
I. Is There a Model of the Mind in Ancient China?

The Greek adage “Know thyself” typifies humanity’s will to self-introspection. In reflexive explorations of the self, humans became aware of the necessity to inquire into the nature and function of the mind and its thinking process. In the West since ancient times, there have appeared different models of the mind: the metaphysical, mathematical, semiotic, psychoanalytic, biophysical, neurophysical, digital, and cognitive, etc. These models display an interesting array of ideas about the mind. They range from a miniature plumbing system with reservoirs of memory, reason, and imagination in medieval common sense, a complex totality of functions in the spatiotemporal processing of knowledge-generating activities in eighteenth-century philosophical discourses, a telephone exchange with “wires” connecting the “exchange” in the brain to “subscribers” at the nerve ends in modern times, to a complicated information processing machine like the computer in the present age of information technology. In ancient China, a self-conscious concern with the human mind started, according to D. C. Lau, in the fourth century BCE, when Chinese thinkers discovered the complexities of the thinking process and became fascinated by them.1 But the human organ responsible for thinking in ancient China was believed to be the heart rather than the brain. Mencius, one of the thinkers who started the initial inquiries into the human mind, articulates a remark that was taken to be a definitive conception: “Xin zhi guan ze si 心之官则思 (The function of the heart/mind is to think).”2 This conception prevailed until the coming of modern science from the West. Although Mencius proposed a fairly detailed model for the relationship between the human heart and the universe including the human body, he did not construct a model for the human mind itself. Given this condition, we may wonder: Is there a model of the mind in traditional Chinese intellectual thought? And if there is one, how does it relate to Western models of the mind?
The view of the heart rather than the brain as the seat for thinking constitutes a transference of functions from one organ to another and does not hinder Chinese thinkers from constructing models of the mind because, despite the misnomer, the heart in Chinese intellectual thought is the equivalent to the mind and has exactly the same function. Guanzi (d. 645 BC), for example, affirms the heart as the locale of intelligence: “Xin ye zhe zhi zhi she ye (The heart is the house of intellect).” Chinese Buddhism has elaborate conceptions about the nature and function of the mind/heart. Mazu Daoyi 马祖道一, a patriarch of Chan Buddhism, said, “Every law is the law of the heart/mind. All names are the names of the heart/mind. Myriad laws arise from within the heart/mind. The heart/mind is the root source of myriad laws.” But as Chinese Buddhism conceives of the mind as ultimately a nonentity with its ontology as kong (void) and wu (nonbeing), it shows little interest in the structure of the mind, still less in constructing a model of the mind.

The Daoist school of thought and traditional Chinese medicinal theory evince considerable interest in the structure of the mind and in constructing a model. Guanzi views the mind as the king in charge of all body organs: “The heart occupies the kingly position of the body. The nine bodily orifices each have distinct functions like ministers. As the heart executes its Dao, the nine orifices follow its rationale.” Clearly, this view is concerned with the relationship between the mind and other body organs. Huangdi Neijing 《黄帝内经》(Inner Classic of the Yellow Emperor) holds a similar view and reaffirms the heart as the locale of cerebral activities: “The heart is the kingly organ from which the spirit and intelligence originate.” From this conception evolves a metaphysical model of the mind predicated on the yin-yang and five elements theory. This model conceives of the mind as having five aspects: hun 魂 (soul) (wood element), shen 神 (pneuma) (fire element), yi 意 (ideas) (earth element), po 魄 (spirit) (metal element), and zhi 志 (intention) (water element). This model only addresses how the mind/heart controls, regulates, and affects various organs of the body and is not concerned with how the mind/heart functions in the thinking process. It is therefore still remote from modern models of the mind.

There is another related model of the mind based on the first metaphysical principle of Chinese philosophy, the Dao/Taiji 道/太极. It conceives of the mind as having operations similar to those in Freud’s psychoanalytic model, Saussure’s linguistic model, Peirce’s semiotic model, and, in a very primitive way, the digital model of the computer. In an article carried in Journal of Chinese Philosophy, I have argued that the Taiji Diagram 太極圖 is not only a fascinating visual representation of the principle of the Dao or Taiji but also a
meta-sign predicated on an implicit system of sign theory in Chinese thought. In the conclusion of that article, I suggest that Chinese intellectual thought on the Dao and Taiji may offer more fascinating insights into the operations of the thinking process, and promise to undertake a follow-up project. This article is meant as a preliminary attempt to explore ancient Chinese theories of the mind in the direction indicated by that article. It will examine the metaphysical ideas of the Dao/Taiji in the texts of the Laozi, Zhuangzi (Writings of Zhuangzi), Yijing (or the Book of Changes), Huainanzi (Writings of the Prince of Huainan), and other thinkers’ writings in relation to modern ideas of philosophy, psychology, semiotics, and representation. The main objective is to explore how traditional Chinese thinkers have over history attempted to establish a conceptual model of the mind through their conceptualizations of the Dao/Taiji and to what extent the Dao/Taiji theory implies a structure of the rationally thinking mind.

