RIGHT WORDS SEEM WRONG: NEGLECTED PARADOXES IN EARLY CHINESE PHILOSOPHICAL TEXTS

Wim De Reu, Assistant Professor
Department of Philosophy, National Taiwan University

Well-known versus Neglected Paradoxes

Almost all well-known early Chinese paradoxes can be found in a mere three chapters of literature. They appear in short lists compiled by intellectual opponents. First, the chapter “Tianxia” 天下 (Under heaven) of the Zhuangzi 莊子 gives a description of the philosophies of some Warring States thinkers and ends with a discussion of the thought of Hui Shi 惠施. The author of this chapter enumerates ten paradoxical statements ascribed to Hui Shi, followed by a list of twenty-one paradoxes used by the bianzhe 辯者 (disputers) in debate with Hui Shi. Further, the chapter “Zhengming” 正名 (Rectifying names) of the Xunzi 荀子 presents a threefold classification of paradoxes. It includes, among others, paradoxes propounded by the Later Mohists as well as by Song Xing 宋钘, Hui Shi, and Gongsun Long 公孫龍.\(^1\) Finally, another chapter of the Xunzi, “Bugou” 不苟 (Nothing indecorous), attributes a short list of five paradoxes to Hui Shi and Deng Xi 鄧析.\(^2\)

Many paradoxes that are included in these lists have been frequently discussed and can be found in any major outline of early Chinese thought.\(^3\) Nevertheless, in spite of their popularity, our understanding of them is complicated by a lack of contextual information. To begin with, in the three chapters mentioned above, the paradoxes are presented out of context without much guide to interpretation. Further, while the context of the paradoxes must have been generally known in the Warring States period, most of it has not come down to us and had probably disappeared at an early stage in history. Finally, even when something of the context is left, as is the case with Gongsun Long’s bai ma fei ma 白馬非馬 (a white horse is not a horse), there is no consensus as to its interpretation. Reconstructing the reasoning behind the paradoxes is therefore problematic and based mainly on indirect evidence and on our own creativity.\(^4\)

Given the difficulties of interpretation, one wonders why these paradoxes have attracted so much attention. Aside from the intellectual appeal of virtually any paradox, two explanations in particular need to be mentioned. One is that some of the paradoxes constitute an important part of what we know about the ideas of certain thinkers. This is the case not only with, for example, Gongsun Long, but also with Song Xing and Hui Shi, none of whose writings have survived independently. Studying the thought of these masters largely involves interpreting the paradoxes they have left to posterity. Another, perhaps more straightforward explanation is that the paradoxes appear in ready-made lists. Being conveniently placed together rather than scattered throughout various works, they form an inviting research topic: there
is no need for the preparatory stage of searching for paradoxes in a multitude of texts. Though this has resulted in intense scrutiny of the well-known paradoxes, it has also prevented many scholars from going beyond them. In this sense, the ready-made lists also constitute a barrier to further research into paradoxes.

There is no reason to suppose that the number of ancient Chinese paradoxes is limited to the statements found in the ready-made lists. Scrutinizing the early philosophical writings, one readily discovers that quite a few paradoxes appear outside these lists. In contrast to their more famous counterparts, these paradoxes are often found embedded in their original contexts. While this contextual information opens the way to a better-founded interpretation, up to now the paradoxes have been marginalized and treated in an unsystematic way that does not take into account the immediate contexts in which the paradoxes are uttered. As a result, these paradoxes constitute a relatively new field of study. The present article makes a first attempt in exploring this field of neglected paradoxes.

**Three Groups of Paradoxes**

The paradoxes introduced in this article generally consist of four characters. Although they frequently appear in series, they are unlike the paradoxes in the ready-made lists in that they are scattered throughout the literature and are written down not by philosophical rivals but by people who employ them in an affirmative way. Some of the more familiar paradoxes are 大巧若拙 (the greatest skill seems clumsy), 上德不德 (the highest virtue is not virtuous), and 不言之教 (the speechless teaching). On the basis of semantic criteria, it is possible to distinguish three main groups. In addition, each group can further be divided into two subgroups. The paradoxical or counterintuitive nature of the paradoxes results from a challenge to the semantic relations that hold between their central terms.

As can be seen from table 1, paradoxes that belong to the first group are characterized by the semantic relation of antonymy. According to our conventional semantic associations, *qiao* 巧 (skill) is antonymous with *zhuo* 瘋 (clumsy), and *ming* 明 (bright) is antonymous with *mei* 昏 (dark, dull). The subgroup to which these paradoxes belong is determined by the position of their antonyms. The antonyms in subgroup 1A come in the second and fourth position, while those in subgroup 1B appear in positions one and four. The paradoxical effect of the expressions derives
Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group 2A 大 X 不 X (“X” = “X”)</th>
<th>Group 2B 不 X 之 X (“X” = “X”)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>大仁不仁</td>
<td>無形之狀</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“the greatest benevolence is not benevolent”</td>
<td>“the shapeless shape”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>上德不德</td>
<td>不知之知</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“the highest virtue is not virtuous”</td>
<td>“the knowledge that does not know”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group 3A 大 X 不 Y (“X” → “Y”)</th>
<th>Group 3B 不 X 之 Y (“Y” → “X”)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>大制不割</td>
<td>不言之教</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“the greatest carving does not cut”</td>
<td>“the speechless teaching”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>大勇不鬬</td>
<td>不言之辯</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“the greatest hero does not fight”</td>
<td>“the speechless disputation”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

mainly from the fact that the verb ruo 若 (to be like, to seem) suggests that the antonyms are similar, though not identical, in meaning.

Paradoxes that belong to the second group are typified by identity (table 2). The graphic identity of the central terms leads to the assumption of semantic identity. Differences in structure justify further division into two subgroups. Paradoxes of subgroup 2A are independent statements, while those of subgroup 2B generally function as the object of a preceding verb. In both subgroups, the identity of the central terms is denied by a negation. This results in paradoxical sayings.

