

## ONE

# LI 理 AS A FUNDAMENTAL CATEGORY IN CHINESE THOUGHT

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The term Li has a strange history. It came into prominence as the central metaphysical category rather gradually, seemingly through the intervention of Buddhist uses, taking on its decisive role only in the thought of the Cheng Brothers (Cheng Hao 程顥, 1032–1085, and Cheng Yi 程頤, 1033–1107), and further developed by Zhu Xi (朱熹, 1130–1200), read back into the pre-Buddhist tradition, although its actual appearance in the early texts is sparse and problematic. Thereafter, the term Li becomes the focus of several explicit controversies in the history of Chinese philosophy. These are well known. Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucians (i.e., those following the line developed by Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi) critique Buddhists for understanding Li as only Emptiness. On the other hand, they critique Lu-Wang Confucians (i.e., those following the approach of Lu Xiangshan 陸象山, 1139–1192, and Wang Yangming 王陽明, 1472–1529) for understanding Li directly as Mind. Cheng-Zhu Confucians themselves, according to the standard interpretation, understand Li as the “principle” of all things, manifested more or less clearly and completely in each instance according to the balance and purity of the constituent *qi* of that thing. It is present in its entirety in each thing as that thing’s true nature, accounting for the vitality and integrity of that thing as such. In man, it is the good human nature, the nature of heaven and earth, which is not the mind per se but discoverable as an aspect of mind, its pure unmanifest and balanced underpinning, from which the empirical human mind may deviate. As we shall see presently, it is this Cheng-Zhu usage, and its various aftermaths, that has been the primary target for modern writers trying to make sense of the term in the context of the encounter with Western philosophy that began in the twentieth century. Finally, the Qing Confucians, such as Dai Zhen 戴震 and Duan Yucai 段玉裁, critique both the Cheng-Zhu and the Lu-Wang Neo-Confucians for understanding

Li as an omnipresent universal principle of all things (whether Mind or the Nature), whereas its real, original meaning, they claimed, on the basis of classical etymological studies, was of the differentiating, particular forms of individual things, the “cuts” between them, not the bridges over these gaps. It is less known that a controversy about the unity and multiplicity of Li also emerges within Tiantai Buddhism, with the so-called Shanjia 山家 or “Home Mountain” school, represented most vocally by Siming Zhili 四明知禮 (960–1024), asserting that Li is both a unity and as multiplicity (known respectively as 理總 *lizong* and 理別 *libie*), and each phenomenon similarly serves both as a unifier and as one of many items unified in any other phenomenon (known as 事總 *shizong* and 事別 *shibie*, respectively), while his opponents, the so-called Shanwai 山外 or “Off-Mountain” school, take Li purely as unity, with diversity accounted for solely by 事 *shi*, as in Huayen thought (that is, allowing only 理總 *lizong* and 事別 *shibie*, though as we shall see later in this book, what is really lacking here is only 理別 *libie*; both Huayan and the Off-Mountain Tiantai writers do actually acknowledge 事總 *shizong*). The term Li clearly has not only exceptional importance, but also exceptional ambiguity. What has allowed it to play these multiple roles?

Before making our own attempt to answer this question, we need to examine a few of the previous attempts at understanding this problem, on some of which we will be building, and the history of the term Li in classical Chinese texts prior to the advent of the brand-name philosophers. In particular, we must make clear what we mean when offering “coherence” as a way of explaining the meaning of Li, and the related problems, or absence thereof, of universals and particulars, form and matter, classes and class membership, nominalism and realism, relativism and natural-kinds, and so on.

Fung Yulan 馮友蘭 famously and rather rashly declared that the Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucian notion of “Li” 理 was the traditional Chinese equivalent of the Platonic Forms, based on their putative transcendence to their instantiations, and their essence-like role as a criterion by which to define the identity of these instances.<sup>1</sup> This suggestion quickly aroused refutations, as the many points of disharmony between the two doctrines became apparent. Most obvious among these is the fact that, while the Platonic forms are many, although perhaps somehow grounded in a greater unity, the Neo-Confucian Li seem to be simultaneously both one and many. Zhu Xi, for example, states at times both that there is only one Li, and that each thing has its own specific defining Li, and that somehow all these particularized Li are one and the same Li (which is also called the Great Ultimate, 太極 *taiji*). The entire supreme Li is contained in each differentiated entity, Zhu Xi tells us in other contexts, as the reflection of the moon

is reflected completely in a multitude of bodies of water. It is not just that Li per se is both one and many; the multiplicity of it is not limited only to the multiple universals, but also to each and every particular thing. It is not just that Li is at once equivalent to the all-inclusive “Form of the Good” and to the particular universals “Blue,” “Red,” “Justice,” “Love,” but that it is also the specific Li of this blue chair and that red hat, including also man-made objects as much as natural objects. Li includes as much every individual existence as it does universals—Du Fu’s collected works, for example, or the existence of a particular individual person: all these things have their Li.<sup>2</sup> The Li of this boat is what makes this boat this boat, while the Li of boats is what makes boats boats. Li are not in any straightforward sense universals. Indeed, as we shall see, the one-many distinction is precisely what the concept of Li has the least use for, in keeping with the lack of a grammatical distinction between singular and plural in the language in which the idea was developed. If these statements are taken as assertions of definitive doctrine, we have an obvious mismatch with the concept of Platonic ideas. The handling of the one-many problem in Plotinus may be less of a problem here than it is in Plato himself; for in Plotinus, the oneness of The One seems to also be instantiated precisely as the Form-ness, so to say, of the many Forms that collectively comprise its first emanation. Even here, however, the forms remain self-identical across their many instantiations in particular things, unaffected by how or where they are instantiated, and thus do not seem to be able to include indifferently both classes and individuals on equal footing as Forms. That is, the unity or oneness formed by an individual entity instantiating many Forms, which are themselves many diversified instantiations of oneness, cannot be a oneness in the same sense, as would appear to be the case for the Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucians.

