Japanese, and Western narratives on the topic proceeds⁸, i.e. well down into European Late Antiquity.⁹ To continue to pose this question, then, is deliberately *reductionist* in the sense that it nonchalantly disregards the historical underpinnings which shaped the notion of philosophy during the crucial Sino-Western intellectual exchanges since the 18th century which surrounded the appropriation of the corresponding Western discipline and its terminologies in China. Consequently, as Denecke poignantly wrote, it is a question, which “pushes careful readings of Chinese texts into a narrow corner of self-defence, predetermining the type of evidence marshalled for a question that was only asked out of the *historical coincidence* that China’s ... desperate opening to western knowledge happened just around the time analytical philosophy flourished in the Anglophone world”.¹⁰

The whole history of the encounter – appropriation – rejection – re-appropriation spiral starting with the Jesuit missions and reaching its preliminary apex with the “legitimacy of Chinese philosophy debate” of the 1990ies need not be reiterated here.¹¹ Despite the great historical and cultural interest of the debates surrounding it and the well-taken caveats which arise from a careful description of their subliminal political agendas or the analysis of their

8 Ori Sela, “Philosophy’s Ascendancy: The Genealogy of *Tetsugaku/Zhexue* in Japan and China, 1870-1930”, Ms., Princeton, 2010.

9 On European perceptions of China during Late antiquity and the medieval period see e.g. Jean-Michel Poinssotte, “Les Romains et la Chine : réalités et mythes”, *Mélanges de l’École française de Rome* 91, 1979, 1: 431-479, and F. Reichert, *Begegnungen mit China : die Entdeckung Ostasiens im Mittelalter*, Siegmaringen: J. Thorbecke, 1992 (Beiträge zur Geschichte und Quellenkunde des Mittelalters; 15). On early Chinese perceptions of the West, see D.D. Leslie & K. H. J. Gardiner, *The Roman Empire in Chinese Sources*, Rome: Department of Oriental Studies, University of Rome (Studi Orientali; 15) 1996.

10 W. Denecke, “Disciplines in Translation: From Chinese Philosophy to Chinese What?”, *Culture, Theory & Critique* 47, 2006, 1: 23-38, at 26-7.

11 See Sela, *op.cit.* For the later repercussions of this process in the so-called “legitimacy of Chinese philosophy debate” see also C. Defoort, “Is there such a thing as Chinese philosophy? Arguments of an Implicit Debate”, *Philosophy East & West* 51, 2001, 3: 393-413, “Is ‘Chinese Philosophy’ a proper name? A response to Rein Raud”, *Philosophy East and West* 56, 2006, 4: 625-660, and the three issues 37.1-3 (2005-6) of *Contemporary Chinese Thought* edited by Defoort and Gě Zhàoguāng 葛兆光.

deliberate oversights, it seems to me that there is still a role to be played for attempts to shoulder the heavy, time-honoured European “conceptual baggage” *within* the “loaded stratosphere of philosophy”.¹² Rather than to retreat into seemingly cozier disciplinary environments, such as “comparative intellectual history”, “intercultural philosophy”, “ethnosemantics”, “rhetorical criticism” etc., which ostentatiously aim at overriding the entrenched universalist/relativist divide or the “logocentric” conditionality allegedly underlying it, I think that to reconstruct what was epistemological *competence* according to explicitly pre-imposed “Western”, or, for that matter, *any* predefined parameters, has the distinct advantage of being easier falsifiable than comparative approaches to historical performances and cultural preferences. While this might seem like a step back into Sela’s fourth appropriation phase of “applying *zhexue* to China’s past”¹³, which started after the full consolidation of the term by 1903¹⁴ and gained prominence in the many attempts to write histories of Chinese philosophy after the abolishment of the state examination system after 1300 years in 1905, any attempt to uncover early historical precursors that would qualify an epistemologically grounded “philosophy” predicate today, will obviously have a quite different legroom.

On the one hand – although one cannot help feeling a nagging doubt about this in view of the current “nationology fever” (*guóxué rè* 國學熱) in the People’s Republic – such endeavours may today afford to rid themselves of an embedding in the politically conditioned tension between programmes of “reordering the nation’s grounding” (*zhěnglǐ guógù* 整理國故) and those of the detractors gathering around the “across-the-board westernization” (*quánpán xīfānghuà* 全盤西方化) slogan during the Republican period. On the other hand, our knowledge of the most important tool in any such discussion – the early Chinese language – has dramatically changed over the past 100 years. Finally, on a more general plane still, to assume that a foreign tradition of thought is capable of philosophizing is, as Roetz has repeatedly pointed out, not a mere matter of charity or patronizing tolerance. Any denial of such a precondition or its reduction to a particular and ultimately unappropriable Western notion of thought would unshirkably undermine claims for transcultural validity of philosophy beyond the realm of questions and experiences made by the Greeks and “the” West, writ large.¹⁵

12 Denecke, *op.cit.*, 39.

13 Sela, *op.cit.*, 39-51.

14 Zhōng Shàohuá 鐘少華, “Qīng mò Zhōngguó rén duì yú ‘zhéxué’ de zhuīqiú” 清末中國人對於‘哲學’的追求, *Zhōngguó Wén-Zhé Yánjiū Tōngxùn* 中國文哲研究通訓, 2, 1992, 2: 159-189, cf. Sela, *ibid.*

15 H. Roetz, “Gibt es eine chinesische Philosophie?”, *Information Philosophie*, 30, 2002, 2: 20-39

III.

Most sinologists critical of an acceptance of the label of “philosophy” for the texts, arguments, and practices of pre-Qín China throughout the 20th century (Gernet, Granet, Grimm, Moritz, Thoraval, Trauzettel, Vandermeersch, to name but of few) have, more or less explicitly, based their arguments on perceived “absences” or “deficits” of its conceptual subcomponents in China, such as a the lack of notions of truth, individuality, utopian thinking or justice. Given the prevalence of epistemological criteria within philosophy conceived as a science of science in the 20th century, especially since the “linguistic turn” in analytic philosophy, such deficit claims, also commonly encountered with respect to science itself, as well as *prima facie* extra-philosophical notions such as “history”, “nature”, or even emotions like “shame” or “melancholy” encountered in other perennially reopening sinological debating arenas, have typically been paired with corresponding deficit imputations targeting the capacity of the Classical Chinese language to express abstractions, sentencehood, counterfactuality, temporal reference, subjecthood, parts of speech categoriality.¹⁶ More often than not, these have been made without any sensitivity for the diachronic and diatopic stratifications of the Chinese language.¹⁷ Moreover, they have been coupled with quite naïve confluences of linguistic categories with units in the writing system used to represent them. With Granet’s “emblematic” interpretation of the Chinese script (and culture) as the primary warrantor, side discourses, already incipient with Herder, von Humboldt and Steinthal have consequently evolved with Derrida, Foucault, Hansen, Luhmann, Stetter, Vandermeersch (to again cite but a few of the more well-known names), which attach the observed “propositional” deficits to the non-alphabetic nature of the script “in which” argumentation was carried out, rather than to language itself.¹⁸ Not only is the whole discourse on pictography as an obstacle to abstraction *conceptually* mistaken¹⁹, but the idea of non-