Paradoxes that belong to the third group are characterized by implication (table 3). The term zhi 制 (carving) conventionally implies ge 割 (to cut), and jiao 教 (teaching) is commonly thought of as implying yan 言 (to speak). With regard to the paradoxes 大制不割 (the greatest carving does not cut) and 不言之辯 (the speechless disputation), the relation of implication is further highlighted by the common graphic element of the central terms. The division into subgroups is the same as with paradoxes of the second group. The paradoxical effect of the expressions results from negating the implication.

Though the paradoxes can be assigned to different groups and subgroups, they constitute a well-defined and interrelated set of expressions. The series in which they typically appear do not include other kinds of paradoxes, suggesting that they form a closed unit. As to their internal structure, they are related in two ways. First, paradoxes that belong to different groups or subgroups sometimes appear in a single series. Laozi 老子 41, for example, contains no less than twelve paradoxes that belong to two main groups and three different subgroups (1A, 1B, and 3A). Second, paradoxes from one group may be rewritten as paradoxes from another group. This
is evident from Zhuangzi 2/5/26–6/3, which first lists five paradoxes, among them 大道不稱 (the greatest way does not designate) and 大辯不言 (the greatest disputation is speechless),
and then rephrases these two paradoxes in reverse order as 不言之辯 (the speechless disputation) and 不道之道 (the way that does not lead the way). This passage indicates that paradoxes from groups two and three are interrelated in a logical way. Furthermore, the paradoxes 大辯不言 and 不言之辯, both dealing with disputation, have a counterpart in the paradox 大辯若謬 (the greatest disputation seems stuttering) from group one. This internal cohesion as well as the fact that the paradoxes are clearly delineated calls for a unified interpretation.

**Distribution and Affiliation**

In searching for paradoxes, I have examined the philosophical literature from the beginning of the Warring States period down to the end of the first century of Han rule (roughly 500–100 B.C.). The search produced around 100 different paradoxes, accounting for a total number of approximately 180 occurrences. This more than doubles the number of different paradoxes found in the ready-made lists.

Two major observations can be made on the basis of the distribution of the paradoxes. First, the paradoxes mostly appear in writings that are traditionally classified as “Daoist.” Within this group, the Zhuangzi, and even more so the Laozi, occupy prominent places: they constitute the most important sources of paradoxes. Second, outside “Daoist” works, the paradoxes mostly appear in so-called “Syncretic” writings, and are occasionally also found in other categories of texts. Moreover, in these writings, the relevant passages can in a substantial number of cases be related to the Laozi and the Zhuangzi.

Though there was strictly speaking no Daoist “school,” these findings suggest that the paradoxes constituted a typical mode of expression among thinkers we could call “Daoist.” As paradoxes sometimes also appear in passages that do not show any apparent evidence of Daoist influence, it is unwarranted to make the stronger claim that the paradoxes are exclusively Daoist in nature. Nevertheless, even in these latter cases, the most plausible scenario is that the paradoxes were taken out of a Daoist context or composed in imitation of Daoist models.

**Interpreting the Paradoxes**

The paradoxes challenge the semantic relations of antonymy, identity, and implication: on the one hand, terms that are supposed to be opposite in meaning are brought closer together, and, on the other hand, terms that are characterized by identity and implication are drawn apart. This gives rise to two basic questions. First, what is the mechanism underlying these paradoxes? Second, what is the motive in formulating them? These questions can be approached from different angles. Some scholars have presented philosophical and religious interpretations, approaching the paradoxes from dialectics, logic, and mysticism. While valuable, these interpretations tend to ignore the immediate contexts of the paradoxes. This is unfortunate, for it is pre-
precisely this context, considered in the light of broader observations on language and communication, that allows for an alternative interpretation. This interpretation holds that the paradoxes constitute unorthodox redefinitions of important terms, and that they are formulated in order to influence the behavior and values of their intended audience. In developing this interpretation, I will first make some observations on the features and use of important terms as a general interpretative background. Then I will explain the underlying semantic mechanism, and discuss the pragmatic and rhetorical functions of the paradoxes.

The Background: Important Terms

Important terms denote things or ideas that are relevant in an aesthetic, philosophical, political, or broadly cultural context. They often have a laudatory connotation and are frequently shared among different groups or subcultures. Typical examples of these important terms include ‘art,’ ‘freedom,’ ‘courage,’ ‘justice,’ ‘love,’ ‘genius,’ and ‘gentleman.’

It is frequently the case that important terms are interpreted in different ways. While ‘art,’ for example, is widely used across subcultural boundaries, its interpretation varies with the intuitions and theoretical frameworks of different groups. What one group means by ‘art’ (the answer to the question “What is art?”) differs from the views of other groups, even to the extent that an object that is labeled ‘art’ by one group will not necessarily be deemed ‘art’ by another. Though different subcultures share a common vocabulary of important terms, there does not appear to be a corresponding unity of interpretation.

This difference in interpretation, when combined with the laudatory connotation of important terms, frequently results in contestation and controversy about the correct use of a term. Terms such as ‘art,’ ‘love,’ and ‘justice’ are considered to stand for valued things and ideas, acquire a positive connotation, and become themselves valued and coveted descriptions. Describing some act as ‘an act of justice’ gives an added value to this act, while the opposite, labeling something ‘unjust,’ condemns it. In a conflict between different groups, it then becomes important to impose one’s own criteria of how a term should be used. As a result, terms become contested, an idea originally put forward by W. B. Gallie, who described the contested character of ‘art,’ ‘religion,’ ‘democracy,’ and ‘justice’ as “inevitably involving endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users” (Gallie 1968, p. 158).

