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The Profit That Does Not Profit: Paradoxes with *Li* in Early Chinese Texts

In early Chinese texts, some concepts are imbued with a predominantly positive connotation, such as the “Way” (*dao* 道) or “heaven” (*tian* 天); others are almost invariably considered negative, such as “regicide” (*shi* 弑) and “disorder” (*luan* 亂). But some acts or entities are evaluated very differently by various authors and in diverse contexts: “benefit” (*li* 利) is one of them. It is generally supposed that, on the one hand, Mozi and his followers strongly promoted *li*, as did perhaps those authors inspired by Yang Zhu. Ru scholars, such as Confucius, Mencius and Xunzi, on the other hand, are said to have expressed an aversion towards it. But as soon as one delves deeper into the statements made about *li* in Warring States and Han texts, its meaning or reference turns out to have been very complex and sometimes even perplexing.

The fact that *li* was used in various syntactic functions, carried different meanings, and changed over time, may have contributed to its complexity, but that does not make it particularly exceptional among classical Chinese terms. What makes it perplexing is that *li* is sometimes used in different or even opposite senses in one single passage, dialogue or expression. A modern scholar studying the concept of *li* is bound to be confused by the statement: 絕聖棄智 民利百倍 ... 絕巧棄利盜賊無有.” Laozi twice uses *li* in clearly opposite meanings: the former is something to be welcomed, the latter to be rejected. Translators are generally not troubled by this inconsistency and spontaneously resolve it by translating the two differently: “Eliminate sageliness, throw away knowledge. And the people will *benefit* one hundredfold. ... Eliminate craftiness, throw away *profit*. Then we will have no robbers and thieves.”¹ But how aware was the supposed author of this inconsistency? Would he have

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¹ *Laozi* 19; Robert Henricks, *Lao-tzu. Te-tao ching* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), p. 224, my italics. Even though the same line in the Guodian manuscripts rejects some other

tried to avoid it if he were more of a clear-minded philosopher? Or did he try to make a point by perplexing his audience with these different uses of *li*, a point that the translation fails to convey.

Such contradictory use of *li* within one passage is not exclusive to so-called “anti-rational” Taoist thinkers, but occurs in many other sources. Nor does it always suggest a lack of consistency or disinterest in rational reasoning on the part of the early Chinese masters. Such passages often indicate an awareness of *li*’s different meanings and a positive exploitation of its ambiguity. Paradoxical expressions concerning *li* in various sources are the clearest indication that the difference in meaning was intended by the author.² Expressions discussed below, such as “大利不利” (*Liu Tao* 六韜), “利而弗利” (*Tang Yu zhi dao* 唐虞之道), “利而勿利,” “不利之利,” “其利不利” (*Lü shi chun qiu* 呂氏春秋), “利而不利者” (*Xun zi* 荀子), and “不以利爲利” (*Da xue* 大學) at once insist on the identity of the term as well as the difference of meaning. If, for the sake of clarity, one *li* were replaced by another term, the expression would lose its rhetorical force, as in, for example, “大利不用 (great benefit is useless)” or, even more so, in “大利不義 (great profit is not righteous).”³ And if the two meanings did not differ at all, the expression would be plainly wrong. It is the identity of the two terms in one expression that forces the audience to establish a difference in meaning.

But what was the point made in those statements? And why was it made in this paradoxical way? Which meanings of *li* can be identified in these paradoxes? And are they also attested in non-paradoxical expressions? Following a general survey of the complexities of the concept of *li* in Warring States and Han texts (in part 1), I will analyse its emotive and descriptive meanings (parts 2 and 3), and trace the genesis of the paradoxes on the basis of discussions related to Mencius (parts 4 and 5).

values, it also uses *li* in these two opposite meanings. See Robert Henricks, *Lao-tzu's Tao Te Ching: A Translation of the Startling New Documents Found at Guodian* (New York: Columbia U. P., 2000), pp. 28–30.

² I take paradox here in a very loose sense as a short and puzzling expression or wordplay that at first sight may look absurd but in fact makes sense. Most philosophical definitions of “paradox” are more restricted and include at least an argument and conclusion, as does Quine’s general categorization as “any conclusion that at first sounds absurd but that has an argument to sustain it.” See Willard Quine, “The Ways of a Paradox,” in W. V. Quine, ed., *The Ways of Paradox and Other Essays* (New York: Random House, 1966), p. 3.

