

Making Things Public Atmospheres of Democracy

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Things Chinese: On *wu*

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The signifier for “thing” in Chinese attracts the cluster of pronunciations (in various dialects and languages) for the written character *wu* (that is the phonetic representation of the character in modern Mandarin, where it is pronounced with a falling tone). It is an old term: In the oracle bones used for divination in the Shang period (1760-1122 BCE) it denoted the “mottled color of an animal”. Its left side is indeed the character for “oxen,” and that part eventually becomes the component marker for any word denoting an animal. By the time of *Shijing*, a classic of poetry from the second century BCE, *wu* as an adjective has become a noun, and we see phrases like “Use the 30 tethered ‘piebald-oxen’ (*wu*) as sacrificial victims” (*Shijing*, “Xiaoya”). *Wu* was also sometimes cognate with *wen*, meaning “streaks, pattern of lines, dappled, ornamented” and from that “writing, essay, literature, culture”.¹

Two things stand out in this etymological beginning: The “thing” that harbors the root of “things” in general functioned in ritual, an *event* that assembled animals, people and objects. (Indeed, some of the appearances of *wu* in the Zhouli (rites of the Zhou Dynasty, dated to around 300 BCE) are simply glossed as *shi*, “affair, an undertaking, something that happens, an event”.)

Secondly, what was important to the Chinese eye about the oxen in question was not its internal substantiality, its self-identity, but the visible, external distinctions perceived. This attention to variety and difference extends outward when the term comes into its own as *wanwu*, “the 10,000 things” that open the classic work of Laozi, the *Daode jing*. Or, as we might re-translate: “the 10,000 (disorganized, chaotic, infinitely various) things (that comprise the world)”. In this world, *wu* is not a separate, substantial, inert object separated from people or living beings. In China, *wu*'s



The character *wu*, stone rubbings of the actual calligraphy of masters whose names and dynasties appear in fine print beneath the characters, in: *Zhongguo shufa da zidian* [The Chinese Dictionary of Calligraphy], Lin Hongyuan (ed.), Guofa keweii Publishing Co., 1908, pp. 908f.

etymology inevitably harbors a sense of objects, creatures, people and events all assembled together. It conveys a sense of relationships happening among them all in a cosmos of constant birth and rebirth.

There was an important philosophical moment in twelfth-century medieval China when much discussion centered upon the problem of *gewu* or “the investigation of things”.² We might be tempted to seize upon this ferment as part of a genealogy of empiricism in China, as did Joseph Needham and William T. de Bary.³ In fact, as Angus C. Graham points out: “A European reading the Sung philosophers for the first time finds himself continuously asking himself whether *wu* means ‘thing’ or ‘animal’, whether the word *sheng*

1 Peter Boodberg, “Philological notes on Chapter One of the Lao Tzu” in his *Selected works of Peter A. Boodberg*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1979, p. 471.
2 *Gewu* appears in the *Daxue* or “Great Learning”.
3 Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1956, II, p. 493. William T. de Bary, “Neo-Confucian cultivation and seventeenth-century ‘enlightenment,’” in: *The Unfolding of Neo-Confucianism*, William T. de Bary et al. (eds), Columbia University Press, New York, 1973, p. 167. Cited in Hoyt Tillman, “The idea and reality of the ‘thing’ during the Sung: Philosophical attitudes toward *wu*,” in: *The Bulletin of Sung and Yuan Studies*, 14, 1978-1979.

means 'to produce/be produced' or 'to give birth to/be born'.⁴ But in many contexts, such questions that turn on familiar grammatical distinctions of our own are pointless.

These philosophers constantly discussed *wu* in relation to *li*, a term whose etymology is traced back, not uncoincidentally for our concerns, to "the veins that provide the pattern in jade". What was at stake was the relative position of *wu* as "matter" and *li* as a far less tangible "principle of coherence". I say "relative" because the debates ranged from unleashing *li* into a plane of transcendence to embedding it as deeply immanent in the *wu*-ish materiality of the world of people, objects, animals and events. (The modern-day term for physics combines the two, willy nilly, as *wuli*, a nicely Einsteinian collapse of materiality and the energetic principles that animate it.)

By the early modern period, beginning in the sixteenth century, philosophical writers evinced a marked turn toward *wu* and a panoply of terms associated with it, such as the two different characters both pronounced *qi* (falling tone): *qi* as the pneuma that permeates the universe and *qi* as utensil, vessel or tool. Matter began to matter much more in this period of enormous urbanization and manufacturing that saw increasing concern on the part of the less philosophically inclined members of the elite to codify and distinguish *wu*, a world of things. In his wonderful book *Superfluous things: Material culture and social status in early modern China*, Craig Clunas tracks the upsurge in writing about "things" as being due to "a heightened awareness of the production and consumption of luxury goods as an arena for potential social conflict, if not correctly handled".⁵ The manuals of connoisseurship that he reads attempt "to establish the material world in wider cosmic connections," implying, we might speculate, that a sense of a breakdown of those connections was being felt.

Caught, then, in a context of Confucian values in which no overt distinction was made between the personal and the public, the political and the aesthetic, the Ming (1365-1644) dynasty elite busied itself in producing a plethora of socially signifying practices: how to dress, what to buy, how to tell the beautiful from the ugly, the old from the new, the authentic from the bogus, all produced to

mitigate social confusion in times of societal upheaval. As the seventeenth century saw China implode into internal corruption, pressed by invasion by the northern Manchus, the need to produce readable social distinctions through the management of things became ever more pressing. Ironically, it was hoped that making these distinctions would allow simultaneously the proper knitting back together of a society shredding itself into fragments. Things were there again, re-implicated and re-theorized within the web of people, objects, animals and events. Things, words for things, words as things, were equally considered as social actors.

How has the term *wu* fared in modernity? As Chinese intellectuals searched their souls and their past for reasons for China's so-called "failures" in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries of colonialism and invasion, there was much criticism of the lack of empiricism and science, a pervading anxiety that they had failed to grasp the materiality of things, and thus failed in governance. As Hoyt Tillman laments in concluding his own discussion of the Sung philosophers' "investigation of things," "their openness to *wu* as objects was overwhelmed by ethical and metaphysical issues, by the tendency to regard *wu* primarily as *shi*, or affairs and events."⁶ This Confucian tendency was criticized by Japanese scholars as early as the seventeenth century: They noted that *wu*/ or *mono* (the Japanese pronunciation of the character *wu*) is not the same as *shi*/ or *koto* (the Japanese pronunciation of the character *shi*). They distinguished them as thing (*wu/mono*) versus fact (*shi/koto*).⁷

The key term, *shi*/event reappears in the post-Maoist modernization campaign's favorite slogan "Seek truth from facts" – literally "From concrete events (*shi*), seek truth". Is it really the case that (despite the rich genealogy of understanding the things of the world, the *wu*, in a dynamic assembly of persons, objects, animals, and events) the Chinese government has adopted the early Japanese critical position and reduced the things of the world to mere facts?

4 Angus C. Graham, *Two Chinese philosophers: Ch'eng Ming-tao and Ch'eng yi-ch'uan*, Lund Humphries, London, 1958, pp. 35f., 69.

5 Craig Clunas, *Superfluous things: Material culture and social status in early modern China*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1991, p. 8.

6 Tillman, op. cit., p. 77.

7 Quoted in Tetsuo Najita, *Japan*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1974, p. 34.