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Confucius the untouchable: on the semiotics of historization

Abstract: The present paper focuses on the semiotics of historization, that is, of "narration as history" and provides a meta-analysis of the semiotic modeling of Confucius as a case in point. I argue that the personage who has come to be known as Confucius has existed and can only exist, without exception, in multiple forms of sociocultural representation and interpretation that are natural results of distinct modeling processes. These forms compose the immediate realities of Confucius for us and the very foundation upon which any further discussions about Confucius, his disciples, and their thoughts and lives are even possible in the first place. This treatment reminds us of how easily we can fall victim to the objective illusion and the confusion of understanding and axiology that Mieke Bal has rightly cautioned against. Moreover, the paper is by no means intended to be a revisionist or nihilistic denial of the historicity of Confucius, but rather an attempt to underscore the central and fundamental role that modeling systems about historical figures play in historization as human sociocultural and cognitive practice. In this sense, the case of Confucius serves as an instance, a specimen, a sign, which is extensible to any other historical figures.

Keywords: modeling; narrative; Peirce; representation; semiosis; sign

1 Introduction

In the preface to the fourth edition of her seminal work *Narratology: Introduction to the theory of narrative*, Mieke Bal explicitly cautions against "the illusion of objectivity, both in storytelling as witnessing and in analysis as the scientific discovery of the truth" and "a confusion of understanding and axiology, against a sense of value inherent in narrative: either as intrinsically true, hence, good, or as intrinsically false, fictional, manipulative, hence, bad" (Bal 2017: xxi). Crucially, Bal stresses that the point of narratology is to ask meaningful questions. Lofty as it apparently is, this theoretical insight is not particularly

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easy to follow, for the abovementioned illusion and confusion have both been so deep-rooted in present-day narratology that it would require quite some effort, a paradigm change, to even attempt to remove them from the mindsets of those misled by these two malaises.

The change that I have in mind is the *re-introduction* of semiotics into narrative studies. After all, narratology not only "spills over into semiotics" (Bal 2021: 86), but may also be rightfully regarded as "the branch of semiotics that studies narrativity" (Danesi 2020: 183). To be exact, as Danesi aptly points out, "the narrative text is a central target within current semiotic practice. The branch devoted to its analysis is called narratology, a term proposed originally by the semiotician Tzvetan Todorov" (Danesi 2020: 104). Like modern linguistics, present-day narratology has already gone beyond its semiotic origin, but neither of them can be completely stripped of a semiotic core. The reason is simple: both linguistics and narratology are essentially two derivatives of semiotics that deal with human modeling (Yu 2021), linguistic or non-linguistic, from their own vantage points.

As a case in point, the present paper focuses on the semiotics of historization, that is, of "narration as history." The specific example for this analysis is Confucius. This historical figure is not chosen at random. Although the paper could choose any figure that has gone down in history, there is hardly any other figure that could rival not only the influence of Confucius but also the dramatic ups and downs in his status over the past two millennia. There have already been rich and heated debates on Confucius, as we shall see. However, the present paper is not meant to enter into such debates. Its sole purpose is to provide a tool and demonstrate its potential productivity in analysis.

To this end, the paper provides a meta-analysis of the semiotic modeling of Confucius, featuring in particular some musings on the unfolding of semioticity in the narrative process (in the broad sense of the term, see Zhao 2013) of historical figures. The narrative takes the form of (re-)presentation, not only of others but also of self (Goffman 1959 [1956]). For this reason, it is not the paper's design to find out what the "true Confucius" must have been like. Instead, it is meant to shed light on the potentiality of semiotics as "the most powerful apparatus developed in the twentieth century for the analysis of texts taken as historical entities" (Haidu 1982: 187). Haidu's observation was made in a time when the development of semiotics had been quite astonishing, but even then, this apparatus had been "effectively cloistered in a corner of ignorance and inaccessibility" (Haidu 1982: 187). In the present-day, too, its power and potential are still to be appreciated, explored, and fulfilled.

2 Confucius the untouchable

In 2007, Ling Li, the famed, outspoken Chinese scholar at Peking University, published a book entitled 丧家狗 (literally "The homeless dog")[1] on Confucius, or Kongzi,[2] an arguably central historical figure for more than two thousand years in Chinese history and the proverbial cultural icon of Chinese communities around the world. Beloved of many and detested by even more when it became an immediate bestseller upon publication, the book caused a sensation that rippled through academia and public forums in China, creating flood tides, as it were, in the ebb and flow of Confucius scholarship through the centuries.

The controversies the book stirred up were unmistakably phenomenal. Those who loved the book hailed it as a masterpiece, or at least a highly quotable work (e.g. Yi 2017), written by a quick-thinking and cool-headed scholar. By contrast, to others who disliked it, the whole book, as well as the author, was sacrilege to Confucius and his teachings. After all, despite a few periods of temporary eclipse of Confucianism in the past two millennia, Confucius has mostly been regarded as the "greatest sage" (see Qian 2017 [1975]; Nylan and Wilson 2010) or "the greatest thinker and educator" (See Li 2011) since the 3rd century BCE. In this light, it is no wonder that Li's book has indeed created an iconoclastic effect.

The fact that this book has been greeted with tidal waves of vituperative comments, most of which turn out to be ad hominem attacks, reflects that Confucius has been such a touchy subject in Chinese academic discourses for so long that this figure can indeed be regarded as "untouchable." This reflection had already been seen countless times in the centuries-old debates about "Confucius himself" before it was rekindled by Li's book into yet another fight over the sacredness of Confucius in the early 21st century.

