The Yields of Transition
The Yields of Transition: Literature, Art and Philosophy in Early Medieval China

Edited by

Jana S. Rošker and Nataša Vampelj Suhadolnik
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—Jana S. Rošker and Nataša Vampelj Suhadolnik
INTRODUCTION

JANA S. ROŠKER

The present volume is dedicated to the Wei Jin and Southern and Northern Dynasties (220–589 A.D.), which is generally regarded as one of the most fascinating phases in Chinese history. In recent years, scholars in Chinese studies have paid increasing attention to various developmental patterns and their causes during this transitional period. While this collection will primarily be of interest to students and specialists in Sinology, our hope is that it will also attract a wider academic readership, especially in the area of intercultural and/or comparative research on various cultural, methodological and theoretical issues, as well as general problems in historiography, ideology and politics. Our aim in compiling this anthology was threefold: to highlight the significance of transition in the making of Chinese culture and history, revise prevailing historical approaches in the study and research of China and develop and enhance existing theories and investigative methodologies in this specific area of research. The focus of the studies gathered here is upon the interaction of ideas, researches and perspectives concerning a wide range of relevant and significant issues in contemporary sinology. It is our firm conviction that inter-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary work is the only credible way forward in the rapidly changing panorama of sinological research and that the comprehension, analysis and transmission of reality based on diversely structured socio-political, cultural and philosophical contexts as a categorical and essential pre-condition to such research provides the surest path for enriching our knowledge and understanding in this field.

History (and official Chinese history is certainly no exception here) has often been used as an ideological tool for promoting the State and the interests of the ruling classes. Based on this awareness, the interdisciplinary approach adopted in the present volume rejects the projection of current beliefs and standards onto the past and affirms the specificity and singularity of each past event. What underlies this approach is the concept that while the past once existed, our historical knowledge of it is semiotically transmitted. The aim is thus to reveal a new image of the Wei
Jin Nanbei period, thereby calling into question the absolute authority and putative objectivity of historical sources and interpretations.

Like most historical discourses, official Chinese history is moulded by a form of historical thinking deeply rooted in human consciousness, and which pervades all cultures and periods. In such discourses, national and cultural identity is understood in terms of “master narratives” that define identity and difference as essential for the forming of cultural awareness. Such views often generate fictitious tensions and struggles, for they present history in terms of “clashes of civilizations”. In so doing, such narratives reinforce the false conception that intercultural relations are little more than power struggles.

It is not surprising, therefore, that official Chinese historiography generally describes the Wei Jin Nanbei period as one of political and economic instability, an era of turmoil which lasted over 300 years. It was also one of the few occasions when north and south were separated, and the official histories blame this separation with hindering economic growth. The frequent changes in political power and military conflicts during this period are also attributed with having increased the suffering of the people, who were already exhausted by natural calamities and plagues. Because the population was tied to the local administrations and events in the Imperial court were largely irrelevant, this colourful era is also considered as a time of obscurantism and dogmatism, in which the previously dominant legal and social system collapsed and the once unchallenged power of Confucianism was subjected to radical critical reexaminations. However, in terms of religion, it should be recalled that Buddhism and the Neo-Daoist philosophical debates also provided an important sanctuary for peasants and tradesmen during this time.

Official Chinese historiography was—and still is—determined by a striving for social harmony. In the traditional Chinese world view, harmony and progress can only be achieved within a great, all-embracing, unified state. Since this was an era of many small states, such historical ideology could hardly regard it as having produced any significant innovations. It was a time of transition, an “abnormal” period bracketed by two “normal” stages of development. As with the prevailing ideologies of today’s globalized world, traditional Chinese historiography could never acknowledge that periods of transition—of the blossoming of a myriad different blooms—can also be extraordinarily fruitful. For this reason, the Wei Jin Nanbei era has never been the subject of exhaustive research. However, for the historian this represents an opportunity, for it offers the possibility of uncovering essential shifts and important contributions in all areas of politics, arts, philosophy and culture. Without these little known
changes, Chinese culture and society could not have developed in the ways we know today.