II. The Taiji Principle as a Theory of the Mind

By reconceptualizing what the Dao/Taiji stands for in accepted traditional thinking, I have argued and proved in my previously published article that the Great Ultimate is a meta-sign. Now, based on that psychological and semiotic inquiry, I wish to offer a new direction in the inquiry into this issue. In Chinese thinkers’ conceptions of the relationship between the humans and the universe, I suggest that the Dao/Taiji may be seen as standing for the totality of the rationally structuring process of the mind. This idea will become understandable when we reverse the accepted theory and trace the origin of the Great Ultimate not from the phenomenal world to the universal principle inhering in it, but from the objective world to the human mind contemplating the workings of the universe. This inverse approach is not new, because in the history of Chinese intellectual thought, it was adopted and made predominant by a group of thinkers in the Song Dynasty. To a great extent, the approach changed the orientation of Zhouyi (周易) scholarship from what may be characterized as a naturalistic concern with cosmology in early philosophical thinking to idealistic explorations (both subjective and objective idealism) of the relationship between the universe and humans in the writings of Song Dynasty’s Neo-Confucian thinkers. The reorientation provides an interesting link with Western models of the mind, especially those conceived from the viewpoint of such idealist thinkers as George Berkeley.

Berkeley’s idealism argues that physical objects exist only if they are perceived. He summarizes his thesis in a famous principle: esse est
percipi (to be is to be perceived). While his conclusion to his philosophical inquiry that no object can exist without the mind is predicated on controversial premises, his esse est percipi principle captures from the subjective point of view the relationship between consciousness and the material world. The phenomenal world does not exist before the primal man became aware of it. As his famous example shows, if a tree falls down in a forest where no one is there to observe it, the phenomenon may be said not to have occurred, at least to the humans. The famous Chan/Zen legend about monks discussing what caused a banner to flutter has been understood as an intriguing illustration of the Buddhist view that all ideas arise from within the heart/mind. In a different light, the legend may be understood as another way of expressing the Berkeleyan thesis. It is neither the banner that flutters by itself, nor the wind that caused the banner to flutter, but the mind of the observer who perceives and conceives the movement of fluttering.

Berkeley further argues “one cannot conceive a sensible object existing unperceived, because if one attempts to do this one must thereby conceive that very object.” From this line of thought, we may formulate another principle: “To be is to be conceived.” This principle will offer us valuable insights into the rationale of the thinking process in the formulation of the Taiji. The accepted theory on the Taiji was derived from a process of reasoning that attempts to find the source of the Great Ultimate by tracing it from the phenomenal world to the principle behind the phenomena. Zhu Xi’s questions and answers in his discourse on the Taiji may be cited as an example to illustrate this process of reasoning:

**Question:** Is the Great Ultimate the highest principle of the human mind?

**Answer:** There is an ultimate in everything or event. That is the ultimate of principle.

**Someone asked:** Like humanity on the part of the ruler and respect on the part of ministers. These are ultimates.

**Answer:** These are ultimates of a particular thing or event. When all principles of heaven and earth and the myriad things are put together, that is the Great Ultimate. The Great Ultimate originally has no such name. It is merely a name to express its character.

In this passage, we need to note a few points. First, since the Taiji is the highest principle of the mind, there is an inherent relationship between the human mind and the Great Ultimate. Second, in his last sentence, Zhu Xi admits, as many Chinese thinkers have done before him, that the Great Ultimate is but a name to represent the human conception of the first principle. Whether that principle is a natural
law or an ethical law does not alter the fact that the Great Ultimate represents human efforts to relate man to the universe. This implies that the Great Ultimate is but an arch symbol or meta-sign for the thinking process concerning the nature of the Great Ultimate. Zhu Xi goes on to say: “There is no other event in the universe except yin and yang succeeding each other in an unceasing cycle. This is called change. However, for these activity and tranquility, there must be the principles which make them possible. This is the Great Ultimate.”¹⁴ In the final analysis, however, what makes the changes possible is not the principle, for the principle, which is the Great Ultimate, is, after all, a human construct. It is human thinking, more specifically, human correlations of things that make changes possible.

My argument finds support in a number of Chinese thinkers’ metaphysical elucidations of the Dao, especially in the treatises by Daoist thinkers. Laozi, the legendary founder of philosophical Daoism, articulates a well-known notion about the generative process of the Dao: “The Dao begets one; one begets two; two begets three; three begets myriad things.”¹⁵ This idea has always been understood as Laozi’s elucidation of how the Dao gives rise to myriad things of the universe. If, however, we relate it to some equivalent concepts in Chinese metaphysics in terms of thinking and representation, we may understand this saying differently. The Dao and Taiji are equivalents. So is the Yi (Changes). In the Zhouyi (the Book of Changes) text, oftentimes, it is very difficult to tell what the Yi exactly refers to: the principle of the book, or the operations of the universe, or the universe itself? The confusion arises because the universe comes into existence only when humans become conscious of its existence. This may explain the confluence of the Dao, the Taiji, and the Yi. They all are the results of human thinking. In terms of a psychological orientation, Laozi’s statement can be understood in this way: The operation of the Dao is like that of the rationally thinking mind. When it starts to think, it has a mental representation of the perceived world, which becomes an idea when expressed in language. One idea leads to another idea, and still more ideas, and ad infinitum.

