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**Rational intuition: a study on semiotic subjectivity**

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**Abstract:** Although scientific research usually emphasizes objectivity unaffected by any form of subjectivity, semiotic inquiries have to consider the role of subjectivity. In fact, social development, art, and literature always follow certain rules of objectivity, but these rules seem to be inescapably linked to the subjectivity of human beings. How can we avoid the subjectivity of research, or research biases caused by subjectivity, to ensure the objectivity of scientific research to the greatest possible extent? This paper answers the question through the cultural semiotics of *jingshen*, which is grounded in Chinese cultural traditions, especially the philosophies of Lao Tseu and Chuang Tzu. This line of inquiry seeks to identify objectivity in the constant transformation between the subject’s states of self and selflessness, while striving to avoid inductive and deductive biases caused by the “conceit” of rationality and to eliminate the constraints of specific concepts and images formed by existing knowledge as well as possible consequential “Verborgenheit.” The purpose is to achieve a state of “rational intuition,” returning to the natural mode of human existence and forging for semiotics a rationality-based path to the intuitive understanding of meaning.

**Keywords:** Chuang Tzu; cultural semiotics of *jingshen*; intuitive perception Lao Tseu; semiotic behavior

1 Introduction

The natural sciences usually emphasize the objectivity of scientific research to the exclusion of any subjective interference. For example, Newton’s law is to determine the state of stillness or uniform linear motion of an object, excluding external factors. The social sciences, on the other hand, cannot disregard the subjective role of human beings. Although social development or literary creation has certain objective rules, it seems that no rule can be free from human subjectivity. Phenomenological philosophy believes that the objective rules – or inherent knowledge formed by the self –
depend on human perception. Modern semiotics, pioneered by the Swiss linguistic semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure and the American logical semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce, has attempted to follow the objectifying trajectory of natural scientific research from the moment semiotics was treated as an independent discipline. Both the “dichotomous” correspondence between “signifier” and “signified” and the three-dimensional distinction among “sign,” “object,” and “interpretant,” are carried out within the framework of scientific positivism.

Yuri Stepanov, a member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, once pointed out that “the scientific study of semiotics has two properties: on the one hand, like other sciences, it is a science, and on the other hand, it is a method of scientific study” (2001: 46). Whether as a discipline of scientific research or as a method, semiotic research inevitably involves the issue of subjectivity. In particular, for semiotics as a methodology, the study of the subjectivity of symbolic activity should also be one of the focuses. How do we avoid the subjectivity of research, or research biases caused by subjectivity, to ensure the objectivity of scientific research to the greatest possible extent? This problem has in fact attracted attention since the middle of the twentieth century. Both Roland Barthes’ “zero creation” or “meaningless words” and Heidegger’s discussion of “Verborgenheit” and “Un-verborgenheit” are the results of this search, which eventually led to the “dissolution of meaning” by deconstructionism and plunged academic circles into the dilemma of the crisis of linguistic representation.

The cultural semiotics of jingshen is grounded in Chinese cultural traditions, especially the philosophies of Lao Tseu and Chuang Tzu. It seeks to identify objectivity in the constant transformation between the subject’s states of self and selflessness, while striving to avoid inductive and deductive biases caused by the “conceit” of rationality and to eliminate the constraints of specific concepts and images formed by existing knowledge as well as possible consequential “Verborgenheit.” The purpose is to achieve a state of “rational intuition,” returning to the natural mode of human existence and forging for semiotics a rationality-based path to the intuitive understanding of meaning.

