Book Review

Reviewed by **Xingzhi Zhao**, College of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Sichuan University, Chengdu, China, E-mail: xingzhi.zhao@scu.edu.cn

Semiotics, in its contemporary sense, did not exist in ancient China. However, sign-related thought and the use of signs were ubiquitous in ancient Chinese society. For example, long-standing philosophical debates about word and meaning, dialectical ideas about *ming* 名 (name) and *shi* 实 (substance, actuality), and reflections on *li* 礼 (ritual) and *yue* 乐 (music) all contained semiotic wisdom. Such thinking had far-reaching consequences for the shaping of the Chinese cultural spirit and the people's character. Thus, the book *Semiotic thought in ancient China* by Zhu Dong et al. is of great importance in Chinese semiotic studies due to its effort to systematically reconstruct the country's tradition of semiotics.

Dong Zhu, the principal author of this book, is a leading scholar of ancient Chinese semiotic thought. His first monograph, *Semiotic thinking in Pre-Qin philosophy* (2014), enjoys a strong reputation among Chinese academics because it reveals how sign-related thought embedded in the classics of the pre-Qin dynasties were rediscovered before the methodology of modern semiotics was adopted to study them. *Semiotic thought in ancient China* follows on from this and represents Zhu's more systematic exploration of traditional Chinese semiotic thinking. In its ten chapters, the book elaborates how ancient Chinese philosophers used the concept of signs, how they reflected philosophically on signification, and which semiotic approaches they used.

The first chapter studies the semiotic mechanism in the *I-Ching* (易经) or *The Book of Changes*, the earliest of the Chinese classics, which remains one of the world's most complex texts. The *I-Ching* is regarded as the origin of traditional Chinese semiotic thought, since it records how sages constructed a system of signs to observe and then construe the things they experienced. Scholars around the world have continued to show an enduring interest in interpreting the related thoughts in this book, and many of them hold that the *I-Ching* develops a kind of dualism, because it mainly studies the dynamics of Yin (阴) and Yang (阳). However, in this chapter, Zhu Dong et al., inspired by Peircean semiotics, provide us with an innovative, triadic way to understand the complexity of *I-Ching*'s semiotic word. They argue that the semiotic system of the *I-Ching* generally consists of three parts instead of two: that is, *guahua* (卦画) (hexagram images), *guaci* (卦辞)

(hexagram statements), and *yizhuan* (易传) (commentaries) (Zhu et al. 2021: 23–24). *Guahua* points to *guaci*'s description of the object, and *yizhuan* interprets the meaning of the signs. These three elements, similar to Charles S. Peirce's triadic model, constitute an unlimited semiosis that could model the law of nature, and thereby shaped traditional Chinese culture.

It is also interesting that the authors adopt Yuri Lotman's semiotics of culture to explain the *I-Ching*'s cultural shaping function in this chapter. Certain elements called "memes" exist in every culture, which can be copied and then inherited generation by generation. Hence, a meme is a unit that carries different meanings and could be spread freely in the semiosphere (see Zhu et al. 2021: 24–28). Different memes can be combined, formed into various cultural thoughts, theories, and doctrines, and finally, become the metalanguage of a culture. In this model, cultures differ due to the different combinations of memes in their semiospheres. In the context of Chinese traditional culture, the *I-Ching* has produced numerous cultural memes and thus plays an important role in modelling.

The semiotic theories of pre-Qin philosophical schools, namely Confucianism, Taoism, Mohism, the School of Names, and Legalism, are then carefully examined in the next four chapters (Chapters 2–5). The sign system of *li* and *yue*, established in the early Zhou Dynasty, is regarded as the prototype of sociocultural ethics in traditional Chinese society. This system clarified the ethical order between superiors and subordinates, between older and younger, and between close and distant, providing a systematic set of social norms. However, this sign system gradually collapsed after the Zhou dynasty, and according to Zhu Dong and his colleagues, this was the reason semiotic thought bloomed in the pre-Qin era. They argue that semiosis can reflect social reality and vice versa: reformations at the semiotic level will result in actual societal changes. Hence, semiotic thought in the pre-Qin era should be considered as a means for philosophers to provide their own reformations for the socio-semiotic system.

These four chapters on pre-Qin philosophy illustrate the different and even contrasting philosophical attitudes of the time toward signs, indicating the presence of productive and diversified semiotic resources. They could be viewed as the varying approaches of different schools of thought to the collapse of the social semiotic system. For instance, the Confucians, as led by Confucius and Mencius, attached particular importance to sign vehicles. They attempted to make full use of the double articulation function of the signs in *li* and *yue* by allocating distinct social, hierarchical, and ethical meanings to each sign vehicle. They hoped that these sign vehicles, with their fixed meanings, could maintain the established reign's stability through adoption into rituals or daily life. In contrast, the Taoists, headed by Laozi and Zhuangzi, held a negative attitude toward cultural signs in the rituals of their time. They believed that people would become disoriented in a

highly semiotized society. Therefore, the authors advance that Taoism was probably the first school in global history to suggest the concept of "desemiotization," as understood in modern semiotics, and to advocate for the elimination of names and of the importance attached to rituals.