Another discrepancy lies in the fact that the Platonic forms may or may not have an evaluative force to them. They do when they define, for example, a virtue, but a universal quality such as “redness” seems to be purely descriptive. There is, of course, a derivative though perhaps pervasive axiological sense in that a putative instantiation of a given form will be judged to be deficient if it fails to meet the definition embodied by the form; a chair is not a “good” chair, which is to say, a real chair, unless it accords with the Form of the chair. This axiological dimension is perhaps reflected in the role given to the sun-like Form of the Good in the *Republic*, and the implied equation between Being and Goodness that is easily derived from the Platonic position. Still, the axiological dimension of the Neo-Confucian Li is clearly front and center, to such an extent that they have been cited as a classic example of the traditional Chinese “fusion of fact and value.”<sup>3</sup> The Li of a thing is both “what makes it so” (所以然之理

*suoyiran zhi li*) and “how it should be” (當然之理 *dangran zhi li*), and ethical norms are derived directly from this fusion of “is” and “ought.” As Graham astutely notes of Li as used by the Cheng brothers, it accounts “not for the properties of a thing but for the task it must perform to occupy its place in the natural order.”<sup>4</sup> Not its passive qualities, but an activity to be done; not the properties it has in isolation, but its ways of relating to what is around it; not solely what it is, but a task, what it must do to continue to occupy the role it plays in the context of the whole. Here, we have the properties of thing only to the extent that properties are considered to be relations, the essence of a thing only to the extent that it is considered a conatus to continue to perform the task of maintaining a certain set of relationships. It is this in which the “chairness” of a chair is seen to reside: the “ness” is not a Platonic essence or a universal of “chair” that iterates identically in all chairs, but the possibility of doing the work required to continue to coexist in a certain set of relations. This could apply either to an individual entity performing the task of maintaining the individual relations that allow it to continue to perform the role of being what it is, or to a class of thing maintaining its relation with other classes, or with individual instances of that class, or with the whole of all objects and purposes.

For these and many other reasons, it has been notoriously difficult for Western interpreters to find a fitting interpretation for Li. Leibniz was the first Western thinker to try to do so, and with results as problematic as Fung’s later attempt from the other side. Leibniz records that the Jesuits had learned that Li is described by “the Chinese” (actually, the canonical Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucian sources) as equivalent to the following philosophical categories: the first principle, Reason, the foundation of all nature, the most universal reason and substance, the supreme being than which nothing is greater nor better. Li, Leibniz tells us, is pure, motionless, rarefied, without body or shape, and can be comprehended only through the understanding. It is the law that directs all things and is the intelligence that guides them. It is the Law and universal Order, according to which Heaven and Earth were formed, the origin, source, and principle of all things. It is the sole cause which moves Heaven in a uniform motion, sufficient unto itself, giving all species of being the ability to reproduce their kind, “this virtue not being in the nature of the things themselves and not depending at all upon them but consisting and residing in this Li.” It has dominion over all, is present in all things, governs and produces the world as its absolute master. It is Being, Substance, Entity, infinite, eternal, uncreated, incorruptible. It is the principle of both physical and moral existence. It is indivisible and yet contains the most perfect multiplicity; it is the Grand Void but also the sovereign plenitude. It is compared to a circle, it is the Nature of things, it

is truth and goodness. In short, it is the supreme being, endowed with “all manner of perfections, so that there can be nothing more perfect.”<sup>5</sup>

Some of the Jesuits had argued that, in spite of these attributes, Li in the Chinese conception does not mean what the Christian tradition means by God, because it also is said to lack will, activity, life, design, and consciousness. Rather, it is Primal Matter, or at best the Primal Form, the Soul of the World in the sense employed by classical pagan thinkers.

Leibniz, however, argues that this cannot be so, that Li is indeed precisely what Christian philosophers mean by divinity. Leibniz asserts that, given the supreme attributes ascribed to Li, the denial that it has life, consciousness, will, and activity “must” mean merely that it lacks these things in their ordinary sense. It means that Li actually has these attributes in a much greater degree, in what theologians call the “eminent” sense, just as some negative theologians had denied “Being” to God, calling him instead beyond Being, or super-ens, *hyperousia*. The unquestioned assumption on both sides of this debate is that there is an excluded middle between activity and passivity, spirit and matter, dependence and transcendence. If something is active, it cannot be passive; if it is spiritual, it cannot be matter; if it is transcendent, it cannot be dependent on the world. In all his arguments, Leibniz relies on the assumption of the excluded middle, and presumes that the philosophical categories into which Li is being translated are the only ones possible. “I do not at all see how it could be possible for the Chinese to elicit from prime matter—as our philosophers teach it in their schools, as purely passive, without order or form—the origin of activity, of order and of all forms. I do not believe them to be so stupid or absurd.”<sup>6</sup> Given the qualification offered in the phrase between the dashes (“purely passive, without order or form”), this is quite true. But it also begs the question. For the real issue here, of course, is whether there could be any other sets of assumptions with which to consider these questions, not premised on a prior separation of form from matter, active from passive, order from chaos, for instance, a separation that requires an absolute ontological difference with no overlap. (Ironically, as we shall see in the “Conclusion” to this book, Leibniz himself introduced a concept into philosophy that, in my view, comes much closer than any other in the European philosophical lexicon to actually describing the character of Li specifically in Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism: not *hyperousia*, much less *divinity*, nor anything like *consciousness*, *design*, or *will*, but rather the concept of *compossibility*. Important qualifications are of course necessary concerning the nature of the *com-* here, and the absence of a God who stands above and beyond compossibility and, for Leibniz, must then go on to make a choice to make the preexisting compossibles actually exist, which will be addressed at the end of this book.)