³ There exist semiparadoxical expressions of the former type because *yong* does have some semantic overlap with *li*. For an analysis of various types of paradoxes in early Chinese texts, see Wim De Reu, “Right Words Seem to Be Wrong: Neglected Paradoxes in Early Chinese Philosophical Texts,” *Philosophy East and West* (hereafter, *PEW*) 56.2 (2006), pp. 281–300.

THE COMPLEXITIES OF *LI*

Paradoxical statements do not arise *ex nihilo*: they attest to a preceding debate on a certain topic, a degree of reflection, an importance attributed to it, and a perceived ambiguity. Although the current academic view on *li* 利 in early Chinese thought agrees that the Mo are unreservedly more interested in questions of profit than the Ru, previous research has shown its complexities in terms of syntactic function, evaluation and content. An analysis of this complexity will set the stage for the analysis of the various meanings of *li*.

The extant sources discussing *li* do not give us a clear glimpse of the classical Chinese language and its morphology. But the word order as well as the context clearly show that it was often used as a noun, an adjective, an intransitive and transitive verb, and occasionally as an adverb. In all these functions, *li* had various meanings, ranging from “sharp,” “smooth” and “skilled” to the more prevalent semantic field of “benefit” or “profit.” The apparently very different meanings of “sharp” and “beneficial” were somehow related, as A. C. Graham has argued: “*Li* ‘benefit’ and *hai* ‘harm’ are concepts which easily connect with the natural tendencies of life since they suggest unimpeded or thwarted activity; a knife is *li* ‘sharp’ if substance offers no resistance, speech is *li* ‘fluent’ ... when it runs freely.”⁴ There are, moreover, some passages about *li* in which the two meanings are somewhat conflated. In *Fa yan* 法言, an unnamed interlocutor asks Yang Xiong 揚雄 “If Confucius knew that his Way was useless, where was he taking it 孔子知其道之不用也, 則載而惡乎之?” Yang responds “that he moved it forward to the gentlemen of the future 之後世君子,” and the interlocutor deems this method of selling one’s Way rather “blunt” (*dun* 鈍). Yang then defends Confucius saying that what the masses consider blunt, in the end turns out to be *li* (sharp-beneficial) and vice versa. The worth of the sage’s teachings knows no bounds: it is beyond comparison and commercial price.⁵ In *Mozi* 墨子, master Mo asks the king of Qi: “Imagine a sword that you try on someone’s head and you swiftly cut it off: can it be judged ‘sharp 利’?” The king says: “It is sharp.” “And if you try it on many people’s heads and you swiftly cut them off: can it be judged ‘sharp’?” The king says: “It is sharp.” Then Mozi asks: “As for the sword, that is *li*. But who will take on its curse 刀則利矣, 孰將受其不祥?” This question already suggests some opposition between *li* and

⁴ A. C. Graham, *Later Mohist Logic, Ethics and Science* (Hong Kong: Chinese U.P., 1978), p. 283.

⁵ *Fa yan* 8: 19/18–20 (“Wu bai” 五百).

bu xiang and thereby introduces the meaning of “benefit” aside from “sharp.” The king’s initial response confirms this shift: “The knife takes on its *li*, but the person who tries this, will take on its curse 刀受其利, 試者受其不祥.” While Mei Yi-pao opts for “benefit” in his translation of 刀受其利 (“the sword reaped the benefit”), modern Chinese translations rather stick to the “sharpness” (“the sword receives the reputation of being sharp”). Mozi’s pun, which lies in the conflation of both meanings, remains difficult to translate.⁶

But even within the semantic field of “benefit” alone, there are various meanings of the noun *li*, such as “profit” or “the profitable,” “profit-seeking,” “benefit” or “the beneficial,” “interest,” “good,” “gain,” “utility,” “advantage,” “welfare” and “prosperity.” As an adjective and intransitive verb, it ranges from (being) “beneficial,” “useful” and “advantageous” to (being) “greedy” or “profiting.” And as a transitive verb, *li* usually means to “benefit,” “be of profit to” or “foster,” but can also mean to “enjoy,” “benefit by,” “derive” or “seize profit from.”