On the one hand, to those who would relentlessly defend the sacredness of their image of Confucius, the status of this historical figure has already been elevated to a quasi-religious one, not subject to suspicion, criticism, or attack. Confucianism is not a religion as is commonly understood but seems to have

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1 Ling Li made this reference to Confucius by quoting from the first formal biography of Confucius, written by Sima Qian. Technically, neither Sima nor Li intended to disparage Confucius, but only to *truthfully* record and repeat what they had found out respectively. In this aspect, they are nothing like the vitriolic political pamphlet that was published in 1974, 丧家狗孔老二 (literally "the homeless dog who was the second son of Kong's family"), in which the same wording 丧家狗 was used in a bitterly satirical tone (see Su 1974).

2 Kongzi can be spelled as Kǒngzǐ or in characters, 孔子. Confucius has also been known as 孔丘 Kǒng Qiū, or by his courtesy name, 仲尼 Zhòngní, or by the respectful title Kǒng Fūzǐ. The word "Confucius" was actually invented as a Latinized equivalent for Kǒng Fūzǐ by sixteenth-century Jesuits (Jensen 1997: 7).

played out as a faith system guiding people's conduct.[3] It is better regarded as part of Chinese philosophy. However, as Fung Yu-Lan rightly pointed out, "the place which philosophy has occupied in Chinese civilization has been comparable to that of religion in other civilizations." (Fung 1976 [1948]: 1) Therefore, it is hardly surprising that against this backdrop, Confucius became "a demigod with an unblemished reputation for integrity, embodying the ideals of supreme civilization" (Nylan and Wilson 2010: 3).

On the other hand, to those who would either wish to desacralize Confucius with their preconceptions and/or various agendas, or simply want to have some reasonable inquiries into Confucius that are different from current orthodox beliefs, the stakes might be high, especially in the second scenario, of which Li is truly representative. Here we are looking at an instantiation of cultural ideology and indeed of symbolic power, in Pierre Bourdieu's sense, that is, how Confucius has become the symbolic form of cultural capital that plays a pivotal role in establishing and maintaining power structures in society.

The divide that Li has exposed and perhaps reinforced in people's opinions about Confucius is unmistakable, but there is one thing both sides of the divide have in common: *Confucius is untouchable*, for two different but related reasons. On the one side, the reason is one of reverence and veneration. To be specific, Confucius is a revered sage, a quasi-religious figure who should only be worshipped from afar or admired with utmost respect. On the other side, therefore, the reason is one of concern, fear, or compromise. To be specific, one should know to tread lightly with great delicacy and *understanding*, although it is not an understanding of the Confucius that is outside of the system of narrative and interpretation endorsed by the opposing side. Now the question is: Is such an understanding even possible? Li's answer is yes, and it has a quaint semiotic flavor.

3 Bring in the semiotician!

Despite all the controversies his book aroused, Li has made a critically perceptive observation, albeit in passing, that Confucius the sage has always been a mere symbol (Li 2007b: 5, 7, 387). This theme first appeared in his article entitled 孔子符号学索隐 ('A semiotic revelation about Confucius')[4] (2007a),

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3 To avoid confusion, it is useful to distinguish between the Confucian school (儒家) as it stemmed from the Analects and Confucianism as a quasi-religion (儒教). By quasi-religion I mean that Confucianism, understood in this sense, has featured neither deities nor their prophets.

4 The English translation is mine. Originally, by "孔子符号学" Li means that Confucius the sage is merely a symbol. In this sense, the words 孔子符号学索隐 could literally translate as "the symbological revelation of Confucius."

which would later be included in *The homeless dog* as its preface. The semiotic touch is evident in Li's observation, although he uses the term "symbol" to describe Confucius (Li 2007c). In effect, the word "symbol" is used in place of "sign," either a sign of the growing need to rebuild the social and moral order in a time of confusion and loss in the wake of cultural revolution (Li 2007b: 5) or a sign of political disagreement (Li 2007b: 7), or simply of the imagined and overgeneralized construct known as "Chinese culture" (Li 2007b: 387). In a sense, the two abovementioned cases of Confucius's untouchability attest to Li's insight.

However, in this book, Li stopped at these remarks and did not go any further in his promising angle. Perhaps due to the brief manner in which it was made, unlike the controversies his book has caused, Li's angle never seems to have captured much attention and has since inspired few subsequent works precisely along this line of thought. It could otherwise have materialized into a unique and powerful route of inquiry that would provide a critical key to the semiotics of historization, or in other words, how such historical figures as Confucius are effectively *immediate realities* (Yu 2021: 651) in people's knowledge and imagination of these figures.

Although Li's own observation on the symbolicity of Confucius has not been fully appreciated, the seeds have somehow been sown. For instance, some recent treatment of the semiotic relevance of Confucianism can be found in (Zhu 2014; Zhu et al. 2021). These works focus primarily on the matter of symbolicity within Confucianism and its sociocultural effects. The spirit has also been shared by some studies in the same vein, for instance, Neville (2000, 2008), Lim (2015), Hsu (2021), and Untea (2022). Other works that have discussed the symbolicity of Confucius, such as Zhang (2011a, 2011b) and Xiao (2015), similar to some earlier works like Li and Lin (2000) and Zeng (2005), are not nearly as critical as Li with regard to the nature of the historical figure and essentially stand for what Li has refuted. We are still in need of a properly semiotic analysis of Confucius the personage that goes beyond making assertive yet mostly arbitrary statements about the "true Confucius."

