

Concepts That Make Multiple Modernities: The Conceptual Modernisation of China in a Historical and Critical Perspective

Christoph Harbsmeier

Nostra, qui erat philosophia philologia facta est. (What was our philosophy has become philology.)¹

In my Science, philosophy undertakes to examine philology. (By philology, I mean the science of everything that depends on human volition: for example, all histories of the languages, customs, and deeds of various peoples in both war and peace.)²

Man wird sich daran gewöhnen müssen, in jeder Wortgeschichte eine Monographie zur Kulturgeschichte der Menschheit zu erblicken. Sprachgeschichte, Wortgeschichte, ist immer Kulturgeschichte. (One will have to get used to see, in each history of a word, a monograph on the cultural history of mankind. Linguistic history, the history of words is always cultural history.)³

Toute l'histoire de la pensée moderne et les principaux achèvements de la culture intellectuelle dans le monde occidental sont liés à la création et au maniement de quelques dizaines de mots essentiels, dont l'ensemble constitue le bien commun des langues de l'Europe occidentale. Nous commençons seulement à discerner l'intérêt qu'il y aurait à décrire avec précision la genèse de ce vocabulaire de la culture moderne. Une pareille description ne pourrait être que la

¹ Pierre Gassendi, *Exercitationes paradoxicae adversus Aristotelem*, I.1 *apud* Fritz Mauthner, *Wörterbuch der Philosophie* (Leipzig: Felix Meiner, 1924), vol. 1, p. 74.

² Giambattista Vico, *New Science: Principles of the New Science Concerning the Common Nature of Nations*, §7, tr. David Marsh (London: Penguin Books, 1999), p. 5.

³ Fritz Mauthner, *Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 1, p. xv.

*somme de multiples travaux de détail, consacrés à chacun de ces mots dans chacune des langues. Ces travaux sont encore rares et ceux qui les entreprennent éprouvent vivement, surtout pour le français, la pénurie des dépouillements lexicaux les plus nécessaires.*⁴

Pre-meditation on Defining Changing Concepts

Gottlob Frege claimed “What is known as the history of concepts is really a history either of our knowledge of concepts or of the meaning of words.”⁵ Frege has a profound point here which conceptual historians disregard at their peril: concepts have structure but they themselves have no history. The invention or discovery of these concepts does of course have a history, but that is a very different story. And it may be useful to point out that Frege’s remark is not just a logician’s or mathematician’s quibble. Nietzsche noted from his own point of view the very same thing, and in terms more directly relevant to conceptual history: “*Alle Begriffe, in denen sich ein ganzer Prozess semiotisch zusammenfasst, entziehen sich der Definition; definierbar ist nur das, was keine Geschichte hat.*” (All concepts in which a whole process is semiotically bundled are beyond definition. One can only define that which has no history.)⁶ Frege and Nietzsche focus on a fundamental problem with conceptual history insofar as it presumes to define historically changing concepts. I feel that we need to sort out this problem.

At an abstract level of logical analysis, concepts must be held constant and “ahistorical” (though only in the sense of “unchanging”). This is not to deny that the knowledge of these concepts and the beliefs concerning these concepts do not change. Logically, a change in an abstract concept amounts to the emergence of a different, but still unchanging, new concept.

The cultural conceptions which we organise within the logical space defined by these concepts, these conceptions as envisaged by humans—and as often though not always expressed in words—do manifestly change over time, as all thoughts and feelings do, and they do vary considerably across individuals, social groups, cultures, and civilisations.

Frege, then, has a valid and important logical point, at least for some kinds of concepts: the concept of a prime number itself is unchanging and ahistorical. One may disagree whether that invariant concept is invented or discovered. But the concept itself does not have a history. Only its discovery or invention.

However, when Frege seems to suggest in his formulation that students of conceptual history are in fact only working with what people know about concepts on the one hand

⁴ Émile Benveniste, *Civilisation. Contribution à l’histoire du mot (Hommage à Lucien Febvre)*, Paris, 1954; reprinted in *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, Paris: Gallimard, 1966, vol 1, p. 336).

⁵ *Die Grundlagen der Arithmetik*, Introduction, p. vii.

⁶ Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, ed. Karl Schlechta (Munich: Hanser, 1966), vol. 2, p. 820.

and terminological history on the other, then he is profoundly misleading. For one thing, whether he likes to reflect on this or not, it makes excellent sense to investigate the historical roots of those abstract concepts that are so “ahistorical”: they emerge in specific cultural and historical contexts, for historical reasons, as cultural conceptions in historical contexts. For another, sound conceptual history is primarily concerned neither with the history of terminology nor indeed knowledge about concepts. Conceptual history is primarily concerned with the historical ethnography of cultural conceptions, notions, ideas, construals, subjective *Vorstellungen*. Frege’s salutary and logically hygienic insight is that these conceptions should be analytically subsumed under—or at least usefully discussed in connection with—those abstract, culturally colourless and essentially, in themselves, ahistorical concepts.

Historicists have been quick to point out that this elevated logical level of abstract transcultural “ahistorical” concepts is itself no more than a historically contingent distillation from various parochial—mostly European—notions and *Vorstellungen*. This, I find, was not a point that Frege took any particular interest in. Like Leibniz, Frege envisaged and aspired to a “mathematics of concepts,” and to a *Begriffssprache*, which aspired to escape as much as humanly possible from the historical and cultural vagaries of subjective conceptions, notions, construals, and *Vorstellungen* and to construct a logically transparent systematic framework which serves as an abstract analytic tool for a coherent analysis of these conceptions. Frege shared these aspirations with the educationalist Amos Comenius, and the mathematician Leibniz and the many adherents of a *characteristica universalis* as well as a *grammatica universalis*. The fact that these aspirations or ideals can never quite be completely or even satisfactorily realised does not make them any less worthwhile. It is the analytic work in the pursuit of these ideals of logical transparency that is so important and that makes for intellectual progress.

I find it important that this analytic work is not only a worthy end in itself, but that in the end it serves an crucial ultimately educational purpose: a practical aspiration which Jan Amos Comenius attempted to realise in his *Janua linguarum reserata*⁷ as well as in his *Orbis sensualium pictus* of 1659.⁸ There is a useful bibliography of the hundreds editions of this latter work, in various languages of the world: Johann Amos Comenius. *Die Ausgaben des Orbis Sensualium Pictus. Eine Bibliographie*, bearbeitet von Kurt Pilz. Nürnberg 1967. To this we must now add the Chinese edition that is important for the present project: *Tuhuazhong jiandaode shijie* 圖畫中見到的世界, tr. Yang Xiaofen 楊曉芬.⁹ I dwell on Jan Amos Comenius in the present context because for me—as for Comenius—logical analysis must serve practicable clarification. Whether logicians like it or not: logical analysis must be made to serve the purposes of philological and historical explanation. And whether conceptual historians like it or not: explanatory transparency in conceptual history can only be achieved by the circumspect and disciplined application of logical analysis wherever possible.

⁷ Curavit Jaromír Červenka (Praha: Statní Pedagogické Nakladatelství, 1959).

⁸ *Opera Omnia*, vol. 17 (Praha: Akademia, 1970).

⁹ Shanghai: Shanghai shudian chubanshe 上海書店出版社, 2001.

Objections

Historians often tend to find Frege's call for logical transparency in conceptual history professionally obnoxious, methodologically naive, and historically barbaric because it establishes a non-historicised realm of logical and semantic structures: the concepts.