In disputes about the proper use of important terms, the core members of each group stick to their interpretation and try to persuade wavering members of other groups of their point of view. Charles Leslie Stevenson was the first to recognize that arguments in favor of a particular view often take the form of persuasive definitions. He claimed that the descriptive meaning of terms such as ‘culture,’ ‘courage,’ ‘justice,’ and ‘philosophy’ is constantly being redefined “with the conscious or unconscious purpose of changing ... the direction of people’s interests” (Stevenson 1938, p. 331). In his view, such persuasive definitions should not be regarded (but frequently are) as pure intellectual analyses or as descriptions of linguistic habits, but as normative, attitude-shaping valuations.
Stevenson also noticed that persuasive definition frequently takes place by putting modifiers such as ‘real’ and ‘true’ in front of important terms. For example, we are told that “real culture means imaginative sensitivity” or that “true love is the communion between minds alone” (Stevenson 1938, pp. 331–332, 334). These modifiers have two major interrelated functions. First, they add to the persuasive force of the definition. The modifier attracts attention and purports to introduce something of the utmost importance. Second, they signal a change in descriptive content. Sørøen Halldén has claimed that the use of modifiers such as ‘true,’ ‘real,’ and also ‘genuine’ is almost invariably accompanied by a change in the field of application of a term. ‘Real culture’ is set against some ‘superficial’ conception of culture, and ‘true love’ implies and is distinguished from ‘ordinary’ or ‘shallow love.’ Compared to the ordinary meaning of a term, this change in descriptive meaning can take different directions: the scope of a modified term can be broader, narrower, or lie outside that of its ordinary usage (Halldén 1960, pp. 55–58).

In sum, when important terms such as ‘humor,’ ‘freedom,’ ‘philosophy,’ and ‘courage’ are shared among different subcultures, they are likely to be used with mutually competing interpretations carrying different scopes and applications. In an attempt to influence the discourse, different groups frequently redefine these terms, and often do so by making use of persuasive modifiers.

The Underlying Mechanism
The observations above on important terms allow us to interpret the paradoxes. Warring States philosophical literature abounds with important terminology that is shared among different subcultures: masters of different lineage argue about the proper dao 道 (Way) to order society, about what constitutes zhi 知 (knowledge, wisdom), about who can truly be considered de 德 (virtuous), about the meaning of yi 義 (righteousness), and so on. Different groups of people place different and competing interpretations on these terms. The central terms of the paradoxes are also usually important, either in ethics (e.g., ren 仁 [benevolence]), in political philosophy (e.g., dao 道, de 德), in politics (e.g., zhi 制 [to carve, to govern]), or in a general cultural way (e.g., yong 勇 [bravery], cheng 成 [success]).

We noted that important terms are typically used in different ways by different groups of people. An important term is, as it were, the center of a web around which different interpretations are positioned. As a result, attempts at defining important terms invariably involve at least two levels of interpretation: first, the target interpretation(s) against which some definition is directed and, second, the new or alternative interpretation introduced in the definition. Though both levels of interpretation are important, they are not equally prominent. The target interpretation usually lies in the background. From the definition of ‘culture’ as “imaginative sensitivity,” for example, one does not readily identify the target use “a man widely read and acquainted with the arts.”19 While this target might be mentioned in the immediate context, the definition as such does not provide any hint of this. In other cases, the target interpretation may be vaguely implied, especially when seemingly insignifi-
cant terms such as ‘also,’ ‘only,’ or ‘alone’ are used. In the definition of ‘love’ as “the communion between minds alone,” the term ‘alone’ suggests that the target is a view on love that includes mental as well as physical aspects. Nevertheless, even in such cases, the target interpretation lies in the background and can only be known indirectly.

The relative invisibility of the target interpretation is usually compensated for by a focus on the new or alternative interpretation. In the two examples above, we obtain more or less straightforward information on the alternative use of ‘culture’ and ‘love.’ We know what someone means when he says that true love is to be found in mutual respect and understanding. This focus on the alternative interpretation corresponds to what we implicitly expect of a definition. We expect it to inform us about the meaning of a thing or term. This transfer of information is best accomplished by focusing on the new interpretation.

Unlike ordinary redefinition, however, the neglected paradoxes do not present direct information on the new interpretations of important terms. The paradox 不德 (the highest virtue is not virtuous), for example, does not make very clear what is meant by shang de 不德 (highest virtue). The new meaning of de is introduced in an indirect way, not by giving a straightforward description, but by saying that it is different from the ordinary conception of de. Similarly, the paradox 大巧若拙 (the greatest skill seems clumsy) only indirectly conveys the new interpretation of qiao (skill). It tells us that instances of the new interpretation would be judged ‘clumsy’ or ‘not skillful’ from the standpoint of the target interpretation. In other words, the paradoxes suggest new and alternative interpretations of important terms, but they do so by referring back to the target uses of these terms. When compared to ordinary redefinition, this unorthodox technique results in a lack of information, which we can only hope to fill in by contextual analysis.

According to the presentation above, the authors of the paradoxes combine both the target and alternative interpretations of important terms into a single expression. While it is likely that some masters copied paradoxes solely for their literary value, the use of paradoxes seems at least in a number of cases to have been a conscious play on the multiple interpretations of important terms. Throughout the extant literature we find passages where masters explicitly contrast their own views with those of others and subsequently present the paradoxes as a result of this opposition. A passage on le 樂 (happiness) appearing in the Zhuangzi illustrates this very well. After having observed that the common people find happiness in such things as wealth, old age, comfort, rich flavors, and beautiful clothing, the author continues as follows:

今俗之所為與其所樂，吾又未知樂之果樂邪，果不樂邪……果有樂無有哉？吾以無為誠樂矣，又俗之所大苦也。故曰：『至樂無樂，至譽無譽』

What today’s ordinary people do and where they find happiness, once more I do not know whether their happiness is really happiness or not… Is there after all really happiness or not? I take non-action as true happiness, and yet ordinary people consider it greatly distasteful. Therefore I say: “Ultimate happiness is without happiness, ultimate praise is without praise.” (Zhuangzi 18/47/29–48/2)
This passage contains two mutually exclusive interpretations of ‘happiness.’ They correspond to the views of different subcultures. On the one hand, there is the vulgar conception of happiness (such as enjoying wealth and comfort) that is held by ordinary people. This is the target interpretation. On the other hand, the author considers himself the representative of a higher ideal that rejects this vulgar interpretation. The alternative he proposes aims at attaining happiness through an attitude of non-action. The second-to-last last sentence provides insight into the formation of paradoxes. Two interpretations (target and alternative) are taken together to form a paradoxical statement: what constitutes true or ultimate happiness for the author of this passage lacks happiness when judged from the point of view of the common people. This paradox on happiness, and by extension also the paradox on praise, rests on a play with the various interpretations that subcultures place on important terms.