Now let us follow Li's line of thought, along which we may simply claim that the problem of Confucious, or perhaps that of any historical figure, is fundamentally a semiotic one. We can call this the updated version of Li's angle – a semiotic angle. This brings to light the value of semiotics to historization. To historize is to narrate as history; and to narrate as history is largely to semiotize, or to treat as sign. In terms of historical narration, being versed in semiotics has a unique and formidable advantage. In addition to what Haidu posited in 1982, let us appreciate a relevant remark from Daniel Chandler:

> Semiotics helps us to take apart what is taken for granted, making our interpretive systems more explicit. In defining realities, sign systems serve ideological functions. Deconstructing and contesting the realities they represent can reveal whose realities are privileged and whose are suppressed. Such a study involves investigating the construction and maintenance of reality by particular social groups. To decline the study of signs is to leave to others the control of the world of meanings that we inhabit. (Chandler 2017: 8–9)

By revealing the symbolicity of Confucius in his generally accepted sage images, as well as their nature as forms of cultural capital in social interactions and communication, Li's book *The homeless dog* has partially achieved what Chandler has pointed out about semiotics. In this regard, it is worth noting that Li's understanding of Confucius and Confucianism seems to have been influenced by a remarkable semiotically minded volume entitled *Manufacturing Confucianism*, written by Lionel Jensen (1997). Jensen is probably the first to have ever used the phrase "semiotics of Kongzi" (Jensen 1997: 20), among other references to semiotics, although his method turns out to be a peculiar mix of Ferdinand de Saussure and Umberto Eco, with no mention of Peirce. The term "semiotics" used in the book carries one of its popular modern-day meanings, denoting "sign systems" that include but are not limited to linguistic signs. It was most likely in the same spirit that Li carried out his analysis to desacralize Confucius in *The homeless dog*.

This desacralization is a theme that is further reflected in both the title and the content of his follow-up study 去圣方得真孔子 ('Only when we desacralize Confucius can we know the true Confucius') (Li 2008). In both works, Li's argument about Confucius the personage is assertive, but by no means arbitrary. He insists on the symbolicity of the sage-figure Confucious, and his target of critical analysis is constantly clear: the sacralization of Confucius. There is an overall consistency between Li's two books, which is desacralizing Confucius, but the second book has carried out a more detailed study of the sign systems, especially the iconology, about Confucius than the first one and afforded a thorough historiographical treatment of the sacralization of Confucius. In terms of methodology, Li does seem to have made a strong case in the second book.

In the meantime, however, Li stresses in both books that there is a "true Confucius," who exists mostly notably in the *Analects*, among other historical narratives such as Sima Qian's biography of Confucius. In Li's words, "there have been two Confuciuses in history, one in the *Analects*, true to life and vivid, the other in the Confucius temple, made of clay and wood for people to worship. The former is true Confucius, the latter fake Confucius"[5] (Li 2008: 114). In a way, Li's goal to "restore" Confucius the personage, not the sage, has unfortunately produced a counter-effect and diluted the criticality of his analysis. As a result, he has

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5 The translation is mine.

unintentionally plunged himself into the centuries-old cultural war over the status of the historical figure. It is hardly surprising, in this light, to see that his works on Confucius have received so much criticism and even hatred that he has stopped writing on this topic.

To be fair, however, Li seems to have been a victim of collateral damage in this cultural war, on the two sides of which have stood the pro-Confucius forces against the anti-Confucius ones. Li is neither of them, nor are any of the others who would reject this strict dualist positioning. In particular, for instance, compared with those who rushed fanatically to demolish the Confucius family cemetery in 1966, Li's own stance can be said to be antithetical to not only the pro-Confucius side but especially the anti-Confucius side. What we need here is a meta-analysis, an exposé that transcends this cultural war by rendering it completely groundless. The tool most attuned to this need is precisely semiotics.

4 The semiotics of historization: the three dimensions

Let us begin this section with a maxim, which I would not hesitate to call the first principle of semiotics: *Nil est in intellectum nec in sensum quod non prius habeatur in signum* ('There is nothing in thought or in sensation which was not first in a sign') (Deely 1988: v). This maxim underscores the fundamental fact that the human being is a semiotic animal (Deely 2010 [2005]: 32, 2018 [1990]: 152) or an *animal symbolicum* (Cassirer 2021 [1944]: 26), which therefore has a profound implication: it is only by means of signs, symbols, images, texts, etc., which may fall under the umbrella term *models* (Yu 2021), that human beings can ever attempt to experience and understand their Umwelten and Innenwelten, the two major domains in which meaning-making is possible.

To elaborate on this point, it is useful to distinguish three dimensions of modeling with which human understanding is associated and which may roughly relate to the well-known Peircean triad of semiosis (CP 5.484). We should note that this triad, in its more comprehensive shape[6] than commonly construed, proves much more nuanced than the three dimensions that I will lay out below. However,

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[6] In Peirce's conception of the sign, there is a crucial element which has long been neglected by contemporary studies on Peirce. It is the element of *meaning* (CP 1. 339, CP 2. 308). Although Peirce unmistakably pointed out the irreducibility of the three components in semiosis, i.e., representamen, object, and interpretant, he did not rule out the possibility of a tetrad that would incorporate semiosis and meaning. This might open up a new discussion to the value of Peirce's sign, particularly in relation to present-day studies on communication and interpretation.

for the sake of argument, let us start with these dimensions first and then incrementally progress to a more detailed Peircean analytical model.