Similarly, cognitive psychologists like the distinguished originator of WordNet, George A. Miller, should find the imposition of a conceptual system constructed logically, for comparative purposes, and unsupported by psychological evidence from the particular languages to which it is applied, thoroughly distasteful. Like the historians, he has his valid point: the ideal must be to study the cognitive system of each language on the basis of the data from that language. But in the case of psychological as well as in the case of historicist empiricism, the stubborn logical fact remains that the conceptual scheme language psychologists might bring to bear must be one that is logically transparent, philologically perspicuous, and generalistic in the sense that the categorial system applied to a given language must ideally be one that makes this language and its speakers systematically comparable to entirely different languages and entirely different speakers.

When my colleagues at Peking University decide to make a Chinese WordNet, they propose to use the English conceptions to make a system for the description of Chinese conceptions. This, of course, is entirely natural in the linguistically anglicised world as it is, and to the extent that modern standard Chinese is highly anglicised, the method is appropriate. But in the historical and comparative context of *THESAURUS LINGVAE SERICAE* (tls-uni-hd.de) we insist on treating English as quite as parochial a language as Chinese. While we are not shy to use English labels for our concepts, as we work towards the conceptual part of a comparative archaeology and history of the cultural imagination. We do what we can to strip these abstract concepts of the idiomatic idiosyncrasies of the parochial English semantics attaching to those labels. We are convinced that we need to find a comparatist and logically well-defined abstract angle on both English and Chinese. Since we are inevitably writing in English, we try to achieve this by taking Chinese primary evidence as our point of departure for constructing a conceptual system. (On the other hand, for example in the context of conceptual modernisation and globalisation, we do introduce English or European concepts, because at that historical stage these were the ones that were historically relevant.)

There are those who claim that there is no such thing as an abstract comparatist angle, only various but equally subjective and inexorably partial parochialisms. The objection is a serious one which applies across the board to all comparative studies: according to this line of thought there can be no general non-parochial angle in linguistics, only variously disguised forms of imposing one's own (typically but not necessarily English-inspired or Euro-centric) categories generally on the languages of the world. But our question is simply this: does this mean linguists should not aspire to reduce this inevitable subjective parochialism as best they can? And the answer to this question is clearly in the affirmative: linguists should do what they can to reduce their subjective parochialisms as best they can. In many ways, Western linguists have done so with some success, although it remains a deeply significant fact that their basic modern theories have tended to be developed on the basis of observations on contemporary English with a few anecdotal

exotic observations from other languages thrown in for good measure. Willard V.O. Quine's philosophy of language was entirely developed on the basis of his analyses of contemporary English, and his excursions into the study of Japanese classifiers are less than impressive. I deplore this. And because of this, in a memorable tête-à-tête lunch with him in Cambridge Massachusetts I did ask him why he did not call himself a philosopher of English, rather than a philosopher of language. He replied that he was professionally concerned with the principles of language which appeared to be the same for all languages. I told him I was not so sure about this, and that I would trust his intuitive judgement on this absolutely crucial matter even more if he had arrived at it after a close philo-logical examination of the principles governing some extremely different and "exotic" languages.

In any case, I am determined to develop my linguistic and semantic theories on the basis of observations, *longue durée*, of the detailed Chinese linguistic evidence held up against the much more accessible and much more reliably described detailed evidence, *longue durée*, from Greek and Latin. In doing so I do not at all pretend in principle to avoid Quine's linguistic parochialism, only to do my very best to reduce it on the basis of the languages I know best. The justified point that subjective parochialism is in principle inevitable does not affect our duty to reduce such parochialism wherever we can, and thus to aim for abstract, non-parochial definitions of terms formulated in the light of one's intensive and sustained detailed philological experience with widely different languages.

Consider the abstract (in Quine's terms transcendent) concept of H₂O, which in our system we would write as WATER, but which we could just as well—INDIFFERENTLY—write as AQUA in the medieval and later European tradition, or as SHUÛ in Chinese: our labels are arbitrary and logically irrelevant in that they are used only to remind us of the relevant stipulative and abstract formal definitions in the conceptual system.

Now it is a historical fact that pure H₂O has always been extremely rare in this world. Historically, H₂O occurs with various quantities of varying admixtures. Moreover, cultural conceptions of the nature and significance of water have varied considerably. (For China, see the monograph by Sarah Allan on the notion of water in Chinese intellectual history.¹⁰) The semantic range of words for water varies very considerably across cultures: the modern Chinese word for water continues to cover liquids of many kinds, including apple juice. None of these historical and cultural facts affect our abstract interpretation of the analytic concept of H₂O, or the usefulness of this interpretation. The conceptual ethnography of WATER is indeed properly understood when one realises that it involves widely different cultural conceptions, *Vorstellungen*, which focus on substances that consist predominantly, but not at all exclusively or most importantly, of H₂O. No historical changes or civilisational differences, however radical they may be, will affect this basic concept of H₂O, or as we have it, of WATER. And WATER is a category under which it is convenient and analytically helpful to analyse these historical changes and civilisational differences regarding conceptions of water. The very reason why we can

¹⁰ Sarah Allan, *The Way of Water and Sprouts of Virtue* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997).

compare the conceptual ethnography of water across history and across cultures as well as civilisations, is that we have this abstract maximally transparent and explicit concept of WATER as H₂O.

One may object that this model may hold for natural kinds, but that many concepts have no such solid “objective” base in the natural sciences. JEALOUSY is a case in point: here our aspiration must be to identify the conceptual tertium comparationis, to make explicit a maximally transparent abstract concept of JEALOUSY which allows us to compare the complex conceptualisations which essentially involve jealousy across history and across civilisations. Essentially, this involves the kind of abstract work that has been attempted by Spinoza in part III of his *Ethica more geometrico demonstrata*, and less successfully, I find, by Descartes in his famous *Les passions de l'âme*: neither Spinoza nor Descartes was concerned with the conceptual ethnography of various speakers of Latin or French. They were concerned with the systemic conceptual underpinnings of the repertoire of human emotions or *passiones* in general. I believe conceptual grids for emotions should be constructed in this spirit of Spinoza and Descartes.

Jost Trier's *Der deutsche Wortschatz im Sinnbezirk des Verstandes*¹¹ marked a most inspiring philological breakthrough in the historical study of semantic fields and conceptual repertoires. His definition of the semantic field he describes as *Sinnbezirk des Verstandes* itself had to be metalinguistic and not limited to the language and the historical period of the language with which he was concerned. Herein lies the general usefulness of Jost Trier's seminal work for the study of conceptual history. Trier's work is especially important in its emphasis on the need to study conceptual repertoires with respect to circumscribed texts and corpora: these repertoires will often vary for different authors and for different texts and text sorts even within the same period. Conceptual repertoires must be expected to vary across texts as well as idiolects investigated.

Conceptions and classifications of the emotions will vary widely across history, cultures, and civilisations, even the size of these repertoires will certainly not be the same in different contexts, but the basic idea of philosophers like Descartes and Spinoza was to reconstruct the emotional elements from which all human emotions are built up (or indeed NOT built up, when a culture refuses to develop a terminological repertoire for a concept that is common across historical periods and different civilisations). Spinoza and Descartes used Latin and French as their points of departure. I feel it may be useful to start out with a highly sophisticated language as distant and as different from our own as possible, in order to try to avoid at least some of the crudest forms of philosophical or analytic parochialism: I choose classical Chinese as my point of departure, not because we imagine we can avoid parochialism, but in order to minimise it.