16 For good catalogues of such claims, and sustained attempts at their refutation see e.g. C. Harbsmeier, *Science and Civilisation in China*, Vol. 7, Part 1: *Language and Logic*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998; Roetz, Heiner, “Validity in Zhou Thought. On Chad Hansen and the Pragmatic Turn in Sinology”, in: Hans Lenk and Gregor Paul, eds., *Epistemological Issues in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1993, pp. 69-113.

17 On the importance of diachronic sensitivity in the translation of ancient Chinese philosophical key terms see H. Köster, “Zu einigen grundbegriffen chinesischer Philosophie in Parallel zur archaisch-westlichen Vorstellungen”, in: *China, erlebt und erforscht. Partielle Beiträge zur kritischen Chinakunde*, München (o. Vlg.), 1974: 234-255, at 235f.

18 Cf. Roetz 2002, P. Schlobinski, “Zum Prinzip des Relativismus von Schriftsystemen: die chinesische Schrift und ihre Mythen”, *Zeitschrift für Sprachwissenschaft* 20, 2001: 117-146.

19 For two good arguments, one linguistic and one philosophical, why graphs of logographic scripts such as Chinese and Egyptian may never be meaningfully analyzed as *pictographic*, see W.G. Boltz, “Pictographic Myths”, *Bochumer Jahrbuch zur Ostasienforschung* 30, 2006: 39-54 and B. Jespersen & C. Reintges 2008,

phonological processing of characters by the human brain is *empirically* untenable.²⁰

With regard to the possibility of reconstructing Ancient Chinese concepts of ‘truth’, so crucial to most epistemological definitions of “philosophy” since the 18th century, Harbsmeier writes after a fine survey of its subtypes and the lexical and syntactical means of expressing them:²¹

“We conclude that far from finding the notion of truth inconceivable, ancient Chinese philosophers frequently asked themselves whether some statement was true or not, although they did not show the same degree of philosophical preoccupation with factual truth as Westerners might expect. The Chinese regularly applied the predicate ‘true’ to words or statements. They often referred to the nominalized notion of truth. (...) The ancient Chinese may have taken a pragmatic approach to language and thinking. But as pragmatists should, they had plenty of use for the scientific notion of objective or truth. (...) [However, their] key concept was that of the Way (*tao*) of conducting human affairs, not of objective factual or doctrinal truth.”

Historically, one of the most common techniques of validating truth claims is via the law of non-contradiction, first explicitly formulated in Plato’s *Republic*²² and in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*²³ in Greece, and in Pāṇinian grammar in India.²⁴ Several ways of expressing contradictions and logical incoherence in Early Chinese literature have been reviewed in the literature²⁵, but the closest equivalent of a *technical term* denoting a logical inconsistency of the type “ $\neg (p \wedge \neg p)$ ”, i.e. to hold the same thing to be something and not something is untrue, was probably the word denoted by the graphs *bèi* 悖~諄. However, before proceeding

“Tractarian *Sätze*, Egyptian Hieroglyphs, and the very idea of script as a picture”, *The Philosophical Forum*, 39, 2008, 1: 1-19.

20 There is a vast recent literature on this topic. For an introduction see, e.g. J.C. Ziegler, L.H. Tan & C. Perry, “Phonology matters: the phonological frequency effect in written Chinese”, *Psychological Science* 11, 2003, 3: 234-8; Han Zi & Bi Yi, “Oral spelling and writing in a logographic language: insights from a Chinese dysgraphic individual”, *Brain and Language* 110, 2009, 1: 23-28.

21 Harbsmeier, *op.cit.*, 207.

22 *Republic* 4.436b: “δῆλον ὅτι ταῦτόν τάναντία ποιεῖν ἢ πάσχειν κατὰ ταῦτόν γε καὶ πρὸς ταῦτόν οὐκ ἐθελήσει ἄμα.” (“It is obvious that the same thing will never do or suffer opposites in the same respect in relation to the same thing and at the same time”).

23 *Metaphysics* IV.1005b: “τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ ἄμα ὑπάρχειν τε καὶ μὴ ὑπάρχειν ἀδύνατον τῷ αὐτῷ καὶ κατὰ τὸ αὐτὸ καὶ ὅσα ἄλλα προσδιορισσάμεθ’ ἄν, ἔστω προσδιορισμένα πρὸς τὰς λογικὰς δυσχερείας.” (“It is impossible that the same thing can at the same time both belong and not belong to the same object and in the same respect, and all other specifications that might be made, let them be added to meet local objections.”)

24 Staal, *Universals*, check REF.

25 See, e.g. D. Leslie, *Argument by Contradiction in Pre-Buddhist Reasoning*, Canberra: Australian National University Pr., 1964; A.C. Graham, *Later Mohist logic, ethics, and science*, Hong Kong: Chinese University Pr. and London: SOAS, 1978: 169, 235, 319, 342, 449; Harbsmeier, *op.cit.*, 212-218.

to look at the rhetoric of “self-refutation” or logical incoherence in some textual examples constructed with the help of this term, it will be necessary to understand why it was *lexically* and *morphologically* uniquely suitable to express statements self-contradiction or -falsification. To this end, the following linguistic digression will hopefully be excused.