The combination of interpretations and points of view can also be observed in Laozi 41, which contains a long series of twelve paradoxes. Immediately preceding the series, the author describes three types of scholars who adopt different attitudes toward the Way:

上士聞道，勤而行之；中士聞道，若存若亡；下士聞道，大笑之，不笑，不足以為道。故建言有之：‘明道若昧，白若黑，治若渾，其利不害’

When a superior scholar hears about the Way, he is diligent in practicing it; when an average scholar hears about it, he wavers; when an inferior scholar hears about it, he sneers. If he did not sneer, it would be insufficient to be regarded as the Way. Therefore, the established sayings contain the following words: “The brightest way seems dark, . . . the greatest white seems stained, . . . the greatest square does not have corners.” (Laozi 41/14/17–15/1)

The paradoxes are presented as a result of the shifting between two different points of view, that is, that of the superior scholar and that of the inferior scholar. What for the superior scholar is bright and white looks dark (not bright) and stained (not white) from the perspective of the inferior scholar. These two groups of scholars adopt opposite interpretations of the terms ming 明 (bright) and bai 白 (white), though, at least from this passage, it is unclear what these interpretations are. In a similar way, what the superior scholar considers to be the greatest square, that is, the most effective way of governing, would be laughed at by the inferior scholar for having no corners, that is, for having no retributive system of punishment. The characterization wu yu 無隅 (not having corners) refers back to the commonsense interpretation of fang 方 (square), according to which governments have strict laws and corresponding sanctions. Here again, the target and alternative interpretations are combined to form a paradoxical statement.

As a last example illustrating the underlying mechanism, consider the following passage from the Lüshi chunqiu:

行不可不熟，不熟，如赴深谿，雖悔無及。君子計行慮義，小人計行期利，不，有知不利之利者，則可與言理矣。

Conduct has to be well considered. If it is ill considered, it is like running toward a deep gorge: you may regret it afterwards, but it will be of no avail. The gentleman, when con-
sidering his conduct, thinks about his moral duty; the petty man, when considering his
counter, is focused on profit, which is not profitable. One can only talk about the right
pattern with someone who knows the unprofitable profit. (Lushi chunqiu 22/143/29–30)

Just as in the two previous passages, we see here again the contrast between different
groups of people. The petty man thinks in terms of profit, probably conceived of as
short-term material benefit. After having pointed out that this, in the end, does not
lead to any real profit, the author extends the term li 利 (profit) to include the moral
counter of the gentleman. At the same time, however, this new conception of ‘profit’
is distinguished from the vulgar interpretation, and is then described as ‘unprofitable
profit.’ This paradoxical saying, too, plays on the different interpretations of an im-
portant term.

The paradoxes introduce new interpretations of important terms, but they do
so in an unorthodox manner by referring back to the target uses of those terms. As
pointed out, important terms are typically interpreted in different and competing
ways. In combining different interpretations into a single expression, the authors of
the paradoxes indicate their awareness of the semantic instability of important terms.
They play on the potential for multiple interpretations. This play on interpretation
enables them to formulate paradoxes. It also explains the challenge to the standard
semantic relations. When considered from the perspective of different subcultures,
antonyms can be similar in meaning, identical terms can have different uses, and
implications between terms depend on particular interpretations that are not univer-
sally accepted.

Pragmatic and Rhetorical Functions
The paradoxes play on multiple interpretations of important terms. Insight into the
semantically unstable nature of these terms undoubtedly at some point informed
the formulation of paradoxes. It would thus seem possible to construe the paradoxes
as targeting philosophical tendencies that presuppose a fixed relation between termi-
nology and interpretation. Explained in such a way, the paradoxes would perform a
purely theoretical function. They would serve as an instrument for unveiling mis-
taken semantic assumptions about language and terminology. I do not find it plausi-
ble that the paradoxes had such a theoretical assumption as their main target. In any
case, such a target is not obvious from the immediate context. Initial observation of
the paradoxes rather suggests that they were formulated on account of pragmatic
and rhetorical considerations. Just like the kind of ordinary redefinition described
above, the central terms of the paradoxes are not neutral but are generally important
and often have positive connotations. As to these terms, effective redefinition causes
people to behave and make evaluations in alternative ways. This pragmatic element
is further demonstrated by the presence of persuasive modifiers such as da 大 (great)
and zhi 至 (ultimate) in the majority of paradoxes.

Giving full recognition to these features of persuasion opens the way for under-
standing the challenge to the standard semantic relations as a kind of rhetorical de-
vice. From this perspective, the paradoxes are formulated in order to produce an
effect of surprise with the ultimate purpose of transforming and redirecting the intended audience toward a purportedly better form of knowledge, behavior, and valuation. This view is in agreement with the general objective of the sayings and writings of the masters. Most of these sayings and writings were composed to instruct disciples or to advise rulers on how to order their state. Rather than being theoretical in nature, they were in most cases designed to guide and direct their audience. In such contexts, one expects the use of rhetorical devices as a means of influencing people.

The paradoxes attract more attention than ordinary redefinition. They catch the reader’s eye. However, as indicated, this is only possible at the cost of losing information. Considered in isolation, the point of the paradoxes is difficult to grasp. This has consequences for their actual rhetorical impact, because in order to realize a change in attitude, the audience should at least have some idea of the message to be conveyed. This implies that the paradoxes should either be directed to people whom one can reasonably expect to understand the message, or, when this is not the case, the context should make the point of the paradoxes sufficiently clear. When neither of these two conditions is met, the paradoxes are likely to be ineffective.