The systematicity of conceptual underpinnings which was a central concern to such systematic thinkers as Leibniz and Spinoza is best made explicit, as Plato was already aware, by specifying the conceptual hypernym for each concept, i.e. to specify for each concept what other concept(s) it is “a kind of.” Thus one might try to construe a HORSE as a kind of DOMESTIC ANIMAL, and JEALOUSY to be a kind of DISLIKE, and so

¹¹ 1931; 2nd ed., Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1973.

on. In other words, all concepts must be tentatively inscribed into a taxonomic system, very much in the spirit of the taxonomic system invented for plants by Carl von Linné. In practice, it turns out that in a whole range of cases it is more convenient (or also convenient) to inscribe a concept into a mereonomic (according to the now-current misspelling, meronomic) part-whole system. (Anna Wierzbicka has understandably given up on the confusion and introduced the barbarically easy and convenient term “partology.”) Anyway, for example, FINGER is best entered into a conceptual system as one of the PARTS of the HAND. And more generally, conceptual grids, like the Word-Net, should arrange their repertoire not alphabetically, but in a complex structured hierarchy. Not much needs to be said about this, because the WORD-NET under the direction of Christiane Fellbaum has elaborated this system to many people’s satisfaction regarding words, not concepts.

The fact that in many languages like Chinese the standard word for the FINGER is the same as that for the TOE is registered not at all as a fact of conceptual history, or a conceptual conflation of FINGER with TOE. We never begin to imagine that the Chinese thought in terms of FINGER-TOES any more than I suspect speakers of English of thinking in terms of ARM-LEGS just because they do think in terms of “limbs.” Rather, it is registered as an interesting fact of the natural ambiguity of Chinese terminology which in no way prevents a Chinese from making a neat conceptual distinction between fingers and toes which he can make explicit as he needs to.

Conversely, it is not Eurocentric parochialist imposition to ask how the abstract concept SIBLING is represented in Chinese: I know of no obvious word or expression for this other than the unidiomatic list “elder brother, younger brother, elder sister and younger sister.” In a highly family-orientated or “familist” culture like the Chinese this vocabulary gap might seem to need an explanation, but it is far from clear whether it can ever get one.

Inevitably, then, a *LEXICON GRAMMATICO-PHILOSOPHICUM* in the educational spirit of Comenius, and inspired by the logical-analytic spirit of Leibniz, and the philosophical/psychological analyticity of Spinoza must operate on two levels with radically different aspirations:

Firstly, there must be a systematic philosophical attempt to define (and continually revise in the light of new evidence considered) a taxonomic and mereonomic grid of abstract concepts which aspires to be (and is continuously revised to become) applicable and useful across civilisations as well as across history.

This web of explicit stipulative definitions of the conceptual grid must be sufficiently systematic and logically transparent to serve as a useful analytical tool and to provide an efficiently predictable browsing environment, but sufficiently flexible and underspecified to allow for a natural representation of the semantic variation and malleability among natural languages.

For philosophers of language it is important to emphasise that this conceptual grid cannot possibly aim for much subtle philosophical detail, although the inspiration from the history analytical philosophy is obvious. The philological and philosophical detail of conceptual ethnography can only be applied to individual languages, realistically perhaps only stages of languages and most probably only to individual writers.

Our general taxonomic and mereonomic grid must aim to remain culturally under-specified and abstract if there is to be any hope for it to remain general in application to distant cultures.

Secondly, then, there must be a philological attempt to specify (and continually revise in the light of new evidence considered), for each abstract concept, the changing concrete repertoire of grammatically as well as semantically contrasting culture-specific and time-specific conceptions, as well as the nuances encoded in the terminologies that make up these repertoires.

Even with the caveats mentioned above, his project raises a host of obvious problems. For example, the notions of the morning star and the evening star may well come to be discussed under neither of these concepts. They may come to be discussed under the concept of VENUS instead, under which concept it will then be noted that VENUS is visible in certain ways in the evening and in the morning. In such cases as these one may well wish to impose a modern point of view, just as in the case of plants and animals one may well wish to opt for the organising principle supplied by Carl von Linné, so that the whale might possibly risk having to be looked for under the mammals, and the fact that most cultures regard it as a fish manifests itself in the system as a deviant interpretation rather than as a different taxonomic classification. By taking Carl von Linné's classificatory system as a point of departure for ethno-botany and ethno-zoology one establishes a *tertium comparationis* with reference to which all parochial systems are compared. For the convenience of retrievability and comparability, one sacrifices ethnographic bottom-up methodology. And one may well come to regret this move. That is why all taxonomic dispositions under the THESAURUS LINGUAE SERICAE system are technologically conceived in such a way that they are conveniently and quickly adjustable in every way.

Again, in astronomy, there will probably be no concept *DIPPER in the conceptual grid of TLS, no matter how plausible and conspicuous this constellation is in the sky. Rather, there will be a concept CONSTELLATION, under which the Dipper will figure for those cultures that see it as a constellation. The culturally contrasting ways of subsuming the stars under different constellations must somehow be made comparable and even commensurable by the taxonomic and mereonomic system.

When we turn to psychological terminology, for example the conceptual history of LOVE we must obviously first define abstractly what we mean by love across cultures, and then—pace Frege—we should certainly not primarily be studying people's knowledge of this concept (they may not know what is happening to them, and they may not be interested in concepts), nor should we be primarily studying the meanings of words for love (they may be unable or disinclined to verbalise their feelings): we should concern ourselves with the changing conceptions of love, the evolution of the system of their changing amorous sensibilities themselves. It is this system of sensibilities as well as subjective cognitive practices that does have a history and that constitutes the proper primary subject of "conceptual history."

It would be a serious philosophical category mistake to think that employing a concept, living by it, is the same as knowing something about that concept. And moreover it would be a serious philological mistake to disregard the crucial evidence on this history of sensibilities that is available to us in the history of the use of words.

The crucial point brought out with such succinct elegance by Gottlob Frege has a relevance that historians often find unpalatable but which they need to take to heart: we can only study the conceptual history of love with analytic transparency insofar as we have determined what we consider an abstractly defined conceptual core of the concept of LOVE that is applicable to or researchable in all cultures. Without defining this abstract concept we have no tertium comparationis for our cross-historical and cross-civilisational comparisons.

Note that even in order to consider whether two words are or are not synonymous we need an abstract metalinguistic notion of the meaning which they share: only to the extent that we manage this do the two words ever begin to become semantically commensurable.

We can then certainly also go on to study the history of man's awareness of concepts or knowledge of concepts. Indeed, at an even higher level of abstraction, we can and should consider Frege's reflections as a contingent historically conditioned event. All these things we should indeed do. But these are not the things that conceptual history itself should be primarily concerned with.

The history of the problematisation of concepts must not be confused or conflated with conceptual history. The problematisation of this problematisation itself, as practised by Gottlob Frege, has itself an interesting history, of course, which we can usefully discuss. And so on. But it is healthy to reflect that it makes excellent sense to study biology separately from the history of biology or physics separately from the history of biology or physics, and conceptual history separately from the history of conceptual history. (None of which must obviously not be taken to deny that in the end the study of biology and physics stands to gain from a self-awareness of its own history. . . .)

To take another helpful example: JEALOUSY, in children, is strong and important long before it becomes terminologically fixed in children, and even longer before it becomes an object of reflexive awareness and knowledge. What we define, when we consider the history of JEALOUSY, is primarily a sensibility and secondarily the history of a changing repertoire of expressions for that sensibility.

Take even the concept of a NUMBER, which was not without interest to Frege. The important differences among both modern and ancient languages in their conceptual practice and their terminological repertoire within this semantic field can only be studied meaningfully after one has abstractly decided what is to count as a concept of a number.