IV.

a. paleography

The characters bèi 𠄎 (悖) and bèi 𠄎 (悖) representing the concept of ‘self-refutation’ in the edited literature do not seem to be reliably attested in pre-Qín epigraphical materials so far.²⁶ The *Shuōwén* 說文²⁷ defines 𠄎 as a phonosemantic character meaning ‘chaotic, rebellious’ (*luàn yě 亂也*), and adds that it has a ‘heart’-classifier variant 𠄎 (悖). Later allographs include a ‘mouth’-variant 悖 and a secondary augmentation by *shū* 殳 ‘to stab with a spear’ of the heart-determined form resulting in 𠄎.²⁸ This kind of classifier variation is well-known from other speech act and psych verbs encountered in Warring States excavated texts and simply reflects the variability of the writing system in pre-Qín China.²⁹ Xǔ Shèn 許慎 furthermore mentions a curious associative zhòuwén 籀文-form³⁰ 𠄎 (bèi 𠄎) here and in two other entries³¹, where it is once glossed as a variant of bèi 悖, once as a variant of bèi 悖. Strangely enough, the latter form 悖 is not itself lemmatized in the *Shuōwén* text, although it not only occurs in the entries just mentioned, but also in the postface to the “dictionary”.³² In the earlier synsemantic variant 𠄎, the ‘chaotic, rebellious’ semantics would seem to be iconically coded by the flipped juxtaposition of two elements conventionally identified as *huò* 或. These ultimately depict two thrust weapons “getting at each other”³³, as still readily retrievable from the oracle bone predecessors of the bare

26 Cf. Hé Línyí 何琳儀, *Zhànguó gǔwén zìdiǎn* 戰國古文字典, Běijīng: Zhōnghuá 1998, vol. 2: 1300-1.

27 *Shuōwén* 3, 言部:1614.

28 See *Jíyùn* 集韻, s.v., “悖, 亦作𠄎”.

29 Cf. Hé Línyí 何琳儀, *Zhànguó wénzì tōnglùn* 戰國文字通論, Běijīng 北京: Zhōnghuá 中華 1989: 〇〇.

30 I.e., a pre-unification seal script form.

31 *Shuōwén* 6, 角部:2851, s.v. 𠄎: “𠄎, 籀文悖字” and 11, 火部: 6394, s.v. 𠄎: “𠄎, 籀文悖字”.

32 In the passage: 又見《倉頡篇》中“幼子承詔”，因曰：古帝之所作也，其辭有神僊之術焉。”其迷誤不論，豈不悖哉！ “When they see [the phrase] ‘the little one takes on the decree’ in the *Cāng Jié piān*, and therefore say: ‘it was created by a thearch of old, in whose words the art of a spiritual immortal is contained’, then they are being mislead and without understanding. Isn’t it really self-refuting?!” Cf. for a heavily commented study and translation of this postface Marc Winter, “... und *Cang Jie erfand die Schrift*”. *Ein Handbuch für den Gebrauch des Shuo Wen Jie Zi*, Bern, Berlin usw.: P. Lang 1998, 557-574 (Schweizer Asiatische Studien; Monographien; 28).

33 But weapons different from a simple *gē* 戈, juxtaposition of which would have resulted in the iconically akin character *cán* 𠄎 (OC *s-lan) ‘to damage, hurt, be vicious’ (cf. *GSR* 155a-b), which, if augmented by a speech classifier comes to mean *jiàn* 𠄎 (OC *s-l[a,e]n-s) ‘insincere, artful’ (155m).

phonophoric 孛, such as 𠄎, or 𠄎. The osteographical form, however, would be more properly transcribed as an inverted concatenation 𠄎 of *róng* 戎 ‘weapons of war’³⁴ or with a later unattested *kǎishū* 楷書 normalization 𠄎. The first epigraphical orthography featuring a genuine doubled *huò* 或 only comes from the Late Western Zhōu “Lǚ Zhòng *guǐ*” 旅仲簋 bronze inscription, where the character occurs as a personal name of the vessel recipee.³⁵ Thus, even if we acknowledge that *huò* 或 (OC *GG^wək) ‘eventually; someone’ etc., *yù* 域 (*G^w(r)ək) ‘territory’ and *guó* 國 (*kk^wək) ‘fiefdom, state’ were often used interchangeably in pre-Qín inscriptions, one can still not construe 𠄎 as the synsemantic depiction of two ‘states’ fighting against each other, as per Duàn Yùcái 段玉裁.³⁶ If the two characters are historically related at all³⁷, despite the fact that one refers to a very concrete, physical sphere and the other to language and abstraction, the replacement of the odd synsemantic character by a straightforward phonosemantic version was most likely late, and due to the orthographic cumbersomeness of writing characters like 𠄎 or 𠄎.³⁸

b. phonology

On the phonological side, the *Guǎngyùn* 廣韻 gives a Middle Chinese reading 蒲昧切 (i.e. MC **bwojH*³⁹) for the two characters 悖 and 諄, as well as its phonophoric *bèi* 孛 (‘comet; halo of a comet’), which would regularly reconstruct to Old Chinese *[N,m]-pp[ə,u]t-s.⁴⁰ A reconstruction in *-u- is corroborated by the fact that *bèi* rhymes in a mixed *-uts/-ups series in one *Shījīng* 詩經 poem⁴¹, and in the following prosimetric rhyme from a famous passage

34 See for a list and arrangement of the relevant forms into the diviner group diachrony Liú Zhāo 劉釗 ed., *Xīn jiǎgǔwén biān* 新甲骨文編, Fúzhōu: Fújiàn rénmin, 2009: 960.

35 *Yīn-Zhōu jīnwén jíchéng* 殷周金文集成 (#3872): “旅仲乍（作）𠄎寶殷（簋）。其萬年子（子子）孫（孫孫）永用享（享）考。” (“Lǚ Zhòng (had) made a treasured *guǐ*-tureen for Bèi. May son’s sons and grandsons’ grandsons eternally use it to feast the deceased forefathers.”)

36 “兩國相違，舉戈相向”，*Shuōwén jiězì zhù* 說文解字注, repr. Shànghǎi: Shànghǎi Gǔjí 1981: 3A/97b.

37 As, for instance, disputed by Mǎ Xùlún 馬敘倫, *Shuōwén jiězì liùshū shūzhèng* 說文解字六書疏證 j. 5, Běijīng: Kēxué 1957, apud Lǐ Pǔ 李圃 et al., *Gǔwénzì gǔlín* 古文字詁林 Shànghǎi: Shànghǎi Jiāoyù 1999, vol. 3: 66, who maximally allows for some metaphorical connection, or for the editors of the *Jiǎgǔwénzì gǔlín* 甲骨文字詁林, Yú Xǐngwú 于省悟, Yáo Xiàosui 姚孝遂 et al., vols. 1-4, Běijīng: Zhōnghuá 1996, vol. 3: 2323/#2403.

38 Cf. Huáng Dékuān 黃德寬, *Gǔwénzì pǔxì shūzhèng* 古文字譜系疏證, Běijīng: Shāngwù 2007, vol. 4: 3279.

39 Throughout this paper, the “beta version 0.99” of the Baxter-Sagart system for Middle Chinese transcriptions and Old Chinese reconstructions is used, in the notation detailed in R.H. Gassmann & W. Behr, *Antikchinesisch – Ein Lehrbuch in drei Teilen*, vol. 3, *Grammatik des Antikchinesischen* (Bern: Peter Lang [Schweizer Asiatische Studien, Studienhefte; 18.3]), 2005, chap. 10.

