

# On the Epistemological Problems of Words, Images and Meanings in Chinese Philosophy from Bertalanffy's Symbolic System View

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**Abstract:** Ancient Chinese philosophy contains rich concepts of Symbolic System. Symbolic System has its unique contribution to the shaping of culture, the development of cognition, and the continuation of civilization. Not only does the interpretation of numbers and language symbols depend on the subject's perspective of rules, but also it is of great significance to the recognition of traditional Chinese philosophy such as "the distinction between being First Great One" and "the relationship between words, images and meanings", as well as the reinterpretation of important issues of Chinese traditional culture.

**Keywords:** Bertalanffy, Systems philosophy, Symbolic System, Epistemology.

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## 1. Introduction: Symbolic System is a Bridge Linking Subject and Object

As the recognized founder of system science and system philosophy, Ludwig von Bertalanffy created the bud of complexity and system science research. Bertalanffy is an outstanding thinker in the 20th century. Starting from the field of biology, he covers many fields such as medicine, psychology, psychiatry, behavioral science, history, sociology, philosophy and so on. He is a "Leonardo da Vinci" generalist. Looking back to the source of system science, Bertalanffy, its founder, can find that general system theory contains rich new scientific thinking and philosophical thought. Symbolic System recognizes the most important way of human cognition. Symbol is the primary feature of human behavior. As a part of social life, symbol is the perception that is considered to carry meaning. Meaning can only be expressed by symbols, and the purpose of human beings to create symbols is to express meaning. Foucault said in his famous book on epistemology, *Knowledge Archaeology* in 1969: "We can call all the knowledge that makes symbols 'speak' and develops their meaning hermeneutics; It is called semiotics to identify symbols and understand all the knowledge of connection laws." [1] Ernst Cassirer extended the scope of Kant's transcendental principle to various fields such as language, religion, mythology, art and science, and tried to explain his views through abstract analysis of various symbolic forms. However, Cassirer's symbolic viewpoint does not reflect the objective world truthfully, but constructs the objective world from the perspective of the subject. As we all know, Kant's category list is basically based on classical physics. He believes that only categories based on physics (such as space, time and cause and effect) are the components in the philosophical sense. In Bertalanffy's view, the form and category of symbols are neither innate passive structures as Kant assumed, nor acquired and formed by simple repetition as Hume and positivism insisted, but individual intelligence and creative functions of related cultures. Therefore, Kant's narrow system of "intuitive form" and "intellectual category" has also been broken. This means that there are not only "rational" elements, that is, common sense and scientific

knowledge, but also all activities that represent the characteristics of human biology and culture-language, myth, art and so on. Bertalanffy developed Cassirer's concept of symbolic form. From the perspective of a biologist and philosopher, he believed that categories originated from biology and culture. Bertalanffy formed his own ideas independently of Cassirer's Symbolic System.

## 2. Subject's Different Interpretations of "One" Under the Action of Different Symbolic Systems

Charles Sanders Peirce said, "By symbol, I mean anything real or self-made. It can have a perceptual form and be applied to another known thing besides it, and it can be explained by another symbol called interpreter, conveying some information about the object that may not have been known before." [2] Bertalanffy clearly pointed out: "In short, our experience category and thinking category seem to be determined by biological and cultural factors". [3] As a philosophy, Bertalanffy has led out a perspective view by emphasizing and studying symbols. According to this perspective, symbols "are created by people with social, biological, cultural and linguistic talents and limitations to study the universe". [4] Symbols have meaning by indicating or referring to things or facts in the outside world. The meaning of a symbol is the object it indicates or refers to, and the meaning of a symbol is given by the interpreter or subject. It is the perspective and translation of the object by the cognitive subject according to symbols and passwords. It always depends on the existing Symbolic System of the subject, which determines what the subject can see from the object. At the same time, the subject always carries out perspective according to the object and translates according to reality. Bertalanffy's view is basically consistent with the actual situation of cognitive activities. Bertalanffy put forward the operation rule of Symbolic System in the article *Symbolic Universe of Man*: input operation instruction (premise) → predetermined symbol rule → output answer.

