

Chinese Conceptions of the Self – Key Chinese terms



Hanfeizi (c. 280-233 BCE)

“Once there was a **rich man** of Song. When the dirt wall around his house collapsed in a heavy rain, **his son** said, “If you don’t rebuild it, thieves will surely break in,” and the **old man who lived next door** told him the same thing. When night fell, thieves actually broke in and made off with a large share of the rich man’s wealth. The **rich man’s family** praised the son for his wisdom, but eyed the old man next door with suspicion.” [transl. Burton Watson (2003), 77]

Rolf Trauzettel's two paradigms on constitution of personhood

- ❑ Paradigm 1: person emerges from within the individual → an individual is an integral and inseparable agent; unique identity, cannot be substituted
- ❑ Paradigm 2: person externally imposed → divisible, partial; no unitary perspective; one part of the self can be observed by another part → person defined heteronomously by social roles. People are replaceable and dispensable. A Chinese person is not an individual because it lacks the undividedness that is characteristic for the smallest elements, *atoma* in Greek, *individua* (Cicero) or *substantia*.
- ❑ Trauzettel is, in my view, correct in saying that 'indivisibility' (Unteilbarkeit) is not within the semantic range of Chinese words that refer to a single human being.
- ❑ That is not to say that the self is less central to the human experience in China. I would argue that the opposite is true.
- ❑ "Self is synecdoche for everything that is human" (Deborah Sommer)

Key words related to ‘person’

- *Ti* 體, limbs, physical frame, one’s own person
 - *Gong* 躬 human body, torso; one’s own person, oneself; used in ritual
 - *Xing* 形 outward form, appearance shape
 - *Shen* 身 one’s person, oneself; one’s integrity, moral quality; torso of man or animal; social status, identity
 - *Ji* 己 self; oneself; itself; used as pronoun
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- All terms except *Ji* 己 show degree of embodiment
 - Body is the unifying element, core of life itself
 - No absolute boundaries between the cognitive-psychological functions and a persons bodily presence or sphere of natural urges
 - Self is an aggregate of several properties

Shen 身

- Used when discussing relations with family members or persons with an ascribed relationship
- Physical, psycho-physical and social entity → *shenfenzheng* 身份證, ID card in modern Chinese
- Relationship referred to by *shen* not chosen
- *Shen* often parallel or resonant to another, often of different rank

Ti 體

- Ability to overlap with others
- Multidimensional
- Parts are consubstantial with the whole
- Materialist conception
- Sommer uses the image of the plant

Ji 己 ‘self’ and its semantic uses

- Refers least to somatic aspects of identity
- Has no visual marks or attributes
- Socially and conceptually constructed
- Not associated or located in certain part of body
- Discrete, does not extend beyond the own body; does not extend beyond itself
- Place of feelings, main site of desire (克己 *keji* to discipline oneself); disciplined desire are seen as wholesome aspirations
- *Ji* 己 describes certainly an individuated self, a self that is seen as being distinct from others
- But it also mostly implies a relationship with another, with another human being; not used in relationships with family member; actors not related



Ji 己 ‘self’

Ji 己 is used to distance the self from others and invites

- Comparison with others
- Negotiation
- Relationality
- Understanding (*bu zhi ji zhe* 不知己者 ‘one who does not know me’)
- Uncertainty of relationship
- Should the self to measure others?
- Xunzi (3rd cent. BC): “sages use themselves (*ji*) as a measure” (*yi ji du zhe* 以己度者).

Singularity of the ruler

- guaren 寡人 (Zhou dyn.; “the bereft one”)
- gu 孤 (Zhou dyn.; “orphan”)
- zhen 朕 (“I”; only used by emperor)

The ruler is in no relationship to anyone. He is the yardstick for everything.

Conclusions

- ❑ Centrality of the ‘self’ in Chinese thought
- ❑ High level of abstractness
- ❑ the self cannot know itself directly → a person can never see themselves how they really are
- ❑ Chinese self is individuated but interconnected
- ❑ “Being humane comes from the self; how could it come from others?” (*Lunyu*, Yan Yuan)