40 Items separated by commas in square brackets indicate competing regular sources for a Middle Chinese form, when the available inner-Chinese evidence is not sufficient to decide between the two possibilities.

41 *Máoshī* 毛詩 #257, “Sāngróu” 桑柔, 13.

on “learning” in the *Lǐjì* 禮記:⁴²

- (1) 今之教者 (...) 言及于數，進而不顧其安，使人不由其誠，教人不盡其材；其施之也悖，其求之也佛。夫然，故隱其學而疾其師，苦其難而不知其益也，雖終其業，其去之必速。教之不刑，其此之由乎。

“According to the system of teaching now-a-days, [the masters] (...) speak of the learners' making rapid advances, and pay no regard to their reposing (in what they have acquired). In what they lay on their learners they are not sincere, nor do they put forth all their ability in teaching them. What they inculcate is contrary to what is right, and the learners are disappointed in what they seek for.”

Here, *bèi* 悖 (*[N,m]-pp[ə,u]t-s) and *fú* 佛 (MC **bjut* < **bət*) clearly rhyme together, and they were even used synonymously in a paronomastic pun in the biography of Dōngfāng Shuō 東方朔 (154-93) in the *Hànshū* 漢書 slightly later:⁴³

- (2) 夫談有悖於目拂 (var. 佛) 於耳謬於心而便於身者 ...

“Now, if your talking is resisting the eyes, defying the ears, running counter to one’s mind, yet still convenient for the body ...”

Taken together, this evidence allows for a quite confident reconstruction of *[N,m]-pp[ə,u]t-s.

c. morphology and word formation

The Old Chinese language underwent dramatic typological changes during the pre-Qín period, which led to the rampant loss of its once abundant and productive derivational morphology, along with the concomitant rise of lexical tones (“tonogenesis”), the abandonment of a once sesquisyllabic root structure, and the subsequent creation of a new disyllabic foot structure of lexical words.⁴⁴ With the exception of a few conservative peripheral dialects, especially in the Mǐn 閩 and Jīn 晉 speaking areas⁴⁵, this process left the fairly unified languages of the early Imperial and Early Medieval periods approaching the quasi-isolating tonal typology of Middle Chinese and the Modern dialects. It is this “new” morphosyntactic shape of the language, which was eventually projected back onto the pre-Qín state of affairs by the first Western missionaries and philosophers who became interested in it,

42 *Lǐjì* 禮記 18: 1.15; transl. Legge 2:86.

43 *Hànshū* 漢書 65:2868.

44 See on this last point Féng Shèngli 2007 °°REF.

45 Cf. L. Sagart, “Vestiges of Archaic Chinese Derivational Affixes in Modern Chinese Dialects”, in: H. Chappell ed., *Sinitic Grammar - Synchronic and Diachronic Perspectives*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

and who almost unanimously failed to question the deceptive continuity of the logosyllabographic writing system. Consciously or not, and with or without ethnocentric undercurrents, they tended to construct Chinese as a typological antipode of Indo-European languages since the 17th century⁴⁶, and often built quite elaborate philosophical upon those precarious foundations.⁴⁷

Under a theory of Old Chinese word formation such as Sagart's⁴⁸ or Jīn Lǐxīn's⁴⁹, the lexical root of a word in Old Chinese is minimally the *CV(C) structure stripped off all affixal materials. The reconstructible Old Chinese derivational morphology is by and large *agglutinative*, such that the root structure is left intact by any given affixation process, in that affixes are monofunctional in a given word formation, and since they – in opposition to the *inflecting* type – typically do not encode paradigms.⁵⁰ One does not have to be very imaginative, then, to see that the root of *[N,m]-pp[ə,u]-t-s is *p[ə,u]-t, i.e. the negative *fú* 弗 or *bù* 不, itself in all likelihood a suffixed version of the bare negative *pə-, integrating a pronominal agreement or object marker *-t- into the root.⁵¹ What, then, is the role performed

46 See for the historical backgrounds of these developments W. Behr, “Language change in premodern China – notes on its perception and impact on the idea of a ‘constant way’”, in: ACHIM MITTAG & HELWIG SCHMIDT-GLINTZER eds., *Ideology and historical criticism*, Special issue of *Historiography East and West*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2004: 13-51 and “Role of language in early Chinese constructions of ethnic identity”, *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 37 (4), 2010: 567-587.

47 For a good philosophical overview of those developments see H. Roetz, “Die chinesische Sprache und das chinesische Denken. Positionen einer Debatte,” *Bochumer Jahrbuch zur Ostasienforschung* 30 (2006): 9-37.

48 L. Sagart, *The roots of Old Chinese*, Amsterdam & Philadelphia: J. Benjamins, 1999 (Current Current issues in linguistic theory; 184).

49 Jīn Lǐxīn 金理新, *Shàngǔ Hànyǔ xíngtài yánjiū* 上古漢語形態研究, Héféi: Huángshān shūshè, 2006.

50 In how far ablaut, i.e. morphologically conditioned main vowel apophony which would interrupt the segmental integrity of the lexical root was operative in Old Chinese as well (as per Pulleyblank, “Close/Open Ablaut in Sino-Tibetan”, in: G.B. Milner & E.J.A. Henderson eds., *Indo-Pacific Linguistic Studies (=Lingua 14)*, 1965: 230-240, Amsterdam : North Holland Publ.) is currently unclear. Suffice it so, that all ablaut phenomena can be phonologically reinterpreted as infixation of the lexical root (cf. Pulleyblank, Ablaut and Initial Voicing in Old Chinese Morphology: *a as an Infix and Prefix”, in: *Proceedings of the Second International Conference on Sinology. Section on Linguistics and Paleography*: 1-21, Táiběi 臺北 : Academia Sinica, 1989; Behr 2007 REF), such that the overall agglutinative typology is maintained.

