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A Chinese *regard oblique*

Abstract: The wealth of topics and the vast range of themes dealt during the Zurich Workshop have stimulated me to propose some preliminary remarks coming from a Chinese point of view. The difficulty of dealing with different set of words and different way of classifying things makes it necessary to provide some basic information, sources and insights into how such fundamental issues as the power of writing, the categorisation of knowledge, and the preeminence of the role of the traditional Classic texts in intellectual, political and administrative life were developed in ancient China. The written language was an empowering language. The privilege of mastering the Classical texts and the ability to write elegantly made success in the imperial exams possible, allowing the scholar to become a member of the powerful élite. This explains the close link established in China between the exercice of power and the literary language. The need to provide the necessary tools to acquire this ability became the main incentive for the production of a set of texts such as dictionaries, glossaries, thesaurus, and encyclopaedias or "books according to categories". In these texts the world of knowledge was ordered according to categories which were functional and useful for the preservation of imperial power in the hands of loyal bureaucrats, carefully selected through the perfect machinery of the examinations, to perpetuate the "mandate of heaven" throughout the centuries.

Keywords: China, classification, Wen xin diao long, genres

I accepted the invitation to participate in the workshop held in Zurich on February 2015 with enthusiasm. For me it was a stimulating challenge to reflect on the variety of topics and views that I have had the privilege to come across during the workshop from the point of view of my own research – namely Chinese traditional culture – considerd as a *"regard oblique"*.

I'm fully conscious of the fact that my *regard* was totally insufficient to deal with all the different topics that came up. As a Chinese writer once said: "If one's knowledge is by nature limited to the capacity of a jar or a tube, how can it be expected to offer all the general principles? As I am deeply imbued in my critical

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experience with the immense heritage of the past, would the unseen generations after me look upon this heritage as dust?"[1]

1 Some preliminary considerations

When I was preparing for the workshop, I spent a long time looking for an image which could easily convey the reflections and the difficulties I found reading the abstracts circulated among the participants and the secondary readings that the colleagues have suggested as useful preparation: I was looking for something which would embody my feeling of the profound distance between concepts, categories and words. All of a sudden, an image came to my mind: the memory of my first visit to a traditional Chinese pharmacy. It was almost forty years ago, in a little alley of the old Shanghai, an alley which has now been eaten up by skyskcapers. In a tiny, dark room, an entire wall was made up of rows of little wooden drawers; and on each drawer was written the name of the ingredient the pharmacist had to select to prepare the appropriate potion.

In those days, I still had a lot of Chinese to learn: I didn't understand all the characters, or I was not sure of some meanings. But I still remember my amazement, bewilderment, and confusion in seeing classified as medicines things which for me had no place in these drawers: there were dried little animals and insects like seahorses and beetles, cockcroaches and ants, snakes, deer and rhinoceros horns, minerals and stones to be ground, plants, roots, orange peel, and more besides. I was confronted with a different way of classifiying things, according to an order which was not mine, a totally unexpected classification which was completely unfamiliar to me. I felt like a stranger in a different world.

In other words, when I reflected on the way to "put the House of Wisdom in order" in the Islamic world, I felt once again as if I were in front of an enormous archive, with unexpected names, and with codes which escaped me. This is a classification which is totally alien to the categories I'm used to, and this immediately reminded me of the prodigious invention of Jorge Luis Borges. In the short essay entitled "El idioma analítico de John Wilkins" (The Analytical Language of John Wilkins)[2] Borges ascribes to an imaginary Chinese encyclopaedia called "Emporio celestial de de conocimientos benévolos" (The Celestial empire of benevolent knowledge), his fictitious taxonomy of animals which looks completely alien. And later (1966) Michel Foucault begins his preface to *Les Mots et les choses*

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1 This quotation is taken from the English translation of the work of Liu Xie, *Wen xin diao long* 文心雕龙, (see below, note 6) by Vincent Yu Chung Shih (1983: 11).
2 The original Spanish text is published in *Otras Inquisiciones* (Borges 1952).