The conventional view of Chinese history is that of alternating periods of political unity and disunity, with China occasionally being dominated by Inner Asian ethnic groups, most of which were assimilated in turn into the Han Chinese population. In this sense, the Wei Jin was one of the most remarkable phases of acculturation in Chinese history. Cultural and political influences from many areas of Asia were borne and transmitted by successive waves of immigration, expansion and cultural assimilation, and such influences are still found in Chinese culture today. This was a crucial moment in the formation of the Chinese nationalities. Ethnic minority groups, including the ancestors of the Turks, Mongols, and Tibetans gradually migrated towards the interior from the north and west, bringing new cultural impulses to early medieval China. While many of these groups were gradually assimilated by the Han nationality, some nomadic groups had already been partly sinicized long before their ascent to power. In fact, various ethnic groups, notably the Qiang and Xiongnu, had been allowed to settle in the frontier regions within the Great Wall from late Han times, while other nationalities in the Yellow River area allied themselves against the ethnic minorities’ reign. At the same time, there were large-scale Han Chinese migrations south of the Yangtze River in the early 4th century. Because the economy during the Nanbei Dynasties developed primarily in the south, there were relatively large migrations from the central into the southern regions, resulting in technology transfers and the strengthening of the local public works in this area.

Recent interdisciplinary research shows that this was one of the most fascinating phases in Chinese history, a period rich with political, economic, cultural and theoretical achievements that would prove decisive for the future development of Chinese culture and society. It was a time of expanding international relations, with diplomatic ties with Korea, Japan, Middle Asia, Southeast Asia and even Rome, and of rapid economic development, a fact often overlooked by historians. Despite the supposed political confusion and turmoil, great advances were made in medicine, astronomy, botany and chemistry. In philosophy, Neo-Daoism enjoyed its golden age. Taking their departure from certain basic ideas inherited from traditional thought, philosophers went on produce significant innovations and developments, providing new solutions to problems the Han Confucians had failed to address. The spread and development of Buddhism, which was often favored and protected by the government, was also a major influence. A plethora of translations of classical Buddhist texts redirected Chinese thought onto literature and calligraphy. Architecture,
poetry and the visual arts also flourished, together with important advances in science and technology. This was thus an era of remarkable diversity, with widespread philosophical, scientific, social and artistic developments.

In order to understand this diversity, and delineate a new image of the Wei Jin Nanbei period, the present volume explores a wide range of cultural, theoretical and historical aspects. The collection opens with an examination of the new theoretical shifts that emerged during this period. In her article, Jana S. Rošker analyses the new discourses in specifically Chinese structural semantics that laid the foundations for a new epistemology and perception of music, while Mateja Petrovčič traces the enigmatic nature of these semantics by exploring their practical application in some of the many translations of Buddhist sutras that first entered the Chinese language at this time. The authors conclude that while theories of meaning are by no means all-encompassing, they can still play a crucial role in clarifying certain fundamental ideas concerning the relation between semantics and logic. This relation is also evident in some significant shifts in mathematical thought, as Ma Li’s article on the new mathematical systems introduced during this period shows.

These important shifts in theory were also reflected in the remarkable artistry of early medieval material culture. The Wei Jin Nanbei period was characterized by the significance of artistic influences in the Chinese material world, with Buddhism introducing new sacred objects, symbols, buildings and ritual implements, as well as new ways of conceptualizing and interacting with these objects. The second section thus recounts the histories of a number of objects that illustrate this tendency, with Annette Kieser and Nataša Vampelj Suhadolnik offering new interpretations of artistic symbols from mural tombs in the Eastern and Western Jin Dynasties respectively, and Nicoletta Celli exploring the variety and meaning of gesture in Buddhist art. Each contribution opens new avenues of inquiry for elucidating the complex relations between the artistic production of the period and the contemporaneous philosophy, intercultural contacts, economy and politics. The authors also provide new insights into the specific attitude towards art that emerged in this transitional era, with artists beginning to express a spiritual aesthetics, and no longer viewing artistic creation as a professional occupation but striving for something beyond mere technique and ornamental beauty.