In ancient China, the relevant situation, which is of great importance for the history of science, may be summarised as follows: the notions of a number was nearly always that of a quantity or an amount (always OF SOMETHING), it was typically the idea of what the Germans call an Anzahl. Numbers as such were not the subject of early Chinese mathematical discourse. Statements such as "The number three is prime," or indeed subjects or sentence topics such as "The number three" are notoriously absent in pre-Buddhist Chinese. This is not a matter of the Chinese failing to understand any mathematical definitions, but of changing Chinese conceptual practices within the general semantic field of NUMBER. Chinese knowledge and conceptions of numbers, fractions, etc. did change. The meanings of the relevant Chinese terminology has changed, also. But what we are concerned with, when we do Chinese conceptual history, is primarily neither what the Chinese knew about the concept NUMBER, nor is it primarily, even, what their

mathematical words meant: it is their changing conceptual practice, the way that abstract concept of NUMBER entered their cognitive schemes, the way that concept entered their cultural activities.

In general, our concern in conceptual history must be with changing repertoires of notions, conceptions, and then also of expressions, as they are found to function in people's lives. We must deal with historical conceptual ethnography.

And as I keep repeating, since I find there is so much of a failure to understand the crucial point: conceptual history must classify conceptions under concepts. And the concepts must be defined as parts of an overall systemic conceptual grid. This overall grid, the Begriffssystem was advocated more than fifty years ago by the great scholar of French etymology Walther von Wartburg and Rudolf Hallig in *Begriffssystem als Grundlage für die Lexikographie. Versuch eines Ordnungsschemas*,¹² is not a word-net, then, but a concept-net. This taxonomic grid or "net" should ideally be a transparently and analytically defined grid of interdefined concepts, and a grid which systematically avoids circularity in the definitions of its terms. THESAURUS LINGUAE SERICAE (tls.uni-hd.de) aspires to provide such a grid on the basis of classical Chinese. At this preliminary stage it provides a draft for such a conceptual grid.

The aspirations behind this idea, and behind this draft, of a conceptual grid thus defined need to be explicated. In what follows I shall first specify the main aspirations that have guided the scheme of conceptual schemes in THESAURUS LINGUAE SERICAE (TLS), and thereafter I shall explain some of the many pervasive problems encountered in the pursuit of these aspirations.

Here then, first, is an outline of the analytic aims pursued:

1. All concepts are defined only in terms of other defined concepts, with the informal addition of what Aristotle would have called syncategorematic terms like "of" or "the," etc. The question of how many "syncategorematic" terms could be converted into proper concepts is not systematically explored so far. On the other hand, the inspiration from Aristotle's systematisation of categories in his *Categories* is fundamental for TLS.

2. All definitions are non-circular in the sense that no concept is defined in terms the definition of which involves the term defined anywhere down the line of definitions. This non-circularity can be checked mechanically by a simple computer program.

3. All definitions specify a taxonomic or mereonomic hypernym for the concept defined. It turns out that multiple parenthood should not be excluded in the taxonomic or mereonomic system.

4. All concepts are introduced into the conceptual grid as and when they are needed for the explanation of specified primary sources.

5. The construction of the conceptual grid generally aspires to follow a historical method: the point of departure is the reconstruction of the conceptual grid needed for the systematic analysis of pre-Buddhist Chinese and pre-Christian Greek and Latin. The addition of biblical Hebrew and early Sanskrit is in preparation. What is avoided is a construction of a conceptual grid for ancient Chinese on the basis of modern English.

¹² 1952; 2nd ed., Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1963.

6. The construction of the conceptual grid pays special attention to empty concepts, i.e. for well-formed ethnographically plausible semantic constellations for which a given language has no terminological repertoire. (Such absence of lexicalised terminological repertoires should not, of course, be confused with the absence of available means of paraphrasing the concepts in question.)

7. For later conceptual developments, these will be added as they fit into or onto the ancient grid. Conceptual innovation beyond the scope of ancient categories is clearly marked as such.

8. Multiple modernities are explained on the basis of the widely different specificities of the terminological repertoires in the various pre-modern languages.

9. For each concept there is a summary international bibliography referring the reader to lexicographic and semantic studies concerning the terminological repertoire for the concept in question in the languages of the world. (See e.g. the singularly useful *Bibliographisches Handbuch zur Sprachinhaltsforschung Teil II, Systematischer Teil (Register) B. Ordnung nach Sinnbezirken (mit einem alphabetischen Begriffsschlüssel): Der Mensch und seine Welt im Spiegel der Sprachforschung*, erarbeitet von Kristina Franke.¹³)

10. All aspects of the conceptual grid are constructed in such a way that they can be changed and elaborated conveniently in the light of new evidence or in the light of criticism: the conceptual grid is seen as an integral part of a continuously evolving tool for conceptual analysis.

The construction of a conceptual grid with the aspirations outlined above faces a number of basic recurrent and pervasive difficulties:

1. All definitions must always remain preliminary, since they are based only on the languages and sources so far surveyed and not on other important languages and sources that remain to be studied: As new languages and new kinds of material are analysed, continuous new adjustments become desirable.

2. All definitions must always remain radically arbitrary: Exactly the same concept can often be defined in a number of alternative ways, just as 5 can be defined as the predecessor of 6, or as the successor of 4.

3. All definitions must always remain essentially stipulative: they do not describe any idiomatic use of the label-word defined but specify how that label is to be used in the system of definitions. One may well come to change the stipulation.

4. Specifications of conceptual hypernyms are often problematic: in the end, it turns out that the purposes of the taxonomic system must always remain ultimately a matter of pragmatic convenience, allowing the user to navigate and browse efficiently in the conceptual grid.

5. The identification of constitutive concepts in the definiens does not, unfortunately, signify that the concepts identified in the definiens are necessary to define the concept in the definiendum: the definitions can only supply what are judged to be sufficient ingredients. (Similar observations do also hold for Leibniz's *Table de Définitions*.)

¹³ Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1989.

6. In the end, the analyses presented in the conceptual grid are always importantly motivated not only by the observed facts, but by what the Germans call subjective *Erkenntnisinteresse*, something like the subjective “analytic interest” of the researcher.

7. The subsumption of given word-meanings under a certain abstract concept is problematic, whenever this word-meaning seems to straddle across the borderlines drawn up in the conceptual grid. Here the system enforces many inevitably arbitrary subsumptions. The problem can be alleviated—but by no means solved—by placing reference notes (SEE X) under the heading where one has decided not to register the problematic X.

8. In the end, it turns out that the conceptual grid as a whole can never be more than a preliminary pragmatic convenience for a transparent organisation of analysis, and for the browsability of the system of concepts involved.

Concepts across Languages, Cultures, and Civilisations

If we are to get an objective “scientific” angle on our own varied Western conceptual traditions, we must focus on the deep contrasts among the European traditions. Many key concepts of modernity are currently treated as part of a common European conceptual heritage, but closer investigation reveals that a wide range of European languages have given rise to important nuances and conceptual developments that defy such a general inter-cultural all-European treatment. Barbara Cassin, ed., *Vocabulaire européen de la philosophie. Dictionnaire des intraduisibles*¹⁴ provides rich food for thought and analysis on the diversity of philosophical and philosophical keywords in the major and some minor European languages. Much basic analytic work still needs to be done on intra-European intraduisibles. Barbara Cassin makes a courageous exploratory beginning.

Moreover, if conceptual ethnography is to address a modern audience of global villagers, there is an obvious need, IDEALLY, for a concerted focus on the conceptual ethnography of non-Western cultures and on conceptual reception history. IDEALLY, we would need a focus on a non-Indo-European cognitive culture with an extended, well-documented, highly sophisticated history of its own, with its own advanced and autochthonous technological, scientific, politico-philosophical, historiographic, encyclopaedic, hermeneutic, and lexicographic traditions, as a counter-balance to the deeply engrained and pre-dominating Euro-centric bias in conceptual history.