The basic distinction made in analytical philosophy between the “emotive” and “descriptive” meanings of terms can help to explain two crucial aspects of *li*. The emotive meaning is the force imbued in some words by which they can “move” (hence: e-motive) their audience in a certain direction, evoke reactions and influence their views or attitudes.⁷ The descriptive meaning is its emotively neutral content or description, namely what it means or what we name by it. Charles Stevenson has shown that two types of debate can be distinguished on the basis of these two meanings of a concept. The first, and according to Stevenson most challenging, type of debate consists in rejecting the current or dominant evaluation of an entity or act: it usually occurs when the emotive meaning of a term is not very strong, so that it can be called into question. The alternative and less explicit type of debate is prevalent when the emotive meaning of a term is generally shared and supported by the audience, so that one rather tries to change its

⁶ *Mozi* 49: 111/32–112/2 (“Lu wen” 魯問). See also Yi-pao Mei, *The Works of Motze* (Taipei: Confucius Publ. Co., 1976), pp. 488–89 and Wu Yujiang 吳毓江 and Sun Qizhi 孫啓治, eds., *Mozi xiaozhu* 墨子校注 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1993), p. 734. Wu and Sun (p. 743, n. 16) suggest that this short sentence is superfluous since it does not directly answer Mozi’s question. But they admit that it was in the text by at least the Song era.

⁷ This distinction was suggested by Charles Stevenson in “Ethical Judgments and Avoidability: Persuasive Definitions,” *Mind* 47 (1938), pp. 331–32, where he deals with “conceptual” and “emotive” meaning. In his book, *Ethics and Language* (1944; rpt. New Haven: Yale U.P., 1972), “conceptual” is replaced by “descriptive.” I have also used this distinction in the analysis of debates concerning the legitimacy of Chinese philosophy. See Carine Defoort, “Is There Such a Thing as Chinese Philosophy? Arguments of an Implicit Debate,” *PEW* 51.3 (2001), pp. 402–3.

descriptive meaning. Stevenson has called this second type “persuasive definition” whenever one opponent “gives a new descriptive meaning to a familiar word without substantially changing its emotive meaning,” with the conscious or unconscious purpose of changing the direction of people’s interests, habits, choices, behavior or acts.⁸

As a concrete example, the act of killing the person who occupies the throne, could be defended in two opposite ways in argument. In a society with relatively mild or mixed feelings about what is called “regicide” one could argue that in some cases regicide is the acceptable or even heroic option. One thereby challenges the negative emotive meaning of the term without further specifying what one means by it. But in a community that attributes a strong emotive (negative) meaning to “regicide,” as was the case in Warring States China, one cannot possibly speak about it in a laudatory tone. An alternative way to defend the act of killing the king is to use a persuasive definition: change the descriptive meaning of the term and retain its emotive force. As I have argued elsewhere, early Chinese masters never defend “regicide” as such because of its negative connotations, but they try to convince their audience that a particular act which they do defend should not be called 謂 “regicide,” but rather “execution,” a term that carries the more positive emotive meaning of legitimacy and order.⁹

Generally speaking, a strong emotive meaning and a flexible descriptive meaning go well together in debates arguing in terms of persuasive definitions or “how one ought to call something.” Conversely, arguments that critically question the established evaluation of something combine a weak emotive meaning of the term with a relatively undisputed descriptive content. This paper will apply these insights to statements concerning *li* in early Chinese texts.

THE EMOTIVE MEANING OF *LI*

Li was clearly a matter of concern: it occurs more in prescriptive than in descriptive statements, teaching the audience about a decent life or good government. One can often intuit the value of *li* thanks to the adjectives or verbs that precede it. *Li* tends to have a negative emotive meaning when it is described as “small” or “petty 小” and “private” or “egoistic 私.” The audience is advised not to “amass 積” or “take 取” it,

⁸ Stevenson, “Ethical Judgments and Avoidability,” p. 331.

⁹ For this analysis of debates concerning regicide, see Carine Defoort, “Can Words Produce Order? Regicide in the Confucian Tradition,” *Cultural Dynamics* 12.1 (March, 2000), pp. 85–109.

nor be “greedy for 貪” or “fond of 好” it, nor to “plan 謀” or “fight for 爭” it. One should, on the contrary, “get rid of 去” it, “cast it off 棄,” “take it lightly 輕,” or “give it less priority 後” than something else. Ru sources postdating Mencius, for instance, sometimes radically oppose *li* to something more valuable, usually *yi* 義 (what is right, appropriate, galant), as does Xunzi when he claims that “to preserve *li* and cast off *yi*, that is what we call ‘the ultimate form of thievery 保利棄義謂之至賊.’”¹⁰ But none of the early sources is always and completely negative about *li*, not even Mencius.¹¹ A positive emotive meaning generally occurs in combination with the adjectives “big 大” or “public, 公” or the verbs “raise 興,” “spread 汜,” or “share 同.” The transitive use of the verb *li*, especially with animate objects, is also predominantly positive.¹² The emotive meaning of *li* was thus both strong and disputed, as opposed to concepts such as “the Way” and “regicide,” which contained a hardly disputed, respectively positive and negative, emotive meaning.