These new aesthetic paradigms also had a major impact upon early medieval poetry and prose, which would then influence the style and contents of later Chinese literature, a fact yet to be fully recognized. The next section begins with Zornica Kirkova’s exploration of court poetry and
Daoist revelations. Kirkova argues that these poems not only expressed court culture, but highlight the need to reexamine standard interpretations of the Chinese poetic tradition, given the possible impact of Daoist religious thought upon subsequent poetic developments prior to the high Tang period. In the chapter which follows, Giullia Baccini analyses the social context that provided fertile ground for the creation of humorous anecdotes in early medieval China. The main purpose of this genre was to entertain the educated elite, offering diversion and pleasure instead of any comprehensive moral structure or hidden teaching. This was one of the features of “Self-fashioning” during the Wei Jin period, which witnessed some important developments in Chinese poetry. The semantic, aesthetic and thematic aspects of this genre are explored and described by Marina Kravtsova and Charles Kwong. In their articles, the authors reveal how this was a time of growing self awareness in Chinese literature, with a general striving for mental and spiritual freedom and a delight in nature and pastoral life that ushered in a fashion for pastoral poetry.

One of the leading exponents of this new genre was Tao Yuanming. The final section begins with Helena Motoh’s investigation into the philosophical dimensions of this early medieval scholar’s work, whose noble indifference to wealth and fame in favour of a return to simplicity and purity made him a model of the ancient recluse. The phenomenon of recluse scholars which flourished during this time was not only closely linked to the political context, but also influenced by the prevailing social metaphysical thought of the period. This section explores the new values that conditioned these changes. The prevailing aesthetic value-orientation in the Wei Jin era clearly advocated purity, with the philosophical debates of the time facilitating the emergence of free thought. New ideas resulting from ethnic, political and economic diversity were also expressed in the common search for the ideal personality, leading to various social-political transformations. By using the “original Chinese value” as an instrumental concept to interpret Ji Kang’s Letter to Shan Tao, Wang Yi’s article shows that despite the turbulent political situation, the sharing of the same moral standards still preconditioned the modes of self-cultivation in human relationships, and how this translated into certain effects and behaviours at both the personal and political levels. In his interesting contribution, Pablo Ariel Blitstein instead analyses the change in the minister/sovereign relation and the status of literary talent in terms of the “moral qualification” of aristocratic families, clearly evidencing how and why certain behaviours and competencies were considered as prerequisites for assuming a political role.
The Wei Jin period is commonly regarded as embodying individualism and a rebellious spirit against tradition and moralizing hypocrisy. The first attack against the traditional aristocratic rule was launched by the seven sages of the Bamboo Groves, especially by Ruan Ji and Ji Kang. Their revolt took the form of wild drinking bouts, attacks against the orthodox parties and unconventional behaviour. In the final contribution, Victor Vuilleumier reveals the impact of early medieval works upon the leading thought that emerged on the threshold of 20\textsuperscript{th} Century China. He shows how these works reflected the New Culture and May Fourth movement and explains why modern Chinese authors have often drawn comparisons between the present era and the Wei Jin Nanbei period.

The wide diversity of contributions to the present volume reflects the Wei Jin Nanbei’s multifaceted potential for creativity and renewal. We hope this collection will open new theoretical and methodological pathways in sinological studies, bringing to the fore a new idea of intercultural encounters based upon a culture of recognition. For it is our belief that creating this culture is the most important task facing scholarship in the humanities generally, and sinological studies in particular, at the start of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century.
THEORETICAL SHIFTS IN LANGUAGE, EPISTEMOLOGY AND LOGIC
CHAPTER ONE

THE THEORETICAL SHIFT IN THE WEI JIN PERIOD AND THE BIRTH OF THE STRUCTURAL SEMANTIC (名理)

JANA S. ROŠKER

The Notion li 理 as a Concept of Structure

In Western sources, the term li has been mostly translated by the notion of principle. This interpretation of this classical Chinese character has also been taken for granted by the majority of modern Chinese theoreticians. However, a more precise translation of this term in the sense of structure or structural pattern can afford us new insight into the nature of the traditional Chinese comprehension of reality, as well as new possibilities for fruitful dialogues between traditional Chinese European philosophy. In Western sources, the term li has been mostly translated by the notion of principle. This interpretation of this classical Chinese character has also been taken for granted by the majority of modern Chinese theoreticians. Let’s begin with a short investigation of the origin of this concept in the context of traditional Chinese thought.