IDEALLY, we should study this non-Western cognitive ethnography “bottom-up,” with unflagging insistence on the non-Western primary sources as the point of departure for our conceptual schemes: for everything we say we must insist on indigenous non-European primary evidence, and explicit reference to dated chapter and verse in our non-Western primary sources accompanied by philologically argued and painfully literal translations. Moreover, everything we say about the non-Indo-European culture should ideally be based on detailed discussion with leading native-speaker specialists in that culture, and on a close study of the relevant non-Indo-European hermeneutic tradition.

¹⁴ Paris: Robert and Seuil, 2004.

IDEALLY this is what we all agree ought to be done. The argument against going ahead and doing it has always been disarmingly incisive: “Life is short.” This is a very powerful argument. And the fact is that the task I have outlined is truly superhuman. However, G. K. Chesterton, inspired perhaps by Propertius’s maxim *In magnis et voluisse sat est* “in great undertakings it is enough to have wanted (to achieve them)” was apparently of opinion that “Everything that is truly worth doing, is worth doing badly.”

In *THESAURUS LINGUAE SERICAE* (TLS) I have needed the solace of Chesterton’s advice. TLS defines a taxonomic and mereonomic network of abstract concepts which have completely interchangeable classical Chinese, modern Chinese and (capitalised) English LABELS. Under each of the abstract LABELLED concepts TLS summarises the changing repertoire of contrasting Chinese words within the relevant semantic field. In addition, TLS attempts to relate the Chinese case systematically to that of Rome and Greece. This has involved more than 15 years of intense collaboration with leading practitioners of the art of sinology from China, Japan, the US, and Europe.

Alongside Carl Darling Buck’s monumental *A Dictionary of Selected Synonyms in the Principal Indo-European Languages*¹⁵ and Émile Benveniste’s legendarily inspiring *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européens*¹⁶ we badly need a *Lexicon Grammatico-Philosophicum of Selected Synonyms in the Principal Languages in World History*. TLS tries to make a (false) start on this, taking China as a point of departure as an antidote against the continuing hallowed philosophical and philological conventions of European intellectual despotism.

European intellectual despotism has led to a state of affairs where it is as if Chinese science, philosophy, and literature tend to be taken to make sense to the Chinese themselves only to the extent that they can be reduced to or subsumed under globalised English categories. What is not so reduced to Europeanised New-Speak or not so subsumed under dominant Western categories comes to look like traditionalist outdated obscurantism. Occidental Despotism has been internalised by the Chinese to frightening extent, and it does appear that this enthusiastic espousal of Occidental Intellectual Despotism by non-occidentals is a dominant trend in large parts of the world.

There is a deep historical validity in these appearances of an enthusiastic espousal of Occidental Intellectual Despotism when it comes to China. But upon close investigation, what goes as Western concepts in the Chinese cultural environment turns out in the end to be strikingly and inexorably Chinese in many subtle ways. These conceptions often turn out to crucially contribute to the making of an ineluctably Chinese modernity.

The Project and Its European Context

Listed below are English versions and non-circular analytic definitions of some basic concepts which are held to have been constitutive in varying degrees of European modernity. The present proposal is designed to bring together leading practitioners of the art

¹⁵ Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1949.

¹⁶ Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1969.

of sinology to discuss, from a sinological and from a comparative point of view, some of those key concepts that have shaped—and are shaping—modernity in China. The concrete aim is to produce a collaborative concise encyclopaedia of Chinese keywords of modernity. The idea is to make an analytic, philological, and historical contribution to comparative cognitive ethnography in a global perspective, where every contributor focuses on concepts that seem to be of special interest and of importance to the formation of modernity.

Western developments have been traced in detail in the context of *Begriffsgeschichte*. The transfer of modernising concepts to other cultures has received considerable attention in the context of missionary studies and its political successors, where the West acts as a superpower imposing its ways on other weaker parties. But China constitutes a powerful and historically influential civilisation of its own, as a highly articulate and sophisticated cultural superpower which has its own large sphere of influence, which is well aware of its historical strength and which is emphatically emerging from its persistent political humiliations by the West since the nineteenth century. Thus conceptual interaction increasingly takes the form, in this case, not of reception history, but of cognitive culture clash.

Western conceptual developments inscribe themselves into a three-thousand-year old, highly literate, sophisticated, articulate, and elaborated pre-existing Chinese conceptual grid which continues to inform modernising conceptual developments in China, and where Western modern concepts have to compete.

It makes no historical sense to construe Western democracy without reference to its perceived Greek antecedents. Not because Greek democracy informed modern democracy, but because modern democracy was construed as a “rebirth” of that Greek tradition. Such conceptual subjectivities continue to matter even when they are full of historical wishful thinking. We need to understand such conflicting historical subjectivities if we want to understand modernisation in China and in the world at large. This is why we need to take the long term Chinese conceptual history seriously when we talk about conceptual modernisation in China, and in general when we wish to reconstruct multiple modernities as multiple historical subjectivities.

By way of introduction it may be useful to outline very briefly some of the European and Chinese bibliographic background to the present ambitious sinological undertaking.

European Reference Works

Owen Barfield’s quaintly antiquated classic *History in English Words: With a Foreword by W. H. Auden*,¹⁷ in spite of its evident popularising inadequacies, provides an eminently readable introduction to the way in which the history of words can be taken to reflect the processes of historical change. Reinhart Koselleck, ed., *Historische Semantik und Begriffsgeschichte*,¹⁸ on the other hand, focuses on the ways in which certain words and concepts not only reflect but MAKE history by being profoundly programmatic rather

¹⁷ Rev. ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1967.

¹⁸ Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1979.

than merely descriptive. These are the keywords and key concepts of modernity. They are the subject of our present project.

On many key concepts of modernity there are useful monographs in the monumental work *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland* edited by Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck.¹⁹ Michel Delon's masterfully concise *Dictionnaire européen des Lumières*²⁰ and the much more detailed massive series of directly relevant monographs presented in Rolf Reichardt and Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink, *Handbuch politisch-sozialer Grundbegriffe in Frankreich, 1680–1820*²¹ summarise detailed research on the crucial conceptual innovations of the eighteenth century, and the special emphasis in these monographs on current general conceptual practice as opposed to advanced discourse by leading intellectuals provides important inspiration for the present project on conceptual anthropology which must avoid the common practice of basing a history of ideas on pronouncements by leading intellectuals only.

A rich selection of key concepts that shaped modernity in politics, philosophy, and literature is discussed in a very communicative and much less ambitious way in the popular little handbook Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*.²² And for the underlying philosophical methodology regarding these cultural keywords we must still gratefully refer to Arne Naess and Associates K. Kvaløe and J. Christophersen, *Democracy, Ideology and Objectivity: Studies in the Semantics and Cognitive Analysis of Ideological Controversy*,²³ the empirical companion volume to Arne Naess's classic *Interpretation and Preciseness. A Contribution to the Theory of Communication*.²⁴

For the Greek conceptual and terminological background of the key vocabulary, as well as a model of scholarly communication on the philology of conceptual schemes, Pierre Chantraine's masterpiece *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque. Histoire des mots. Nouvelle édition mise à jour*²⁵ will always have to be at hand as a splendid example of readable analytic lexicography, and because its organisation allows and indeed encourages a very detailed comparison between the morpho-syntactic flexibility of Greek versus Chinese words.

The subject of this inquiry into historical key concepts is not merely that of terminology as such, but that of the concepts themselves. This systemic concern, and this meta-linguistic aspiration, is brought out with great vigour in the introduction to Rudolf Hallig and Walther von Wartburg, *Begriffssystem als Grundlage für die Lexikographie. Versuch eines Ordnungsschemas*, and the history of the conceptually orientated systematic ordering

¹⁹ 8 vols., Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1972–1997.