In the business of "reaching" a personage, say Confucius, either to imbue them with meaning or to interpret meaning out of them, there are hardly any possibilities other than three dimensions. The first dimension may be called the *physical representation dimension*, of which the most notable examples are the narratives about Confucius, including those in the *Analects*. This is in keeping with what Marcel Danesi refers to as the "principle of representationality"[7] (2022: 135). The second dimension may be called the *thinking dimension*, that which composes thought or is simply identified with thought, in other words, one's reasoning and/or imagination (mental models) about Confucius in their mind. This is the dimension where understanding is ultimately anchored. The third dimension may be called the *contact dimension*, which is related to or even identified with "reality" in the most widely accepted sense of the term. An example[8] of this dimension is that Confucius's disciples, as recorded in such narratives as the *Analects*, had the privilege of immediate acquaintance, that is, direct contact, with Confucius himself *in the flesh*, conversing, training, and traveling with the master.

Relatively speaking, only by means of the physical representation dimension and the thinking dimensions could people possibly have had any understanding of Confucius since his death. In this case, the contact dimension has ceased to be a possibility. After all, when somebody or something is not in the immediate realm of perception, even the denotative[9] knowledge of that person or thing, not to mention narratives of them, can only be achieved by description (Russell 1910: 113), and not by acquaintance (Russell 1905: 479, 1910: 108), as in the case of direct perception. Two things should be noted about these dimensions. First, the terms for the dimensions are only my expedients. It is what they refer to that truly matters. One may feel free to use other terms to similar ends. Second, in the case of reaching a personage whose immediate acquaintance is possible, there might be a different ordering of the dimensions, where the contact dimension becomes first if the presence of the personage comes before their representation.

The contact dimension deserves a bit more elaboration here. When framed in relation to historical narrative, this dimension can be associated with "historical reality," but the former should not be identified with the latter. As Dana Arnold

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7 To Danesi, representation is "the use of sign vehicles to relate, record, depict, portray, or reproduce something perceived, sensed, imagined" (Danesi 2022: 135). I see it as applicable to the discussion in the present paper. In effect, representation is another name for what Sebeok and Danesi referred to as an externalized form (Sebeok and Danesi 2000: 1), or simply an external model.

8 Note that this example is already built on narratives.

9 See Russell's "On denoting" (1905).

aptly observes, historical reality is "a 'referential illusion', in which we try to grasp the reality (the referent of language) that we believe lies beyond the barrier of the linguistic construction of its narratives. In this way history becomes a Myth or an ideology as it purports to be reality" (Arnold 2002: 2). Now we can see why Ling Li was wrong in believing that he had found the true Confucius as a purely objective reality (as in the contact dimension) recorded in the *Analects*. This belief is what Peirce called a "the metaphysical figment" (CP 5.312). The incontrovertible fact is that, since Confucius's death, nobody has been able to reach the absolutely true Confucius, unless "true" means narrative truth, in which sense "'reality' as we know it is no more and no less than a model" (Yu 2021: 651). In this light, we can see a new meaning of the expression "Confucius the untouchable": Confucius as is generally known mainly exists in systems of narrative, and is hence untouchable in that he lies beyond immediate acquaintance and outside of the contact dimension.

5 The semiotics of historization: a Peircean approach

The systems of narrative in question here are in fact instances of semiotic modeling. Narrative, even in the broadest sense of the term (Zhao 2013), relies prominently on language, which is by nature semiotic. As Patrick O'Neill observes, in the case of past events, the problem for narrative theory is that in order to discover what really happened, it is necessary to sift through accounts of what happened, for the world of the story, what "really happened" can be reached only through the discourses that present it (O'Neill 1996: 34). In this sense, narrative may be regarded as a system of codes. According to Umberto Eco, "the codes, insofar as they are accepted by a society, set up a 'cultural' world which is neither actual nor possible in the ontological sense; its existence is limited to a cultural order, which is the way in which a society thinks, speaks and, while speaking, explains the 'purport' of its thought through other thoughts" (Eco 1979 [1976]: 61). If we take the matter one step further, that is, go beyond the semiotics of coding and enter the semiotics of interpretation (see Cobley 2014; Kull 2020), it would be clear that even the narratives of Confucius are subject to the principle of intertextuality in that they are inevitably the targets for interpretation, which is essentially the unfolding of semiosis involving various other signs, or models.

At this point, it is necessary to note that, although all narrative texts are models, not all models are narrative. This leads us to a key question: if it is not possible to reach Confucius independently and outside of any system of narrative,

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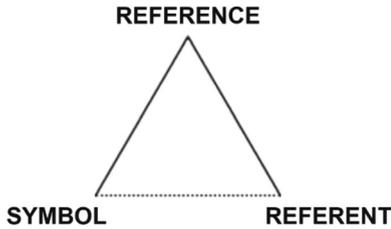
SYMBOL   **REFERENT**

Figure 1: Ogden and Richards's triangle of meaning.

then is it possible to reach Confucius completely independently and outside of other types of modeling systems, including models like spirit tablets, paintings, carvings, sculptures, monuments, temples, rites, acting, and so on? Unfortunately, the answer is still a resounding no, although this has nothing to do with skepticism and nihilism, which are supposed risks that are associated with this answer. The pivotal point is how "reaching" works. As to this, a highly valuable insight can be found in Peirce, who pointed out that it works by an "infinite series of inductions and hypotheses" (CP 5.311). This brings us to the Peircean triad of semiosis.