Zhuangzi’s (369 BC–286 BC) musing on the essence of the Dao is conducted in a similar spirit. Self-consciously aware of the interrelation between human thinking and the universe, he makes a paradoxical effort to explicate the Dao in terms of speech:

The universe and I exist together, and all things and I are one. Since all things are one, what room is there for speech? But since I have already said that all things are one, how can speech not exist? Speech and the one then make two. These two (separately) and the one (the two together) make three. Going from this even the best mathema-
What should interest us is the similarity to Heraclitus’ elucidation of the Logos as the unifying One. Heraclitus’ fragment on the Logos states: “Listening not to me but to the Logos; it is wise to agree that all things are one.” In Heidegger’s opinion, what Heraclitus tries to convey in the fragment is the idea about the Logos: “All is One.” In this connection, Zhuangzi’s passage may serve as a footnote to Laozi’s conception of the Dao. Here, Zhuangzi is discussing a creative as well as interpretive process, the rationale of which is exactly one of signification, representation, and interpretation. The One is of course the Dao, which unifies all things under heaven. It is not a material entity like the heaven or earth. It is an intuitive comprehension of the operations of the universe. As the product of intuition, it is largely unconscious. Speech makes the unconscious conscious. The conscious urge to describe the One results in a mental representation of it (equivalent to Saussure’s concept). Speech then represents it as a materialized one (acoustic image or written symbol), which is a separate entity independent of the One or Dao. As a materialized image, the represented one is capable of being perceived by others. In terms of C. S. Peirce’s theory of signs, the One (Dao) is a referent (in this case it is a principle, not an object); the two is a sign because it combines the One with the perceived one (in terms of the sign algorithm S/s, it can be written as One/one); the three is an interpretant because it grows out of a correlation between the One (referent) and the two (sign). Peirce claims that theoretically, semiosis, the production of interpretants in the process of understanding a sign, is unlimited. In a similar way, Zhuangzi also claims that even the best mathematician cannot exhaust the generative process.

While Peirce’s semiosis is mainly concerned with understanding and interpretation, Zhuangzi’s discourse goes beyond the concern with interpretation as it is also preoccupied with expression. This can be seen from the distinction he makes between “nothing” and “something.” While “something” represents conceptualized thought, “nothing” represents the nebulous state of mind when the speaker tries hard to come to grips with how to represent a yet-to-be-conceptualized mental impression. Thus, it is reasonable to say that “to proceed from nothing to something” is a creative process while “to proceed from something to something” is an interpretive process. In this sense, Zhuangzi’s musing on the essence of the Dao vividly captures the elaborate mental function involved in the process of signification, representation, and interpretation. His and Laozi’s
insights into the workings of the Dao laid the ground for a model of the mind to be conceived by later thinkers.

III. The Taiji Model of the Mind

While early Chinese thinkers contributed precious insights into the workings of the mind, it is the Neo-Confucianists of the Song Dynasty who collectively conceived an implicit Taiji model of the mind. In his "An Exploration of the Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate (Taiji Tu Shuo 《太极图说》)," Zhou Dunyi 周敦颐 (1017–1073) explored the origin, operations, and principles of the universe and established a holistic worldview that embraces all dimensions of the universe and human existence. His idea that the mind of the sage and the mind of the universe are one and the same paved the way for the appearance of the Taiji model of the mind. But it is Shao Yong 邵雍 (1011–1077), the well-known philosopher of the Song, who made systematic efforts to establish the implicit Taiji model of the mind. Shao Yong was a controversial figure among the Neo-Confucians of his time, because he was fond of Daoism and Buddhism. Although he agreed with Zhou Dunyi that myriad things in the universe originated from a single source, which is the Taiji, he went beyond the latter’s insight that equates the mind of the sage with that of the universe and identified the Great Ultimate with the human heart/mind in general. Thanks to his multiple interests, he was able to conceive a model of the mind that draws insights from different sources. His model of the mind is metaphysical in nature, but it is also predicated on empirical intuition and logical analysis. As a whole it is a numerical, semiotic, and quasi-cognitive model. Shao Yong’s model is established on his major thesis: “Xin wei Taiji 心為太極 (The mind is the Taiji).” This thesis is complemented by another idea: “Dao wei Taiji (The Dao is the Taiji).” The two ideas represent exactly the two ways of conceptions in the thinking process that I have observed in Chinese thought: One relates the humans to the universe in the direction from the mind to the universe; the other from the universe to the mind.