²⁰ Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997.

²¹ Munich: Oldenbourg, 1985ff.

²² London: Fontana/Croom Helm, 1976.

²³ Oslo: Oslo University Press, 1956.

²⁴ Oslo: Skrifter utgitt av Det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi i Oslo II. Hist.-Filos. Klasse 1953. No 1.

²⁵ Paris: Klincksieck, 1989.

of vocabulary (rather than the retrieval-orientated alphabetic ordering of vocabulary) is told in commendable bibliographic detail in Franz Dornseiff, *Der deutsche Wortschatz nach Sachgruppen*,²⁶ Introduction pp. 29–158. Based on von Wartburg and Hallig's conceptual scheme, a huge task of international bibliography has been undertaken which is sumptuously indexed in Helmut Gipper and Hans Schwarz, *Bibliographisches Handbuch zur Sprachinhaltsforschung, Teil II, Systematischer Teil (Register) B. Ordnung nach Sinnbezirken (mit einem alphabetischen Begriffsschlüssel): Der Mensch und seine Welt im Spiegel der Sprachforschung*, erarbeitet von Kristina Franke.²⁷ On the basis of this extensive cross-linguistically orientated bibliography, which is also rich in references to Chinese historical semantics, we should be able to place the Chinese evidence on our key concepts in a broader international context whenever this seems desirable.

Concepts and conceptual schemes must be investigated through a detailed study of semantic fields, or as we prefer to say, of organised repertoires of words in synonym groups. The finest introduction to this approach is on—and originally in—Russian: J. D. Apresjan, *Systematic Lexicography* (translated by Kevin Windle).²⁸ Apresjan's *Explanatory Dictionary of Synonyms in the Russian Language (Objasnitel'nyj slovar' sinonimov russkogo jazyka)*²⁹ and its predecessors are linguistically orientated, and they do not focus on key historical concepts, but from the point of view of the systematic semantic analysis of synonym groups they provide invaluable inspiration. J. D. Apresjan, *English-Russian Dictionary of Synonyms (Anglo-russkij sinonimicheskij slovar')*³⁰ will occasionally be of direct use for the discussion of relevant semantic fields and synonym groups in English, and it certainly marks a great methodological advance when compared to the useful *Webster's New Dictionary of Synonyms. A Dictionary of Discriminated Synonyms with antonyms and Analogous and Contrasted Words*.³¹

Inspired by the readability of Keywords, by the exemplary concise cultural depth of the *Dictionnaire européen des Lumières*, and above all by the most admirable spirit of historical and critical analysis cultivated and exemplified in the work of Reinhart Koselleck and his associates, I propose to organise the compilation of a concise handbook with the working title CONCEPTS THAT MAKE MULTIPLE MODERNITIES: THE CONCEPTUAL MODERNISATION OF CHINA IN A HISTORICAL AND CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE, a project on which I have enjoyed Reinhart Koselleck's kind advice as late as a few weeks before his death a few months ago.

In working on this concise handbook constant reference will also be made to the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* founded by Joachim Ritter and others, of which the twelfth and last fat volume was published in 2004. This comprehensive work may serve as a methodological model and an important source on some dimensions under

²⁶ 7th ed., Berlin: DeGruyter, 1970.

²⁷ Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1989.

²⁸ Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

²⁹ Moscow/Vienna: Akademija Nauk, 2004.

³⁰ Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Russkij Jazyk, 1980.

³¹ 4th ed., Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam Company, 1973.

which conceptual developments can be studied in the West. (And as a specialised work on aesthetic terminology, much of which is highly relevant to the general theme of programmatic modernisation, we now have the complete *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe: historisches Wörterbuch in sieben Bänden* edited by Karlheinz Barck et al., the seventh volume of which was published by Metzler in 2005.)

In the context of our research it is important that all these handbooks contain extensive subclassified international bibliographies. And practically everywhere these bibliographies systematically exclude research results published not only in Japanese and Chinese, but simply in all non-West-European languages: even Russian research is largely disregarded throughout this literature.

The time has come to put East Asia on this map of conceptual history and intellectual history.

Shifting the focus of conceptual history fundamentally from the Eurocentric to the global perspective, in the present project we have every reason to reconsider fundamental assumptions and accepted methods in traditional *Begriffsgeschichte* while at the same time considering carefully what may turn out to be useful methods specifically in the Chinese historical and intellectual environment.

Wherever appropriate, we may place our investigations in the broader methodological context of historical discourse analysis on the basis of Achim Landwehr, *Geschichte des Sagbaren. Einführung in die historische Diskursanalyse*³² which conveniently lays out a variety of approaches to historical semantics and provides the methodological background to Koselleck's approach to conceptual history. However, the contribution of the present project is not primarily theoretical or methodological in nature: we are not concerned to say what ought to be done, we set out to do something. The project is intended as a substantive and philologically concrete contribution to the art of conceptual and cognitive anthropology from a sinological and historical perspective.

One is acutely aware of the unmanageable vastness of the sinological task begun in the present project. There is, even, something youthfully megalomaniac about it. And I hasten to plead guilty: this is indeed a comprehensive project that I have cherished ever since I began studying Chinese philosophy of science and Chinese logic over forty years ago. I have got to the stage where I no longer intend to wait for others to undertake the manifestly necessary task this project undertakes. What has held one back for so long is that in order to write the kind of analytic Chinese conceptual history properly, we would need, to begin with, for traditional China, plain basic summaries of conceptual developments during important periods, like the admirable series of such summary surveys by Georges Matoré, *Le vocabulaire et la société médiévale*,³³ *Le vocabulaire et la société du XVIe siècle*,³⁴ and *Le vocabulaire et la société sous Louis-Philippe*.³⁵ To my knowledge, we have no such systematic semantic surveys for any period of Chinese. In all too many

³² Edition Diskord, 2001.

³³ Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1985.

³⁴ Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1988.

³⁵ Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1967.

frightening ways, the systematic study of Chinese conceptual history has to—and has the refreshing opportunity to—start from scratch. However, some useful tools do exist.

Chinese Tools and Sinological Methods

On the sinological side, the present project can bring together

A. The Chinese evidence on modern terminology (from *c.* 1860 onwards) assembled in the project *Modern Chinese Scientific Terminologies* (WSC) by Michael Lackner, Joachim Kurtz, and Iwo Amelung.

B. My own project *Thesaurus Linguae Sericae*, which analyses the conceptual schemes of the formative period of classical Chinese philosophy 1100 B.C. to 200 A.D. and reaches forward into more recent stages of Chinese linguistic history.

C. For classical Chinese literature down to *c.* 1760 we are able to base ourselves on a digitised version of the vast collection Sikuquanshu 四庫全書 “Complete Assembly of Books in Four Categories,” which though not quite as complete as the name might suggest, does allow us to survey in consummate detail a vast part of the uncensored literature of traditional China down to the eighteenth century.

D. For nineteenth-century developments huge digitised libraries are available, and our collection of hundreds of digitised popular novels of this period is of special relevance to our purposes.

E. For the detailed ethnography of spontaneous modern Peking speech we have an audio-dictionary of the language of a Manchu speaker from Peking who provides unprepared spontaneous comments on the vocabulary in the *Vocabulary of the Chinese Language* 漢語拼音詞彙,³⁶ and two other specialised dictionaries of Peking Mandarin Chinese. This audio idiolect dictionary compiled from 1966 to 1969 is unique for its scope (over 130,000 words) and its detail (over 1,500 hours of digitised tape), and especially for the high narrative quality of the linguistic and sociolinguistic observations by Ms Tang Yunling, who has a strong background as a professional story teller (說書的), on her own language. This allows us to supplement our long-term historical perspective with a highly in-depth perspective of individual cognitive ethnography. Our research on modern usage will thus not have to be limited to written sources, much less to the highly problematic published sources, as has tended to be the case in the *Begriffsgeschichte* of the past. Public discourse has its own special importance, but our ultimate interest must be in the cognitive anthropology of spontaneous private discourse. We are not only interested in how people publish, but in how they speak privately—and think.