This book also gives particular attention to the study of names, tracing its development from the School of Names through Mohism and finally to Legalism (Zhu et al. 2021: 103–112) Because the core concern of Ming Xue (名学), or the study of names, is the interaction between *ming* and *shi*, it is often regarded as the most semiotic-like of philosophical discussions in ancient China. In semiotic terms, it mainly concerns the relationship between a sign and its objects and indicates how a name can represent meaning. However, Zhu Dong et al. argue that the term *ming* in ancient China was polysemous, in that it referred not only to a name (or sign) in itself, but also to relevant social norms or ethical codes. According to this logic, traditional Chinese semiotic thought always consists of two approaches: pure or academically oriented linguistic semiotics and practically oriented political and ethical studies. The latter aims to protect the stability of the social order. The book elaborates on these two approaches and their development in ancient China.

Sign-related thought in ancient China was shaped in the *I-Ching* and then developed into different doctrines in pre-Qin schools. The authors discuss how meta-signs and sign-related thought universally influenced the conduct, beliefs, and philosophies of Chinese people in traditional society (Zhu et al. 2021: 113) The next three chapters (6–8) thus discuss the signifying mechanisms of cultural signs, such as *He Tu* (河图) and *Luo Shu* (洛书), *Wu Xing* (五行) (Five Agents), and *Kan Yu* (堪舆), and their respective roles in shaping traditional culture. For instance, Wu Xing and Kanyu summarize Chinese ancestors' experience in coping with the environment, vividly embodying their unique understanding of the relationship between nature and human beings. Thus, this book deepens its discussion to discuss the semiotics of Kan Yu and its relation to the Five Agents, aiming to explore its ecological philosophy called *Tian Ren He Yi* (天人合一) (the unity of heaven and man). In addition, Chapter 9 on Buddhism in the Tang and Song dynasties and Chapter 10 on Yang Ming Xin Xue (阳明心学) elaborate on how sign-related thought was formed, interacted, and developed in ancient Chinese intellectual history.

One of the most significant features of this book is its dialogic nature. For instance, potential dialogues can be found between pre-Qin philosophers and their Western counterparts, such as Charles S. Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure, in terms of the structure of semiosis. Dialogues also take place when meta-signs of Chinese culture have been inherited and altered from generation to generation, just like Lotman's description of the semiosphere. Zhu attaches great importance to this kind of dialogical process – in fact, he stresses that the theoretical reconstruction of Chinese semiotics is essentially the dialogical process. "The meaning

of each sign has to be produced, understood, and communicated through the dialogic process. Likewise, the construction of the Chinese semiotic tradition includes dialogues between the past and the present, and between East and West. Modern western culture […] provides us with the "other" perspective with which to examine our own culture" (Zhu 2021).

Another feature of this book is its emphasis on the ethical values inherent in Chinese sign-related thought. The authors hold that ethics are, in essence, "the signifying principles of interpersonal communication" (Zhu et al. 2021: 3), and thus, ethics should be embraced by semiotics. The human being is not the only animal that can use signs, but it is the only one that can reflect on the consequences of using signs. Thus, human beings should shoulder their semiotic ethical responsibilities to each other. This is particularly evident in ancient Chinese culture; moral and ethical issues have always been at the core of Chinese semiotic thought. "For the wise in ancient China, moral ethics is not only a matter of knowledge but also a matter of belief and practice […] the formation of semiotic thought in ancient China is itself an approach of ethical semiotics" (Zhu et al. 2021: 5). In other words, ethics in ancient China was naturally bounded by semiotic thought.

The authors suggest that the 10 chapters of the book can be roughly categorized as concerning the following four types of ethics: (1) metaethics – the chapters on the *I-Ching*, *He Tu*, and *Luo Shu* belong to this category, because they concern the origins of Chinese civilization; (2) natural ethics – the chapters on *Wu Xing* and *Kan Yu* belong to this category because they reflect how ancient people conceived of the relationship between humans and nature; (3) religious ethics – the chapters on Buddhism and Wang Yangmin's philosophy of mind belong to this category because they concern how religious beliefs in ancient China changed from centring on the natural world to emphasizing human relations; (4) social ethics – this constitutes the major subject of semiotic thought in the pre-Qin era. These ethical categories are considered as the sign-mediated societal rules and norms that guided social activities in ancient China. Thus, by "drawing on the metaethics of Chinese culture," the book ultimately aims "to construct a Chinese tradition of semiotics with the dimensions of natural, social, and religious ethics" (Zhu et al. 2021: 14).

The above approach – that is, from sign-related thought to moral ethics – accords with the doctrine called "semioethics" (Petrilli 2004), the new trend in semiotics today. The groundbreaking definitions of semioethics by Petrilli (2004) and Deely (2005) take more account of human beings' ecological responsibility for life on this globe within the framework of biosemiotics and global communication. However, this concept, to some extent, has been broadened in the current book, that is, from ecological to social and religious ethics. Accordingly, it will provide a diversified and wider view for developing the study of semioethics.

To sum up, this book should be regarded as a milestone in Chinese semiotic studies and will play a significant role in promoting dialogue between Chinese and world semiotics. It not only constructs a comprehensive theoretical system of semiotic thought in ancient China but also provides a new approach to the semiotic study of Chinese traditional ethics. Most importantly, this book promotes the academic transformation of the precious Chinese semiotic heritage, thus setting an important stage for global scholars to jointly mine valuable semiotic resources from China and the world.

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