(The Order of Things) quoting or misquoting this Borgesian joke on a imaginary Chinese Encyclopaedia as possible evidence that no classification system, and no viewpoint on the world is special or more correct than any other:

> Dans l'émerveillement de cette taxinomie ce qu'on rejoint d'un bond, ce qui à la faveur de l'apologue, nous est indiqué comme le charme exotique d'une autre pensée, c'est la limite de la notre, l'impossibilité nue de penser *cela* [...]. Dans son sillage naissait le soupçon qu'il y a pire désordre que celui de l'*incongru* et du rapprochement de ce qui ne convient pas; ce serait le désordre qui fait scintiller les fragments d'un grand nombre d'ordres possibles dans la dimension, sans loi ni géométrie, de l'*hétéroclite*; et il faut entendre ce mot au plus près de son étymologie: les choses y sont 'couchées', 'posées', 'disposées' dans des sites à ce point différents qu'il est impossible de trouver pour eux un espace d'accueil, de définir au-dessous des uns et des autres un lieu *commun*.[3]

2 A Chinese approach

It might be helpful, at this stage, to consider the Chinese approach to this matter as it appears in a dialogue between the Buddhist monk Yi Cun 义存 from Xuefeng 雪峰 and his disciples:

> When I speak of this thing or that thing you concentrate all your effort on the pursuit of my words, in a chase after my phrases. But if I were like the antelope that hangs by its horns, where could you lay a hand on me?[4]

This is a Zen metaphor which needs an explanation: when monk Yi Cun's disciples gathered around their teacher to learn about the meaning of enlightenment, he likened their quest for a specific method to that of the hunter's dog, sniffing along the ground in search of its prey, the antelope. The latter, according to the Chinese belief, customarily stayed out of range at night by hanging from the branches of a tree so that no trace of scent was discernible on the ground. This Chan-Buddhist image of the "branch-hanging antelope" (*lingyang gua jiao* 羚羊挂角) was applied to Chinese poetry by the critic Yan Yu 严羽 (c. 1200 CE) in his attempt to convey the spirit of the intuitive approach to poetry.[5] That is to say, the essence of poetry lies not in the words (the traces or tracks) but in what lies beyond the words.

If we apply this metaphor to the participants of our Workshop we could possibly say that we were all "hunters" in search for the "antelope": and our

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3 Foucault 1966: 2.

4 The dialogue is recorded in *Chuan deng lu* 传灯录 "Record of the transmission of the lamp" – compiled by Daoyuan 道原 in 1004. See Taisho Tripitaka No. 2076 (51.195–467), quoted in Rickett 1978: 3.

5 For the explanation of the idiom see *Chengyu Cidian* (2005: http://tw.18dao.net/成語詞典/羚羊掛角.).

"antelope" might be identified in our search for a common language to express what really matters, in spite of the difficulties represented by distant traditions and cultures, and different ways of categorizing knowledge.

In fact, this "search" is an exciting and frightening challenge from which, in today's world, we can no longer escape. A challenge which at present also comes directly to each of us, scholars of different disciplines, in the manifold ways that competing narratives and interpretations of events are immediately available through the globalized network of information. It is only through our mutual exchange of reflections and a comparative analysis of sources across different traditions of cultures, past and present, that a fruitful dialogue can fruitfully develop. A new categorization of knowledge and a new set of under-standable, common words – fully respectful of each tradition – is necessary and indispensable to the putting into practice an effective multicultural dialogue. A dialogue which has to give full consideration, as a main actor, to the rich treasure of cultural, literary and speculative heritage which is coming from Islam, China, but also India, and the Byzantine world.

3 A literary mind

From this perspective, I'm proposing some reflections on the importance and the primary role of the written texts in ancient China, as a necessary support for my *regard oblique*. They come from the long acquaintance I had in my past research with the Chinese classical culture, mostly through my work of translating into Italian one of the masterpieces of ancient Chinese literature and literary criti-cism, *Wen xin diao long (WXDL)*,[6] a treatise written in a marvellous "parallel prose" (*pianwen* 骈文)[7] at the beginning of the VI. century A.D. by Liu Xie 刘勰. The text was obviously written in a period prior to the one we were referring to in our Workshop, but it may be that a synchronic comparison is not the most relevant aspect to focus on at this point of our reflection.