F. A digitised version of the twelve-volume 漢語大詞典 (Great Dictionary of Chinese) the Chinese equivalent of the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

There are also such popular and less than respectable compilations as Boye Lafayette De Mente, *NTC's Dictionary of China's Cultural Code Words*.³⁷ It is easy to make fun of the obvious weaknesses of popularising informal publications of this sort, but there is

³⁶ Beijing: Wenzhi gaige chubanshe 文字改革出版社, 1963.

³⁷ Lincolnwood, IL: NTC Publishing Group, 1996.

much to learn from their communicative style and their choice of conceptual fields that are of broad cultural interest.

It will be clear that the field of Chinese philology offers a true bonanza for enthusiasts of lexicometry, the statistical investigation of the use of terminology, but lexicometry will always remain no more than a minor ancillary discipline in our analytic inquiry into conceptual ethnography. And the kind of conceptual anthropology that our project aspires to achieve must inevitably be tied up with what Stephen Greenblatt well might have wanted to call the conceptual poetics of Chinese modernity.

As my brief survey of the Chinese resources at our disposition suggests, this project intends to explore and explain the conceptual poetics of Chinese modernity against the background of long-term developments in Chinese intellectual history. Our project is not only concerned with the processes of modernisation from the nineteenth century onwards: we intend to explore the traditional background into which Chinese modernity inscribes itself, and by the continuing presence of which this modernity continues to be profoundly Chinese.

The project will demonstrate how Chinese evidence can begin to contribute towards putting the deliberately Germano-centric analyses in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* and the Euro-centric surveys in *Keywords*, the *Dictionnaire européen des Lumières*, *Vocabulaire européen de philosophie*, as well as in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, into the kind wider analytical and historical comparative perspective they need so badly, and which they indeed richly deserve.

The intellectual agenda of our project will in no way be determined by the awe-inspiring achievements of German *Begriffsgeschichte* and French intellectual history. For traditional Chinese conceptual history we have important contributions like those of Zhang Dainian 張岱年 and others, as well as many handbooks such as the Fang Keli 方克立, *中國哲學大辭典* (Great Dictionary of Chinese Philosophy).³⁸

For more recent modernising Chinese terminological history, we shall be able to base ourselves in this connection on the recent dictionary *Jinxiandai Hanyu xinci ciyuan cidian* 近現代漢語新詞詞源詞典 (Etymological Dictionary of Modern Chinese New Terms)³⁹ which provides some initial information on the introduction of Western vocabulary into China, and also on Federico Masini, *The Formation of Modern Chinese Lexicon and Its Evolution toward a National Language: The Period from 1840 to 1898*.⁴⁰

Our sinological *Concepts that Make History* can at this stage be based on detailed digitised terminological evidence from ancient China, from 1100 B.C. onwards down to present times.

All our “concepts that make history” are analytically defined in the context of the *Thesaurus Linguae Sericae*, and their related semantic fields in classical as well as modern Standard Chinese are laid out in that database. At the same time, for most of these concepts, the WSC database provides a wealth of references (over 120,000 entries) to the

³⁸ Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe 中國社會科學出版社, 1994.

³⁹ Shanghai: Hanyu da cidian chubanshe 漢語大詞典出版社, 2001

⁴⁰ Berkeley, CA: Journal of Chinese Linguistics, 1993.

evolution of the ways in which these terms were rendered into Chinese from 1860 onwards.

Wherever and however it is felt desirable by the authors of our encyclopaedia, the entries in Concepts that Make History will refer freely to *Modern Chinese Scientific Terminologies* (WSC) by Michael Lackner, Joachim Kurtz, and Iwo Amelung and to the Thesaurus Linguae Sericae (TLS)[<http://www.hf.uio.no/forskningssprosjekter/tls/>]. Whenever it is felt desirable, the authors will be able to start out with a summary of the terminological history relating to these concepts in ancient and modern China.

All entries, it is hoped, will be freely discussed in a series of meetings to be held in the Norwegian mountains, on the premises of the Norwegian Academy of Sciences, at Atnasjøen. In this way it is hoped that the individual articles will be the result not only of individual research by leading authorities on Chinese intellectual history, but of a congenial dialogue inspired by some of the most spectacularly beautiful landscape in Norway. Leading practitioners of Western conceptual history will be invited to join these informal discussions in the Norwegian mountains.

In spite of all our efforts to reduce the Euro-centric bias and to work towards a global perspective on modernity, our working definition still remains, inevitably, an—albeit watered down and mitigated—parochial Western scheme of conceptual schemes which will always continue to be in need of revision from global perspectives. It shares this precarious predicament with strictly ALL human sciences with global aspirations which choose to articulate themselves in a European OR INDEED ANY OTHER EUROPEANISED/WESTERNISED/MODERNISED language, including, for example, Modern Standard Chinese.

Nonetheless, since everything we say about Chinese conceptual history will be strictly based on Chinese primary sources, it is my quiet hope that we may be able to provide empirical evidence for those crucial non-Westernizing elements and nuances of modernisation in China which are in the process of creating a very specific Chinese modernity. On the basis of three millennia of extensively digitised and selectively analysed literary history we hope to establish Chinese conceptual history as a rich autonomous discipline which provides something of an abundantly documented external angle on the European conceptual experience, and on the very notion of modernity. The over 2000-year-long history of Chinese-Chinese dictionaries will be of particular interest in this connection.

Every one of the concepts listed below—if indeed they deserve to be in our list in the first place—should merit a sinological monograph in their own right, much in the style of Reichard and Lüsebrink's monograph series on French keywords. What the present project sets out to do at this initial stage is no more than a preliminary definition and elaboration of some of the main issues raised by the immensely rich Chinese evidence from the last three millennia.

The Definitions

Our project needs cross-linguistic, cross-cultural and even cross-civilisational definitions of the key terms which avoid, as far as possible, a modern Western bias. The idiomatically

awkward, analytic, minimalist working definitions of the historical keywords listed below are integral parts of the comprehensive scheme of “metalinguistic” analytic definitions of semantic fields elaborated in the THESAURUS LINGUAE SERICAE project. Evidently, this list represents a limited selection from the huge array of modern terminology: for example, Carl von Linné thought of a repertoire of 67,000 species of plants and animals alone. Modern scholars reckon with ten million species, an average of ten thousand new ones being identified each year. Precious little of this modern terminology can be represented in TLS which is concerned with historical current-use ethnobotany and ethnozoology only.

The story is similar for the vast range of new technological and scientific terminologies in a wide range of areas.

Our system of analytic non-circular definitions focuses on common-use key terms, and it is directly inspired by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz’s justly famous *Table de définitions* (1704) of which I bought a copy almost forty years ago,⁴¹ and then by the unjustly neglected *Lexicon Reale Pansophicum* (1665) by the founding father of the science of education, Amos Comenius, which I have only managed to find a decade ago.⁴² Indeed to this day I feel that my aspirations cannot be more adequately summarised than in the title which I found in Leibniz, but which is due to his admired predecessor Dalgarno: *LEXICON GRAMMATICO-PHILOSOPHICUM*.⁴³

For some more recent related methodological discussion on systems of definitions see e.g. Anna Wierzbicka, *Semantics: Primes and Universals*⁴⁴ and *Understanding Cultures through Their Key Words: English, Russian, Polish, German, and Japanese*⁴⁵ which are particularly inspiring through their persistent focus on commensurable variance in comparative semantics.