John Emerson describes ancient China as a ritually governed aristocratic society in which, roughly up until Confucius’ times, self-assertion and the visible pursuit of individual interest were suspect. “While rational, self-seeking behavior did occur in these societies, there was no legitimate way of speaking of it.”¹³ This sense of public decency became at risk when Mo Di and his followers proposed *li* as a criterion for judging acts and attitudes. The *Mozi* is the earliest extant Chinese source that consistently and forcefully puts *li* on the agenda. What should matter in government, according to the Mohists, are not one’s good looks, aristocratic connections or cultivated manners, but the extent to which one contributes to prosperity, security and order.¹⁴ Their

¹⁰ *Xunzi* 2: 6/2 (“Xiu shen” 修身). See also John Knoblock, *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works* (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 1988, 1990, 1994) 1, p. 153. Several scholars have argued that the sharp opposition of *li* versus *yi* (duty, righteousness) postdates Mencius. Jörg Schumacher, *Über den Begriff des Nützlichen bei Mengzi* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1993), pp. 20–40, has traced the evolution of this opposition. See also Wang Qishan 王啓珊, “Dui xian Qin rujia yiliguan xiandai jiazhi de bianzheng renshi” 對先秦儒家義利觀現代價值的辯證認識, *Zhejiang shifan daxuebao* (*Shehui kexueban*) 浙江師範大學報 (社會科學版) 1999.3, p. 69; Xu Yafei 許亞非, “Xi Kong Meng Xun de yiliguan” 析孔孟荀的義利觀, *Sichuan shifan daxuebao* (*Zhexue shehuikexueban*) 四川師範學院學報 (哲學社會科學版) 1996.6, p. 45.

¹¹ See Schumacher, *Über den Begriff*, pp. 112–14. This study provides a detailed analysis of the meaning of *li* in *Mencius* and its relation to *yi* in later texts up until the 20th c.

¹² See A.C. Graham, “The Right to Selfishness: Yangism, Later Mohism, Chuang Tzu,” in *Individualism and Holism: Studies in Confucian and Taoist Values*, Donald Munro, ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1985), p. 81, n. 25.

¹³ John Emerson, “Yang Chu’s Discovery of the Body,” *PEW* 46.4 (1996), pp. 533–66, p. 538 in a broader description of the social changes that gave rise to Yang Zhu’s thought. For the importance of “speaking” of *li*, see below.

¹⁴ Other scholars have debated as to whether Mozi’s philosophy is consequentialism (Fraser) or utilitarianism, whether it is act- or rule-utilitarianism, weak (Ahern) or strong (Vorenkamp),

general criterion, *li*, seems to have been more influential than the actual policies they suggested.

The first thinkers who took up this Mohist idea were those who valued life and health above a political position or wealth; their spokesman was Yang Zhu 楊朱. Graham has argued that those inspired by him also thought in terms of *li*: “Yangism,” according to Graham, “starts from the same calculations of benefit and harm as does Mohism, but its question is not “How shall we benefit the realm?” but “What is truly beneficial to man?,” more specifically ‘What is truly beneficial to myself?’”¹⁵ In some writings identified as Yangist, benefit is indeed perceived as the natural and justifiable object of one’s concern.¹⁶ As *Lü shi chun qiu* puts it: “Therefore the sage’s attitude towards sounds, colors and flavors is that if they are beneficial to his nature he chooses them, and if they are harmful to his nature he discards them 是故聖人之於聲色滋味也，利於性則取之，害於性則舍之。”¹⁷ But I have argued elsewhere that most Yangist writings tend to express suspicion of *li* as something that lures men to act in self-destructive ways. Hence their advice that, “if one values life, then one will put less weight on *li* 重生則輕利。”¹⁸

This strong appeal of *li* to rulers of the fourth century bc also invited critical reactions and aroused negative evaluations among the defenders of the tradition. Even the good intentions of the king of Wei to “benefit his state” were criticized by Mencius, because the king spoke of his duty in terms of *li*.¹⁹ Graham is convinced that for Mencius *li* cannot be “anything but sordid self-interest,” the “damning word which

religious (Taylor) or secular, linguistic (Hansen), hedonistic, subjective, or institutional (Brandt) utilitarianism. See Dennis Ahern, “Is Mo Tzu a Utilitarian?” *PEW* 3 (1976), pp. 185–93; Rodney Taylor, “Religion and Utilitarianism: Mo-tzu on Spirits and Funerals,” *PEW* 29.3 (July 1979), pp. 337–46; Dirk Vorenkamp, “Another Look at Utilitarianism in Mo-Tzu’s Thought,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 19.4 (1992), pp. 423–43; David Soles, “Mo Tzu and the Foundations of Morality,” *ibid.* 26.1 (1999), pp. 37–48; Chad Hansen, “Mo-Tzu: Language Utilitarianism,” *ibid.* 16.3/4 (2003), pp. 355–80; Richard Brandt, “Comments on Chad Hansen’s ‘Language Utilitarianism,’” *ibid.* 16.3–4 (2003), pp. 381–85; and Chris Fraser, *Mohism*, in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mohism>> (2002).