Shao Yong’s explication of the thesis was unfolded by a rationally thinking mind in terms of numbers, language, and cognition. He explains the movement of the Taiji in the light of an interaction of four related terms: spirit, number, image, and object:

The Taiji is the One. Inactive, it produces the Twos. The Twos are indeed spiritual (shen 神). The spiritual Twos give rise to numbers (shu 數). The numbers give rise to images (xiang 象). The images give rise to objects (qi 器). That the Taiji does not move is its nature.
Aroused, it becomes spiritual. Being spiritual, it leads to numbers. In numbers are born images. Out of images grow objects. With the appearance of objects, changes take place and revert objects to the spiritual.20

In his reading of this passage, Zhu Bokun, an eminent scholar of *Zhouyi* philosophy, highly praises Shao Yong’s innovative move to view the human mind as the source of a numerical model of the Taiji. He also affirms Shao Yong’s view of the mind as a “logical and mathematic” view in contrast to the ethical mind promoted by Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi.21 Previous scholars have generally adopted a metaphysical approach to Shao Yong’s statement and viewed his ideas as explications of the *Zhouyi* in terms of numbers. This is certainly true of Shao Yong’s thinking. If, however, we relate the above passage to Shao Yong’s central thesis, “The mind is the Taiji,” Shao Yong’s discourse is implicitly or even explicitly meant as a model of the mind in terms of the operations of the Taiji. His model is certainly numerical or mathematical in nature, but a close reading of his ideas will reveal that the model is a synthetic one that integrates the insights of his predecessors and those of his own. Epistemologically, it is both naturalistic and metaphysical, empirical and idealistic. It is a model constructed on psychological, linguistic, and quasi-cognitive insights. It is especially close to the semiotic view of the workings of the mind engaging in a thinking process. In the following, I will explicate how Shao Yong integrates the multiplicity of insights.

In traditional exegesis, “*yi*,” literally, one, is the Taiji, the unchangeable oneness. Shao Yong insists that it is “the beginning of numbers but not itself a number.” *Shen*, literally, “spirit,” refers to dynamic activities of the mind; *shu* refers to odd and even numbers and their interaction; *xiang* refers to trigram images; *qi* refers to myriad objects in the universe. I suggest that the interaction of the four terms goes beyond the mathematical logic and touches upon the workings of the mind that shifts from an unconscious state to a conscious state in signification and representation, hence sharing some commonality with Freud’s psychological and Peirce’s semiotic models of the mind. The Freudian mind comprises of two interrelated areas: the unconscious and consciousness. The Taiji model of the mind is endowed with Freudian insights. This can be seen in Shao Yong’s discourse. Shao Yong’s theory is based on the metaphysical ideas expressed in the *Xicizhuan* (Appended Verbalizations to the *Book of Changes*), the *Daode Jing* 《道德经》, and the *Zhuangzi* 《莊子》, as well as the insights of his time. Before the appearance of *yi* (one) there is *wu* (nothing or nonbeing). While *yi* (one) indicates consciousness, *wu* 無 (nothing) suggests the nebulous state of mind before conscious conception comes into being. The movement from
nothing to one, and to two, and to three, and to myriad things in the universe represents a movement from the unconscious to consciousness. If we view the whole process as the working process of the rationally structured mind, we will see a psychological and semiotic process of thinking.

Wu signifies the mental state of unconsciousness in perception and conception. In semiotic terms, *wu* as the unchangeable nonbeing may be understood to represent the unconscious mental state of the primitive people or the amorphous nebula of the mind of someone who has not yet thought through something. *Yi* (one) represents the mental state of consciousness. In psychological and semiotic terms, *yi* as the conceived One may be understood to be a conscious representation of something, be it the universe or a particular thing in the mind. In the *Book of Changes*, *shen* seldom refers to divine beings. It refers to the unfathomable combinations of the *yin* and *yang* principles: “*Yin yang buce zhi wei shen*” (The immeasurable changes of the *yin* and *yang* are called the divine). Thus, *shen* as spirit may refer to the workings of the psyche. *Shu* as odd and even numbers refers to *yin* and *yang* dichotomies in interaction. The dynamic interaction between *yin* and *yang* is like the correlation of signifier and signified. Out of the correlation grow hexagram images based on the odd and even numbers, which in turn represent objects and conditions of the natural and human world. It is the movement of the mind that gives rise to the representation of miscellaneous objects in the world.

Shao Yong himself was close to offering such an explanation. To understand his point, we can retrace the steps that he has taken in describing their interrelations of the four terms. The myriad objects come from images; images come from numbers; numbers come from the twos; the twos come from the one. The one is the Taiji. Before the appearance of Taiji there is Wuji (the non-ultimate). What is the Taiji? Why is it capable of generating myriad things? Shao Yong provides a Berkeleyan answer: “The mind is the Taiji.” He describes the mind thus: “The human mind should be as quiet as stagnant water. If so, it is in peace. When it is in peace, it is tranquil. If it is tranquil, it is clear.” Here the tranquility of the mind means the nonexistence of ideas, as the Chinese saying goes, “the mind is like a pool of stagnant water.” This notion corresponds with the statement, “The Taiji is the One and does not move” and “That the Taiji does not move is its nature.” When the mind generates ideas, it enters the state of movement: “Aroused, it becomes spiritual. Being spiritual, it leads to
numbers.” In movement, the mind generates odd numbers; in tranquility, it generates even numbers. The odd and even numbers may refer to the hexagram lines, but the ultimate sources of them are the alternation between tranquility and movement of the mind. His other statement, “Xin yi er bu fen 心一而不分 (The mind is one and does not divide),” is another way of saying that the mind without engagement in the activity of thinking is the one and the Taiji. He also points out that the Xiāntiān Xue 先天學, a school of scholarship on the Book of Changes, which centers on the various diagrams of the Taiji, “is a theory of the mind (xinfa 心法),” and “The various Taiji diagrams all arose from within; myriad transformations and things are born of the mind.”