Now it may seem that the three dimensions are not that different from the well-known Peircean triangle, onto which Umberto Eco directly mapped Ogden and Richards's triangle of meaning (Figure 1. Eco 1979 [1976]: 59).

The truth, however, is that the these dimensions are not exactly homologous with either of the two triangles. I will use Peirce's (Figure 2) for demonstration. The physical representation dimension relates to Peirce's notion of the representamen, which may be part of one's Umwelt, although the representamen could also be of a psychical nature, that is, part of one's Innenwelt. The thinking dimension is exclusively part of Innenwelt and relates to Peirce's interpretant, but it could also entail the representamen of a psychical nature. The contact dimension relates to Peirce notion of object, but only insofar as both of them are the result of a physical

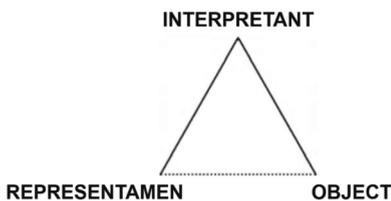**INTERPRETANT**

REPRESENTAMEN   **OBJECT**

Figure 2: Eco's figure of Peirce's semiosis.

entity that may be immediately accessible. In this regard alone, Peirce's notions seem to have more analytical power than the three dimensions. In addition, Peirce's triad would help us to appreciate some dynamics that are hidden between the three dimensions but mostly overlooked.

In general, these dimensions are semiotically useful insofar as they are used to explain the possible worlds of modeling that we may have access to when we try to reach a historized personage. We could stop here and apply these dimensions to the semiotics of historization with considerable effects, but the effects would not be optimum. As is suggested by their names, these dimensions, qua dimensions, are often perceived and experienced as being separate from each other without any causal or projective relations in between, although it is actually the opposite that is true. The contact dimension most often takes place first, giving rise to the thinking dimension and providing a ground for the possible physical representation dimension. These dynamics can be visualized in relation to the Peircean triad. However, Eco's figure does not do justice to the triad. It shows the three key components in semiosis but does not model their interactions (Yu 2020: 176). Consider instead an updated figure (Figure 3) below in the context of two elaborate definitions of the sign from Peirce.

> A sign, or representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the interpretant of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its object. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the ground of the representamen. (CP 2. 228)

> I define a Sign as anything which is so determined by something else, called its Object, and so determines an effect upon a person, which effect I call its Interpretant, that the latter is thereby mediately determined by the former. (Peirce 1977 [1909]: 80–81)
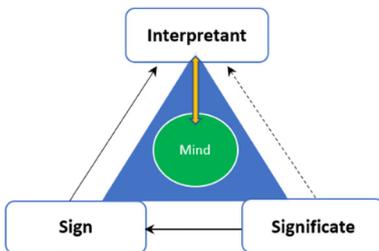

Figure 3: The complete Peircean triad of semiosis. Yu 2020: 179.

Given the clear causal relation between the sign (representamen)[10] and interpretant, I have used an arrow pointing from the sign to the interpretant. Insofar as the interpretant exists only in the mind, I have highlighted the fact with a word "mind" in relation to (two-directional arrow) the interpretant. Since the object and the interpretant are not in a direct causal relation, but a mediated one through the representamen, a dotted arrow has been used to point from the object to interpretant. In this sense, we may say that an understanding (interpretant) of Confucius (an object) is mediated by signs (representamens), including the very name "Confucius," among other signs and systems of signs, without which it would be impossible to even talk about Confucius. But would it be possible to directly access or reach Confucius the object? The answer is still no. The reason lies in the nature of Peirce's notion of the object, which "is itself of the nature of a sign" (CP 1. 538).

The reader might notice that I have replaced the word "object" with "significate." This was under the inspiration of the late John Deely, who was acutely aware of the sign nature of the object. As Deely rightly pointed out,

> once it becomes clear that 'all thought is in signs', it becomes further clear that all objects are objects signified, or, to suppress the redundancy, all objects are significates. Not all things are significates, but all objects are. In other words, to say 'significate' is to say clearly what 'object' says obscurely and confusedly, and in the late modern habits of English usage, perhaps, not at all. (Deely 2009: 15)

Moreover, Deely went on to accentuate this point by explicating that "not all things exist as significates, but only known things, things cognized, what has entered into awareness. But all objects exist as significates, whether they are also things or not" (Deely 2009: 16). All this is perfectly in keeping with Peirce's thought. Therefore, this brings us back again to the fact that the object of such signs as the words "Confucius" and "Kongzi" can only be reached through the signs. But here we are faced with a choice between two scenarios: either the object is reached through signs that represent the object, or the object was already of the nature of a sign (cf. CP 5. 314), say, in front of his disciples. The ramifications of these two scenarios are profound.

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10 In Peirce's writings, *sign* turns out to be an umbrella term which may apply to all three components/subjects in semiosis, hence the definition of semiosis as action of a sign. Most of the time, unless otherwise specified, sign is merely another name for the representamen, which is apparently a more technical term. However, the interpretant is definitely a sign, to be exact, a developed one (CP 2. 228); the object is also in itself of the nature of a sign (CP 1. 538). The most important thing about the sign is not whether it should retain the less technical term *sign* or the more technical term *representamen*, but its function of reference or significant, that is, "standing for" something other than itself.