¹⁵ A. C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (La Salle: Open Court, 1989), p. 56.

¹⁶ On the basis of recurrent slogans and dominant concerns with one’s life or nature 生/性, with one’s own body or person 身 and with genuineness 真, Graham has identified the following chapters as displaying a Yangist constellation of ideas in the 3d c. bc: *Lü shi chun qiu* 1/2, 1/3, 2/2, 2/3, 21/4, and *Zhuangzi* 28, 29, 30, 31. See, for instance his “Right to Selfishness,” pp. 74–75.

¹⁷ *Lü shi chun qiu* 1/2.3: 2/17–18 (“Ben sheng 本生”). See also John Knoblock and Jeffrey Riegel, *The Annals of Lü Buwei* (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 2000), p. 65.

¹⁸ See Carine Defoort, “Mohist and Yangist Blood in Confucian Flesh: The Middle Position of the Guodian Text 唐虞之道,” *BMFEA* 76 (2004), pp. 37–38. See also below.

¹⁹ *Mencius* 1A/1. See also below.

for Mencius is enough to condemn a philosophy utterly and finally.”²⁰ By Mencius’ lifetime, “the very word *li* 利 ‘benefit’ has been so soiled by Mohist and later by Yangist calculations of benefit and harm that one can hardly translate him coherently without switching the English equivalent to ‘profit.’”²¹ However, Jorg Schumacher shows in a monograph dedicated to the concept of *li* in the *Mencius* that Mencius’ use of the term is not consistently negative, but sparse and complex.²² While Mencius for the most part refrained from talking about it, the topic nevertheless gained importance during the following centuries, among all trends of thought, including the Ru. Xunzi’s remarks on this topic, which have to my knowledge not yet been studied in detail, are not only much more numerous, but also contain both negative and positive emotive meanings.

The many complex evaluations of *li* are remarkable in view of the paradoxes to be studied below: the opposite emotive meanings are not strictly divided along the lines of different schools, masters, texts, and not even passages or expressions. Paradoxes and other statements easily combine two uses of *li* – a positive and negative one. The consensus among English translators seems to agree with Graham’s intuition concerning “benefit” and “profit,” as we saw in the case of *Laozi* 19 quoted above.²³ When the “Nei ye” chapter of *Guanzi* discusses the cultivated mind, it advises the ruler to “cast off sorrow, happiness, joy, anger, desire and *profit-seeking* 去憂樂喜怒欲利” because they inevitably impair the mind. Only then will the mind revert to equanimity, because “its true condition is that it finds calmness *beneficial* and, by it, attains repose 彼心之情, 利安以寧.”²⁴ The original author’s use of *li* is ambiguous or inconsistent, mainly in its opposite evaluation of *li*, but that does not make his advice particularly confusing for his audience or translators.

²⁰ Graham, “The Background of the Mencian Theory of Human Nature,” in *Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Literature* (Singapore: Institute of East Asian Philosophies, 1986), pp. 50, 52.

²¹ Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, p. 41.

²² Schumacher, *Über den Begriff*.

²³ Aside from Henricks quoted above, see also D.C. Lau, *Lao Tzu. Tao Tê Ching* (New York: Penguin Books Ltd., 1985), p. 75; Michael LaFargue, *The Tao of the Tao Tê Ching: A Translation and Commentary* (New York: State University of New York P., 1992), p. 170; Arthur Waley, *The Way and its Power: A Study of the Tao Tê Ching and Its Place in Chinese Thought* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), p. 166. Although this consensus is not well-founded – “profit” is used in English both approbationally and disapprovingly, depending on the speaker – its use as a translation for *li* is remarkably widespread in sinological circles.

²⁴ *Guanzi* 49: 115/22–23 (“Nei ye” 內業); Harold Roth, *Original Tao: Inward Training and the Foundations of Taoist Mysticism* (New York: Columbia U.P., 1999), p. 113, p. 51, my italics. For a similar translation, as far as *li* is concerned, see W. Allyn Rickett, *Guanzi: Political, Economic, and Philosophical Essays from Early China, Vol. II* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1998), p. 40.