There are a number of passages that clarify the pragmatic and rhetorical functions of the paradoxes. The most vivid illustrations are found in dialogical passages, two of which are quoted below. The first is an example of the effective use of paradoxes. It consists of a conversation between Laozi and Yang Ziju 陽子居. The opening lines of the story describe Laozi as being disappointed in Yang. It is initially unclear why Laozi is disappointed. A subsequent exchange, which takes place at an inn, clarifies the matter:

「向者弟子欲請夫子，夫子行不開，是以不應。今開矣，請問其過。」老子曰：「而難難哉。」而難難哉，而誰與居？大白若辱。盛德若不足。」陽子居蹴然蹙容日：「敬聞命矣！」其往也，舍者迎将，其家公執席，妻執巾栉，舍者避席，燭者燭灶，其反也，舍者與之爭席矣。

"Earlier your disciple wanted to ask you, master, for advice, but you walked without taking a rest, so I did not dare to ask. You are taking a rest now. May I ask about my mistake?" Laozi said: “You have a haughty and disdainful look. Who would hold you company? The greatest white seems stained, the most abundant virtue seems lacking.” Yang Ziju, embarrassed, changed countenance and said: “Respectfully I hear your command.” When Yang Ziju first arrived, the people at the inn came out to welcome him. The innkeeper took out a mat, and his wife took out towel and comb. The guests gave up their mats and those who were preparing food left their place at the stove. When he came back from his interview with Laozi, the guests competed with him for a mat. (Zhuangzi 27/80/26–81/4)²³

Laozi regards the self-important attitude of Yang Ziju as a source of unpopularity. The point of the story is that while haughty conduct might result in respect and reverence, people will often keep a distance. In order to be treated as an equal, one should instead act in an inconspicuous way. Laozi’s instruction occupies the pivotal position. He exhorts Yang Ziju to change his conduct and conveys his message by way of the paradoxes 大白若辱 (the greatest white seems stained) and 盛德若不足...
(the most abundant virtue seems lacking). These paradoxes do not have a theoretical objective. On the contrary, their goal is to produce a change in attitude.

It is interesting to note that Laozi could have made his point in a more direct and informative way. Instead of saying “the greatest white seems stained,” he could, for example, have claimed that “the most sociable persons adopt a low-profile attitude.” While this characterization would arguably have had the same outcome on Yang Ziju’s conduct, it probably would have missed the compactness and startling effect that is typical of paradoxes. The choice for a paradoxical formulation can thus be explained on stylistic and rhetorical grounds. Moreover, the loss of information is, at least in this passage, compensated by the context. The interpretation of the central terms bai and de shifts from “self-important attitude” (target interpretation) to “low-profile conduct” (alternative interpretation).

The conversation between Laozi and Yang Ziju focuses more on the social than on the political aspects of behavior. By contrast, the next passage is more political in nature. It deals with conspiracy and sharing secrets. The Duke of Bai 白公 (d. 479) considers usurping the throne of his native state of Chu 楚. According to tradition, he consults Confucius for advice. The conversation centers on the question whether it is possible to share secret plans without one’s opponents finding out. The issue is phrased in terms of wei yan 微言 (speaking in subtle ways):

白公問於孔子曰：「人可與言乎？」孔子不應。白公曰：「若以石投水，何如？」孔子曰：「吳、越之善沒者能取之矣。」白公曰：「若以水投水，何如？」孔子曰：「蠻、灃之水合，易牙嘗而知之。」白公曰：「然則人固不可與微言乎？」孔子曰：「何謂不可！唯知言之謂者乎！夫知言之謂者，不以言言也，爭魚者濡，逐獸者溼，非樂之也，故至言去言，至為無為。夫淺知之所為者，末矣！」白公不得也，故死於浴室。

The Duke of Bai asked Confucius: “Is it possible to speak with people in a subtle way?” Confucius did not respond, and the Duke of Bai asked: “What about throwing a stone into water?” Confucius replied: “Good divers from Wu and Yue would be capable of retrieving it.” The Duke of Bai asked: “What about throwing water into water?” Confucius said: “Would the rivers Zi and Sheng meet, Yi Ya would know the difference by tasting the water.” The Duke of Bai asked: “If so, is it then impossible to speak with people in a subtle way?” Confucius said: “Why should it be impossible! You only have to know the import of words! Those who know the import of words do not speak with words. Those who catch fish get wet, and those who chase animals have to run, but it is not that they enjoy doing this. Therefore, the ultimate speech does away with speech and the ultimate action is without action. In general, those of shallow knowledge pursue inconsequential things!” The Duke of Bai did not understand this, and as a result died in the bathing rooms. (Huainanzi 12/105/20–26)

Confucius disapproves of the use of language in scheming. He suggests that there will always be someone who is able to sense the real intention behind the words, no matter how subtle and indirect the phrasing. Language, as a result, is not a safe and reliable method in conspiracy. He then changes the interpretation of wei yan in favor of a kind of communication on the level of the import of language, and gives additional impetus to his view by formulating the paradoxes 至言去言 (the ultimate speech does away with speech) and 至為無為 (the ultimate action is without action).
These paradoxes do not constitute absolute rejections of language or action. The former paradox, for example, does not mean that we should unconditionally abandon all language in all circumstances, which is the kind of interpretation that would arise from considering the paradoxes out of context. It has to be viewed in the context of plotting, where it serves the double goal of discouraging the Duke of Bai from using language and instead urging him to use another method of communication.

While the paradoxes make this passage more attractive and provocative, there is also a substantial loss of information. Moreover, in this particular case, the context is not very revealing. As a result, the paradoxes miss their rhetorical objective, which is indicated by the Duke’s death. The advice of Confucius may nevertheless be understood by looking at the chapter “Jing yu”精語 (Profound communication) of the Lushi chunqiu. In addition to the conversation between the Duke of Bai and Confucius, this chapter also contains another story on conspiracy. It argues that the founders of the Zhou house of rulers were able to overthrow the Shang because they shared similar aims and did not need to put their plans into words. As a result, they could not be accused of plotting. The author of the story uses paradoxical statements, including 不言之謀 (the speechless scheming), to describe an intuitive way of understanding that is typical of like-minded conspiratorial people. Viewed from the perspective of this story, Confucius’ advice to the Duke of Bai is to conspire only with people whom he knows already have the same intention. This would allow him to usurp the throne of Chu without actually having to speak about his plans.