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6 The *WXDL* contains approximately 37,000 characters. It is divided into ten *juan*, scrolls, each consisting of five chapters, carrying a descriptive title. The title of the book has been translated in different ways (Lavagnino 2011). I will use here the common English "The literary mind and the carving of dragons", which is different from my translation into Italian, "Il Tesoro delle lettere, un intaglio di draghi" (Liu 1995).

7 *Pianwen* 骈文, or *piantiwen* 骈体文, is a technique employed in the writing of extra-poetic literary genres. Its most salient features are a preponderance of couplets in which metrical identitity (most often four or six characters) and syntactical parallelism occur between corresponding lines. Thus, in terms of form it shows many of the same prosodic qualities as Chinese poetry. In fact it was the style of writing favored from the late Han through early Tang (Nienhauser 1986: 656).

In May 2014 at the Università degli Studi di Milano, we organized a one day international Symposium entitled "*Wen xin duihua* 文心对话: Dialogue on the Literary Mind/the core of Literature". The aim of the symposium was to initiate a dialogue between some European and Chinese scholars on crucial topics such as creative writing, poetry and literature. We opted to start from the Chinese point of view rather than the European one, and we took *WXDL* as a starting point to initiate this dialogue, because this masterpiece perfectly represents the Chinese traditional view on those important themes, views which are still shared and revered in today's China.

This choice was dictated by our fascination for this masterpiece but, more importantly, it was motivated by the fact that *WXDL* is the first and unquestioned, systematic compendium of Chinese literary thinking, and the first categorization of literary knowledge. In the Chinese tradition *WXDL* is not only the essential reordering of the literary world as a first catalogue of literary genres and forms, but also – in the word of Liu Xie – to a marvelous "[...] gallop over the course of literature, in peering into the house of the poetic art".[8]

The Symposium was a very precious moment for special exchanges of views, opinions, and ideas between scholars who provided different approaches, methodologies and practices, and we are now publishing the Acts of the Symposium both in English and in Chinese.

In fact, "the *WXDL* is an incredible work, part literary criticism, part cosmological treatise, and it is also perhaps the best guide we know on how to write well" in literary Chinese.[9] "It is an anomaly in the history of Chinese literary thought, and it is a systematic treatise on literature as it was conceived around the turn of the Sixth Century."[10] In his work, the author, Liu Xie, provides us with a systematic classification and categorization of knowledge, as it is recorded through written documents.

In the first Chapter of the book, "Tracing the origin to the Dao" (*Yuan Dao*), which is a Chapter with a clear cosmogonic framework, Lu Xie shows great ability in playing with the polysemy of the word *wen* 文, a term which is crucial to the entire book, and not only because it is part of the title of his work, *Wen xin diaolong*. *Wen* in fact means pattern/written graph/writing system, in a very complex system of thinking which is strongly based on the preeminence of the written text over the oral form.[11]

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8 *WXDL*, ch. 50, (Wong et al. 1999: 189).
9 Eoyang 2006: 57.
10 Owen 1992: 183.
11 Lavagnino 2015: 189–200.

Wen, or pattern, is a great virtue/power indeed. It is born together with heaven and earth [...]. With the emergence of mind, language is created, and when language is created, writing appears. This is natural. [...] Tao is handed down in writing through sages, and the sages make Tao manifest in their writings.[12]

The categorization of knowledge that Liu Xie proposes here pays homage to the traditional cosmological trinity, called "three powers" (*san cai* 三才):"heaven, earth and man" (*tian* 天, *di* 地, *ren* 人).[13]

The book is organized following a precise hierarchy, starting with the homage to the Sage Confucius, the great Master, the first thinker who wanted to put things in order, giving to each thing its "correct name" (*zheng ming* 正名), because when the correct name corresponds to the real nature of the thing, the world of human beings will be in peace,[14] then describing the main official literary genres in rhyme *wen* 文, and in prose *bi* 笔. Wilkinson lists 33 literary genres.[15]