2 Between subject and object: the subjectivity of semiotic behavior

For a long time, semiotics has usually been regarded as a discipline investigating the meaning relations between signs and the objects they represent. Whether Saussure, Peirce, Morris, Barthes, Heidegger, Bakhtin, or Lotman, whether Eco, Sebeok, Tarasti, Deely, or Copley, all of them have explored the meaning of signs from their respective
academic perspectives, and these studies include linguistics, logic, philosophy, culture, sociology, biology/ecology, art, and media, among others. Almost all non-Chinese semioticians strive to interpret the meaning of signs with the knowledge of their own disciplines. Chinese semioticians, such as Zhao Yuanren, Li Youzhen, Hu Zhuanglin, Zhao Yiheng, Ding Ersu, and Wang Mingyu, were deeply influenced by Western semiotics, and all of them tried to interpret the meaning of signs within their own academic framework as well. This kind of research is the intervention of the scholar’s own subjectivity in the perception of symbolic meaning. Academics have focused their attention on the symbols and the meanings of their representational objects, while the subjectivity of symbolic behavior has yet to be studied in depth. The subjectivity of symbolic behavior often determines the interpretation of symbolic activity, even the determination of symbolic meaning.

Although Peirce’s “interpretant” deals with the subjectivity of the symbolic interpreter, Peirce barely addresses the subjectivity of the symbolic behavior agents and the symbolic researchers. As symbolic studies continued to progress, the subjectivity of symbolic behavior began to receive attention, with special mention being made of the research of Norbert Wiley at the University of Chicago. He said, “neither sign, object, nor interpretant are, for Peirce, persons. The communicating persons-speaker and listener, utterer and interpreter – are tacked onto the two ends of the semiotic triad, making it a pentad” (Wiley 1994: 24). On this basis, Wiley proposed “a six-place hexadic scheme” in which the “speaker communicates in semiotic triads (sign, interpretant and object) to the listener but in addition the speaker communicates reflexively with him or herself” (Wiley 1994: 27).

In fact, what Wiley calls the “six-place hexadic scheme” is a synthesis of the theories of Pierce (1839–1914) and George Herbert Mead (1863–1931): “For Mead it was I to me and present to past. For Peirce it was I to you and present to future” (Wiley 1994: 24). Wiley introduced the temporal element into the study of semiotic meaning, and the dialogue of the semiotic self shifted from the static to the dynamic. This “six-place hexadic scheme” combines the subject of symbolic behaviors and the object of symbolic representation, which makes the symbolic behavior so vibrant.

Whether from I to Me or from I to You, Peirce and Mead work within the realm of rationality, except that these rational thoughts are in a dialogical dynamic exchange. However, human rational thought has a number of limitations and is easily overshadowed by other possible factors when a certain conclusion must be drawn. Human rational thought constrains human consciousness and imagination when it participates in exploring the meaning of symbolic representations. In addition, misunderstanding and unilateralism are inevitable when people perceive from the outside. The more human rationality intervenes in the process of perceiving, the narrower the perception engaged in. This is precisely the reason why Western deconstructionist thinking shook the foundations of human civilization.
Clearly, Wiley's research has not yet escaped the constraints of rational thinking, much less the subjectivity of semiotic researchers, which is often stronger due to their own position and the different goals they pursue. It is difficult for researchers to interpret other possibilities freely while revealing the representation of symbolic activity from one side due their constrained rational thinking. When human rational thinking opens a door for perceiving the world, it tends to close the door to other possibilities at the same time, either consciously or unconsciously.

It is uncontroversial that the subjectivity of symbolic activity should be explored within the context of human rationality from the perspective of cultural semiotics of *jingshen*. A new understanding of this issue is likely to be generated on the basis of human rational intuition if Lao Tseu's concept of “The Law of the Dao is its being what it is” (Lao 2016: 35) and Chuang Tzu's philosophy of “the known and the knowable” (Chen and Yao 2020: 536) are applied to the exploration. The cultural semiotics of *jingshen* is dedicated to investigating meaning construction in an unparalleled Chinese way, so as to lead semiotics studies to a deeper level.

Western philosophers have been exploring the issue of reason and intuition since the times of ancient Greece, including examination of early Greco-Roman discussions, Medieval theological theories, and all the theories from the Renaissance to the classical German philosophy period, especially Kant's research on the a priori laws of reason and Hegel's aesthetics. Moreover, Freud's theory of the unconscious mind and Bergson's theory of vital force, among others, regard irrationality as an inherent capacity of the human brain. Clearly, Western philosophy is based mainly on the exploration of such concepts as a priori ideas, absolute spirit, or brain mechanisms. The linguistic turn, which began in the twentieth century, and its study of the phenomenon of “Verborgenheit” of symbolic representations are also based on rational analysis and logical deduction.