IV. A NEW INTERPRETATION OF SHAO YONG’S THEORY

Shao Yong’s thesis, “The mind is the Taiji,” has exerted a profound impact upon the ideas of his contemporaries and later thinkers. I believe that it was instrumental in making the paradigmatic shift in Zhouyi philosophy and scholarship from what Chung-ying Cheng sees as the onto-cosmology of nature to the ideological dominance of idealism, whether it is the subjective idealism in the Xinxue 心学 (the Learning of the Mind) upheld by Cheng Hao 程颢 (1032–1085), Lu Jiuyuan 陸九淵 (1139–1193), and Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1528), or objective idealism in the Lixue 理学 (the Learning of the Principle) advocated by Cheng Yi (1033–1107) and Zhu Xi. His thesis finds a most interesting development in Lu Jiuyuan’s famous saying: “The universe is my mind, and my mind is the universe.” Shao Yong’s thesis has also given rise to debates over the nature of the mind. Does he refer to the mind of the universe or the mind of sages? Some scholars believe that he means the former while other scholars believe he means the latter. In terms of Western philosophy, the former view is believed to be one of objective idealism while the latter one of subjective idealism. There is still a compromised view based on Zhou Dunyi’s famous saying that it is the mind of heaven and earth and at the same time the mind of sages.

In my opinion, adopting Western philosophical concepts to interpret Shao Yong’s thesis will not be able to resolve the controversy. If, however, we view his thesis as one about the working of the human mind in the process of signification and representation, we may come to the realization that Shao Yong might have meant to use the model of the Taiji to conceive a model of the human mind in a rationally thinking process. This view may transcend the differences of previous views and is still able to keep intact the accepted view that the Taiji
resides in everything and everything possesses the Taiji, thereby resolving the controversy arising from the conflict between naturalism and idealism.

Although Berkeley’s idealist thesis, “to be is to be perceived,” cannot help us resolve the controversy, it may help us reconceptualize Shao Yong’s thesis: “The mind is the Taiji.” From the objective point of view, the Taiji is the mind of heaven and earth because the Taiji is believed to be the source of myriad things in the universe including heaven and earth. The view that the Taiji gives rise to everything in the universe is the natural law. It exists independent of the humans in the way Berkeley’s falling tree exists whether there is anyone to observe its falling. But at the same time, before the appearance of sages, the natural law of the Taiji may be said to be a paradox: It both exists and does not exist. It exists because it is a natural law independent of the humans; it does not exist because before sages discover it, it is unknown to the humans. After sages discover the rationale of the Taiji, the natural law became human knowledge. By this time, as Zhou Dunyi’s idea states, the mind of the universe became fused with the mind of the sages. The operations of the sages’ mind made it possible for the mind of the universe to be discovered and known. Through the operations of the sages’ mind, the model of the Taiji and the mind of humans become fused into one and the same thing. Shao Yong achieved this fusion by superimposing the mind of the sages onto the rationale of the Taiji. Or we may say he borrowed insights about the Taiji to conceive the mind. In either case, the mind of heaven and earth is the mind of the Taiji and that of sages.

My reconception is best explicated by recourse to Lu Jiuyuan’s famous thesis: “The universe is my mind, and my mind is the universe.” Through the same reversal of predication, Shao Yong’s thesis, “The mind is the Taiji,” becomes a different but equivalent thesis: “The Taiji is the mind.” This thesis has two related facets: “The Taiji is the mind of heaven and earth” and “The Taiji is the mind of the sages.” In terms of Berkeley’s idealist thesis, “to be is to be perceived,” the first thesis is made possible by the second thesis. In my reasoning, the two theses are fused through the cognition of the sages: “The Taiji is the mind of heaven and earth in the mind of the sages.” Specifically, the Taiji is the mind of heaven and earth in the mind of Shao Yong or other Yijing scholars. Hu Wei 胡渭 (1633–1714), the Qing scholar of the Zhouyi, expressed a similar opinion. He states that Shao Yong’s thesis “The mind is the Taiji” should be understood as: “the mind of Master Shao shares the same form as the Taiji.” Shao Yong’s son Shao Bowen 邵伯溫 (1157–1134) provides a clear explanation: “The mind of heaven and earth exists between movement and stasis and relies on movement and stasis to evidence itself. The mind of heaven
and earth can be observed through this movement and stasis. The
mind of sages is the mind of heaven and earth. It is also evidenced
through this movement and stasis.”

Apart from metaphysical thinking in terms of numbers and psy-
chology, Shao Yong’s discourse reaches out to the domains of lan-
guage and representation.