The word *Li* is indeed an odd one, with an odd history. Without attaching undue importance to it, readers not proficient in Chinese might get some sense of the semantic range of this term by looking at the compounds in which it appears in the modern Chinese language, remembering that this cannot be used as reliable evidence for its meaning in the classical language of any particular period.<sup>7</sup> Pondering these usages, we may notice the range of senses spanning over our notions of “knowing,” “noticing,” “reason,” “thinking,” “rightness,” “reasonability,” “ordering,” “pattern,” “managing,” and “standard of value.” The connection between “noticing,” “responding to,” and “ordering” should particularly pique our interest here. We should note also that the standard modern translation of Plato does indeed use the term *lixing* 理型 (Li-form) to translate “Idea” in the Platonic sense. We should note also the easy transference of the nominal and verbal usage of the term in modern language.

The most useful starting point for probing more deeply the philosophical implications of the term *Li* is perhaps still Tang Junyi’s seminal essay “Yuan Li” (原理 Tracing the Origin of Li), originally published in 1955 but later used as the opening chapter of the first volume of Tang’s massive history of Chinese Philosophy.<sup>8</sup> In this work, Tang attempts a comprehensive overview of the usages of *Li* throughout the history of classical Chinese philosophy, separating out six distinct meanings of the term while also tracing its etymological bases. Tang’s six senses of the term are: *wenli* (文理 *Li* in the context of cultural activities), *mingli* (名理 *Li* in logical reasoning about abstract philosophical attributes, considered by Tang to be synonymous in its usage with 玄理 *xuanli*, abstruse or metaphysical *Li*), *kongli* (空理 *Li* as Emptiness), *xingli* (性理 *Li* as Human Nature), *shili* (事理 *Li* pertaining to events or affairs), and *wuli* (物理 *Li* pertaining to concrete empirical things). Tang’s discussion is illuminating, in particular his discussion of the role of human activity in the definition of *Li* even in its apparently most concrete and objective usages; the distinction between “pattern” as a simple fact found in an object and *Li* as a kind of interface between human subjectivity and the structure of the surrounding world will be crucial to our discussion below. Tang also brings into focus the problem of *unity versus multiplicity* that formed one of the essential points of contention between Song-Ming Neo-Confucians on the one hand (*Li* as the unifying principle of all things) and their later critics among Qing Confucians on the other (*Li* as the separating, distinguishing forms of individual things). Tang’s analysis is rooted, quite reasonably, in one of the earliest extant usages of the term *Li*, a passage from the “Minor Odes” 小雅 section of the *Shijing*, 詩經 (“The Book of Songs”), Ode 210, “Xin nanshan” 信南山, where we find the following verse:

信彼南山、維禹甸之。畇畇原隰、曾孫田之。我疆我理、南東其畝。  
 Truly, the region of that southern hill  
 Was governed so as to bring forth crops by Yu.  
 The lands of those marshes and plains  
 Are now made into fields by his distant descendants.  
 We separate them, we *divide* them  
 Into acres stretching to the south and to the east.

Li is here used as a verb, not a noun. It is parallel with the term 疆 *jiang*, “to divide or make a border.” Li here seems to be a verb meaning “to separate into groups, to divide into sections,” but with an implication of doing so for a particular purpose: in this case, the division of a field in order to cultivate crops, and the creation of pathways of access to these fields. The implication is that here Li means “to cut and divide in a way which is consistent with a particular human value,” or a *coherence that also necessarily coheres with some human desires or inclinations*. Hall and Ames also make much of this passage, but seem to blur this crucial aspect when they characterize this usage as meaning, “dividing up land into cultivated fields in a way consistent with the natural topography.”<sup>9</sup> But the point here is surely not that the field is simply being cut “in a way consistent with the natural topography.” Rather, what is most evident is the human action and desire and valuation involved. We would perhaps be closer to the implication if we said, “cutting in a way that is consistent with both the topography and, even more decisively, with human need, desire, valuation, and response.” Indeed, this is closer to the “Nominalist” implication Hall and Ames wish to see in the tradition, as we shall discuss in more detail presently.

Tang notes this point as well in his discussion of this ancient usage, stressing above all the subjective and active/temporal sense of Li as primary, with its objective and static/spatial aspects as derivative: Li as a verb rather than as a noun. He also notes, importantly, the role of human will, a human project, in all these early usages of Li; that is, the essential connection with value and valuation. Tang sees Li in its earliest meaning above all as the purposive, humanly motivated *act* of cutting, tailoring, which connects its various aspects and phases as means toward this end. It is primarily a human activity, and only derivatively the patterns that emerge from this activity.<sup>10</sup> However, Tang’s discussion is excessively beholden to the mutually exclusive categories of subjective and objective, concerned in an almost Bergsonian way with establishing Li as subjective *rather than* objective (in certain primary usages) and temporal/active *rather than* spatial/passive. But in fact it is obvious that both sides of what we would call the subject/object split are necessarily involved. Li is here “cutting in a way which is consistent

with *both* the topography and human value,” or the overlap of the two. We have here again the inclusion of human response in the overall pattern of coherence. And this is how we will be understanding Li in almost every case throughout the tradition, including Buddhist and Neo-Confucian uses. Li always means, “coherence between a set of disparate items, which necessarily includes both nonhuman reality and human responses to that reality (desires and cognitions).”