By contrast, ancient Chinese philosophy shows a very different ideological interest, mainly in the dimension of “mind” and “perception,” namely *tian ren he yi* ‘human oneness with nature’ (Zhang and Yu 2020: 519), which not only identifies with rational thinking but also reveals the limitations of rational cognition. In ancient Chinese philosophy, any scholarship based on reason can become an obstacle for human perceptual cognition. Therefore, in the theory of natural Daoism in Lao-Chuang philosophy, not only is the mind irrelevant to the cognition of rational intuition, but it is also excluded from it and considered as the reason for human self-conceit. Since Lao Tseu, the essence of natural Daoism is that the unlimited vastness of nature overthrows human self-conceit (Yan 2011: 180).

From Chuang Tzu's perspective, rational generalizations and their linguistic expressions usually reflect the state of human certainty and self-conceit. Linguistic expressions always manifest speakers’ attitudes to their lives. The characteristics of language determine its intellectual certainty when describing something. Natural
Daoism aims to overthrow the spectrum of knowledge with the infinite possibilities of true nature, including overthrowing the intellectual certainty of knowledge and human self-conceit constructed on such certainty. This is the most essential conflict between speech and the concept of Dao, the ontological isolation between conventional language and life attitude revealed by the true natural world (Yan 2011: 252).

Human scientific cognition is usually regarded as the correct knowledge of the subject about the object and its law of development. Both Descartes’ epistemology and Husserl’s phenomenology in Western philosophy focus on the cognitive process of the subject’s understanding of the object on the basis of the separation of subject and object. Western semioticians since the twentieth century have been more or less influenced by epistemology and phenomenology. In their view, the subjectivity of symbolic activity is also reflected in the representation and meaning interpretation of the object by a sign. But in ancient Chinese philosophy represented by Lao-Chuang, the subject and object are fused into one, with natural Daoism especially changing the state of separation of subject and object, or thing and I. It also attempts to overthrow the existing rational analysis and generalization, and, definitely, to overthrow the life attitude and linguistic representation that are blended with reason, so as to create a new world in nature.

The distinction between subject and object does exist in ancient Chinese philosophy, such as in the distinction between “the knowable” and “the known,” which refer to “subject” and “object” respectively. Chuang Tzu clearly distinguished between the concepts of “the knowable” and “the known” in The adjustment of controversies, and various schools in the pre-Qin dynasty have also made a similar distinction, on the basis of which the traditional Chinese philosophical view of “the knowable and the known” was constructed. This distinction aims to discover the inadequacy of the separation between “the knowable” and “the known,” so that “the knowable” and “the known” can be integrated and “the knowable” can be maximized on the basis of reason and beyond at the same time. Finally, the state of tian ren he yi ‘human oneness with nature’ can be realized, which is considered the best state of human perception of the world.

3 In reason: intuition originated between the brain and the mind

Reason and intuition seem to be a pair of incompatible concepts. Intuitive thinking refers to a form of thinking that directly comprehends the essence of things without being bound by certain fixed logical rules. Intuition, as a psychological phenomenon, is usually regarded as existing under reason or consciousness, but above
irrationality or unconsciousness at the same time. Intuition usually refers to the human brain’s “instantaneous” direct perception of external things that suddenly appear. It is a cognition that has not yet risen to rational analysis. Evidently, intuition cannot be produced in rationality, or even opposed to rationality.

The Austrian psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud once divided human psychological activities into two parts, namely, the “unconscious” and “consciousness” (Wollheim 1971: 157–176). Intuition is somewhere in between the two. That is to say, intuition is neither the unconscious perception, nor the conscious cognition, but an intuitive perception based on irrationality. It can be interpreted that intuition is undoubtedly a physiological instinctive reaction only from the physiological mechanism of human beings, regardless of the cultural accumulation of history, the role of society, and education. Without the internal impulse of perception and the “instantaneous” stimulation of external objective things, human intuition cannot be produced. From the perspective of scientific research, excluding external factors and taking the human physiological mechanism as the main research object, it is not difficult to draw the conclusion that “intuition and reason” are not directly related.