A gentleman who studies the Book of Changes should consider the
hexagram images, line numbers, hexagram statements, and meanings
of hexagrams. The images arise from the shapes of objects; numbers
from the quality of objects; names from verbal statements; and mean-
ings from the functions of hexagrams. When there is meaning, there
must be words; when there are words, there must be images; when
there are images, there must be numbers. If numbers are established,
then images will be born; if images are born, then the words will be
clear; if words are clear, then the meanings will be shown. As images
and numbers are fish-traps and rabbit-snares, so words and thoughts
are fish and rabbits. It is all right to forget the fish-trap and rabbit-
snare after one has captured fish and rabbits. If one abandons the
fish-traps and rabbit-snares to capture fish and rabbits, he will never
see his catch.

Previously, scholars are right to point out that Shao Yong’s statement
was made in response to Wang Bi’s (226–249) discourse “Zhouyi
Mingxiang《周易明象》(Elucidation of Images in the Zhouyi),” but
from another perspective, he may be said to have proposed a model of
the mind in terms of semiotic and linguistic representation. His model
differs from that of Wang Bi in that while the former is one of repre-
sentation that proceeds from the intention of the sages, through
hexagram statements, to images and numbers, the latter follows a
route from the opposite direction, that is, from images and statements
to the intentions lodged in the sages’ mind. This may explain why the
two sagacious thinkers held different views on the same thinking
process. In simple words, while Shao Yong’s model is one that lays
more emphasis on representation, Wang Bi’s model is one that
focuses more on interpretation. We may find implications in Shao
Yong’s remark that “The Pre-heaven school of thought is the mind;
the Post-heaven school is the mind’s traces.” This remark seems to
suggest that Shao Yong makes a distinction between what is signified
and what is interpreted.

Through a representational model of the mind, Shao Yong draws
a conclusion that summarizes his view on the relationship between
the Taiji Diagram and the human mind: “The pre-heaven school of
thought on the Book of Changes is the law of the mind. Therefore, all
diagrams arose from the human mind; myriad changes and things
were born of the mind.” He also views the Taiji Diagram as a dia-
grammic representation of the rationale underlying the universe:
“Although the Taiji Diagram has no words, what I have talked all day long does not depart from this diagram. This is because the rationale of heaven and earth and myriad things is completely contained within. The pre-heaven Taiji Diagram is an encircled center.”32 In general, Shao Yong conceives of the pre-heaven Taiji Diagram as a transcendent, archetypal Sign that gives rise to miscellaneous diagrams, numbers, meanings, and words in the way the mind generates ideas, words, and images. Traditional scholarship has interpreted Shao Yong’s view of the Taiji Diagram as a numerical method of infinite division and multiplication.33 In terms of my view of the Taiji Diagram as a meta-sign, we may reinterpret his view as one on the working principle of the Taiji in terms of signification. From this new perspective, Shao Yong’s model of the mind becomes semiotic and psychological in nature.

V. A PSYCHOLINGUISTIC MODEL OF THE MIND

My reconception of Shao Yong’s theory corresponds with linguistic and semiotic theories. C. S. Peirce considers thoughts as signs. In his account of the link between pragmatism and semiotics, Pierce asserts: “every thought is a sign.”34 In terms of this idea, the reasoning about the Taiji is nothing less than thinking processes. Carl Gustav Jung makes an observation of the Dao, which is more directly relevant to my view: “If we take Tao as the method or conscious way by which to unite what is separated, we have probably come quite close to the psychological content of the concept.”35 In the beginning, a thought is hazy and nebulous in the way that wu 無 represents first of all an amorphous entity. Gradually the amorphous entity becomes an intuition, which is the undivided One. Further on, the movement of the mind clarifies the intuition. When the thought becomes clarified, it assumes forms. Then, it engages in correlating the formless entity with objects, ideas, and concepts. Zhuangzi seems to allude to this thinking process:

In the great beginning, there was non-being. It had neither being nor name. The One originates from it; it has oneness but not yet physical form. When things obtain it and come into existence, that is called virtue (which gives them their individual character). That which is formless is divided [into yin and yang] and from the very beginning going on without interruption is called destiny (ming, fate).36

In the Huainanzi 《淮南子》(Writings of the Prince of Huainan) there is a passage which describes the genesis of the cosmos: “When Heaven and Earth did not yet have form, there was a state of amor-
phous formlessness. Therefore this is termed the Great Beginning (*Taishi*). This Great Beginning produced an empty extensiveness, and this empty extensiveness produced the cosmos. In a way, we may view it as an account of the beginning of human consciousness. The splitting of the Taiji into two parts is like the opposition between signifier and signified. To the primal man at the dawn of human consciousness, the objects that he was first aware of must be the sun and moon, or heaven and earth. Curious enough, in the traditional Chinese gallery of diagrams concerning the Taiji, there are some diagrams which show the sun and moon in a circle, heaven and earth in another circle, and all four categories in still another circle:

There are some other similar diagrams which show the Chinese characters of “six (*yin* number),” “seven (*yang* number),” “eight (*yin* number),” “nine (*yang* number),” “metal (*yang* element),” “wood (*yin* element),” “water (*yin* element),” “fire (*yang* element),” etc., to form binary oppositions inscribed in circles. These diagrams are graphic illustrations of the perception of the universe in *Huainanzi*’s account:

The cosmos produced the primal fluid (*yuan ch’i*), which had its limits. That which was clear and light collected to form Heaven. That which was heavy and turbid congealed to form Earth. The essences of Heaven and Earth formed the *yin* and the *yang*, and the concentrated essences of the *yin* and *yang* formed the four seasons. The scattered essences of the four seasons formed the myriad things. The hot force of *yang*, being accumulated for a long time produced fire, and the essence of fire formed the sun. The cold force of *yin*, being accumulated for a long time, produced water, and the essence of water formed the moon.