This implication is very much in evidence in the definition of Li in the earliest Chinese dictionary, Xu Shen’s 許慎 *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字. Li is there defined simply as “the treating of jade” (治玉也 *zhi yu ye*). But jade is not “treated”—i.e., cut, polished, and shaped—merely in accordance with its “natural topography” or its own “inherent lines of pattern,” as we would understand “its own” under the force of the ontological split between the subjective and the objective. Rather, as the great Qing commentator Duan Yucai 段玉裁 says of this entry, “When jade has not yet been treated (理 Li), it is called *pu* 朴, the unhewn raw stuff. Li here [is a verb and] means to cut it open and break it apart. Although jade is supremely hard, it is not difficult for it to be made into a vessel (器 *qi*) if one can find its lines of division along its edges and corners (腮理 *saili*),<sup>11</sup> and this is what is meant by Li.”<sup>12</sup> Duan is writing with a very specific polemical intent here: he wants to distinguish the original meaning of Li, and its proper sense in true Confucian thought, from the Buddhist and Daoist uses of the term, and the corruption of the term in the perverted Buddhified Confucianism of Zhu Xi and others. The crux of this polemic, however, lies in his imputation of “separation”—cutting, dividing, differentiating—as the primary sense of the term Li in its verbal sense, which brings with it the stress on the sense of differentiation and division of proper roles when it is used in its nominal sense. This is contrasted to the Buddhist, Daoist, and latter-day Confucian interpretation of the term as pointing above all to “unity,” to what is shared, to what is in fact omnipresent. Whatever we may think of Duan’s polemical purposes, it must be admitted that he has identified an unmistakable shift in the meaning of the term. And here we have the crux of our present problem: *How is it that a term meaning cutting and differentiating comes to mean the undifferentiated omnipresent?* And with this comes a related problem: *how does a term meaning originally deliberate human shaping of raw material come to mean the state of the thing prior to human intervention?* For Li develops not only from meaning “divided” to “all-inclusive,” but also from “to order” to “the interface between human intentions and the material to be ordered,” and finally to “the true state of the thing prior to deliberate human interference, free of one-sided, private bias.” It is in this last sense that Li tempts the translation “objective Truth” as opposed to subjective emotion. In this it seems to run from the subjective to the subjective-objective and finally to the objective.



Of course there is no reason why a term cannot in the course of time, or even in different contexts, change its meaning, and indeed take on an opposite meaning, although “meaning” is such that it must do so by pivoting off continuity with its preexisting denotations and connotations in some way or other. But the fact is that the term *Li* points to a notion of separation and differentiation that runs smoothly into a concept of undifferentiated omnipresence, and from subjectivity to objectivity. It points to a set of concepts of “coherence” which structures these apparently opposed ideas of differentiated finiteness and undifferentiated omnipresence in a distinctive intertwining, a notion of separation that also points to a joining and vice versa, a notion of subjectivity that also points to objectivity and vice versa. The point I will be trying to make here is that these terms *one*, *many*, *subjective*, *objective*—are of very limited value when walking about *Li*, and need to be superseded if we want to understand its history.

Tang Junyi’s analysis is particularly astute on this point. For if the primary sense of *Li* in pre-Qin texts is what Tang calls 文理 *wenli*, taken to mean initially the *action* of making cultural patterns, as expressed especially in social interactions but also in pragmatic skill-activities such as field division and jade treating, then we have in hand a powerful model for understanding the intertwining of unity and differentiation in this concept, as Tang notes in his critique of the Dai Zhen/Duan Yucai “division-only” position. The unification here refers to the *end*, the goal of the activity, as present in each differentiated and even contrasting particular operation in the procedure. The diversity refers to the various individual means used to achieve this end. Tang stresses, importantly, that the unity here is temporal, not the joining of an array of differentiations but the unity of a single orienting intention governing a complex process. So in treating jade I may sometimes cut and sometimes polish, sometimes sharpen a corner and sometimes dull an edge. “Sharpening” and “dulling” are diverse opposite operations, but they are unified, not as objects in space as in an enveloping container, or instantiations of a universal to which they bear some morphological mimetic similarity, but as immediate phases of the total process of shaping the jade. The presence of the unifying “universal” orientation, the willed, value-informed human activity of creating a coherent pattern, is *wholly* present in each of these aspects of the process, not partially present, but it is not for that reason replicated as distinct instances of this orientation. *Li* implies both unity and differentiation in this distinct sense: it is temporal, purposive human activity, orienting means around a definite intended end.

Tang’s comments here are a crucial starting point. But again, I believe he has overstressed the sense of subject/object dichotomy, and with it the means/end dichotomy, which I think is alien to the case. We make more progress by following his further implication that what we are talking about here is not really the subjective so much as the intersubjective, the social

interactions of humans within a given community. But this changes the contours of the situation decisively, and allows us to conceive the relation of subject and object, and of unity and differentiation, somewhat differently. We can begin to pick up the thread of the problem from Duan's comment above. *Pu*, the unhewn, and *qi*, vessel, are key terms in the *Laozi*, as explored in *Ironies*, and part of Duan's intent here is to contrast his reading of Li with a "Daoist"- or "Buddhist"-leaning reading that identifies it with the one undivided universal universal, the unhewn, the whole, the encompassing background, the unifying, the omnipresent, as contrasted to individualized vessels. For a "vessel" is a *culturally valued object* which has been cut out of the unhewn raw material for a particular reason—i.e., because it has an intersubjectively recognized "market value" (whether ritual or economic), to put it crudely.

In many early Daoist works, this cutting of culturally valued "vessels" out of the natural unhewn raw material is seen as a kind of violence to that raw material, damaging it and destroying its true value. Duan's point here is that *certain* of the patterns—not necessarily all of the patterns—found "naturally" in the raw material can be used as guidelines to facilitate the creation of a vessel with human cultural value. Both the "objective" and "subjective" sides of coherence are relevant here, but it is the points at which these two types of coherence themselves "cohere" or overlap which makes Li. *Li would then mean "second-order coherence between found coherences in the world and coherent clusters of human evaluation."* The question of to what degree these "found coherences" are really in the world, or are themselves effects of the organizing teleology of human evaluations, is left open here, and, as we shall see, to a large extent rendered irrelevant.

Before pursuing these points through a textual analysis of the early philosophical usages of the term, however, it is worthwhile to clarify our approach to some of these points by taking a quick tour of some of the most suggestive of the attempts to reinterpret and translate the term by recent Western sinologists, which are of especial relevance here since our primary concern is with the mismatch of the Chinese and the Western categories. Of particular interest will be the works of Joseph Needham, Chad Hansen, A. C. Graham, Willard Peterson, and Roger Hall and David Ames, all of whom have contributed crucial insights to the present approach to be taken in the pages to that follow.