However, if we analyze the acquired formation process of the human cognitive mechanism, based on the accumulation of education, culture, and history, perhaps the conclusion is different. Intuition cannot be produced without the specific cognitive subject, in which intuitive perception of external objects often depends on the subject’s own cultural literacy and knowledge accumulation and generates in rationality. Apparently, the intuitive perception of literate and illiterate people is quite different when appreciating the moon in the dark sky, with the former obtaining aesthetic perception, while the latter perhaps not being conscious of the beauty of the moonlight.

Jakob von Uexküll, the founder of the Tartu–Moscow School of Semiotics, once pointed out that, “Thanks to the assimilation of external motifs, the body of every subject becomes a meaning recipient for the vehicles of meaning whose educational melodies have taken form as motifs in the subject’s body”1 (1940: 54). The growth of a person is accompanied by the process of psychological maturity, the accumulation of cultural knowledge, and the formation of his/her rational thinking, which also form “three characteristics unique to humans, namely physiology, social culture, and intuition” (Cheng 2002: 1, our translation). These three characteristics are organically interdependent and cannot be separated. Therefore, human intuition is not only derived from the human physiological mechanism, that is, the brain, but also from the accumulation of cultural knowledge, that is, the mind. It is in this sense that

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1 German: “Dank der Übernahme fremder Motive gestaltet sich der Körper eines jeden Subjektes zu einem Bedeutungsempfänger jener Bedeutungsträger, deren Bildungsmelodien als Motive in seinem Körper Gestalt gewonnen haben.”
intuition arises from reason. The intuitive perception of symbolic behavior by any researcher of symbolic activities depends not only on his/her own physiological structure, but also on internal cultural accumulation and habits of mind.

In fact, any human symbol-cognitive activity is inseparable from its own living environment, which is the “umwelt” and “semiosphere” proposed by Uexküll and Lotman respectively. As Kalevi Kull and Mihhail Lotman point out, “Jakob Uexküll, when he described the worlds of animals and men, required an inclusive fundamental concept, for which he introduced the concept of ‘umwelt.’ Juri Lotman, when describing the universe of mind, texts and cultures, also required an inclusive basic concept, and thus he introduced the concept of semiosphere” (2012: 314). In the past, when academic circles mentioned “intuition,” they thought more from the dimension of “umwelt,” and regarded the subject of symbolic activities as a living creature, therefore regarding intuition as a perceptual activity between rationality and irrationality. However, if we start from the standpoint of “semiosphere,” we regard the subject as an individual produced in the cultural context, in which intuition is apparently dominated by reason. The intuitive perception of symbolic activities is influenced by both the “umwelt” of creatures and the “semiosphere” of cultural accumulation. In this sense, intuition is not only the individual physiological mechanism, namely the response of the brain, but also the mental result of knowledge accumulation.

Mihhail Lotman once said, “I would like to point out that we are not dealing here with just terminological differences – we cannot just replace environment with Umwelt; the difference between these notions is not even conceptual, but paradigmatic: a completely different idea of life, organism, evolution, biology itself evolves” (2002: 34). He further interpreted that “Yuri Lotman’s cultural semiotic works initially proceeded from the paradigm which is very similar to that of Uexküll’s. In the function of organism he had text, the analogy of Umwelt was context […] [T]ext produces its context in the widest sense, including all the participants in the communicative act” (2002: 34). In terms of perceiving symbolic meaning, the Tartu–Moscow School has stepped out of the cognitive paradigm of pure biology, mixed it with the accumulation of culture and knowledge, and explored a research approach that integrates natural science, humanities, and social sciences.