While interpreting the term li 理 to mean “structure” may seem highly unusual, there are several good reasons for doing so. This meaning is already apparent in the original etymology of the character li 理, which is composed of the phonetic element 里 and the radical 玉, which designates jade. Originally, it denoted the lines or coloured stripes in jade. As Wolfgang Bauer explains:

in classical Chinese, this character in a figurative sense also denoted structure, for example in the meaning of a crystal net that represents the immaterial principle of ordered matter, and was already used with this sense in the Confucian commentary on the Book of Changes 易經 (Bauer 2000, 256–57).
A.C. Graham, a modern pioneer in the study of ancient Chinese logic, is one of the very few sinologists who consider the concept *li* as the expression of both a structural pattern and a structure:

Li is the patterned arrangement of parts in a structured whole, of things in an ordered cosmos, of thought in rational discourse, and in Names and Objects,\(^1\) of words in a completed sentence. Its emergence in the Sung Dynasty (A.D. 960–1279) as one of the central concepts of neo-Confucianism was the culmination of a long development. In the pre-Han philosophy it attracts attention especially in the Interpreting Lao-tzu of Han Fe tzu,\(^2\) who uses it to mean the specific configuration of properties (“square or round, long or short, coarse or fine, hard or soft”) in each kind of thing (Graham 1978, 191–92).

The philosopher cited by Graham, Han Feizi 韓非子, was one of the founders of the legalist school and described the concept *li* as follows:

短長, 方圓, 堅脆, 輕重, 白黑之謂理. (Han 2010, Jie Lao 29)

We call li that which is long or short, square or round, hard or soft, heavy or light, white or black.

This term underwent numerous semantic variations. Originally, it expressed cosmic, then social structure; subsequently, its semantic connotations also included the structure of language and meaning and, finally, the structure of the mind and consciousness. All these specific kinds of structural patterns were unified in the Chinese tradition in a single, general and basic rational structure, which was distinguished by its fundamental compatibility with innumerable kinds of different structural patterns.

萬物殊理, 道不私, 故無名. (Zhuangzi 2010, Ze yang 10)

Each thing has its own particular structural pattern (li). Dao treats them all equally; therefore, it has no name.

Thus, the fundamental cosmic structure has been defined by its basic pattern which could be re-established in countless forms of particularities:

然一物之中, 天理完具. (Zhou 2010, I. Tai ji tu shuo 9)

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\(^1\) Graham’s translation of the chapter *Mingshi lun* 名實論 (On Names and Actualities) of the Mohist Canon.

\(^2\) In the official pinyin transcription: Laozi in Han Feizi.
In such a way, the structure of nature (the cosmic structure) has been contained in every single thing.

A basic criterion or *ultima ratio* of this compatibility can be found in either the ethically determined “justice” and “righteousness” of Confucian discourses, or in the “naturalness” of Daoist texts.

This unification of particular, specific structural patterns into one single, general and basic structure, only became possible through a progressive semantic abstraction of the term *li*. This process lasted several centuries and must be viewed within the wider context of more general changes in Chinese culture and society. In practical terms, it was defined by the political and economic development of traditional China, while ideologically it was the result of the formalization of Confucianism as the state doctrine, the new approaches formulated by Neo-Confucian philosophies, and certain elements of Buddhist philosophy. Therefore, it is by no means coincidental that one of the most relevant elaborations of this concept was made in the transitional, culturally agitated period of the Wei and Jin Dynasties. In this era, the notion *li* 理 gained new dimensions by virtue of the development of its linguistic and epistemological connotations. In this period, for the first time in history the notion *li* has appeared as the central concept of structural semantics (名理). To better understand this dimension, we first look at the linguistic-epistemological origins of the classical pre-Qin philosophy and mainly concentrate upon discourses that came into life in the scope of debates on the relation between names (concepts) and actualities (名實). In this context, we focus on the one hand upon the connections between this relation, and on the one hand the concept of structure or structural pattern (理).