Similarly, in a paradox to which we return later, the *Da xue* warns the reader that, in James Legge's translation: "In a State, *pecuniary gain* is not to be considered to be *prosperity*, but its *prosperity* will be found in righteousness 國不以利爲利, 以義爲利也."²⁵ Again, the difference in the two senses of *li* that the paradoxical structure forces us to detect, is basically one of evaluation, here translated as despicable "pecuniary gain" versus laudable or acceptable "prosperity." Pecuniary gain is fake benefit because it isolates and weakens the gainer, while real benefit provides him with the loyalty of others.

This outline of the emotive power of *li* shows that it was undeniably, but not uncontestedly, an increasingly hot topic during the last four centuries before our era, in which its positive emotive meaning increased. As *li* was mentioned more often, it also became a more respectable topic for conversation, but not without serious reservations. The disagreement concerning the emotive meaning of *li* that originally may have divided different thinkers, somehow became internalized by subsequent authors. They realised that *li* was a sharp double-edged sword and often chose to retain both positive and negative meanings: paradoxes gave persuasive force to their message at the possible risk of diminished conceptual clarity.²⁶

THE DESCRIPTIVE MEANING OF *LI*

The evolution in the emotive meaning of *li* was, of course, connected with its descriptive meaning. When Mo and Yang talked rather positively about benefit, and Mencius or Xunzi more negatively, they obviously had something in mind. While the arguments were mainly in favor or against *li* (emotive meaning), they at least implicitly included some specifications concerning its content broadly speaking (descriptive meaning). The most important differences in the description of *li*

²⁵ *Li ji* 43.2: 166/22–24 ("Da xue" 大學); James Legge, *Confucius: Confucian Analects, The Great Learning & The Doctrine of the Mean* (New York: Dover Publications, 1971), p. 380, replacing his italics by mine. When the same line is repeated below, Legge, p. 381, translates it as follows: "In a State, gain is not to be considered prosperity, but its prosperity will be found in righteousness."

²⁶ I have not found in philosophical literature further reflection on the basis of Stevenson's "persuasive definitions" about what is discussed here as paradox. Stevenson, *Ethics and Language*, p. 84 describes the two uses of "wrong" as emotively active and inactive in the word-play: "When there's wine and there's women and song, then it's wrong not to do something wrong." Stevenson, "Ethical Judgments and Avoidability," p. 335, quotes Aldous Huxley: "But if you want to be free, you've got to be a prisoner. It's a condition of freedom – true freedom" and his reflections about the abuse made of "good names" in *Eyeless in Gaza*.

concern such intertwined and tentatively distinguished aspects as its object, quantity, scope, status, and content. Some of these differences gained importance and subtlety over time, and ended up in the paradoxes concerning *li*.

The object of *li*, namely what undergoes the action of the transitive verb, is usually the person who enjoys the act of benefit or those who are being benefited. The identification of this object as either oneself or others was from the very beginning crucial for Mohists and determined their evaluation of *li*. It is therefore not totally correct to claim, as Schumacher does, that “the word *li* was always used positively by Mohists.”²⁷ The admittedly few instances in which *li* is seen negatively are when it is used with the reflexive adverb “oneself 自利” and associated with “slighting others 虧人.”

Since a son cares for himself and not for his father, he slights his father and benefits himself. Since a younger brother cares for himself and not for his elder brother, he slights his brother and benefits himself. Since a minister cares for himself and not for his ruler, he slights his ruler and benefits himself. This is what we call disorder. 子自愛不愛父，故虧父而自利。弟自愛不愛兄，故虧兄而自利。臣自愛不愛君，故虧君而自利。此所謂亂也。²⁸

The same claim is made about fathers and elder brothers towards their sons and younger brothers, about rulers and ministers in relation to each other, about thieves and robbers, and finally about feudal lords and ministers. In *Mozi* 14 (“Jian ai, shang” 兼愛上) and 17 (“Fei gong, shang” 非攻上), presumably two of the oldest chapters of the book, *li* is exclusively used in this negative sense.²⁹ Thus, for Mozi, benefit is only good when directed toward others. The object of benefiting, which was a fundamental point of disagreement between Mo and Yang – “for others” versus “for oneself” – became the dominant topic in paradoxes.