In the present paper I will focus on the first scenario, in which we may say that Confucius is much like "Schrödinger's cat." Unless we could time-travel to be in the presence of the personage, the answer to whether Confucius ever existed or not really depends on our leap of faith, based on a kind of trust in whatever community we feel ourselves to be a part of. This, of course, would not be an ideal scenario, but it is inherent in and contingent upon the sign. In his first elaborate definition of the sign as quoted above, Peirce did not specify in what respect or capacity when he argued that "a sign, or representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity" (CP 2. 228). This capacity can only be inferred or presupposed, in that the sign stands for its object, "not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea" (CP 2. 228). Peirce called the idea the ground of the sign, but it is also a sign itself, as "every thought is a sign" (CP 5. 314). In this light, it is highly relevant to include here a particularly insightful remark from Peirce, which for its unique value is quoted in full below.

> The real, then, is that which, sooner or later, information and reasoning would finally result in, and which is therefore independent of the vagaries of me and you. Thus, the very origin of the conception of reality shows that this conception essentially involves the notion of a COMMUNITY, without definite limits, and capable of a definite increase of knowledge. And so those two series of cognition – the real and the unreal – consist of those which, at a time sufficiently future, the community will always continue to re-affirm; and of those which, under the same conditions, will ever after be denied. Now, a proposition whose falsity can never be discovered, and the error of which therefore is absolutely incognizable, contains, upon our principle, absolutely no error. Consequently, that which is thought in these cognitions is the real, as it really is. There is nothing, then, to prevent our knowing outward things as they really are, and it is most likely that we do thus know them in numberless cases, although we can never be absolutely certain of doing so in any special case. (CP 5.311)

From this quote we can see how lies, disinformation, and misinformation are possible in the first place. In these cases, the link between the sign and its object is so tenuous that, once exposed, the link would simply break. However, this does not in any way change the fact that the sign has already worked in its role as a sign, a model. Once again, this confirms my previous opinion of models as immediate realities. However, this does not mean that the objects, or significates, are altogether not reachable. They are reachable insofar as they are cognizable and indicatable.

Perhaps it is useful to think of the object, or the significate, as a quasi-stable source of affordances for significant. This observation could also have applied to Confucius and his disciples, which we can only infer due to the impossibility of time-travel to be in their presence. One of the best ways in which we make this inference is to relate to how we understand a person who has had dealings with us but who is not currently in our presence. Apart from all the semiotic systems that

we can rely on to make models of this person, how else can we "reach" them when they are not in our immediate presence? In this case, the person becomes the object of the sign. According to Peirce, the interpreter of the sign has to find out about its Object's "collateral experience"[11] (CP 8. 314). However, the Object here is what Peirce called the Mediate, Dynamical, or Dynamoid Object, which exists *outside of* the sign. There is also the Immediate Object, which is represented *in* the sign. The sign cannot express but must indicate the Dynamical Object by a hint, "and this hint, or its substance, is Immediate Object" (Peirce 1977 [1909]: 83; cf. CP 8. 314).

Peirce made this distinction between the objects of a sign to a double effect: first, to reiterate the fact that the object is of the nature of a sign, and second, to presuppose and stress the possible existence of the "phenomenal manifestation of a substance"[12] as the substance (CP 5. 313) of something as the something. In this light, to understand a person who has had dealings with us but who is not currently in our presence, we mainly rely on semiosis, in which the Immediate Object exists. In other words, we understand this person through the semiotic systems about this person. In addition, the Dynamical Object is "real" in the sense that we have had immediate acquaintance with the person, and this acquaintance confirms the Dynamical Object as a quasi-stable source of affordances for significant. However, the acquaintance is itself a form of experience that is by nature ephemeral and ultimately anchored in and shaped by memories, in that as soon as it happens in the present, it immediately becomes the past. And memories, being mental models, can be wrong (see Kahneman 2011: 377–385). If we map this onto Confucius's case, it becomes apparent the Confucius that we can possibly reach is the Immediate Object of various signs, or modeling systems, that we rely on for any understanding of Confucius. As for the reachability of Confucius the Dynamical Object, we can only infer that we are not as lucky as the master's disciples in that regard, as we do not have the luxury of collateral experience with this Dynamical Object. Even to Confucius's disciples, the Dynamical Object in their narratives of Confucius cannot be said to capture everything that Confucius the personage had been, although it is reasonable to infer that they did have an advantage over others to whom the Dynamical Object is simply beyond reach.

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11 Peirce used this example to illustrate what he meant by "collateral experience": "I point my finger to what I mean, but I can't make my companion know what I mean, if he can't see it, or if seeing it, it does not, to his mind, separate itself from the surrounding objects in the field of vision" (CP 8. 314).

12 It is very important to note that Peirce did not mean "materialism" or "realism" by Dynamical Object, as he hesitated to use the word "real" to describe the Dynamical Object and made it clear that "because perhaps the Object is altogether fictive, I must choose a different term" (CP 8. 314). In fact, it is generally acknowledged that Peirce's semiotic philosophy has overcome the realism–idealism dichotomy (see Nöth 1990: 43).

In the second scenario, where the object, or significate, is already of the nature of the sign, we are taken one step further from the contact dimension as explained above: even in the contact dimension and in the context of immediate acquaintance, the "objectivity" of the object itself should not be taken for granted. In this light, the concepts of fixed "self" and "other" are nothing more than myths propagated and exacerbated by false beliefs in modern psychology. This entails an important two-fold problem of (re-)presentation of the person in their immediate presence, not only of others but also of self (Goffman 1959 [1956]; Wiley 1994). However, since it goes beyond the objective of the present paper, the discussion of the problem is not undertaken here but should merit another treatise.