According to a learned friend dedicated to the study of conceptual history, the definitions below read like vulgar and barbaric “pixie book definitions,” are outrageously as well as offensively unsubtle, and are miserably unworthy of consideration in the context of the subtleties presented by serious students of conceptual history in the great tradition of Reinhart Koselleck and Quentin Skinner.

A formidable historian of Chinese science has come up with what he apparently thought was a devastating criticism of the definitions that follow: “Your definitions of academic fields like physics are closer to those of 1850 than today.” Such devastating

⁴¹ Louis Couturat, *Opuscles et fragments inédits de Leibniz* (1903; reprint, Hildesheim: Olms, 1966).

⁴² See the beautiful modern edition in Iohannis Amos Comenii, *DE RERUM HUMANARUM EMENDATIONE CONSULTATIO CATHOLICA, EDITIO PRINCEPS, TOMUS II, PAMPAEDIAM, PANGLOTTIAM, PANORTHOSIAM PANNUTHESIAM NECCON LEXICON REALE PANSOPHICUM CONTINENS* (Prague: Academia Scientiarum Behemoslovaca, 1966), pp. 449–681.

⁴³ See Couturat, *Opuscles et fragments inédits de Leibniz*, p. 435.

⁴⁴ Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

⁴⁵ Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

criticism, of course, warms my heart for what our definitions must aspire to capture is pretty exactly the usage of that period around 1850 for subjects like physics or science more generally. Quite generally, our definitions must aim to identify the cognitive nerve of such emerging concepts.

These definitions must try to seem suitably unfashionable and perhaps even quaintly outdated, barbarically basic, logically as trivial as can be, maximally inane, and as culturally uninteresting as is humanly possible, as unaffected by current intellectual fashion as I can make them. And above all, these definitions must naturally apply to the formative historical period during which conceptual westernisation and then modernisation took shape in the Chinese context, i.e. during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Only in this way will the definitions be maximally unobtrusive for the kind of minimally biased comparative research in the cross-civilisational cognitive anthropology and folklore of conceptual history that is our concern.

Thus, to take an interesting example, for our comparative purposes of historical conceptual anthropology, a definition of the cross-cultural concept of SCIENCE will not be taken to refer only to a systematic inquiry that shows a “clear expectation that its language be mathematical equations” (because this would exclude traditional botany), nor does the notion include any idea “that new understanding derive from experiments that anyone with the same equipment can repeat” (which would exclude such methodologically crucial scientific disciplines mathematics, the foundations of mathematics, and logic, as well as traditional astronomy). What the system needs for the purposes of comparative cognitive anthropology is a general term, and by definitory stipulation we (ab)use the English word SCIENCE, capitalised, for our purposes, much in the spirit of the *Maison des Sciences de l’Homme*, and not at all in the spirit of those for whom the word “science” excludes the social sciences and the human sciences as unscientific.

It has been objected that the English word “science” is today mostly used as short for the natural sciences, and if the aim of our definition were the description of predominant current usage that would indeed be a serious objection. But the purpose of our definition is nothing of the kind. In principle, our definitions must be taken as stipulative, identifying a meaning for which—*faute de mieux*—one uses convenient English and Chinese mnemonic labels, these label being a convenient means only, and the definition is not an attempt to describe the meaning of the English word in the label any more than the Chinese term in the alternative label. The only reason one does not use the label “115” instead of “SCIENCE” is that “115” is mnemonically less helpful than “SCIENCE” in reminding us of the stipulative definition of the concept. By writing labels in capitals, by writing “SCIENCE” and not “science” one constantly reminds the reader that what is intended is a stipulatively defined abstract concept and not any set of meanings of an English word. In practice, it turns out that there is always the danger of forgetting this crucial theoretical point, and of using the labels simply to stand for the words from which they are capitalised. I find that revising the definition system is very often the weeding out of just the kind of conceptual confusion, or logical category mistakes, that might tempt one to use SCIENCE as if this word referred specifically to what is called “science” in early twenty-first-century English.

All capitalised words in the definitions must ideally be used in the technical meaning the definitions in the system attribute to them, and they must ideally be defined in a non-circular way so that no concept F is ever defined in terms of any other concept which itself, directly or indirectly, is defined by the use of that concept F. As everyone can vividly imagine, the construction of this non-circular network of analytic stipulative definitions poses immense problems and it will always remain a distant ideal to work towards rather than an aim achieved. On the other hand, I have found it analytically immensely useful to work towards this end.

Note that EMPIRICAL-PHYSICAL-SCIENCES is a concept which one might want to discuss as a separate item, an item which within the system would still need to be neatly different from QUANTIFIED (MATHEMATICS-BASED) SCIENCES, since we want to contemplate the logical possibility that a science is empirical without involving the use of mathematical formulae. Indeed, among the quantified sciences one would be free to introduce a separate concept of those involving equations and those merely involving measurements without the use of equations. But under this heading one could not include the foundations of mathematics, since these are not based on mathematics but have mathematics as their explicandum.

None of these considerations affect the historical importance of the more inclusive and more abstract concept of SCIENCE which we judge to deserve special historical attention in the first place.

It clearly cannot be emphasised too much or repeated too often, then, since it keeps being misunderstood by so many users of the drafts of the working definitions that follow, that these definitions are not definitions of uses of the English words that are used as labels, but of abstract concepts, with aspirations much in the abstract philo-logical analytic spirit of Leibniz and of the educational philosopher Comenius.

The need for this focus on concepts and not on words was made plain and explicit by the great etymologist Walther von Wartburg and his collaborator Hallig in their *Begriffssystem* a long time ago, as we have seen above. However, this high “metalinguistic” aspiration raises immense, indeed perhaps unsurmountable problems not only of theory, but particularly of defintory practice. Leibniz never published his *Table de définitions*, nor did Comenius live to publish his splendid draft *Lexicon Reale Pansophicum*. I would probably have been much wiser if I did not publish—or even circulate—these working definitions either: *si tacuissem philosophus mansissem*. For every week of the year it turns out that many of them are found to be insufficient and have to be improved and corrected. Mostly the changes are in the direction of making the definitions less fashionably modern, and in the direction of making them less tied up with contemporary Western methodological preoccupations, leaving as much room as possible for the crucial open-minded comparison with pre-modern and non-Western conceptual practices in various cultures and civilisations. Above all, there is a constant need to weed dependence on the vagaries of current English idiom wherever possible. For we wish to discuss modernisation as it relates to and grows out of pre-modern conceptual history.

Here as everywhere, our main concern has to remain to make the Chinese evidence comparable in a global and a historical context and to enable the necessary, philologically based, cross-civilisational dialogue within the “vast field” of conceptual history. The

purpose of this comparative study must never become the mere subsumption of the Chinese evidence under our conceptual scheme, or the tediously repetitive diagnosis of conceptual and cognitive deficiencies in the Chinese traditional conceptual system, but to tease out of the Chinese evidence the strategic schemata and the poetics of conceptual modernisation that are creating in China a modernity that is intensely modern, and remains in important ways irreducibly Chinese.

I believe that the agenda of modernisation in China is set by Westernisation mainly from the nineteenth century onwards. But what needs careful detailed attention is the persevering constitutive interference of pre-modern traditional Chinese conceptual modes in the creative process of the Chinese appropriation of new Western conceptual content, and the way in which concepts of Western origin get to live very much their own independent lives in the varied and evolving modern Chinese cultural contexts.