This gives strong evidence for the fact that in the Chinese tradition the process of "putting things in order" started very early.[16] In fact, the literary landscape described by Liu Xie displays, in a systematic way, the ordering of knowledge, as registered in written documents, which was named according to the three main categories: *zi* 子 (the Masters), *shi* 史 (history), and *wen* 文 (embellished writings). Under the Sui Dynasty, this categorization then became the orthodox classification system for the entire knowledge recorded in the Imperial Library, the so-called "four classifications" (*sibu* 四部) system. Although already in use during the Eastern Jin dynasty (around the fourth century CE), the system became the orthodox classification for all knowledge in the Imperial Library under the Sui Dynasty. The bibliographic section of the official history of the Sui dynasty was compiled by Wei Zheng (580–643), the director of Palace Library. Wei applied the *sibu* sequence as orthodox historiography, i. e. the division according to which all documents in the Palace Library would be classified, for the first time.[17]

The first category is called *Jingbu* 經部 "Confucian Classics".Under the category were included the entire set of most revered Confucian texts,[18]

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12 *WXDL,* ch. 1 (Shih 1983: 23–24).

13 From the beginning of the Chinese culture the number three has been important symbolically (Nielsen 2003). From this initial trinity, many others are derived: the three divisions of the Daoist canon, the three mythical dynasties etc. (Eberhard 1986).

14 See *WXDL,* ch. 3 (Liu 1995: 14–19).

15 Wilkinson 2015: 409.

16 On the concept of "process" as a characteristic feature of Chinese traditional thinking compared with the concept of the Western "creation", see Jullien (1989).

17 Yi 2015: 12.

18 Lavagnino 2014: 69–80.

commentaries on them, books on musical theory, dictionaries and the 'lesser studies' *xiaoxue* '小学, i. e. "philology".

Shibu 史部 "Historiography", included biographies, administration, policy, geography and bibliography.

Zi bu 子部 "Masters and philosophers", included various scientific and scholarly treatises, books on practical matters, and narratives.

Jibu 集部 "Collected writings", included belles-lettres, poetry and anthologies.[19]

Later, the Southern Song Historian Zheng Qiao (1114–1162) (who was roughly a contemporary of the Islamic scholars discussed in the present volume)[20] in his *Tong zhi* 通知 *Comprehensive Treatises* encyclopaedia included a treatise on bibliography, which expanded the four classification scheme to 12 main categories. Of the 12 main categories (*lüe* 略), several were linked to natural studies:

Classics, Rituals, Music, Philology, History, Pre-Han and Later Masters, Astrology, Five Phases, Arts, Medicine, Encyclopaedia, Literature.[21]

4 The importance of writing

As we have seen in the exordium of the *WXDL*, great homage is paid to the importance of the written document, because the primary role of the written document is to manifest the cosmic principle of Dao and to enable the cultivated man to spread the wisdom by means of written texts.

As Mark Edward Lewis pointed out:

> The ultimate importance of writing to the Chinese Empire and imperial civilization did not derive from its administrative role. Rather the Chinese empire, including its artistic and religious versions, was based on an imaginary realm created within texts. These texts, couched in an artificial language above the local world of spoken dialects, created a model of society against which actual institutions were measured. More important, they provided the basis of an educational program that embedded the vision of empire within the upper reaches of local communities. A shared commitment to these texts thus created the links between the imperial system and localities, links far more numerous and penetrating than those provided by bureaucratic administration dwarfed by the realm it was supposed to govern. The implanting of the imperial vision in local society in the form of written language and its texts also provided the mechanism by which the institution of the empire

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19 Sibu fenleifa 四部分類法 (2011).

20 For the significance of Sino-Islamic contacts in pre-modern era seen through recently discovered maps see Park (2012).