²⁷ Schumacher, *Über den Begriff*, p. 16: “Tatsächlich hat das Wort *li* für die Mohisten immer einen positiven Sinn und bringt ganz generell die Vorstellung des Wohltuns zum Ausdruck.” About the possibly negative emotive meaning of the verb “derive benefit from,” see below (part 5).

²⁸ *Mozi* 14: 24/5–6 (“Jian ai, shang” 兼愛上). See also Mei, *Works of Motze*, p. 156. “Disorder 亂” is a term with an unchallenged negative emotive meaning and therefore often appears in persuasive definitions.

²⁹ I believe that the three “Jian ai” (chaps. 14, 15, 16) and “Fei gong 非攻” (chaps. 17, 18, 19) chapters, in their current chronological order (*shang, zhong, xia*) constitute the oldest part of the Mohist core chapters. The “Tian zhi” 天志 chapters, in the order *shang, xia, zhong* (chaps. 26, 28, 27) are later. See Carine Defoort, “The Growing Scope of *jian*: Differences between Chapters 14, 15 and 16 of the *Mozi*,” *OE* 45 (2005–06), pp. 121–26. For an overview of the debate on dating the core chapters, see Karen Desmet, “The Growth of Compounds in the Core Chapters of the *Mozi*,” *OE* 45 (2005–06), pp. 99–105.

But very soon, as a result of debate, the Mohist position gained subtlety, more particularly concerning the quantity of *li* in relation to this object. Some authors thought of *li* in terms of a fixed quantity (like a pie that one shares with a limited number by cutting it into pieces) while others saw it as something with undetermined quantity and even potential growth (like a movie that can be enjoyed by an unlimited number of people without any loss). The negative evaluation of *li* quoted above seems to assume as a matter of fact that *li* is something with a fixed and limited quantity, and that it inevitably diminishes as one divides it among different people. Hence, if a son benefits himself, he naturally slights his father. But this view changes as the status of *li* rises: in *Mozhi* 15 (“Jian ai, zhong”), *li* is for the first time considered positively and the argument is made that one can only increase one’s own benefit by benefiting others.

Well, if one cares for others, others will as a result care for him; if one benefits others, others will as a result benefit him. 夫愛人者人必從而愛之; 利人者人必從而利之.³⁰

Thus for a slightly later Mohist, self-benefit, if well conceived, is no egoism but a rational foundation for altruism.³¹ The question of whether sharing *li* brings about a win-win situation for all parties concerned remains a topic of debate. Hanfeizi argues that benefit for the ruler inevitably diminishes as his minister gains it 臣利立而主利滅, which is why a minister can never be really loyal.³² But others make the opposite point by introducing the metaphor of a boat, showing that advantage or gain tend to be shared or lost by everyone using the boat to cross a river.³³ The author of the “Ban fa jie” 版法解 chapter in the *Guanzi* 管子 is even convinced that benefit increases when it is being shared:

In general, there is no one who does not desire *li* and dislike harm. Therefore, if one shares his *li* with the realm, he will be supported by it; if one monopolizes the *li* of the realm, the realm will plot against him. The one against whom the realm plots, will certainly

³⁰ *Mozhi* 15: 25/24 (“Jian ai zhong” 兼愛中). See also Mei, *Works of Motze*, p. 166.

³¹ In the third “Jian ai” chapter the argument becomes even more complex because it is argued, against the Ru, that the best way to benefit one’s parents, is to benefit the parents of others. This argument thus combines the non-egoism of the good son in relation to this father (according to chapter 14) with the well-considered egoism (of chapter 15).

³² *Hanfeizi* 31: 70/27 (“Nei chu shuo xia, liu wei 內儲說下, 六微”). See also W. K. Liao, *The Complete Works of Han Fei Tzu* (London: Arthur Probsthain, 1959) 2, p. 2.

³³ *Liu Tao* 2/1: 12/8–9 (“Fa qi 發啓”): “It is like sharing a boat to make a crossing: if you succeed then everyone shares it its *li*, if not then everyone shares it harm 若同舟而濟, 濟則皆同其利, 敗則皆同其害.”

tumble down even if he is established; the one who is supported by the realm will not get in danger even if he possesses a high position. Hence it is said: “Security in a high position is determined by sharing *li*.” 凡人者 莫不欲利而惡害。是故與天下同利者天下持之；擅天下之利者天下謀之。天下所謀 雖立必隳；天下所持 雖高不危。故曰“安高在乎同利。”³⁴

The idea that benefit is capable of extension and can be enhanced by sharing it (like a movie or a boat rather than a pie), is also a point that recurs in some paradoxes.