It is through the emphasis on the role of Symbolic System in cognitive activities that perspective shows the subjective and objective characteristics of cognitive process, which is

the process of interaction between people as cognitive subject, cognitive object and surrounding environment, and the unity of subjectivity and objectivity. As a philosopher trained in the philosophy of logical positivism, Bertalanffy, like the Vienna School, of course, recognized that "the comprehensive proposition has cognitive significance only when it is confirmed by experience", but he stressed that "description is a simple assertion of reality, and interpretation means the logical subordination of specific things in a more general situation." Systematize reality through the general connection of things, which also means that each reality needs a new set of explanations, that is, to find a more comprehensive connection. This systematic explanation of reality is the so-called perspective. According to Bertalanffy's perspective, people's cognitive process is first manifested in the dependence on people's psychological system and physiological system. From the perspective of a biologist, Bertalanffy believes that the category of experience or intuitive form is not what Kant said is universal and a priori, but depends on people's psychological and physiological structure.

The origin of Chinese characters is closely related to numbers. Numbers are one of the most harmonious and complete Symbolic Systems created by human beings, and the same symbol will have different meanings due to different interpreters. For example, the problem of "harmony between man and nature" embodied in ancient Chinese numbers is mainly related to Taoism, Confucianism, Chinese medicine and other thoughts. Among these ten numbers, the numbers "one, two and three" can best embody this philosophical thought. In the book *Shuo Wen Jie Zi*, there is such a record about the number "one", "one, only at the beginning, the Tao stands in one, and the heaven and the earth are divided into all things. All who belong to one are from one". [5] Thus, the number "one" occupies an important position in the whole ancient digital system. It is the beginning of all things, and only from it did the second and third numbers appear one after another. Lao Tzu has the following view in *Tao Te Ching*: "Tao gives birth to one, one life to two, two lives to three, and all things to three", [6] Lao Tzu explained the creation process of the universe from scratch with figures, and also reflected the concept of the unity of heaven and man. Here, "One" is Tao, and Tao is embodied in One, that is, "One" is the material embodiment of Tao, which is figurative, while Tao is invisible. This reflects the simple world view of our ancestors, and the process of everything in the world from scratch. Lao Tzu asked, can the body and soul become one without separation? The vitality of the world becomes soft, can it be like a baby? Clear dirt and observe carefully, can there be no defects? [7] Lao Tzu used this rhetorical question to tell the secret of personal self-cultivation and self-cultivation, reminding people to keep the unity of form and spirit, keep a baby-like state of no desire and weakness, and pay attention to self-reflection. "Ying Po" means soul or mind. People's body carries the soul, and people are the unity of soul and body. At the same time, Plato in ancient Greece also put forward a similar idea. He believed that "mind" was an immaterial entity, which was in the world of ideas. And "body" is a kind of material entity, in the visible world. After the soul enters the body, the relationship between the two is equivalent to the relationship between the spirit and the carrier. While "Bao one" combines soul and body, which is the "one" of subjectivity. Another example is Heidegger's "being", Sartre's "being" and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's "body-subject".

Subjective existence is not only a material existence, but also a spiritual one. It can be seen that "one" in the so-called "carrying the spirit and embracing one" has different meanings from "one" in "Tao Sheng one". Although "one" as a symbol itself has the explanatory function of counting and counting, the meaning of "one" is also different under the influence of different Symbolic Systems or by different interpreters.

### 3. The Subject's Perspective on Language Symbols

Cassirer said: "How much people's symbolic activity ability progresses, physics really seems to retreat correspondingly. In a sense, people are constantly dealing with themselves instead of dealing with things themselves. He is so surrounded by the forms of language, artistic imagination, mythical symbols and religious rituals that he can't see or know anything unless these people are the intermediaries of human media." [8] Since the birth of civilization, it is closely related to the symbolic universe created by human beings. The time series of civilization is increasing with the increasing speed of change. Bertalanffy pointed out: "All species evolution based on genetic variation of species has been replaced by history based on symbols." [9] Because there is no sign system, the evolution of living things can only rely on genetic variation. For example, the society of chimpanzees has not changed for millions of years. Since the emergence of civilization, human beings have tried to construct a Symbolic System that is suitable for the evolution of human civilization and easy to understand, and used it to replace the intuitive world we face. This Symbolic System includes language, artistic imagination and myth, among which language is the most complete Symbolic System of human beings. With the efforts and reforms of human beings, language symbols have already evolved into systems with extraordinary creativity. Bertalanffy believes: "By using a set of properly selected terms and rules-'grammar' in advance, we can grasp the symbols-'vocabulary', and these symbols seem to be the things they represent." [10] The things represented by different symbol rules are different, depending on the subject's interpretation and interpretation of the rules. In the language Symbolic System, it can better reflect the characteristics that the subject always carries out perspective according to the object and translates according to the reality.