#### NEEDHAM AND ORGANIC PATTERN

As noted, Fung Yulan had suggested that Li be translated as "Platonic Form," and Form in the Aristotelian sense has also been proposed as a translation, along with Reason, and Law of Nature. Joseph Needham, in his classic work

*Science and Civilization in China*, rejects these suggestions, again with mainly the Neo-Confucian usage in mind, in developing his own overall account of the distinctive nature of traditional Chinese thinking. For Needham, all of these terms are misleading in that they suggest a heteronomous source of order, either form as imposed upon passive matter, or natural law as enforced by God as legislator, in both cases implying a transcendent source of order standing outside the things that are ordered, bearing a different ontological status. He suggested instead the terms *organization*, or better, *organism*, as modeled on the interrelation of parts in an animal organism, viewed as spontaneously interacting and organizing themselves around each other. In the West, Needham said, even organism always had to have an extrinsic “guiding principle,” due to the basic belief in a personal god or gods who directed things. In the Chinese context, Needham thought, “cooperation of the component parts was spontaneous, even involuntary, and this alone was sufficient.”<sup>13</sup> As Hall and Ames point out, this is a rather unusual understanding of the English word *organism*. In Western thought, even in Whiteheadian thought, which informs Needham’s understanding, organic order is understood as profoundly teleological: “[T]his term is most generally associated with living things conceived as complex arrangements of parts function with respect to some end or aim.”<sup>14</sup> This characterization leads, they note, to “a classification of ends or aims which would then undergird a [single, unambiguous, synordinate] taxonomic organization of ‘natural kinds.’”<sup>15</sup>—precisely what is lacking in the Chinese case. Still, Needham’s intention is clear; he wants to understand Li as spontaneous pattern brought to bear not by extrinsic coercion, even by a “guiding principle,” but by the spontaneous, involuntary cooperation and reciprocal adjustment of the members in any group. The antitranscendentalist perspective is stressed here. It is not clear, however, that this model can do all the work Needham wants it to do. In particular, the normativity, definiteness, simultaneous oneness and manyness of Li, and its application to human ethics, remain for the most part mysterious on this reading.

#### HANSEN AND THE MASS NOUN HYPOTHESIS

Chad Hansen, in a controversial study of ancient Chinese logical paradoxes, suggests one reason why the question of universals might not have developed in China in a way that is at all comparable to its development in the West. It should be noted that Hansen was not directly addressing the question of how to interpret or translate Li, whether in Neo-Confucianism or elsewhere, but the more general issue of classes and their members in Chinese thought. Hansen suggests that classical Chinese nouns function more like mass nouns than like count nouns. Mass nouns (e.g., “water”) refer to one pervasive

amorphous entity that is spread out in various places, and can be divided up in various ways, while count nouns (e.g., dog) come with predetermined units for counting. I can have “one dog, two dogs, three dogs” and so on, but “one cup, one quart, two pools” of water. This suggestion has caused some consternation in that it fits better the grammar of modern Chinese (where indeed nouns are generally preceded by a special measure word to indicate the amount of that noun which is being indicated) than classical Chinese, where countable entities can be indicated without recourse to measure words. The lack of special forms indicating singular and plural in both ancient and modern Chinese, however, remains significant in this context. The point is that if a noun indicates primarily the entire mass of that substance, everywhere in the world, the problem of relating individual members to the general class disappears. There is no need to unify individual dogs with a universal canine essence if each dog is really just one dog-shaped scoop of the dog-substance spread out throughout the world. The implication is that rather than an additive class derived cumulatively by assembling individuals and collating their similarities, we are “dividing down” from the whole and provisionally selecting out subdivisions for closer consideration. There is no need for a two-level ontology here, where abstract essences or universals or forms, accessible to the intellect but not to the senses, “participate in” and unify concrete particulars; rather, the mass and each chunk of the mass are equally concrete and available to the senses.<sup>16</sup>

Hansen’s insights are particularly important for setting the agenda of the present work. He notes in particular the circumvention of both Platonic ideas and mentalist ideas in classical Chinese thinking. The mind is not a representational faculty that entertains ideas or perceives the intelligible realm of ideas. There are no universals, just stuff-kinds. The mind is a faculty of actively distinguishing among these real kinds. The epistemology functions on the basis of only names and stuffs; no other entities, such as properties, attributes, essences, universals, or particulars, are necessary. However, in spite of his affirmation of stuffs as real kinds, Hansen continues to speak of this view as a kind of nominalism. He notes that the notion of “a class” is employed by nominalists as a way of avoiding these abstract entities beloved of Realist epistemology. But, Hansen adds, classes, with the exception of Russell and Lesniewski’s mereological notion of class, are themselves abstract entities. A class is not necessary to the whole-part stuff ontology, he thinks.<sup>17</sup> But the stuff-kinds are at least viewed by Hansen as real kinds existing in nature, independently of the distinguishing function of the dynamic human mind, which can thus divide either correctly or incorrectly. They are thus real in a strong sense, and not merely conventional, although still for Hansen fully concrete. But this concreteness ends up being of a very strange kind, indeed of so strange a kind that it raises questions about all

concreteness. For like a universal, it is instantiated in multiple noncontiguous times and places, and it seems to allow of no distinction between being partially instantiated and being fully instantiated (it is not claimed that it is only “partially present” when it is identified as present in any of its “parts”). The same oddness would then pertain even to contiguous applications of “the same” name to all the parts of any concrete object (for every object is actually multilocal, spanning more than a mathematical point of space), if the name can be applied in whole to each part. The problem is again exactly what we could possibly actually mean by oneness and difference, conceived as mutually exclusive, as we have argued is the real problem lurking at the back of all questions of nominalism and realism. But the assertion of the view that the stuffs are entities present in their entirety, rather than only partially, in every place they are present, and which are capable of warranting so strong a naturalism of real kinds, raises questions about whether it is not misleading to still call it a nominalism in any normal sense. For as we argued in the prequel, the nominalism/realism issue is interestingly readable as ultimately an offshoot of the more fundamental issue of the relation of oneness and otherness, of what constitutes actual sameness and difference and whether these can be thought of as mutually exclusive. A real oneness of any kind that is thinkable in abstraction from and exclusive of otherness, which could be undividedly present in more than one location, is, we would claim, ipso facto an abstract entity in the relevant sense.