51 *Bù* 不 has the Middle Chinese readings *pjuw (甫鳩切) and *put (方久切), the latter probably assigned secondarily in analogy to *fú* 弗. Ultimately the shared underlying OC negative was probably just *p- (as opposed to the *m-series negatives), which was *schwa*-vocalized by default, if attaching to a following verb (cf. Pulleyblank, REF^{ooo}). Cf. for competing theories about the syntax and morphology of 弗 e.g. P.A. Boodberg, “The final -t of 弗 fu” (Notes on Chinese Morphology and Syntax; 1 [1934]), and “The Morphology of Final -N and -T” (Notes on Chinese Morphology and Syntax; 3) reprinted in: A.P. Cohen ed., *Selected Works of Peter A. Boodberg*, Berkeley, Los Angeles & London : University of California Press, 1979: 430-431, 432-434), Dīng Shēngshù 丁聲樹, “Shì fǒudingcí ‘fú’ ‘bù’” 釋否定詞「弗」「不」, *Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology* (Extra Volume, Fs. Cài Yuánpéi 蔡元培) 1 (1933-35) 2:

by the other affixes? In Baxter & Sagart's morphological theory, prefix *N- is a valency diminisher, i.e. a prefix typically turning a transitive verb into an intransitive verb. The *phonetic* consequences of this nasal prefix, which is unspecified for place (i.e. it assimilates to the following root initial) are in most environments very similar to those of the bilabial prefix *m-, which changes nonvolitional verbs into volitional, nouns into volitional verbs, and verbs into agentive nouns.⁵² Suffix *-s, on the other hand, has mainly three functions, namely the formation of deverbal nouns out of verbs, the marking of perfective-resultative aspect in verbs, and the encoding of exoactivity, i.e. the outward direction of the verbal action. Since the end-product of the double affixation in *[N,m]-pp[ə,u]t-s is not a noun and volitionality clearly plays no role in the verb semantics of *bèi*, the most likely combination involved here is that of detransitivizing *N- combined with exoactive *-s. Like in the contrasts between *bài* 敗 < MC **paejH* < OC **pprat-s* 'to defeat' and *bài* 敗 < **baejH* < *N-*pprat-s* 'to be defeated' or *jiàng* 降 < **kaewngH* < **kkruŋ-s* 'let down sth., step down from' and *xiáng* < **haewng* < *N-*kkruŋ* 'to submit oneself', the detransitivized verb is commonly interpreted as (medio-)passive or reflexive.

In other words, from the bare negative root *pə- 'not' a transitive, exoactive verb *p[ə,u]-t-s is first formed, literally 'to negate someone/-thing', which becomes 'to be negated, to negate oneself' after prefixation by the valency diminisher *N-. It is from this semantic basis as a verb "to negate" that both metaphorical extensions and lexicalizations 'to be rebellious, refractory', 'to go against, contravene, disrupt' vs. 'to be or become confused, incoherent, contradictory' must have arisen.⁵³ Notice also, that medieval rhyming dictionaries note a second pronunciation for *bèi* 悖 – **pwojH* (補妹切), though not for *bèi* 悖, which would preserve the expected reading for the non-intransitivized OC root *pp[ə,u]-t-s. If this is not a lexical ghost, this would mean that the active-exoactive usages with full lexical objects resulting in the Early Imperial usages as 'to be rebellious, refractory', 'to go against, contravene, disrupt' would have been neatly differentiated in the *spoken* language from the

967-996; Huáng Jǐngxīn 黃景欣, "Qín-Hàn yǐqián gǔ Hànyǔ zhōng de fǒudingcí 'fú' 'bù' yánjiū" 秦漢以前古漢語中的否定詞「弗」「不」研究, *Yǔyán Yánjiū* 語言研究 (1958) 3: 1-23; C. Harbsmeier, "Fú in the Mawangdui manuscripts of the Laozi and in the Remnants of Qin law", in: J.C.P. Liang & R.P.E. Sybesma eds., *From Classical FU to 'Three Inches High'. Studies on Chinese in Honor of Erik Zürcher*, Leuven & Apeldoorn: Garant, 1993: 1-60; Gassmann, Robert H. [Gāo Sīmàn 高思曼], "Fǒudingcí 'fú' de jùfǎ" 否定詞「弗」的句法, *Gǔ Hànyǔ Yánjiū* (1993) 4: 1-9.

52 Other usages in the realm of *nominal* morphology include the marking of body parts, animal names, and grain designations. Cf. W.H. Baxter & L. Sagart, "Old Chinese word structure and affixes in the Baxter-Sagart 0.99 system", Ms. Paris & Ann Arbor 2009: 1.

53 For a good selection of early glosses see Zōng Fúbāng 宗福邦 et al., *Gùxùn huìzuǎn* 故訓匯纂, Běijīng: Shāngwù 2003: 793 (s.v. 悖) and 2121 (s.v. 諄).

passive-reflexive usages going back to *N-, which developed into the ‘to be or become confused, incoherent, self-contradicting’.

Just as in the case of the Old Chinese “sentence negative” *fēi* 非, which emerged from the fusion of the negative *bù* 不 (OC *pə-) with the archaic copular verb *wéi* (隹~唯~惟~維 *(tə)-wuj) to yield *fēi* 非 (< MC *pjij < OC *pəj), the same copula, incidentally, which was used in *suī* 雖 (OC *s-(tə)-wuj) “let it be the case that” → “even” and *wēi* 微 (OC *ma-t-wuj) “it has not been the case that” → “if it had non been for” in counterfactual or irrealis marking in the early literature⁵⁴, the root of the word written by the different *bèi* orthographies was a negative verb derived from *bù* 不.

V.

It was precisely against this etymological background, it would seem, that the term *bèi* came to operate as the most prominent expression for the the notion of logical incoherence, or ‘self-refutation’ in early Chinese philosophical discourse. While it has been discussed elsewhere, mostly with respect to its usage in the Mohist canons⁵⁵, let us briefly look at some examples today again. Just like in the case of many other notions used to make validity claims in Early Chinese, *bèi* is most often found in contexts, where the social or moral adequacy of a certain thought or action is at stake, not its propositional logic. The *zhèng míng* topos clearly lurks behind passages like the following in the *Huáinánzǐ*

- (3) 亂國則不然。言與行相悖，情與貌相反，禮飾以煩，樂優以淫。°⁵⁶

“In a disordered country, this is not the case. Words and actions are mutually contradictory, emotions and looks are mutually opposed. Rituals are adorned up to a point when they become a hassle, and music is indulged in up to a point when it becomes licentious.”

Here, *bèi* is used as a moral classification of the state of affairs in a world in decline. It is largely synonymous with *fǎn* in the following sentence, and it needs the reciprocal pronoun *xiāng* at its side to fully establish the relation between the two objects compared. The focus is on the *behaviour* of not recognizing the logical consistency of something, not on the theory of what gives rise to such failures, as also in the following passage in the *Lǚshì chūnqiū* 呂氏春

54 Cf. W. Behr, “Morphological notes on the Old Chinese counterfactual”, *Bochumer Jahrbuch zur Ostasienforschung* 30, 2006: 55-87.