21 Elman 2015: 184.

survived the collapse of each of its incarnations. It was the intellectual commitment of local elites to the text-based dream of empire, and their economic dependance to this reality, that both secured the longevity of the imperial system and led to the omnipresence of the written graph in Chinese culture.[22]

Apart from the *Lunyu* – the celebrated Confucian Classic which, according to the tradition, recorded Confucius words and wisdom through his discourses to disciples – the oral tradition was not appreciated by the Central Tradition,[23] if not recorded in an authoritative written document. As Liu Xie reminds us in *WXDL*:

> *Shi* 史, or a historian, literally means *shi* 使, or to employ, one who waited on the left or right of the king and who was employed to keep written records. In ancient times, the left-hand historian kept records of what was done, and the right-hand historian of what was said.[24]

Since earliest times, through its entire history, Chinese civilization has based its strong cultural foundations on the Chinese system of writing: written language was an empowering language. The privilege of mastering the Classical canon and the early Histories, and the ability to write elegantly could lead to success in the imperial exams,[25] allowing the scholar to become a member of the powerful élite. This system was the fundamental tool through which not only the traditional heritage was transmitted, but it was also the system through which the class of imperial officials was enabled to manage and control the bureaucratic machinery of the state. In fact, the Mandarins identified themselves entirely with the main instrument of their power – their mastery of the written language – *wen yan* 文言 – and in their skill of "surfing in the huge ocean" of texts preserved in the Imperial Libraries. Through the ages, their ability itself became the symbol of their privileged class.

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22 Lewis 1999: 4. Looking at today's China, it seems that the artificial language of propaganda could easily be seen as the direct inheritance of the imaginary realm created within texts which Lewis refers to, and today's "China Dream" – the favourite catchphrase of the present communist leadership group – could be seen as a new "dream" created within the realm of this artificial language. On the role of contemporary propaganda and its artificial language see Lavagnino (2016).

23 In fact, it was based on a formidable written tradition going back to antiquity. See Idema/Haft 2004: 41–55.

24 *WXDL*, ch. 16 (Shih 1983: 167).

25 The general term from the Han to the Tang was *xuanju* 选举 (selection and appointment), and after the Northern Song he normal term was *keju* 科举 (selection by examination) (Wilkinson 2015: 299).

This explains the close link established in China between political power and the written texts, between the exercise of power and the literary language. The need to provide the necessary tools in order to acquire this ability became the main incentive to produce a set of texts such as dictionaries, glossaries, thesaurus, encyclopaedias or "books according to categories".[26]

In these texts the world of knowledge was ordered according to categories which were functional, necessary and useful for the preservation of imperial power in the hands of loyal bureaucrats, carefully selected through the perfect machinery of examinations, to perpetuate the "mandate of heaven" throughout the centuries.

5 Final remarks

The wealth of topics and the vast range of themes dealt with in our Workshop have stimulated me to propose the initial reflections I have just sketched above, as a *regard oblique* coming from the Chinese tradition. Even if they may seem somehow random and scattered, my aim is to provide some basic information, sources and insights into how Chinese civilization started to deal with the fundamental issues of categorizing knowledge. They could be considered a sort of Chinese mirror, reflecting images in a Chinese way.

The next step should be to isolate some basic key-terms, and possible common topics on which to concentrate our dialogue, as has been suggested by the wise organizers of our Workshop – to whom I now forward my deepest remerciement. These common topics could become the core of a further sharing of opinions from the perspective of discovering new faces of our multicultural prism.

I shall conclude my reflection formulating to colleagues some questions coming from my personal curiosity, on the basis of what I have just described about traditional China:

What is the power of the written tradition in Islamic culture?

What is the importance of a properly written text on the good administration of power?

What is the status of the well-educated man?

I very much hope that we will have time, in the future, to go on with these reflections.

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26 On this topic, exhaustive information is found the gigantic work *Chinese History, a new manual* written by Endimyon Wilkinson, an eminent British sinologist with a brilliant diplomatic career – he served as Ambassador of the EU in Beijing in the 90s. The fourth, enlarged edition (2015), is really a magnificent guide to all those interested in the civilization and history of China which I can highly recommend.

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