One thing that I would like to draw attention to at this point is that the dotted line between representamen and object in Eco's figure (Figure 2) is now an arrow (not dotted, Figure 3) pointing from significate to representamen, in response to Peirce's observation that "a sign must have a real physical connection with the thing it signifies so as to be affected by that thing" (CP 7. 356), whether this sign is a weathercock or a word. According to Peirce, compared with a weathercock, a word's connection to what it signifies may be an indirect one, but "unless there be some way or other which shall connect words with the things they signify, and shall ensure their correspondence with them, they have no value as signs of those things" (CP 7. 356). In his sense, words are and should be motivated. Onomatopoeia, interjections, and even compound words should come as good examples, phonetically or morphologically. These examples aside, whether there is an innate connection between a word and what it signifies still remains an enigma and therefore an object of heated debate for decades or even longer. The reason is that not all words are traceable to a motivated origin, even if such an origin existed in the first place, which is not a certainty. Although they are not strictly analogous to each other, Peirce's description inevitably reminds us of Saussure's principle of the sign, in which "the bond between signifier and the signified is arbitrary" (de Saussure 2011 [1916]: 67). In an attempt to reconcile the two stances, I have decided to take both into consideration and use a long dash-dotted arrow between the representamen and the significate (Figure 4). After all, it is reasonable to speak of
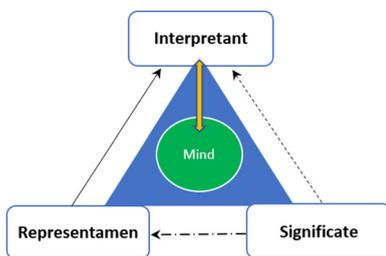

Figure 4: The revised complete Peircean triad of semiosis.

absolute *and* relative arbitrariness, each not being able to completely rule out the other (Nöth 1990: 243). In other words, as Ersu Ding aptly describes, the principle of arbitrariness has little to do with whether signs are motivated or not, and the motivatedness of signs does not contradict the notion of the arbitrariness of the sign (Ding 2012).

Technically, it should be the Dynamical Object that determines the sign, or representamen, and is hinted at by the Immediate Object, which is basically a mental representation produced in the presence of the sign. With this Immediate Object, there would be no need to resort to the Dynamical Object. The end result of all this is the impression that it is the Immediate Object that determines the sign. But no matter, as Peirce observed that "the Object is altogether fictive" (CP 8. 314), which has an unintended but unmistakable flavor of Chan Buddhism.

Now it should be clear that in the semiotics of historization, with that of Confucius for instance, we are at first faced with a representamen that mediates between our first resultant interpretant and the significate (Immediate and Dynamical Object). The significate leads to the representamen which in turn leads to the interpretant, thus establishing a correspondence between the interpretant and the significate. The ground of the representamen might have been any of the ideas that have been produced and shared by, say, Confucius's disciples, other supporters, and critics, and so on, who happen to have had their own immediate acquaintance with the personage. The signs, among other semiotic modeling systems that have composed the genuinely and immediately accessible source of understanding of the historical figure, stand *for* the figure *to* these ideas.

However, models, qua models, are inevitably double-edged swords. They are a blessing and at the same time a curse. They could stand efficaciously *for* their objects *to* certain ideas, or not. Nevertheless, in any case, they are the only tools that we can possibly work with and indeed depend upon in all processes of thinking, understanding, and communicating. Since they compose the immediate realities for us most of the time, they seem like part of our composition, so much so that we would not hesitate to jump to their defense, one way or another, once we feel that these models of ours are under threat or being compromised. This effect takes place not just at the level of the individual, but also at the level of society. As Bandura pointed out, "not only is modeling an important vehicle for diffusing ideas, values, and styles of conduct with societies, it is also wielding increasing influence in transcultural change" (Bandura 1986: xii). In short, we live by, in, and for models; models may change, but this fact does not.

Moreover, semiosis is seldom a one-off occurrence; it grows, as its components grow (Figure 5). The representamen, the interpretant, and the significate are all destined to change and grow. It is an inescapable fate that is inherent in the sign. This brings me to what I would like to call the second principle of semiotics:
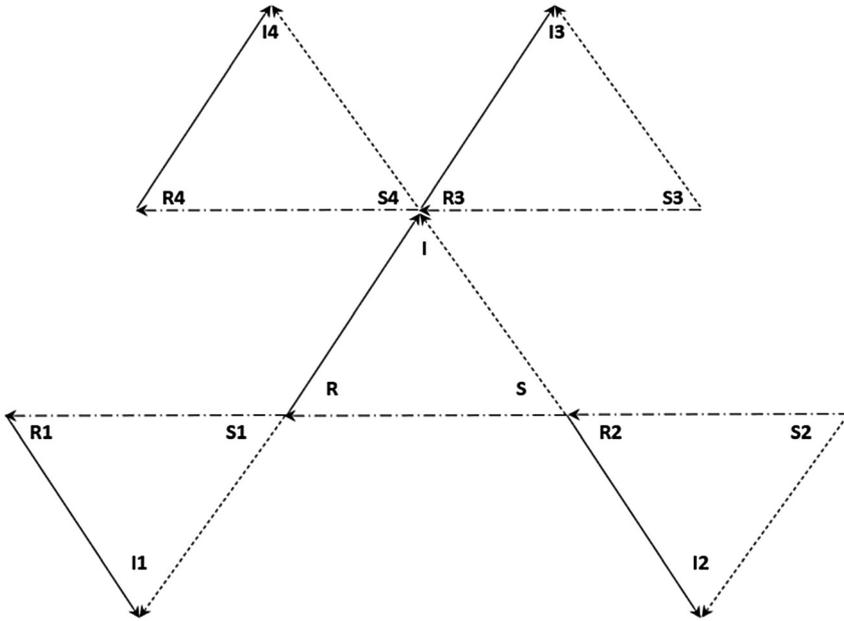
Figure 5: The growth of signs and semiosis.