**The Origins of the Linguistic and Epistemological Connotations from the pre-Qin Era**

Xunzi 荀子 in several parts of his work extended his understanding of structure to connotations, linked to the structure of language.

辭順，而後可與言道之理. (Xunzi 2010, *Quan xue* 16)
If words are running smoothly, language is well structured.

The political theoretician Guan Zhong 管仲 also presupposed that consideration of proper structure, which defines proper language, was
necessary for the establishment of correct names, and thus for the existence of any well regulated and harmonious state.

Words, expressed by rulers are in accordance with the structure and are therefore congruent with the situation of the people. Thus, the people can accept his statements. And if they accept them, the correct names are established.

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

Phrases originate from reasons, they grow in accordance with structure and move in accordance with categories.

For the Mohists, the sentential or linguistic structure was a system that served as a basic tool for defining the relation between actuality and its conceptual understanding and naming, respectively. The classical Chinese term *ming* could appear in two semantic connotations. The first, which mainly occurred in logical discourses, is a connotation of name (as a linguistic mark), and the second, found particularly in semantic and epistemological works, represents a concept.

“Concept (gainian)” and “category (fanchou)” are translated notions. Ancient China developed the so-called “name (ming).” This word had a dual meaning: terms, and concepts. In the “Mo Jing” it was written: “Terms (ming) can be divided into complete and particular (partial).” Here, both kinds of terms represent concepts. Xunzi’s distinction between “Great universal names” (which referred to every thing or being) and “Great particular names” (which referred to particular species) in his essay on “Correct names” was also dealing with concepts in both cases.

Precise definitions and explanations of notions represented the central methodological task of the logic of disputes, or semantic logic, which forms a theoretical basis of the later Mohist school:
夫辯者，將以明是非之分，審治亂之紀，明同異之處，察名實之理。
(Mozi 2010, XI, Xiaoqu 1)
The dialectics explain the lines of demarcation between true and false, they define the borders between order and chaos, they explain the points of identity and difference and they explore the structure of concepts and actualities.

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

故見其象，致其形，循其理，正其名.
(Deng 2010, Wu hou pian 16)
First we have to look at the appearance of an object, and to perceive its external form. The correct concept of the object can be defined by following its structure.

This record deals with the epistemology of structural perceptions, in which concepts were established in accordance with the inherent systematization of given objects of comprehension that are parts of external reality. Dong Zhongshu, the famous reformer of Confucian ideology from the Han Dynasty has fundamentally taken over this idea of a structural connection between names and actualities, although for him, being a Confucian, the names (in the sense of concepts) were surely primary, and the fundamental structure of linguistic, social and ethical spheres was therefore to be formed in accordance with the “proper naming,” i.e. in congruence with concepts that were by no means arbitrary, but holding in themselves the original essence of reality.

深察名號：錄其首章之意，以窺其中之事，則是非可知，逆順自著，其幾通於天地矣。...是故事各順於名，名各順於天，天人之際，合而為一，同而通理.
(Dong 2010, Shencha minghao 1)
The detailed investigation of concepts: Concepts are the crucial element of the great structure. If we apply the meaning of this crucial element in dealing with corresponding matters, we will be able to seize (the difference between) true and false. The difference between congruency and discordance will become obvious. All this will enable us to comprehend

3 The ancient and medieval Confucians advocated the conceptual theory of knowledge, since in the Confucian system, names represented the essence of reality.
their connection with heaven and earth... If we deal with all matters in accordance with their concepts, which are congruent with nature, the borderline between men and nature will disappear. So men will unite with nature and so they will be congruent with the structure.

For Dong Zhongshu, the regulation of names (concepts) and their presumed adjustment to Confucian “correct names” that are consistent with the natural structure of the cosmos was a fundamental purpose of Confucius’ *Spring and Autumn Annals* (Spring and Autumn Annals). In his comments to this work, he wrote:

春秋辨物之理，以正其名，名物如其真，不失秋毫之末. (Dong 2010, Shencha minghao 4)
The Spring and Autumn Annals investigate the structure of things to make possible the rectification of names. If the names of objects correspond to their actuality, nothing will be lost.