#### GRAHAM AND THE ABSENT COPULA AND CORRELATIVE THINKING

A. C. Graham slightly amends Hansen’s suggestion, in a passage we also quoted in *Ironies of One and Many*:

We might say that while the English translations use count nouns for individuals or classes, the Chinese uses mass nouns which carry with them instructions as to where the primary division is to be made. There are also words, some of them important in philosophy (*chi*, *tao*, *li*) which carry no such instructions, so that there is no contradiction in dividing out Yin and Yang as “the 2 *ch*’i” yet also picking out as “the 5 *ch*’i” the Five Phases, or the 5 atmospheric influences, whatever one chooses to select from the mass. On this approach a *lei* “kind,” such a *jen* “man” or *ma* “horse,” is a mass like cattle exhaustively divisible into similar parts (like Greek *genos* “genus” in its original sense of a race which could die out, not a class which may become empty of members): the *shih* “object” which . . . we described as “concrete and particular” is a chunk

out of a mass which is no less concrete than itself. This does not of course alter the fact that, irrespective of language, discontinuous and constant objects enforce on us a priority over divisions we can make as we please. Even if a *shih* “object” is a chunk out of a mass, the most convenient examples of it will be individuals—in the Mohist account of naming . . . not a pool or drop of water but a horse. But that the objects are indeed conceived as divisions is confirmed, as Hansen notices, but the fact that where we would speak of class and member or whole and part the Mohist logic uses only a single pair, *chien* and *ti*, and defines *ti* as a “a division in a *chien*” (Canon AC *ti, fen yu chien ye*).<sup>18</sup>

As noted in the previous volume, Graham here accepts the implication that the Chinese tendency is to divide down from the whole, adding however that these wholes often come with *built-in instructions* about where the main “cuts” or divisions were to be made, and that *in several important cases there are more than one possible way to legitimately make these divisions*. The idea of “built-in instructions about how to cut something up” will be quite a useful hint for us in considering the ways in which coherence comes to be understood, and all the more so the idea that several alternate, even incompatible, sets of instructions might be not only applicable, but indeed built in, with the full authority of objectivity, as it were.

Graham makes another suggestion relating to this question. The Chinese language, he notes, lacks any collapse of existential and predicative sense of “being” such as is peculiar to Indo-European languages. The broadest term for “being” (有 *you*), literally “having, possession,” implies primarily “presence in the world,” and does not neatly apply to abstract entities, predicates, or uncontextualized substances. Moreover, its use to say “X exists” actually puts the “X” in the object position of the sentence, thereby positing an implicit subject, a further entity that “possesses” X:

[T]he subject of the English “is” corresponds to the object of the Chinese *yu* [有 *you*]. In Indo-European Languages a thing simply *is*, without implying anything outside it, and it is the most abstract entities which the Platonic tradition most willingly credits with being. In Chinese, on the other hand, one approaches the thing from outside, from the world which “has” it, in which “there is” it. From this point of view, the more concrete a thing is, the more plainly the world has it; for example, one can emphasize the absolute non-existence of X by saying . . . “The world does not have X” (more literally, “There is no X under the sky”). In this respect, as in the absence of the copulative function of “to be,” *yu* is like “exist,”

which also implies a concrete thing with a background from which it stands out (*existit*). But there remains the difference that “exists,” like “is,” is attached to a subject and not to an object. . . . This is the source of one of the most striking difference between Chinese thinking about *yu* and *wu* and Western thinking about Being. In English, a table is a thing, exists, is; Beauty is not a thing, does not exist, but we can still say it is. Having the verb “to be” (*esse*), we can form a noun from it and say that Beauty, although not a thing, is an “entity” (*ens*, *entitas*). We can also form an adjective from “thing” (*res*) and say that it is “real.” To indicate the kind of being which is not existence we can invent “subsistence.” Beauty, that real, subsisting entity, is assimilated as closely as possible to the table, that real, existing thing. As a last refinement, we may find reasons for claiming that such an immaterial entity more truly is, is more real, than the phenomena perceived by the senses. . . . In Chinese, on the other hand, the word *yu* is used primarily of concrete things. . . .<sup>19</sup>

This relates directly to our problem. In classical Chinese we literally cannot say something exists without simultaneously positing something larger in which it exists. This has obvious implications for the question of the Omnipresent, and with it the notions of unconditioned determinateness and the relation between classes, as discussed in the previous volume. It also discourages the development of a two-tiered metaphysic and any decontextualized absolutes. It points us further directly toward the “dyadic a priori,” discussed in *Ironies*, and the self-overcoming of coherence into its ironic effacement, as we’ll see below.