These two dialogical passages demonstrate the pragmatic and rhetorical functions of the paradoxes. Whether effective or not, they are used to startle their audience and to produce a change in attitude. As non-dialogical passages also implicitly address rulers and disciples, it is reasonable to suppose that paradoxes appearing in these passages also perform similar functions. This can be illustrated by the paradoxes 大音希聲 (the greatest tone makes little sound) and 大器晚成 (the greatest vessel takes a long time to complete).24 Passages containing these paradoxes not only show the pragmatic and rhetorical functions clearly, they also reveal that the same paradoxes are sometimes used in support of different ends. In a first example, which is taken from Lushi chunqiu 16.5, the paradoxes are placed at the very beginning of the chapter and serve as a headline to introduce the point of subsequent anecdotes:

大智不形，大器晚成，大音希聲，禹之決江水也，民聚瓦礫，事已成，功已立，為萬世利，禹之所見者遠也，而民莫之知(…)  

The greatest knowledge does not take shape, the greatest vessel takes a long time to complete, the greatest tone makes little sound. While Yu was digging channels for rivers and streams, the people were still piling up rubble to make banks. After his task was completed and his merit established, a myriad of generations benefited. Yu’s way of looking at things was far-reaching, but none of the people realized this. (Lushi chunqiu 16.5/94/15–18)

The paradoxes are placed in a political context to further the view that ministers of great potential are initially unnoticed or, in less fortunate cases, even meet with animosity. The first anecdote argues that Yu’s efforts were of the utmost importance, despite the fact that the common people were unaware of this. The other anecdotes
also illustrate the view that worthy ministers and good policies need some time to be recognized as such. The message to the ruler is to continue to support his ministers in the face of persistent criticism. As indicated at the very end of the chapter, “average rulers stop pursuing the right course of action because of such criticism, while worthy rulers establish their merit in the midst of it” (Lushi chunqiu 16.5/95/20).

Another instance of these paradoxes appears in the chapter “Yu Lao” of the Han Feizi. While this chapter is at first sight merely a commentary on the Laozi, it also contains a message for the ruler for whom it was written. More specifically, the passage containing the paradoxes urges the ruler to emulate the government of King Zhuang of Chu (r. 613–591). The paradoxes function as concluding statements:

楚莊王莅政三年，無令發，無政為也。右司馬街而與王隱曰：‘有為止南方之煩，三年不翅，不飛不鳴，黙然無聲，此為何名？’ 王曰：‘三年不翅，將以長羽翼；不飛不鳴，將以觀民則。雖無飛，飛必沖天；雖無鳴，鳴必驚人。子釋之，不穀知之矣。’ 處半年。乃自聽政。所廢者十，所起者九，誅大臣五，舉處士六，而邦大治。舉兵誅齊，敗之徐州，勝晉於河雍，合諸侯於宋，遂霸天下。莊王不為小善著，故有大名；不蠻見示，故有大功，故曰：’大器晚成，大音希聲。’

King Zhuang of Chu had been overseeing the government for three years, but had neither issued commands nor outlined policies. The senior Minister of Warfare stood in attendance and hinted to the king: “There was a bird perched on a hill in the south. It did not flutter, fly, or sing for three years. Being silent and not making any sound, what name should one devise for it?” The king responded: “Not fluttering for three years allowed it to grow wings. Not flying or singing allowed it to observe the practices of the people. Though it had not flown, it surely challenged the sky when it actually did fly. Though it had not sung, it surely startled people when it actually did sing. Put it out of your mind, I understand your point.” Half a year later, he started to deal with government affairs himself. For every ten things he dismissed, he raised nine. For every five senior ministers he punished, he promoted six unknown scholars, and the state was in great order. He assembled the army to punish Qi and defeated them at Xuzhou. He conquered Jin at Heyong, gathered the feudal lords at Song, and subsequently held hegemony over the world. King Zhuang did not act out of minor considerations, and hence achieved huge fame. He did not commit himself prematurely, and hence achieved great merit. Therefore it is said: “The greatest vessel takes a long time to complete, the greatest tone makes little sound.” (Hanfeizi 21/45/15–20)

While this passage also describes an initial period of anonymity, the political setting is quite different. In contrast to the previous passage, the paradoxes here do not refer to the ministers but to the ruler. Moreover, it is argued that the ruler, unlike the ministers in the previous passage, should not at first make any conscious efforts in creating order. Only after a prolonged period of non-action and observation will he be able to act in a decisive way. The use of paradoxes is thus different from the previous passage.

While the paradoxes play on multiple interpretations of important terms, close attention to the immediate contexts of the paradoxes reveals that they can best be understood as rhetorical devices. The paradoxes are then probably not designed for theoretical purposes, but for influencing the behavior of disciples and rulers. The use
of paradoxes thus shows the rhetorical dimension of Chinese philosophy. Moreover, as the Daoist writings in which the paradoxes typically appear are not homogeneous, and as some other “non-Daoist” writings also contain paradoxes, it is not surprising to find that the paradoxes are often used in support of different ends.