In spite of this, Dong was along with other contemporary philosophers also beginning to develop further the Mohist positing of language as a system structured in accordance with the concept *li* 理. In this context, names or concepts were explicitly expressed as nominal or conceptual signs (*ming hao* 名號) that have in the language formation process served as certain kind of codes, through which men could gain an insight into the structure.

民之為言，固猶瞑也，隨其名號，以入其理，則得之矣. (Dong 2010, Shencha minghao 4)
When men were creating language, they first behaved like blinds. They followed the symbolic signs of names to gain an insight into their structure. In this way, they succeeded.

The Confucian reformers, however, were by far not the only philosophers who developed the legacy of later Mohists in this way. The author of the Daoist work *Huainanzi* 淮南子 also pointed out that language is a well regulated system that functions properly only in accordance with the structure *li*. When describing the men of the ideal past society, he wrote:

其言略而循理. (Huainanzi 2010, Ben jing xun 1)
Their language was well regulated and congruent with the structure.
In their disputes on names (concepts) and actualities, the classical philosophy from the pre-Qin and the early Han era still derived from the realist understanding of reality as objective external world or external form of things. This form was perceived as a direct part of the structure of things, as has been manifested in the ancient concept li. The structure (li) of meaning, which cannot be encountered before the Wei Jin period, however, was not anymore something directly connected with things or something, forming a part of them. In this concept, we can already witness a first result of a certain abstraction of the notion structure (li). The representatives of the School of Mystery (玄学) modified the ancient disputes on the relation between names (concepts) and actualities into investigations of the relation between language (yan 言) and meaning (yi 意). They were primarily interested in the research in the structure of concepts or names (ming li 名理). This was one of the most important theoretical shifts in the history of traditional Chinese thought (Tang 1955, 65). It can be asserted, that their treatises on the structure of names or concepts (名理), i.e. their studies on the relation between language and meaning represent the basis of the specific Chinese structural semantics and at the same time the theoretical elaboration of ancient disputes on the relation between names (concepts) and actualities. As a matter of fact, the central issues of the philosophers from this period, who mostly belonged to the before mentioned School of Mystery or to the group of Pure Conversations (清談), i.e. the debates on the structure of concepts (名理) and on the structure of meaning (意理) can be seen as germs of a structural semantic, as has been developed by Western linguistic discourses more than one and half millenniums later.

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

In this way, the members of both above mentioned currents created and developed an entire philosophical discipline. Investigations and debates on structural semantics were very popular in the intellectual circles of that
time, and gradually the name (*ming li* 名理) has also been used to designate philosophy itself (Tang 1955, 65).

Thus Wang Bi, the most prominent member of the School of Mystery, wrote in his comments on Laozi’s *Classic of the Way and Virtue* (道徳經):

夫不能辯名，則不可與言理. (Wang 1974, 40)

*If we are not able to distinguish particular names (concepts), we cannot speak about the structure of language.*

In his methodology, he strove for a hermeneutics, based upon a search for the meaning that is hidden within the structure of the whole text.

尋而後既其義，推而後盡其理. (Wang 1974, 40)

*First we search for the meaning (of individual concepts), and then we can infer to their structure.*

In his studies, Wang Bi has chiefly dealt with the relation between meaning (*yi* 意), words (*yan* 言) and signs or symbols (*xiang* 象). In this account of these relations, the individual meaning was part of metaphysical structure that can be summarized by the general compound “semasiological structure” (*yili* 意理). Words and symbols, however, here come to life only as descriptive (metaphorical) expressions of individual meanings within this structure. These expressions were seen as signs with a clearly perceivable form, by which one could define them; they thus belong to the sphere of physical, determinable, tangible objects. If we therefore want to define them through the optics of traditional methods of comprehending reality, by means of the binary category of roots (*ben* 本) and summit (*mo* 末), that route has also been applied by Wang Bi. In his idealistic model the meaning belongs to the sphere of abstractions, and forms the metaphysical basis upon which words and symbols are created.  