Ancient Chinese interpretations of "First Great One" can be divided into "First Great One Taoism", "First Great One Religion" and "First Great One Stars". People must say "First Great One" when they talk about "Tao" because the prefix "First Great One" appears in Taoist classics. [11] The book of Zhuangzi: "First Great One" represents the vitality between heaven and earth, and Taoism thinks it is the origin of the universe. [12] Huainanzi Quanyan: Heaven and earth are completely undivided, and the whole place presents an undivided chaotic whole. At that time, tangible things have not yet been formed, and this state is called "First Great One". [13] Everything comes from this "First Great One" state. After forming, there are birds, animals and fish, which is called "the process of dividing things". The discussion of "Tao" with "one" or replacing "Tao" with "one" became a common practice in the pre-Qin period. [14] This "one" is the interpretation of "Tao". Heaven and earth become clear and quiet when they get Tao, gods get Tao and have spirit, river valleys get Tao and fill, all things grow when they get Tao,

and then the king and Hou get Tao and order the world, so the heaven and earth become orderly. Everything in heaven and earth originates from Tao or Yi, and Tao is the ontological existence of all things in the universe. If heaven and earth lose Tao, all things will eventually die, gods will fail, river valleys will dry up and princes will tyrannize. Therefore, in the classic works of Taoism, "First Great One" is "Tao". As for "the religion of First Great One", First Great One, the Eastern Emperor, was one of the nine righteous gods in ancient times, and was the highest deity of Chu in the pre-Qin period. The chapter recorded with Emperor First Great One of the East as the religious object was first published in Qu Yuan's Nine Songs of Emperor First Great One of the East, which was named "Heavenly Emperor" after Emperor First Great One of the East. Obviously, it was influenced by "Taoist First Great One". Before Nine Songs was finished, Taoist First Great One was widely spread. Huangfu Mi in the Western Jin Dynasty wrote "Imperial Century", saying: "The emperor is magnificent, Dihuang is Tianyi, Ren Huang is First Great One." In ancient China, the East Emperor First Great One was sacrificed as the Emperor of Heaven. With the continuous development of Taoism, people's faith gradually turned to Taoist gods, and the belief of the East Emperor First Great One was gradually cut off among the people. Whether it's Taoist First Great One or religious First Great One (Eastern Emperor First Great One), this First Great One represents a kind of supreme, supreme and chaotic, which can only be recognized through faith rather than rational reasoning. In other words, in the knowledge concerning First Great One, the ancients were surrounded by mythical beliefs and religious symbols, and through this symbolic medium, the ancients were able to know and master First Great One's knowledge. Different from Taoist First Great One and religious First Great One, which became the category system of myth and religion, the ancient formulation of First Great One existed in the field of astronomy. Xiong Kejian believes: "People often take the astronomical data provided in Records of the Historian and Official Records as the basis, and think that the 'First Great One' is the 'North Star' or the 'North Star'. This seemingly conclusive answer is correct if only the star First Great One in the Han Dynasty is concerned. As far as the star First Great One in the Warring States Period is concerned, it is wrong. " [15] In the mid-Warring States period, the religious field replaced "Emperor of Heaven" with "First Great One", which was the result of the influence of Taoist "First Great One" theory. During the Western Han Dynasty, First Great One, the star, occupied the Purple Palace and lived in Beichen, which was the concrete application of the Taoist theory that First Great One was in harmony with Beichen. The star "First Great One" is the initial reflection of the religion "First Great One" in the field of astronomy.

#### **4. The Epistemological Thought of Symbolic System About the Relationship Between Words, Images and Meanings**

Symbolic System, as the basic existence mode of human thought and behavior, includes mathematics, language, art, music, morality, religion, mythology and other extremely broad fields. But in the most general sense, Bertalanffy divides symbols into two categories: inferential symbols and non-inferential symbols. The so-called symbol of inference can be broadly defined as the transmitted mark, that is,

various forms of language. In principle, it can be measured by bits, such as the number "one" in the above example. The non-inferential symbol is the symbol of innate existence. It can't be obtained through logical reasoning and perceptual intuition, but a transcendence of logic, belonging to the field of experience, emotion and desire, similar to what A. H. Maslow called "being cognition" or "extreme feeling". This form of feeling is "unspeakable", that is to say, it cannot be expressed by the category and language of inference. As far as the category of inference is concerned, it is the means and form of mutual cognition between us and the world around us, while non-inferential symbols can only be conveyed by metaphor, as in non-inferential Symbolic Systems such as painting, poetry and music, and in value Symbolic Systems such as morality and religion. Bertalanffy believes that the symbol of inference expresses the knowledge of facts, and the purpose is to grasp and control the external world, such as science; The non-inferential symbols express the values, emotions and functions that are the basis of human behavior, and their purpose is to achieve the self-realization of human nature, such as religion, art and music. At this level, Bertalanffy is influenced by Kant's transcendental philosophy, and Kant believes that all knowledge begins with experience. There is knowledge that does not depend on experience or even our senses. Such knowledge is called transcendental knowledge, and it is different from empirical knowledge, which originates from posterior knowledge, that is, it has its origin in experience. Inferential symbols are posterior knowledge, and non-inferential symbols are transcendental knowledge. Transcendental knowledge is knowledge obtained without relying on experience or senses, for example, "The One Religion", which can only "perceive" its existence through belief and sacrifice. Post-empirical knowledge, such as "The One Star", is based on the calculation and observation of the stars by astronomers, and belongs to the category of inferential symbols.