We may note another use of the “to be” verbs in some Indo-European languages which is notably and importantly absent in Chinese: the use of “to be” in passive constructions. In English, for example, we transform the active “to see” into the passive “to be seen.” It is worth pausing to consider what kind of connection between being and passivity, or perhaps objectivity, is implied by this grammatical peculiarity. In classical Chinese, purely passive constructions might be expressed by auxiliary verbs indicating receiving, wearing, carrying, bearing or, a bit later, being the locus of the action of a main verb (e.g., 被 *bei* and 所 *suo*). But in many cases the same verb is used to indicate both passive and active aspects of the same action without morphological distinction, or with an alternate pronunciation that continues to attribute the action to the supposed recipient. “To see” (見 *jian*), for example, is written in classical texts in the same way as “to be manifested, to be seen” (見 *xian*). We also have the important and often misconstrued usage of *xiang* 相 to make a verb transitive without indicating its object.<sup>20</sup>

It is interesting to note that the passive construction does later come to be written with *wei*, beginning in translations from Buddhist sutras, possibly to try to echo the use of the copulative “be” construction for passive voice in Indic source languages.<sup>21</sup>

Putting these points together, we may suggest that to say that something exists in Chinese always implies that it is *actively present* and that it is so *in some context*. The general tendency to divide down from the whole, noted by both Hansen and Graham, is again in evidence here. While it is true, as Graham points out, that this makes Chinese thinkers particularly hesitant to attribute “being” to abstract or nonsensory entities (such as *Li*), preferring to call them 虛 *xu* “tenuous,” 空 *kong* “empty,” 無 *wu* “nothingness,” or 非有非無 *feiyoufeiwu* “beyond being and Non-Being,” it does not positively exclude the abstract from the category of being. But it does make the notion of pure transcendence, or unconditionality, problematic: it is immediately obvious that anything *determinate* (i.e., divided down from a larger context and deriving its identity from contextualization in that whole) cannot be unconditional. It ensures, in effect, that even abstract entities will be thought of as primarily contextualized, perhaps making the later Buddhist idea that abstract entities are perceived by the intellect in a way not fundamentally distinct from the way the senses perceive their objects easily assimilable: the mind is a sense organ that perceives ideas and thoughts, which also always come with a context, and are therefore not simply and completely determinate. This circumvents the “determinate but unconditional” paradox noted in the previous volume.

Graham translates *Li* as “pattern,” which he specifies as meaning the “recurring” patterns in which things are organized, the sorting out of which is the thinking which belongs to the realm of man. We will have to return to the question of recurrence below. The possibility of iterability of “the same” anything in different times and places is, in normal Western usage, predicated on the existence of some kind of universal that can subsume and recur identically in many instances. For this reason, I would like to bracket “recurrence” in the strong sense for the moment. For a Daoist, Graham thinks, these *Li*-patterns would include things such as “the relative positions of heaven and earth and the alternations of Yin and Yang, rise and fall, birth and death; they do not include standards of conduct, which a [Daoist] denies in principle.”<sup>22</sup> He describes *Li* in Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism as “the universal pattern branching by division from the Supreme Ultimate (T'ai-chi) [太極 *taiji*], setting the lines along which things move,” which is opposed to 氣 *qi* as the “universal fluid out of which things condense and into which they dissolve, freely moving when fine or inert when coarse, active as the Yang or passive as the Yin.”<sup>23</sup> *Li* in this system are “the pat-



terns which regularize things and events.”<sup>24</sup> Again we may reserve judgment especially about the implications of the term *regularize* here.

Graham provides a distinctive solution to the descriptive/normative problem. In general, he asserts, Chinese thought assumes that we are already spontaneously moved in various directions before any prescriptive moral discourse comes to us. But these spontaneous promptings are alterable; they change when we are aware of more or other things. The point of ethical culture in China then was to expand awareness of all relevant implications, so that we would be spontaneously moved in a different way. The ultimate standard was the way the wisest and most fully aware persons, the sages, were spontaneously moved. In terms of Li in Neo-Confucianism, this helps Graham explain why struggle is needed to attain the sage’s lucid spontaneity, and why Li can be spoken of both as “what makes things what they are”—a matter of simple fact—and “how things should be”—a prescriptive norm (the “fact/value fusion” alluded to above). Graham says, “To the extent that I remain ignorant, the dense *ch’i* [qi] of my organism runs blindly in the broad channels of the *li* where it happens to be; but by moral training I refine my substance to greater transparency and penetrate into the finer veins of the universal pattern, so that my spontaneous reactions change as the rarified *ch’i* out of which the denser goes on being generated adjusts to newly perceived *li*. The assumption is that if I still fail to respond in the full light of my knowledge, it is because a *li* has permeated just far enough to awaken a spontaneous inclination along its path, but not yet to articulate the motions of the organism as a whole.”<sup>25</sup> One is always proceeding according to some portion of the overall Li however one is moved and whatever one is doing; moral value attaches only to how much or little of the Li one has penetrated. Right and wrong is a matter of greater and lesser penetration of Li. If one continues only in the “coarser veins” of Li where one “happens to be,” one has failed to live up to the Li of being a human being, which is exemplified by the sages, who have shown that man’s mind is able to penetrate the entirety of Li. When one fails to do so, one is a “not really a human being”—not fully realizing the Li of being a human, but only the less comprehensive Li of being an animal, for example. We will be returning to, and partially adopting, this interpretation of Li’s ethical implications in the pages to follow.

Graham describes Zhu Xi’s Li as

a vast three-dimensional structure which looks different from different angles. In laying down the lines along which everything moves, it appears as the Way (*Tao*); in that the lines are independent of my personal desires, it imposes itself on me as Heaven (*T’ien*);

as a pattern which from my own viewpoint spreads out from the sub-pattern of my own profoundest reaction, it appears as my own basic Nature (*hsing*). Looking down from the Supreme Ultimate, at the apex of which its branches join, it first divides as the Way of the first two diagrams of the *Changes*, Ch'ien and K'un, patterning the *ch'i* in its Yang and Yin phases; but from my own viewpoint, the major lines which connect me with the whole are the principles of conduct, Benevolence, Duty, Manners, Wisdom [i.e., 仁義禮智, *ren yi li zhi*, the four cardinal Mencian and Neo-Confucian virtues]. Each person, peering into the vast web from his own little corner of it, may, if his *ch'i* is perfectly transparent, see all the way to the Supreme Ultimate at its farthest limits.<sup>26</sup>

Of crucial importance in this interpretation, which makes admirable sense of the “one-many” question, is Graham’s claim that the “subjectivizing, Chinese” assumption that “the knowing of a *li* [is] inseparable from the reactions it patterns.”<sup>27</sup> The organic pattern is not merely an objective network to be observed and studied from without; our own reactions are also parts of this network of connections. The mind is not set aside as a separate ontological category, but is part of the whole. This insight will serve us well in the considerations below.