(Zeng 2002, 175)

The members of the School of Mystery presupposed concepts (*ming* 名) form the basis of language (*yan* 言), while meaning (*yi* 意) is merely evident
from the structure (li 理), for it is not situated in the objects (wu 物) in themselves (Tang 1955, 66).5

Their investigations in structural semantics primarily arose from Mohist and Nomenalist bases, but were also influenced by certain earlier paradigms taken from Zhuangzi’s epistemology and philosophy of language. This central representative of classical Daoism argued for the thesis language cannot entirely express meaning, while meaning cannot entirely reach dao (Tang 1955, 67). There were two philosophical currents in the Wei Jin period concerning the question of whether language can or cannot express meaning: the first one advocated the positive, the latter the negative answer to this question.6 The major representative of the first current Ouyang Jian 歐陽建, tried to prove his position from the viewpoint of the structure (li) of meaning:

夫理得於心, 非言不畅. 物定於彼, 非名不辨. 名逐物而遷, 言因理而變. 不得相譽與為二矣. 勝無其二, 言無不盡意. (cf. Tang 1955, 67)
The structure is re-established in the mind, therefore it can be expressed by language. Through this (linguistic structure) we can determine objects which can be distinguished only by concepts. The concepts change with regard to objects, and the language according to the structure. They cannot be separated. And because they cannot be separated, language can always entirely express the meaning.

Ouyang’s position is grounded upon the concept of structure that arises from the notion that the mind contains linguistic, conceptual, as well as semantic patterns. All three elements are viewed as dynamic and changeable, just like the structure (li 理) that connects them. Although his most prominent opponent Wang Bi strictly advocated the presumption language cannot express the meaning, he likewise refused to annihilate the structural connection between language and meaning; he only questioned the reliability of concepts (ming 名) as such.7 This position has also been advocated by Wang Bi’s contemporary He Yan 何宴 (190/174–249), whose...
central theory is entitled *The Teaching of Namelessness* (無名論). The third famous representative of the School of Mystery Guo Xiang 郭象 (252/?–312) advocated the view that while names (concepts) express objects (in visual or sonic form) there is also something that limits our images about them. He pointed out that concept were needed only as long as we don’t seize the structure (*li* 理) of objects, to which they refer (Tang 1955, 8).

The School of Mystery in their treaties on semantic structure certainly exceeded the linguistic logical disputes of the Mohist and Nomenalist school. These two currents dating back to the pre-Qin era, dealt with various problems concerning the nature of factual objects—the logic and systematization of their concrete attributes, i.e. their form, colour and quantity, as well their dynamics and their occurrence in time and space. Although their studies were partly of an excessively abstract nature, they nevertheless were dealing with objective, concrete particular existing realities and their structure. Even when referring to conceptual definitions of these objects, they remained captured by the doctrines of the then most fashionable debates on the relation between names (concepts) and actualities. However, the philosophers from the Wei Jin period had already begun to deal with the structure of meaning which no more belonged to the sphere of the concrete existing, objective external reality (Tang 1955, 68).

Chinese theoreticians from this period were no longer merely concerned with problems of “proper” behaviour, i.e. of “proper” rituals, nor with the search for wise proverbs that could inspire people to more prudent, ethically more fulfilled lives and to establishing a more harmonious society. They were now far more interested in reflecting on what is expressed in human communication, in investigating the relations between expressions and the reality to which they refer. They tried to find out which names (concepts) were suitable to designate certain objects and which were not appropriate for this task. They were equally concerned with the inverse situation, trying to ascertain which kinds of realities could represent appropriate objects for certain names or concepts. From these investigations they tried to infer fixed criteria of semantic demarcation that could distinguish certain concepts from one another. In this way, they sought to delineate likely possible errors and misunderstandings that result from inaccurate application of names or concepts. At this stage, they had seized the epistemological dimensions of meta-language. And devoted themselves to research, on the one hand about the nature of the relation

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