In ancient China, philosophers put forward a way of cognition that conformed to the Symbolic System very early. The discussion on the relationship between name and reality and the relationship between words, images and meanings has always been an important topic in ancient Chinese philosophy, which can be discussed through systematic epistemology. Words refer to rhetoric, words and phrases; Meaning refers to concepts or propositions, and sometimes even refers to holy words and truth. For words and meanings, it is the expression carrier of meaning, bearing the original intention of truth, concepts and holy words. In short, words are the expression form of meaning, meaning is the ideological content of words. Meaning can be understood as an ontology, and it can also be understood as the true meaning of all the texts we want to reveal. Pre-Qin philosophers mainly discussed the relationship between words and meanings, but the category of objects was rarely involved. In the Book of Changes, the category of image is first introduced between words and meanings. It is an important link of communication, linking meaning and speech. It can even be said that without image, we can't "search for words" after "observing meaning". Naturally, words can't exhaust the original meaning of meaning. In the Book of Changes, the image is an image or concept that can be represented by some kind of symbol or can be recognized in some kind of activities or objects. In short, it is natural phenomena, objects and events, and divinatory symbols. In the view of system philosophy epistemology, image is a symbolic system that communicates

the cognitive subject (interpreter) with the cognitive object (object), meaning that the object we want to explain, whether it is metaphysics, Tao or noumenon, is the answer we want to output. A link and bridge has been established between the experiential world and the subjective world. Images do not represent concrete things, but symbolic meanings of objects. At the same time, whatever kind of images are used to explain the principles of the Book of Changes. The image represented by the image is a virtual hypothetical image, which exists in imagination. Compared with the objective and concrete image, it can be regarded as an abstract conceptual model. As an image Symbolic System, it can make the subject actively construct the real objective world, which has the significance of systematic generation.

In the Book of Changes, there are two words that are most talked about by later generations, that is, "you get an image but forget it, and you forget it when you are proud of it." [16] Images is used to express the meaning of a saint, and hexagrams and inscriptions (language) are used to explain and explain Images. If you understand the meaning of Images, you can temporarily forget the expressions, and if you understand the meaning of a saint, you can forget Images. In other words, as a symbol, image can express real meaning and real ontology, but it needs language or hexagrams to explain and elaborate. But in fact, words can't exhaust the original intention of images, just as vague images can't exhaust the ontological thoughts of interpretation. Therefore, myths, intentions, symbols and ideas are more valuable approximations to meaning. Bertalanffy pointed out: "Witchcraft, whether it is oral (calling the name of something means dominating or controlling it) or non-oral (painting on the cave wall in the Paleolithic Age as a way to ensure lucky hunting), is very similar to the representative origin of symbols. To practice witchcraft, you have to have a mythical idea first. Therefore, people may be interested in putting forward some general categories of mythical forms, such as divine intervention (description of mind image, personification, animism, isomorphism of god and man, etc.), materialization (representing imaginary things with existing objects), materialization (transforming concepts into 'real' beings), etc." [17] This can explain that images, as a symbolic system, transforms people's inner feelings into physical objects (a kind of physical object that is not completely material, such as supernatural power, vitality, gods, Tao, etc. in Chinese philosophy), and then expresses this feeling through some words "words" that represent things.

## 5. Conclusion

In a word, the ancient Chinese philosophy has its unique contribution to the Symbolic System and its epistemology. Not only does the interpretation of numbers and language symbols depend on the subject's perspective of rules, but our understanding is more in line with the basic way of

understanding input operation instructions (premises), predetermined symbol rules and output answers. Therefore, it can be used to explain the traditional Chinese philosophical cognition problems such as the relationship between name and reality, the relationship between words and images and meanings, and reinterpret words and meanings, forms and names, and things and self.

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