This way of thinking may also provide us with a clue to another question: How did those objects and concepts first come to be associated with *yin* and *yang*? A conventional answer is that because those
objects have the material substance to be designated as such. But a semiotic answer would be that because those objects were constituted into a series of binary oppositions: heaven and earth, sun and moon, heat and cold, joy and sorrow, pleasure and anger, life and death, etc. The Chinese philosophical thinking concerning the mechanisms of the Taiji is replete with such binary oppositions. The binary thinking suggests that binary opposition constitutes the very way of thinking itself. From this point of view, I venture to say that the Taiji Diagram with its signifying principle may be regarded as a binary model of the workings of the mind, which shares the most fundamental logic of computer language, a binary arithmetic based on the operations of the two cardinal numbers: one and zero. Interestingly, while the computer language makes use of one and zero in the binary arithmetic, the Taiji theory employs the binary opposition between yi (one) and wu (nothing), wu (nothing) and you (something), or yin and yang. It is no accident that Leibniz should have related the Taiji theory with his invention of the binary arithmetic.

The psycholinguistic model of the mind may be further illustrated with other Taiji Diagrams. Zhou Dunyi (1017–1073), who is believed to have started the diagrammic tradition of the Taiji studies, explicates in his “An Explanation of the Diagram of the Great Ultimate” the working principle of the Taiji in a way that may be viewed as a discourse on the workings of the mind and the process of signification in signs:

The Great Ultimate of Non-being and also the Great Ultimate (T’ai-chi)! The Great Ultimate through movement generates yang. When its activity reaches its limit, it becomes tranquil. Through tranquility the Great Ultimate generates yin. When tranquility reaches its limit, activity begins again. So movement and tranquility alternate and become the root of each other, giving rise to the distinction of yin and yang, and the two modes are thus established.

The Five Agents constitute one system of yin and yang, and yin and yang constitute one Great Ultimate. The Great Ultimate is fundamentally the Non-ultimate.

Zhu Xi offers an elucidation of Zhou Dunyi’s “Taiji Diagram.” He asserts in his treatise “The Great Ultimate”: “The Great Ultimate is nothing other than the principle.” He illustrates how the principle generates yin and yang:

The Great Ultimate is merely the principle of heaven and earth and the myriad things. With respect to heaven and earth, there is the Great Ultimate in them. With respect to the myriad things, there is the Great Ultimate in each and every one of them. Before heaven and earth existed, there was assuredly this principle. It is the principle that “through movement generates the yang.” It is also this principle that “through tranquility generates the yin.”
In semiotic terms, this principle may be regarded as the principle of signification, semiosis, or correlation of signifier and signified, and the production of interpretants. Peirce’s theory of semiosis is about the generation of interpretants in the thinking process. As one Peircean scholar points out, “Thinking, then, is sign development, or a process of sign interpretation, and the entire process is called *semeiosis* (which Peirce sometimes spells ‘semiosis’).” If we view *yin* and *yang* as archetypal signifiers which engender unlimited series of signifiers, we may perhaps say that the Chinese Taiji theory is about the production of interpretants in thinking process, comparable to Peirce’s conception of semiosis. The only difference is that in terms of the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, Jacques Lacan, and Roland Barthes, *yin* and *yang* are respectively replaced by signifier and signified. A correlation of the Taiji Diagram with Saussure’s pictorial representation of the sign will enable us to see a striking similarity:

![Saussure’s Sign Diagram](Image1) ![The Taiji Diagram](Image2)

In the four diagrams, the first is a modified graph of Saussure’s sign structure; the second is the Taiji Diagram; the third is the Taiji Diagram in the form of Saussure’s sign diagram; the fourth is the Taiji Diagram in the form of a sign. In the last diagram, “Taiji” is the totality of a sign; *yin* and *yang* represent signified and signifier, respectively. In semiotics, signifier stands for the means of representation while signified represents all that is meant to be represented. In the Taiji theory, *yin* represents latent thought and the unconscious while *yang* represents manifest content and consciousness.