Appendix A: Overview of Groups and Subgroups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group 1A 大 X 若 Y (“X” ↔ “Y”)</th>
<th>Group 1B X Y 若 Z (“X” ↔ “Z”)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>大巧若拙</td>
<td>明道若昧</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“the greatest skill seems clumsy”</td>
<td>“the brightest way seems dark”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZZ 10/25/16–17; LZ 45/15/21; HNZ 12/111/25</td>
<td>LZ 41/14/18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>大成若缺</td>
<td>建德若偷</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“the greatest success seems deficient”</td>
<td>“the most solid virtue seems weak”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LZ 45/15/21</td>
<td>LZ 41/14/19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group 2A 大 X 不 X (“X” = “X”)</th>
<th>Group 2B 不 X 之 X (“X” = “X”)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>大仁不仁</td>
<td>無狀之狀</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“the greatest benevolence is not benevolent”</td>
<td>“the shapeless shape”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZZ 2/5/30; (LSCQ 17.3/102/5)</td>
<td>LZ 14/5/6; WZ 7/35/6; HNZ 12/106/11; LSCQ 5.2/23/21; HFZ 20/39/20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>上德不德</td>
<td>不知之知</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“the highest virtue is not virtuous”</td>
<td>“the knowledge that does not know”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LZ 38/13/15; HFZ 20/34/8, 11; XY 12/19/20; (LSCQ 17.3/102/5)</td>
<td>ZZ 22/62/24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group 3A 大 X 不 Y (“X” → “Y”)</th>
<th>Group 3B 不 X 之 Y (“Y” → “X”)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>大制不劀</td>
<td>不言之教</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“the greatest carving does not cut”</td>
<td>“the speechless teaching”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LZ 28/10/6; (HNZ 12/108/14–15)</td>
<td>ZZ 5/13/7, 22/60/11; LZ 2/1/11, 43/15/12; WZ 2/7/3, 8/42/18; HNZ 9/67/3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>大勇不劀</td>
<td>不言之辯</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“the greatest hero does not fight”</td>
<td>“the speechless disputation”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HNZ 17.15/169/13; LSCQ 1.4/52; (ZZ 2/5/30; HNZ 14/141/1)</td>
<td>ZZ 2/6/2, 24/71/1; WZ 2/7/4, 9/47/25–26; HNZ 6/50/23, 8/63/5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Remarks:
1. Abbreviations are as follows: ZZ = Zhuangzi, LZ = Laozi, WZ = Wenzi, HNZ = Huainanzi, LSCQ = Lüshi chunqiu, HFZ = Han Feizi, XY = Xinyu.
2. References in parentheses indicate slightly different paradoxes.
## Appendix B: Distribution of the Paradoxes on the Basis of Ban Gu’s Classification

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Work</th>
<th>NP/NC (work)</th>
<th>Frequency (%)</th>
<th>NP/NC (category)</th>
<th>Frequency (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daoist</td>
<td><em>Zhuangzi</em></td>
<td>38/65406</td>
<td>0.580</td>
<td>81/242095</td>
<td>0.334</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Laozi</em></td>
<td>27/5676</td>
<td>4.756</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Liezi</em></td>
<td>7/30972</td>
<td>0.226</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Guanzi</em></td>
<td>6/128750</td>
<td>0.046</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Huangdi sijing</em></td>
<td>3/11291</td>
<td>0.265</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syncretic</td>
<td><em>Huainanzi</em></td>
<td>41/133828</td>
<td>0.306</td>
<td>66/235577</td>
<td>0.280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Lushi chunqiu</em></td>
<td>25/101749</td>
<td>0.245</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legalist</td>
<td><em>Han Feizi</em></td>
<td>6/107144</td>
<td>0.055</td>
<td>8/108175</td>
<td>0.073</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Shenzi</em></td>
<td>2/1031</td>
<td>1.939</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confucian</td>
<td><em>Chunqiu fanlu</em></td>
<td>2/62356</td>
<td>0.032</td>
<td>3/72672</td>
<td>0.041</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Xinyu</em></td>
<td>1/10316</td>
<td>0.096</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terminologist</td>
<td><em>Yin Wenzi</em></td>
<td>3/6076</td>
<td>0.493</td>
<td>3/6076</td>
<td>0.493</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Remarks:**

1. NP/NC: ‘NP’ stands for “number of paradoxes,” while ‘NC’ refers to “number of characters.” With the exception of the *Huangdi sijing*, the number of characters can be found in the ICS concordance series. Ryden 1997, p. 298 presents a list for the *Huangdi sijing*.

2. The frequency refers to the number of paradoxes per thousand characters.

3. The *Liezi* contains four relevant passages that all have close parallels with pre-Han sources. For the date of the *Liezi*, see Graham 1986. The relevant passages from the *Guanzi*, which as a whole is perhaps better classified as “Legalist,” all appear in the chapters *Xinshu shang* (Art of the Mind, Part One), *Xinshu xia* (Art of the Mind, Part Two), and *Neiye* (Inner Training). These chapters are generally considered to represent early forms of Huang-Lao thought. Most scholars believe that the excavated manuscripts called *Huangdi sijing* also belong to Huang-Lao, though some would question the title of the work. For a brief discussion of the different views on the title, see Ryden 1997, p. 3 n. 3. The paradoxes appear in the manuscript *Cheng* (Sayings). I have not included the *Wenzi* in this statistical overview. Virtually all paradoxes in the post-Han received *Wenzi* are copied from the *Huainanzi*.

4. The transmission of the *Shenzi* seems to have stopped shortly after A.D. 1616. Several Qing scholars have tried to reconstruct the *Shenzi* on the basis of quotations preserved in ancient writings. The paradoxes in the received version were copied from the *Lushi chunqiu* by Ma Guohan 馬國翰 (1794–1857). It is, however, doubtful whether the paradoxes should have been included (see Creel 1974, pp. 339, 375 n. 6).

5. For the date of the *Yin Wenzi*, see Daor 1974.
Notes

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1 – One of the paradoxes included in this chapter reads 马非馬 (a horse is not a horse). This is commonly seen as a variation on Gongsun Long’s 白馬非馬 (a white horse is not a horse).

2 – The paradoxes that appear in this chapter are usually only attributed to Hui Shi. Deng Xi is probably mentioned because (in Xunzi’s view) he was engaged in the same kind of pernicious intellectual activity as Hui Shi.


5 – A general overview of all groups and subgroups is included in Appendix A. References in the Appendix as well as all other references throughout this article are made according to the concordances compiled by the Institute of Chinese Studies (ICS) of the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

6 – In this as well as in the following tables, the term *da* 大 (greatest) in formal representations such as 大*X* 若 *Y* can be replaced by other terms indicating a degree, such as *zhi* 至 (ultimate) and *shang* 上 (highest). The signs $\rightarrow$, =, and $\rightarrow$ symbolize antonymy, identity, and implication, respectively. Capital letters such as *X* and *Y* are variables standing for characters.

