‘Self-Refutation’ ( bèi) in Early Chinese Argumentative Prose: Sidelights on the Linguistic Prehistory of Incipient Philosophy

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There seems to be an emerging consensus within the field of classics that the lexical field of ‘philosophy’, which is absent in the earliest Greek sources, originated in the 5th century BC with Pythagoras of Samos (c. 570-480 BC) and his followers, although formations from φιλοσοφ-(-ία, -εῖν, -ικός etc.) are only attested somewhat later.1 From a colorful description in Cicero (106-43 BC), likely to harken back to much earlier Greek sources such as Heracleides Ponticus (c. 390-310 BC), we learn that the initial self-definition of Pythagoras as a philosopher was set against two negative prototypes of Greek contemporary culture: those who ‘with their trained bodies strive for the glory and profit of the crown’ in sports, and those who are ‘attracted by the prospect of profitable purchase and sale’ at the Olympic games.2 In contradistinction to the athlete and the businessman, then, the philosopher is a rare person, striving for sagacity (sapientiae studiosos), ‘in whose life the contemplation and exploration of things take a far more prominent place than anything else’.3 Remarkably, Aristotle, who is viewed by some as the father of ‘philosophy’ in Greece, located the origins of those ‘sciences which relate neither to pleasure nor yet to the necessities of life’4 with the leisurely priestly class in Egypt, with whom Pythagoras is in turn said to have studied for many years.5 The philosophers, characterised in other early Greek texts as itinerant, often ascetic people forming esoteric groups and interested in the open ‘observation’ (θεωρία) of the

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2 ‘.. alii corporibus exercitatis gloriam et nobilitatem coronae peterent, alii emendi aut vendendi quaestu et lucro ducentur.’ (Cicero, Tusculanae 5.8-9, see Riedweg, ‘Zum Ursprung des Wortes “Philosophie”’, pp. 150-153 for a detailed discussion of the passage).
4 αἱ μὴ πρὸς ἡδονὴν μηδὲ πρὸς τάναγκαία τῶν ἐπιστημῶν (Tredennick, trans., Aristotle, 1.981 b).
5 See Holenstein, ‘Philosophie außerhalb Europas’, pp. 65-77. Similar classical passages, which point to early Greek knowledge of Egyptian language and literature or mention an indebtedness to Egyptian science, are collected in Quack, ‘Die Rolle der Hieroglyphen’, pp. 86-90.
nature of things in general to the exclusion of more mundane activities, are thus *not* defined as against the sages of earlier periods. Quite to the contrary, \( \text{φιλόσοφος} \) – originally an exocentric possessive compound before being reanalyzed as a verbal determinative compound between the 6th and the end of the 5th c. BC – was construed as a categorical continuation and, indeed, an ‘elativic’ enhancement of *prevailing* notions of sagacity.\(^6\) Moreover, the philosopher’s primary activity of \( \text{θεωρέειν} \) still echoed the religious activities of oracle divination and pilgrimages to sacral feastings during this period, held in communities such as the one of Pythagoras, who was revered as a ‘*guru*-like’\(^7\) head of a sect, much occupied with rituals regulating sacrificial behavior and food consumption\(^8\) apart from his more scientific preoccupations.

During the preceding archaic period, pronunciation of \( \text{ἀλήθεια} \) ‘the state of being unconcealed or evident’, was still the prerogative of the skilled epic singer, the seer, or the king, combining mantic functions with those of a judge – the three prototypical *maîtres de la vérité* of Marcel Detienne’s study of the same title.\(^9\) The term \( \text{ἀλήθεια} \), often linked to the spirit of justice (\( \text{δίκαιος} \)) and revealed by the memory-preserving techniques of chanting, praise, and epiphanic visualization of these masters, is systematically opposed to oblivion (\( \text{λήθη} \)), not to deception and trickery (\( \text{ἀπάτη, δόλος} \)), and it is simply *asserted* without the need for argumentation, persuasion, let alone demonstration obeying certain pre-defined rational criteria. \( \text{ἀλήθεια} \) and \( \text{λήθη} \) thus complement each other, never mind ambiguities arising out of their pairing. Yet at the end of a long and complicated process of what Detienne calls ‘laicization’ and ‘devaluation’ of \( \text{ἀλήθεια} \), essentially two camps emerge in sixth century Greece. On the one hand, the urban milieu of the sophists, who radically break with the religious tradition and reduce language to a tool, choosing from the complementary pair whatever is effective in political discourse; on the other, the religious-philosophical sects of the Pythagoreans, Orphics and others, living on the margins of the city, who successfully reinstatiate \( \text{ἀλήθεια} \) as an absolute, now diametrically opposed to the forces of oblivion, deception and trickery, but also to opinion (\( \text{δόξα} \)) and (per)suasion (\( \text{πεῖσις} \)).\(^10\) Following Detienne, a dichotomy comes into the Greek world with this move, which

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\(^7\) Riedweg, ‘Zum Ursprung des Wortes “Philosophie”’, p. 173.

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\(^9\) Detienne, *Les maîtres de vérité dans la grèce archaïque*, see on these roles especially chap. II and III.