The task of the cultural semiotics of jingshen is to reveal the spiritual connection between all things, and this spiritual connection is closely related to the characteristics of the object itself and the subjectivity of researchers. From the cognition of the objective world and the history of human civilization, the position, cultural context, and knowledge reserve of individual researchers often determine the conclusions of the judgment. Such conclusions can reveal a certain truth and may lead to a certain misinterpretation of the object of judgment. In this way, the researcher’s rational thinking and knowledge accumulation becomes an obstacle to cognitive judgment.
and must be removed. Therefore, in the view of the cultural semiotics of jingshen, truly and comprehensively understanding the essence of the cognitive object requires not only the subject-object separation of the researcher's rationality, but also subject-object integration to exclude the interference of rationality. As said, “Always without desire we must be found, / If its deep mystery we would sound; / But, if desire always within us be, / Its outer fringe is all that we shall see” (Lao 2016: 3).

Apparently, intuition cannot be separated from reason, and comes into being in reason. However, only by shrugging off the constraints of reason and returning to the free state of nature can human intuition perceive the true meaning of the objective world. Human intuitive perception is a kind of behavior that makes cognitive activities depart from the interference of cultural accumulation and return to the physiological mechanism of natural creatures. In order to achieve this intuitive perception of the world, we have to go through the process of “practice” in traditional Chinese culture. In other words, only after self-cultivation can a social and rational person return to nature and eliminate any distraction, integrate into nature, and become a natural person who can understand the truth.

4 Returning to nature: breaking away from knowledge “Verborgenheit”

Whether in the study of natural science or social science, it seems to be an undoubted truth that knowledge is power, especially in today's rapid development of contemporary science and technology. However, it is known to all that language is the carrier of knowledge, and the representation crisis is caused by the phenomenon of the “Verborgenheit” of language, that is, it is difficult to interpret language meaning. Since the linguistic turn, the academic discussion on “Verborgenheit” and “Un-verborgenheit” has lasted for more than half a century. Is there no phenomenon of “Verborgenheit” in the generation of knowledge? When people recognize a certain objective rule or a certain cognition that is regarded as knowledge, does it also produce the phenomenon of “Verborgenheit” of other rules or knowledge? The answer is yes, because people's cognitive ability is limited, and even cannot avoid some stereotypes.

In fact, human society develops in parallel with the process of constantly overcoming our own cognitive limitations, and the more it progresses, the more we feel our insignificance. In ancient Greece, although the development of human civilization was in its infancy, people proposed a very big question, “What is the nature of the world?” By the seventeenth century, when Western civilization was making great strides, the academy, led by the French philosopher Descartes,
narrowed the problem and took an epistemological turn, asking the question, “How can we know the nature of the world?” As we stepped into the twentieth century, a linguistic turn took place, further narrowing the question to “How can language be used to express the nature of the world?” Before entering the twenty-first century, we were confronted with new questions, such as, “In what cultural context can language be used to express the nature of the world?” Each shift reveals the “Unverborgenheit” of the original knowledge and the “Verborgenheit” of the new knowledge. Moreover, the time between each question shift is getting shorter and shorter, which means that we are discovering cognitive deficiencies and the limits of our original knowledge more and more quickly.

How should human beings get out of the predicament of knowledge “Verborgenheit” and choose an ideal cognitive path? This is not only an important issue that the academic community should think about, but also one of the focuses of semiotics research, which is directly related to the cognition of symbolic meaning. Regarding this issue, Lao Tseu proposed a combination of symbolic cognitive activity “for learning” and symbolic cognitive activity “for achieving the Dao.” While cognition “for learning” constitutes the acquisition of knowledge, cognition “for achieving the Dao” is the act of diminishing oneself and thus escaping the dilemma of knowledge “Verborgenheit” in order to return to intuition. The cultural semiotics of jingshen endeavors to review the spiritual connection of symbolic cognitive activity based on Lao-Chuang philosophy and attempts to explore the way to release the meaning of symbols. As Lao Tseu says, “He who devotes himself to learning (seeks) from day to day to increase (his knowledge); he who devotes himself to the Dao (seeks) from day to day to diminish (his doing). He diminishes it and again diminishes it, till he arrives at doing nothing (on purpose). Having arrived at this point of non-action, there is nothing which he does not do” (2016: 71–73).