55 See esp. Graham, *op.cit.*, 199-200, and the refutation of Chad Hansen’s pragmatic misreading of passage (°°REF) below, in item 13 of his indispensable catalogue of Zhōu validity concepts by Roetz 1993: 93-95.

56 *Huáinánzǐ* 淮南子 11.18; transl. B. Wallacker, *The Huai-nan-tzu, Book Eleven: Behavior, Culture and the Cosmos*, Philadelphia: American Oriental Society, 1962: 34.

秋:

- (4) 攻伐之與救守一實也，而取舍人異，以辨說去之，終無所定論。固不知，悖也。知而欺心，誣也。誣悖之士，雖辨無用矣。是非其所取而取其所非也，是利之而反家之也，安之而反危之也。⁵⁷

“To attack and to defend are one reality, but the people differ in accepting or rejecting it. Rejecting it on account of discrimination or persuasion, there will, at the end of the day, be no ground for a definite discourse about them. To obstinately fail to take notice of that is self-contradictory. Knowingly to pretend otherwise is deceptive. Scholars who are self-contradictory or deceptive may well be discriminating, but it is of no use. This is because it amounts to negate what they accept and at the same time to accept what they negate, to benefit someone and at the same time to harm his family, to safeguard someone and at the same time endanger him.”

It is easy to see, how from such morally loaded usages of *bèi*, the word could end up lexically as a mere qualifier of the ethical or ritual inappropriateness of *actions*:

- (5) 釋己之所得為，而責於其所不得制，悖矣。⁵⁸

“It is perverse to demand of someone something over which he has no control instead of that which it is possible for him to do.”

- (6) 然則性而已，則人無禮義，不知禮義。人無禮義則亂，不知禮義則悖。然則性而已，則悖亂在己。⁵⁹

“But if one starts out with human nature by itself, then man has no ritual propriety or rectitude, he does not understand ritual propriety or rectitude. If man lacks ritual propriety and rectitude, then he will be prone to rebel, if he does not understand ritual propriety and rectitude he will be incoherent. But if one starts out with human nature by itself, then the incoherence and the rebelliousness is within oneself.”

As a consequence of this development, Hán Fēi, at the end of the Warring States period, often uses *bèi* already as a synonym of ‘stupidity’, for instance when he quotes it in one row with “Babies, imbeciles, the blind, the mentally deranged” (嬰兒、癡聾、狂悖之

57 *Lǚshì chūnqiū* 呂氏春秋 7.3.2.3; cf. transl. Knoblock & Riegel 2000: 179f.

58 *Huáinánzǐ* 淮南子 9.18/18; translation R. Ames, *The Art of Rulership: A Study of Ancient Chinese Political Thought*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983: 208.

59 *Xúnzǐ* 荀子 23.8.5; Knoblock 3:154.

人...)⁶⁰. Even when *bèi* refers to language, instead of actions or beliefs, it can still tend toward this pragmatic, judgemental usage:

- (7) 夫繁文以相假，飾辭以相悖，數譬以相移，外人之身使不得反其意，則論便然後害生也。⁶¹

“But, while involved diction to falsify [the argument], decorated words to pervert it, numerous metaphors to shift it, raising the voice so that it is impossible to attain to [understanding] may be convenient to the argument, still harm results from these.”

It would be mistaken, however, to assume with Hansen that the kind of statements classified as *bèi* stop at this merely evaluative level. First of all, it is clear that several Warring States authors were well aware that *bèi* operates at the level of *categories* of objects, and that it is the task of the rhetorically skilled person to recognize this categoriality, if he wants to escape self-contradiction:

- (8) 類不悖，雖久同理。⁶²

“What is in one category is not self-contradictory, even after a long time it conforms in its structural principles.”

- (9) 辯者，別殊類，使不相害，序異端，使不相悖。⁶³

“Disputants distinguish different categories to prevent their interfering with on another. They (arrange in succession =) keep separate incompatible doctrines to prevent their mutual contradiction.”

Such contradictions, the disputant would no doubt have recognized, may arise from the way the world is organized, or from the conditions of the human being living in it:

- (10) 惡人聞之可也，惡己自聞之，悖矣。⁶⁴

“To hate it that others hear [the bell ring] is acceptable, to hate it that oneself is hearing it, is self-contradictory.”

But they clearly may also transcend the natural environment and refer to types of knowledge or belief, not only behaviors and actions. Witness for instance the following

60 *Hánfēizǐ* 韩非子 30.18/2; transl. Harbsmeier, *TLS*. In many passages of the *Lǚshì chūnqiū* Knoblock & Riegel also translate the term as “madness”.

61 *Hánshī Wàizhuàn* 韓詩外傳 6.6/3; transl. Hightower 1951: 196.

62 *Xúnzǐ* 荀子 (5.5.3).

63 *Hánshī Wàizhuàn* 韓詩外傳 6.6/1; transl. Hightower 1951: 196.

64 *Lǚshì chūnqiū* 呂氏春秋 24.3.4.1; Knoblock & Riegel transl. 613.

statements, which are in no way less abstract than the earliest formulations of the law of non-contradiction in Ancient Greece:

- (11) “臣聞沐者其心倒，心倒者其言悖。今君不沐，何言之悖也？”⁶⁵
“I have heard, that when one washes one’s hair, one’s heart is upside down, but when the heart is upside down, one’s utterances are contradictory. Now if the lord is not washing his hair, why is it that his utterances are contradictory?”
- (12) 無由接之患，自以為智，智必不接。今不接而自以為智，悖。⁶⁶
“The calamity that comes from being unable to apprehend them (the wise and the worthy) is that one regards oneself as wise, while those truly wise are necessarily not apprehended. Now, it is contradictory not to recognize those who are truly wise and yet to regard oneself as wise.”

More importantly, it was clearly recognized, that the usage of *bèi* entails some kind of metadiscourse on language in language, or even, as one might be tempted to translate *cí* 辭 in the following example from the *Lǚshì*, in propositions:⁶⁷

- (13) 夫辭者，意之表也。鑒其表而棄其意、悖。⁶⁸
“Now, propositions are the surface of ideas. To reflect the surface while discarding the corresponding ideas is self-contradictory.”