interpretation is inevitable and unstoppable; it is what gives the sign the status of a sign. After all, "nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign" (CP 2. 308). A representamen (R) may become the significate (S1) that is represented by another representamen (R1), which produces another interpretant (I1). A significate (S) may be interpreted as a sign, a representamen (R2), which stands for another significate (S2) and produces another interpretant (I2). In the same vein, an interpretant (I) may also be interpreted as a sign, a representamen (R3), which stands for another significate (S3) and produces another interpretant (I3). Now the interpretant (I) can be the significate (S4) of another sign, or representamen (R4), which in turn produces a new interpretant (I4). As interpretation grows, expands, and advances, the sign's significate, or to be exact, the Dynamical Object, seems to recede in proportion (cf. Cassirer 2021 [1944]: 25).

Take the *Analects*. As the most widely read collection of ideas, sayings, and deportment attributed to Confucius and his contemporaries (most notably his disciples) over the past two millennia, the *Analects* has already become the subject of countless interpretations from multiple perspectives including linguistics, hermeneutics, archeology, sociology, politics, history, historiography, cultural communication, and so on. It is clear that differences in points of departure would

have their impact to varying degrees on the representation and interpretation with regards to the historical figure of Confucius. Apart from the disciplinary perspectives, interpretive differences can also be found in the interpreter's age, gender, profession, class, ethnicity, education, life experience, sociocultural traditions, and all the other possible factors that may result in a complex interplay of frames of reference and converge in the *identity-formation* of the interpreter. Consequently, the idea *to* which a certain representation stands *for* Confucius varies. This would in turn lead to significant variation in the basic semiosis, that is, the triangle S–R–I in the middle, thus opening up possibilities of new growths. For instance, Confucius could be represented in any of the following familiar images: the greatest sage, the greatest teacher, a statesman manqué, a practical thinker, a self-made person from rags to influence (not so much of riches), a great learner, or the complete opposites of all these. How about interpreting Confucius as a son, a brother, a father, a husband, or simply a person who grew up as a child with his single parent and trained himself to become an inspiring role model for some contemporaries? All these variations in the significate S and the representamen R would initiate new routes of interpretation and result in variations in the interpretant I. The Representamens may end up being the significates of other representamens, the Significates may be interpreted as new representamens, and the Interpretants may become either a new significate or a new representamen, each belonging to their own semioses. In the final analysis, the historical figure has thus undergone representations and interpretations beyond measure. Nevertheless, one thing that remains unchanged is that these representations and interpretations are all models and thus invariably *partial*.

6 Concluding remarks

Despite centuries of tremendous impact and a legacy of enduring importance, Confucianism has continued to be contested in Chinese civilization. Interestingly enough, the converse is also true: although Confucianism has never been truly free from criticism and attacks, studies of Confucius and his thoughts have not ceased since as early as his own times. This opposition has long been a fait accompli and evidenced by a literally inexhaustible and ever-increasing number of scholarly and general accounts treating both Confucius and Confucianism from different perspectives throughout history. It is these accounts, linguistic and non-linguistic alike, that have served as frameworks for understanding not only Confucius, but particularly the predominant role that has been repeatedly attributed to this historical figure and to his philosophy in Chinese society over the past two millennia. There are at least two things these accounts share in common. First, virtually all of

them have purported to be a truthful picture of Confucius and Confucianism; second, most, if not all, of them have ignored, either explicitly or implicitly, the essential semioticity of Confucius the historical figure.

In the present paper, I have provided a semiotic meta-analysis in which I argue that the personage who has come to be known as Confucius has existed and can only exist, without exception, in multiple forms of sociocultural representation and interpretation that are natural results of distinct modeling processes. These models include most notably visual forms, such as historical narrative of various genres, paintings, carvings, spirit tablets, sculptures, monuments, temples, rites, acting, and so on. They compose the immediate realities of Confucius for us and the very foundation upon which any further discussions about Confucius, his disciples, and their thoughts and lives are even possible in the first place. It is therefore impossible to reach the so-called "true" Confucius completely independently and outside of these widely varied modeling systems that have been used to create the resultant models about Confucius.

There is simply no other way in which we can have any meaningful understanding of Confucius. On the surface, this treatment seems to be only stating the obvious, but in fact it serves a critical function: it reminds us of a fact too often neglected, that is, how easily we can fall victim to the objective illusion and the confusion of understanding and axiology that Mieke Bal has so rightly cautioned against. Moreover, the treatment is by no means intended to be a revisionist or nihilistic denial of the historicity of Confucius, but rather an attempt to underscore the central and fundamental role that modeling systems about historical figures play in historization as human sociocultural and cognitive practice. In this sense, the case of Confucius serves as an instance, a specimen, a sign, which is extensible to any other historical figures. Furthermore, whatever modeling processes have unfolded and in whichever directions they have evolved, it is probably the never-ending attempts to seek to "restore" Confucius to his "original" self, as it were, and what these attempts tell us about ourselves that really matter.

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