In the Chinese tradition, *yin* and *yang* have been associated with numerous objects and concepts. How did those objects and concepts first come to be associated with *yin* and *yang*? A conventional answer suggests that because those objects have the material or conceptual qualities to be designated as such. But an examination of the
“Shuogua Zhuan” of the Book of Changes informs that the associations designated for a trigram are often random, and even contradictory. For example, the hexagram $qian$ 乾, according to “Shuogua Zhuan,” symbolizes heaven, ring, king, father, jade, gold, cold, ice, scarlet color, thoroughbred horse, old horse, lean horse, motley-colored horse, trees, and fruits. From a commonsensical viewpoint, ring, cold, ice, old horse, lean horse, and fruits cannot possess material or masculine qualities associated with $yang$, the fundamental quality of $qian$. Their original meanings must have had to do with representation and signification. Heidegger once remarks, “The doctrine of signification is rooted in the ontology of Dasein.” Dasein or “being,” he reminds us, is not a primary and absolutely irreducible signified in its general syntactic and lexicological forms within linguistics and Western philosophy. It is rooted in a system of language and has a historically determined “significance.” This is also true of the Taiji. In terms of this understanding and in relation to the exegeses concerning the Taiji and the meanings of the hexagrams, it is reasonable to believe that the various meanings associated with $yin$ and $yang$ came from numerous attempts at semiotic correlations at different historical times and under different circumstances. In the correlations concerning the Taiji, binary opposition is a frequently used paradigm. To a great extent, binary opposition constitutes the very way of thinking in conceptualizing the Taiji. Take the Taiji’s two basic principles, the $yin$ and $yang$, for example. Objects and concepts were constituted into a series of binary oppositions: you (being) and wu (nonbeing), heaven and earth, sun and moon, black and white, full and empty, hot and cold, pleasure and sorrow, life and death, etc. The Chinese philosophical thinking concerning the exegeses of the Taiji is full of such binary oppositions. It is unnecessary to enumerate any more. The binary correlation is never static; on the contrary, it is fluid and often turns binary concepts into their opposites.

VI. Concluding Remarks

Ancient Chinese thinkers, like their Western counterparts, were engaged in pondering the operations of the mind in perception and conception, representation and interpretation. In their metaphysical inquiries into the principle of the Taiji and the Taiji Diagram, they attempted to formulate conceptual frameworks to capture the mind in action, similar to those articulated by modern semiotic thinkers. The difference is that even though Chinese thinker attempted to formulate their ideas about the mind at work in analytical and logical terms, because of the different cultural orientations, they were not
concerned with establishing rigorous models of the mind based on scientific systems of representation. Nevertheless, while contemplating on the operations of the rational thinking mind, they conceived of a distinct model of the mind that anticipated the rise of modern models of the mind in the West, especially the Freudian model, which consists of the unconscious and consciousness, the Peircean semiotic model, which is grounded in a general doctrine of signs, and the computer model, which, at the most basic computational level, describes a computer as a symbol-crunching machine that manipulates the cardinal numbers of one and zero in a binary arithmetic. In conclusion, I suggest that the Chinese model of the mind based on the theory of the Dao/Taiji is basically a psycholinguistic and quasi-cognitive model whose operating principle is the incessant interaction between you (being) and wu (nonbeing) or yin and yang.

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ENDNOTES

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3. Guanzi, Guanzi, Juan 13, in Ershier Zi《二十二子》(Twenty-Two Masters) (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1986), 144b.
5. Guanzi, Guanzi, Juan 13, 143b.
6. Huangdi Neijing《黃帝內經》(Inner Classic of the Yellow Emperor), Juan 3, in Ershier Zi (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1986), 885b.
7. Ibid., Juan 1–3, 875–89.
9. Professor Chung-ying Cheng’s recently published book, Yixue Benti Lun《易學本體論》(Theory of Ontology in the Philosophy of the Yijing) (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2006) is a systematic study of the nature, ontology, epistemology, and hermeneutics of the Zhouyi. Of the numerous fresh insights into the Zhouyi, one that has relevance to this study is the central idea that the ontology of the Zhouyi is one of onto-cosmology that unifies the universe, humans, and human mind into a totality.
10. Berkeley’s original words read: “For as to what is said of the absolute existence of unthinking things without any relation to their being perceived, that seems perfectly unintelligible. Their esse is percipi, nor is it possible they should have any existence out of the minds or thinking things which perceive them.” In A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge (Chicago: Open Court, 1910), 31.
11. According to the legend about Huineng 慧能, the Sixth Patriarch, when he came to a Buddhist temple at 39, no one knew he was the heir of the Fifth Patriarch. He joined
several monks in a discussion of what caused the banner on the flagpole to flutter. While the monks were heatedly arguing whether the banner was moving by itself or the wind was moving it, Huineng surprised them all by declaring, “It is neither; it is the mind that moves.” See The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch, translated with notes by Philip B. Yampolsky (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 73.


15. Adapted from D. C. Lau, trans., Tao Te Ching (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), 103.


20. Ibid.


24. Ibid., 522.

25. Ibid., Juan 13, 518.

26. See Chung-ying Cheng, Yixue Benti Lun. For ideas and insights relevant to my argument, see the first five chapters.

27. Wing-tsit Chan, A Source Book, 579.


30. Shao Yong, Huangji Jingshi Shu, “Guanwu Waipian,” Juan 13, 517.

31. Ibid., 518.

32. Ibid.


38. The diagrams are copied from Hu Wei’s Yitu Mingbian, 58, 59, and 60.


41. Wing-tsit Chan, A Source Book, 463.

42. Ibid., 638.

43. Ibid.


45. For a detail account of the correspondence between the Taiji Diagram and the semiotic theory of the sign, please read Ming Dong Gu, “The Taiji Diagram,” 195–218.

46. See Zhouyi Zhengyi, Juan 9, 95.