Moreover, the discourse on self-refutation was something to be *tested* against paradoxical propositions of the “sophists”, then current in the philosophical discourse:

- (14) 「非而謁楹」，「有牛馬非馬也」，此惑於用名以亂實者也。驗之名約，以其所受悖其所辭，則能禁之矣。⁶⁹
“The flying arrow does not pass the pillar, a white horse is not a horse — these are examples of errors in the use of names that disorder objects. If we test such

65 *Hánshī Wàizhuàn* 韓詩外傳 10.3/3; transl. J.R. Hightower, *Han shih wai chuan: Han Ying's Illustrations of the didactic application of the Classic of songs; an annotated translation*, Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1951: 320 (Harvard Yen-ching Institute Monograph Series; 11).

66 *Lǚshì chūnqiū* 呂氏春秋 16.3.1.1; cf. transl. Knoblock & Riegel 2000: 382.

67 On sentencehood in Classical Chinese see R. Bosley, “The Emergence of Concepts of a Sentence in Ancient Greek and in Ancient Chinese Philosophy”, *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 24, 1997, 2: 209-29. For a useful historical overview of the treatment of “sentencehood” in Ancient Chinese linguistics see now also Guō Pán 郭攀 & Xià Fèngméi 夏鳳梅, “Zhōngguó gǔdài yǔyánxué ‘jù’ gāiniàn de yǎnjìn” 中國古代語言學 “句” 觀念的演進, *Gǔ Hànyǔ Yánjiū* 古漢語研究 2009, 3: 35-42.

68 *Lǚshì chūnqiū* 呂氏春秋 18.4.5.3; cf. Knoblock & Riegel transl. 455.

69 *Xúnzǐ* 荀子 22.3.3; Knoblock 3:131.

cases against the agreed use of names and if we use ‘what one accepts’ to show that ‘what one rejects’ is fallacious, then we can exclude such statements.”

And from here, the whole gamut of embedding statements of self-contradiction with the negative verb *bèi* into further negative operators –including, of course, *bèi* itself– started:

- (15) 公叔死，公孫鞅西游秦，秦孝公聽之，秦果用彊，魏果用弱，非公叔瘞之悖也，魏王則悖也。夫悖者之患，固以不悖為悖。⁷⁰

“When Gōngshū [Zuò] died, Gōngsūn Yāng traveled west to Qín, where Duke Xiào of Qín heeded his advice. In fact, Qín used what is strong, and Wèi what is weak. It was not Gōngsūn Zuò who was incoherent, but the king of Wèi who was incoherent. As a matter of fact, the wickedness of what is incoherent is to obstinately take what is in not incoherent as what is coherent.”

Given this background, one marvels less at the seeming historical exceptionality of the manipulation of ‘self-refutation’ by the Later Mohists. Since this has been discussed in great detail elsewhere⁷¹, I merely cite the most important passages as a source for discussion, starting with the culmination of negation embedding in the following beautiful example, in which assertion is effected via double negation. Notice that no less than *five* different lexemes historically incorporating the negative *pə- (非 *pə-(tə-)wuj, 非 *pə-(tə-)wuj, 弗 *p[ə,u]-t, 不 *p[ə,u]-, 諄 *[N,m]-pp[ə,u]-t-s) are used in this passage, and four negatives (+ 無 *ma, 否 *pə-q) in the one immediately following:

- (16) 非非者諄，說在弗非。不非己之非也，不非非。非可非也，不可非也，是不非非也。⁷²

„(Canon:) To reject denial is self-contradictory. Explained by: he does not reject it.

(Explanation:) If he does not reject his own denial he does not reject denial. Whether his rejection is to be rejected or not, it amounts to not rejecting denial.

- (17) 知知之否之足用也*諄，說在無以也。論之，非智無以也。⁷³

“(Canon:) It is fallacious that the knowledge of whether one knows something or not is sufficient to act on. Explained by: lacking what distinguishes knowledge.

70 *Lǚshì chūnqiū* 呂氏春秋 11.2.5.6; cf. transl. Knoblock & Riegel 2000: 256.

71 Cf. Graham, *op.cit.*, passim.

72 *Mòjīng* 墨經 B.79; transl. Graham 1978: 453-4.

73 *Mòjīng* 墨經 B.34; transl. Graham 1978: 401 seq.

(Explanation:) When we sort out one from the other, the non-knowledge lacks what distinguishes knowledge.”

(18) 假必諱，說在不然。

假必非也而後假。狗假霍也，猶氏霍也。⁷⁴

“(Canon:) To loan-name is necessarily self-contradictory. Explained by: not being so of it.

(Explanation:) What it is loan-named it necessarily is not, otherwise it would not be a loan-name. When a dog is loan-named as being a crane, it is as when one gives it the clan-name 'Crane'.”

(19) 學之益也，說在誹者。以為不知學之無益也，故告之也。是使智學之無益也，是教也。以學為無益也，教諱。⁷⁵

“(Canon:) That it is useful to learn. Explained by: the objector.

(Explanation:) Thinking that he does not know that it is useless to learn, he therefore informs him. This is causing him to know that it is useless to learn which is teaching. If he thinks that it is useless to learn, to teach is to contradict himself.”

VI.

Clearly, then, if we make the coherent reflection of the logic of self-contradiction a criterion for the existence of ‘philosophy’ in a given culture, Warring States China meets the claim. If statements as the ones cited in section V. above are still perceived as unsystematic, *ad-hoc*, and theoretically not terribly ambitious in comparison with their Greek counterparts, this might indeed have something to do with rhetorical preferences, the anthropological settings of scholarly exchange and text production in Early China. As Harbsmeier pointed out repeatedly, the cultural difference lies in the fact that despite a clear understanding of the concept of propositions, truth and contradiction as a tool to prove it, the reticence of the scholars to pursue those issues beyond what was necessary for their pragmatic needs was rather subdued:

(20) 故君子之說也，足以言賢者之實、不肖者之充而已矣，足以喻治之所悖、亂之所由起而已矣，足以知物之情、人之所獲以生而已矣。⁷⁶

74 *Mòjīng* 墨經, B.8; transl. Graham 1978: 358.

75 *Mòjīng* 墨經 B.77; transl. Graham 1978: 452.

76 *Lǚshì chūnqiū* 呂氏春秋 16.8.1.2; cf. Knoblock & Riegel transl. 400, cf. Harbsmeier 1988: 209.

“Thus, the explanations of the gentleman are sufficient to discuss the truth of the worthy and the reality of the unworthy, but stop with that. They are sufficient to illustrate the factors that cause disruption of order and the causes from which disorder arises, but stop with that. They are sufficient to know the essential nature of things and what man must catch in order to live but stop with that.”