7 – In subgroup 2A, the negation can also be a verb; for example, 至智棄智 (ultimate knowledge casts off knowledge) in *Lushi chunqiu* 吕氏春秋 17.3/102/5. The same is true for subgroup 3A.

8 – These paradoxes are 明道若昧 (the brightest way seems dark), 進道若退 (the way that leads forward seems to lead backward), 夷道若穎 (the smoothest way seems uneven), 上德若谷 (the highest virtue is like a valley), 大白若辱 (the greatest white seems stained), 廣德若不足 (the broadest virtue seems insufficient), 建德若偷 (the most solid virtue seems weak), 賢真若渝 (the purest authenticity seems soiled), 大方無隅 (the greatest square does not have corners), 大器晚成 (the greatest vessel takes a long time to complete), 大音希聲 (the
greatest tone makes little sound), and 大象無形 (the greatest image is without shape).

9 – The other three paradoxes are 大仁不仁 (the greatest benevolence is not benevolent), 大廉不廉 (the greatest honesty is not humble), and 大勇不恥 (the greatest hero is not cruel).

10 – Dao 道 also has the sense of “to speak.” Hansen (1992) interprets it as “guiding discourse.” This not only clarifies the paradoxical nature of the paradox 大道不稱 but also explains the replacement of cheng 稱 (to designate) by dao in the paradox 不道之道.

11 – Laozi 45/15/21–22.

12 – For reasons of comprehensiveness, I have not a priori excluded writings of suspicious origin such as the received versions of the Liezi and the Yin Wenzi. The examined writings are (in alphabetical order): Chunqiu fanlu 春秋繁露, Deng Xizi 登析子, Gongsun Longzi, Guanzi 管子, Han Feizi 韓非子, Heguanzi 鵪冠子, Huainanzi 淮南子, Huangdi sijing 黃帝四經, Laozi, Liezi 列子, Lushi chunqiu, Lunyu 論語, Mengzi 孟子, Mozi 墨子, Shang jun shu 商君書, Shenzi 申子, Shenzi 申子, Shizi 子思, Wenzhi 文子, Xinshu 新書, Xinyu 新語, Xunzi, Yanzi chunqiu 晏子春秋, Yin Wenzi 尹文子, and Zhuangzi.

13 – As for groups one and two, the expressions found could readily be identified as paradoxical. Group three is more complex for there are expressions without the relation of implication but with a similar grammatical structure as the paradoxes (e.g., 無罪之民 “innocent people”). In addition, there are some borderline cases where it is difficult to decide whether there is an implication or not. Due to limits on space, it is impossible to list all paradoxes.

14 – The well-known lists contain around 42 different paradoxes, with a total number of 45 occurrences. Unless explicitly indicated, numbers hereafter refer to the number of occurrences, not to the number of different paradoxes.

15 – Please consult appendix E for an overview of the distribution of the paradoxes. In presenting the data, I have listed the works according to the classification found in the bibliographical chapter of the Hanshu 漢書.

16 – As for the Huainanzi, 7 out of 19 passages can be related to the Laozi (4) and the Zhuangzi (3). For the Lushi chunqiu: 2 out of 9 passages are related to the Laozi. The paradoxes in the Han Feizi all appear in the chapters Jie Lao 解老 (Explaining Laozi) and Yu Lao 喻老 (Illustrating Laozi). The single relevant passage from the Xinyu is an explicit quotation from the Laozi.

17 – For the dialectical interpretation, please refer to Sun 1993, pp. 1–10, 122–128, and Zhang 1996, pp. 146–156. This interpretation, which depends on the idea of cyclical change, has indirectly been criticized in Lau 1958. Yan (1989) and Zheng (1992, pp. 151–156) have argued that the paradoxes violate the logical laws of identity and noncontradiction. Their interpretation, however, fails to
explain the semantic play on important terms that is typical of the paradoxes (infra). For mystical interpretations, see, for example, Qian 1980, pp. 463-465, and Schwartz 1985, p. 198. Apophasic mystical readings of the paradoxes seem to have been typical of Chan-influenced or post-Buddhist Confucian commentaries (see note 22 below).

18 – These terms have been the subject of study in a number of articles, most notably in Stevenson 1938, Halldén 1960, and Gallie 1968. The expression ‘important term’ is my own. Gallie speaks of ‘essentially contested concepts,’ while Stevenson and Halldén name the linguistic structures in which these terms appear ‘persuasive definitions’ and ‘essence statements,’ respectively. I have no intention to give an exhaustive overview of the problems and discussions related to important terms. I will describe these terms only insofar as relevant to the interpretation of the paradoxes.

19 – I here employ the alternative and target interpretations of ‘culture’ put forward in Stevenson 1938, pp. 331–332.

20 – The paradox 明道若昧 does not appear anywhere else. Other passages containing the paradox 大白若辱 indicate that bai and ru stand for different kinds of behavior. I will discuss one of these passages further on.

21 – The paradox 大方無隅 is very similar to the paradox 大制不割 (the greatest carving does not cut). Both yu 隅 (corner) and ge 割 (to cut) suggest harsh laws and punishment. This political interpretation is supported by the fact that the term zhi 制 has the double meaning of ‘carving’ and ‘governing.’

22 – Mark Csikszentmihalyi (1999) has shown that early Chinese commentators favored a semantic interpretation of Laozi paradoxes. By contrast, later Chan-influenced or post-Buddhist Confucian commentaries generally present apophasic mystical interpretations. I would further argue that early commentators favored a semantic interpretation precisely because the paradoxes were originally formulated as a semantic play on important terms.

23 – This story also appears with minor variations in Liezi 2/13/16–22.

24 – The latter paradox is not obviously paradoxical (see the remark on borderline cases in note 13 above). Nevertheless, it always appears together with the clearly paradoxical 大音希聲, and is, in Laozi 41, part of a series of twelve paradoxes. It presumably had some paradoxical flavor for the masters who used it.

References