In fact, Lao Tseu intended to answer the question of “what” the world is when he discussed the Dao. He believed that the Dao can urge people to renew their living style by revealing the infinity of nature, which is the consensus among most schools of Daoism (Yan 2011: 202). The philosophy of Lao-Chuang does not seek to reveal a certain law or truth of the world merely by means of human rational thinking, nor does it seek to answer a certain cognitive question, but focuses more on a natural way of human existence. In Lao-Chuang philosophy and the theories of its disciples, the Dao is not only an objective law in nature, but a way of perceiving the world. The world (universe) is vast and boundless, and any rational comprehension of the objective world or exploration of the laws by human beings is an attempt to recognize the infinite universe with limited cognition. It seems inappropriate to apply the methodology above. The infinite world should be perceived in an infinite way, such as the Dao. The Dao is one kind of rational intuition and is also a natural way of interpreting the world.
Human society is a product of nature that has been nurtured for tens of thousands of years, and every person comes from nature and will eventually go back to nature at the end of his/her life. Although human beings possess infinite creativity due to their rational thinking and various abilities, they are very small, powerless, and even insignificant on most occasions when confronted with the mysteries and unfathomability of nature. Human beings have to retreat to a state of “vacancy and stillness” (Lao 2016: 23), the original possibility of life, to recognize nature; but “The Dao produced All things” (Lao 2016: 63), which implicitly extradites man’s capacity to the mysterious mirror of nature, which can be regarded as the curiosity and the capacity to interpret things through causation (Yan 2011: 204).

In the first chapter of Tao Te Ching, Lao Tseu says, “The Dao that can be trodden is not the enduring and unchanging Dao. The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name” (2016: 3). The world of knowledge that “can be trodden” or “can be named” and the world of natural doctrine that “cannot be trodden” or “cannot be named” are two different realms for human beings. The former is the tangible world described and analyzed in words, while the latter is the intangible world containing infinite knowledge which is hard for humans to reach. Dao refers to the true nature of the world, which cannot be easily understood by a knowledge system. Dao can be perceived not only by the rational experience of daily life, but also by the state of “forgetting myself,” “forgetting knowledge,” and “forgetting words.” In order to gain access to such a state, it is necessary for a person to dismantle their existing knowledge system and make themselves return to the original state of nature. Then, they can cultivate their moral character and overcome the limitation of cognition.

Chuang Tzu asked, “Who knows the argument that needs no words, and the Way that is not to be trodden?” (2016: 29) His thinking centrally interpreted the theory of “the known and the knowable” in traditional Chinese culture. Accordingly, from the perspective of the subjectivity of symbolic activity, the state of “The Perfect Man [who] uses his mind like a mirror” (Chuang 1996: 95) should be advocated by separating subject and object with a high degree of rationalization on the one hand, and unifying subject and object through moral cultivation on the other hand. Finally, the comprehensive “known” can be obtained by the integration of reason and intuition.

From the progress of human society, hominids were relatively weak in rational thinking due to the primitive natural environment at that time. With the development of social civilization, human rational thinking is continuing to improve, but the original state of nature is gradually shrinking or even disappearing. Although more and more people recognize the importance of protecting natural ecology, the return of human thinking to nature has been overlooked. The narrow conception of ecology protection caused by human subjectivity should be excluded because the ecological problems are generated by human thinking as well. The same is true for semiotic
research, which should realize that any rational revelation of symbolic meaning is only a method of analysis, but not the only one. The education of human beings should not be limited to the transmission and accumulation of knowledge, but should engage in dialogue, criticism, and other heuristic methods. The brains of the educated should be left in a state of “Verborgenheit,” an ecologically friendly and unpolluted environment which is conducive to the enhancement of thinking and creative abilities.

5 Conclusion

The return of human thinking to nature does not mean a return to the original and uncivilized condition, but a return to the state of “He who devotes himself to learning (seeks) from day to day to increase (his knowledge); he who devotes himself to the Dao (seeks) from day to day to diminish (his doing)” (Lao 2016: 71–73), which is more reasonable for survival in the society of the future. Human society moves forward in a series of zigzags, and when it evolves to a highly rationalized stage, it will certainly explore ways to return to nature. Rational intuition is not only a way of perceiving symbolic meaning that should be pursued by symbolic subjects, but also the ideal state of understanding the future world.

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