Graham also develops a notion of Chinese thinking, particularly from the Han on, as marked by “correlative” or analogic, rather than “analytic” or “causal” pattern formation. We will return to this suggestion in the discussion of the treatment of these problems by Hall and Ames below.

#### PETERSON AND COHERENCE

In his 1986 article “Another Look at Li,” Willard Peterson made a breakthrough suggestion on how to translate, and understand, the term *Li* in Neo-Confucianism. The translation he suggests is the English word *coherence*. By coherence, Peterson means “‘the quality or characteristic of sticking together,’ with the connotations of varying according to context.”<sup>28</sup> The contextualizing implication is perhaps not analytically derivable from the notion of “coherence” as such, but it is a qualification that fits well with the points we have considered above, and indeed the two parts of this definition bring into sharp relief the crux of the problem. For indeed, coherence does suggest contextualization, if “sticking together” is meant to apply not only to the parts of the entity in question, but to the way the entity as a whole “sticks together” with what surrounds it. Coherence, then, means both the coherence of the parts of any whole with each other and the coherence of

this whole with all other things that are related to it, which contextualize it. Peterson notes that this interpretation allows many of the mysteries surrounding the Cheng-Zhu use of Li to disappear. He makes the following points about the Cheng-Zhu use of Li as coherence:

1. "There is coherence for each and every thing, whether that thing is taken as heaven-and-earth as a whole, or a thing smaller than a cricket, an ant, or a blade of grass."<sup>29</sup> Each thing, to be the thing it is, must have its own coherence, and this applies both to any whole as a whole and to each part as a part.
2. "Coherence is unitary." This solves the one-many problem: "[W]e can speak of the coherence of my puppy, the coherence of all dogs, the coherence of all living things, and so on, without involving ourselves in a verbal dilemma over the relationship between the 'different' levels or envelopes of coherence."<sup>30</sup>
3. "Coherence of object or phenomena is not locatable independently of ch'i."<sup>31</sup> Here we have the immanence of Li to qi.
4. "Coherence is categorically distinct from the ch'i of which things are constituted."<sup>32</sup> Here we have the transcendence of Li to qi.
5. "Coherence is transcendent as well as immanent."<sup>33</sup> This is a restatement of the previous two points.
6. "Coherence is that by which a thing is as it is."<sup>34</sup> It is descriptive, and also explanatory, in the sense of being "that by virtue of which a thing is what it is, rather than any other thing."
7. "Each phenomenon has its associated ultimate or 'perfect coherence' (*chih li* [*zhi Li*]), which may or may not be attained."<sup>35</sup>

This is meant to solve the problem of the simultaneous descriptive and normative use of "coherence." Peterson explains his understanding of this connection as follows: "The logic is simple. There is the coherence of all that is. There is the coherence of what will be or ought to be, usually expressed as the perfect coherence. As an aspect of that which we now are, we have the coherence of what we ought to be and the allied capacity to attain that ultimate, the full realization (*ch'eng*) of our potential. The puppy becomes a dog, what it ought to be, if it acts in a manner congruent with fulfilling that potential coherence within it (e.g., if it does not run under the wheel of a truck) and is not otherwise interfered with."<sup>36</sup>

This last point is the only part of Peterson's rather brilliant exposition of Li as coherence, which I will otherwise be adopting and building from here, with which I will be taking issue. The imputation of a distinction between "potential" and "actual" coherence invoked here, it seems to me, implies an abstract transcendentalism that undermines the power of the coherence model. Peterson tries to circumvent this implication by suggesting that the former is an "aspect" of the former, and indeed, both can be subsumed under the concept of "coherence." As Peterson puts it, Zhu Xi is "urging us to understand as a coherent whole both what a man is now and what he might be in the future."<sup>37</sup> This restatement continues to rely on the distinction of "is" and "might," but the whole point of having recourse to the concept of coherence is surely that it reaches across these putatively separate categories of potentiality and actuality.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, Peterson makes the point that Li must be understood as standing on both sides of the pair "potential" and "realized or actualized."<sup>39</sup> But the implications of this claim remain to be explored, and we will have to pay careful attention to the question of Li as potential, particularly in the Buddhist contexts, later.

#### HALL AND AMES AND THE FOCUS/FIELD

Hall and Ames also have a problem with the putative "transcendentalism" of Peterson's notion of coherence, which was of course intended only as an explication of the term's use in Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism, not in the entire tradition of Chinese thought, early and late. Hall and Ames state that they wish to adopt this interpretation for pre-Qin thought, but leaving out the transcendentalism, which they take to be applicable only to post-Buddhist, Neo-Confucian uses of the term.<sup>40</sup> (This radical separation of Buddhist uses from other Chinese uses, which in fact dates back to the Neo-Confucian critiques of Buddhism, is one of the issues the present work hopes to reconsider.) Hall and Ames's discussion of Li comes in the context of their overall interpretation of the dominant modes of "Han thinking" as a whole, which they characterize as privileging what Graham had identified as the "correlative, analogical, metaphorical" mode of classification over the "analytic, causal, metonymic" mode, as we discussed at length in *Ironies of One and Many*. Correlative groupings are loose, metaphorical, and ad hoc in character, producing concepts that are "image clusters in which complex semantic associations are allowed to reflect into one another in such a way as to provide rich, indefinitely "vague" meanings. Univocity is, therefore, impossible. Aesthetic associations dominate."<sup>41</sup> These associations are nominalist, pragmatic, historicist, thus always necessarily ambiguous and negotiable. Hall and Ames see one of the most important examples of this in the "seemingly ubiquitous distinction between yin and yang," which is