Nowhere, however, is there any hint that it was the structure of the Chinese language itself, which would have precluded attempts at such an inquiry. Dubs has it undoubtedly right, if he writes that⁷⁷

“... we have no reason to seek in the Chinese language the cause of the failure of the Chinese to develop such philosophical systems as those of Plato or Spinoza. The Chinese language is capable of expressing whatever ideas are desired to be expressed.”

Benvéniste’s famous much-quoted adage that “C’est ce qu’on peut dire, qui délimite et organise ce qu’on pense”⁷⁸ and that consequently the system of Greek logic ultimately rests upon the system of Indo-European inflection is clearly mistaken. Nor does the fact that the expression of self-contradiction in Old Chinese *etymologically* operates with a verb derived via agglutinative word formation from an underlying negative mean, of course, that a non-isolating linguistic typology is a prerequisite for the possibility of formulating precise propositions. Most speakers during the later part of the Zhōu period, when derivational morphology was already rapidly obsolescing, were probably not even aware of its existence. And when early medieval lexicographers began at least to take notice of the derivational properties of tone change⁷⁹ left over from the earlier affixation processes, they were facing such a mess of half-genuine, half-petrified, half-analogically adjusted evidence, that they failed to establish any coherent system of the grammatical functions encoded by such derivations.⁸⁰ Secondly, the importance of morphology in

77 H. Dubs, “The failure of the Chinese to produce philosophical systems”, *T’oung Pao* 26, 1929, 96-109, at 104.

78 E. Benvéniste, “Catégories de pensée et catégories de langue”, *Les Études philosophiques*, 4, 1958: 419-429.

79 The now classical Western article on the topic is G.B. Downer, “Derivation by tone-change in Classical Chinese”, *Bulletin of the School of African and Oriental Studies* 22, 1969, 258-90; the most up to date study of the phenomenon is Sūn Yùwén 孫玉文, *Hànyǔ biàndiào gòucí yánjiū* 漢語變調構詞研究, rev ed., Běijīng: Shāngwù, 2007.

80 Cf. David Prager Branner, “On Early Chinese Morphology and its Intellectual History”, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Ser. 3, 15, 1998, 1:45-7.

general has been grossly overrated in discussions of the expressive and analytical capacities of natural language.⁸¹ This is largely due to the establishment of morphological typology in linguistics as part of an alterity discourse in 18th century Europe, which in turn was influenced by the rise of the European vernaculars against the Latinate literary dominance. But, as the linguist Wolfgang Klein concludes in his provocatively titled article “Wozu braucht man eigentlich Flexionsmorphologie?” — “Die Flexion ist für die menschliche Sprache entbehrlich”.⁸²

Conversely, nothing should preclude using a Chinese set of statements defining, say, the famous discourse on the relationship between ‘names’ (*míng* 名) and ‘realities’ (*shí* 實)⁸³ in a reading of the *Κρατύλος*. Or to compare the social embedding of this discourse in Ancient China in an age of ethical crisis, say, to the theological and social transformations, which gave rise to the literature on the “crisis of discourse” in Middle Kingdom Egypt. Or, again, to the *Lamentations of Khakheperreseneb* of the 18th Dynasty (New Kingdom), where the author complains that the “juste rapport des paroles au réel et révoquée” (*ḥt mty mdwt*) in his age of turmoil.⁸⁴ Maybe it would be even illuminating to know why the Chinese struggled so hard in distinguishing ‘names’ and ‘realities’, the latter etymologically objects which are ‘solid matter’, ‘knots’⁸⁵, while the Egyptians, on the other hand, used one and the same word for the word ‘word’ (*mdw.t*) and for the word ‘matter, affair’, while, conversely the word with the literal meaning ‘knot’ (*ḥs*) was used for the concept of ‘statement, utterance’.⁸⁶ Yet the

81 For an extreme, if very learned example see J. Lohmann’s discussion of Chinese in “Martin Heideggers ontologische Indifferenz und die Sprache”, *Lexis* 1, 1948: 49-106 or Karl Haags “Der Ausdruck der Denkkordnung im Chinesischen“, *Wörter und Sachen*, N.F. 3, 1940: 1-25.

82 W. Klein, “Wozu braucht man eigentlich Flexionsmorphologie?”, *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* 131, 2003 24-54.

83 On which see, minimally, A.A. Крушинский, “Имена и реали в древнекитайской логике и методологии” [“Names and realities in Old Chinese logic and methodology”], in: *Современные историко-научные исследования: наука в традиционном Китае* [Contemporary historical and scientific research: science in traditional China], Москва 1987: 88-105; R.H. Gassmann, *Cheng ming, Richtigstellung der Bezeichnungen: zu den Quellen eines Philosophems im antiken China : ein Beitrag zur Konfuzius-Forschung*, Bern, New York usw.: P. Lang, 1988 (Schweizer asiatische Studien. Monographien ; Bd. 7); J. Makeham, *Name and actuality in early Chinese thought*, Albany. SUNY Pr. 1994 (SUNY series in Chinese philosophy and culture); H. Roetz, “Worte als Namen: Anmerkungen zu Xunzi und Dong Zhongshu”, in: M. Friedrich, J. Quenzer et al. eds, *Han-Zeit. Festschrift für Hans Stumpfeldt aus Anlaß seines 65. Geburtstages*, Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz 2006: 203-216.

84 L. Coulon, “La rhétorique et ses fictions. Pouvoirs et duplicité du discours à travers la littérature égyptienne du Moyen et du Nouvel Empire”, *Bulletin de l’Institut Français d’archéologie orientale* 99, 1999: 103-132. Thanks to Andréas Stauder (Chicago) for bringing this text to my attention.

85 實 (OC *mə-lit) ‘fruit; solid’; cf. for the word-family comprising, among others, *zhì* 質 (*t-lit) ‘real, solid; quality’ and *jié* 結 (*k-llit) ‘to form fruit, coagulate, form a knot, tie’, L. Sagart, *op.cit.*, 90, 103.

86 J.F. Borghouts, “Indigenous Egyptian Grammar”, in S. Auroux et al. ed., *An International Handbook on the*

precondition for comparative projects like that, it still seems to me, would be to acknowledge that language, at the end of the day, is almost as much a problem for an understanding intra- as crosslinguistically, and that literary Chinese was always just as adequate a medium as a language for science⁸⁷, as it was for philosophy.

Evolution of the Study of Language from the Beginnings to the Present, Berlin, New York: de Gruyter, 2000: 5-14.

87 Cf. K. Robinson & J. Needham, "Literary Chinese as a language for science", in: J. Needham et al, *Science and Civilization in China*, vol. VII, pt. 2, *General conclusions and reflections*, Cambridge. Cambridge UP, 2004: 95-198.