In these reflections concerning the quantity of *li* there is often a third aspect implied, namely its *scope*: how far does one’s beneficial influence reach: to family members, village neighbours, compatriots, foreigners, or to everybody in the world? For Mohists, the positive emotive meaning of *li* increases with its growing scope: the more people you benefit, the better you are. The first “Jian ai” chapter (the one that uses *li* negatively) advises people to care for each other; the following chapter asks them to widen the scope of their care and beneficial acts to include the weak, the poor, the vulgar and the simple of mind. And the last “Jian ai” chapter further widens the scope to widows and orphans, the hungry, the cold, the sick and even the dead. The scope further grows in the “Tian zhi 天志” chapters, in which Heaven is portrayed as a model that benefits everybody in the realm.

As for Heaven, it cares for everything in the realm inclusively, quickly ripens all things to *li* them. Since even the tips of autumn hairs, all are made by Heaven, and people get to *li* from it, it can be said to be substantial. 今夫天兼天下而愛之，攬遂萬物以利之，若豪之末，末非天之所爲也，而民得而利之，則可謂后矣。

The sage kings of antiquity followed this model, “they inclusively cared for everybody in the realm and, consequently, *li* them all 兼愛天下也 從而利之。”³⁵ And so should the people of today: one who benefits his family 利家 is good in Mozi’s esteem, one who benefits the state 利國 is better, but one who benefits the realm 利天下 is the best.³⁶

A fourth aspect, which also considers *li* in gradual rather than absolute terms, is its social status. I do not thereby exclusively mean its

³⁴ *Guanzi* 66: 154/23–24 (“Ban fa jie” 版法解), in a chapter with a strong Mohist flavour. See also Rickett, *Guanzi*, Vol. I, p. 146.

³⁵ *Mozi* 27: 45/17–18 (“Tian zhi zhong” 天志中) and 28: 48/15 (“Tian zhi xia” 天志下). For this evolution, see Defoort, “Growing Scope of *jian*,” pp. 135–39.

³⁶ See *Mozi* 13: 22/5–23 (“Shang tong xia” 尚同下). See also Mei, *Works of Motze*, pp. 146–48. On the importance of *li* as a criterion, see Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, pp. 39–40.

importance and priority (which falls under its emotive meaning) but also its relation to a certain life-style, a sense of decency and good appearances. When Mencius in his first conversation with the king of Wei explains that “if one gives priority to *li* by placing *yi* behind, people will not be satisfied unless they can grab 苟爲後義而先利 不奪不饜,” he is, of course, speaking of the status of *li* in terms of its value, importance, lesser priority, in short, its emotive meaning discussed above. But I suspect that he also thinks of *li* in a more social or cultural sense as something that is a minor concern to those who are cultivated. It certainly has its value, even for the Ru, but only for what it is: a fact of life, part of how humans are,³⁷ or a mundane need. But it is nothing to be proud of, nor a guide for a good life. One who keeps the status of *li* in mind knows how to treat it discretely. One important aspect of that treatment is not to speak 言 of *li* in public, as Emerson remarked in his description of the aristocratic culture cherished by the Ru. Apparently Confucius did not often speak of *li* (*Lun yu* IX/1), nor did a gentleman according to him (*Lun yu* IV/16). Mencius also remains remarkably discreet about the topic and is irritated by the king’s choice of words to express his concern for the state: “Why must the king speak of *li*? 王何必曰利.” The prescribed silence on the topic of *li* was probably caused by a sense of shame of a decent person to publicly argue about *li*. This sensitivity does not recur in later paradoxes and may have lost some of its urgency when *li* withdrew from the façade of decent behavior to the realm of moral reflection or calculation.³⁸

A final and potentially the most informative aspect of the descriptive meaning of *li* are direct comments about its *content*: What does *li* amount to independently of its object, quantity, scope, and status? What does the benefited person receive? Wealth and health? Or a good education and basic moral values? Implicit information can be gathered from terms that are often used in connection with *li* in *Mozi* and various later sources. From *Mozi* 15 onward, *li* functions as a close companion of *ai* 愛: to care for someone is to benefit him. As the negative counterpart

³⁷ Such remarks are common for Xunzi. See, for example, *Xunzi* 4: 15/7-8 (“Rong ru” 榮辱): “In general, what human beings all share is desiring food when hungry, desiring warmth when cold, desiring rest when exhausted, loving *li* and hating harm. This is what they have from birth, what is as it is without depending on anything 凡人有所一同: 飢而欲食, 寒而欲煖, 勞而欲息, 好利而惡害, 是人之所生而有也, 是無待而然者也.” See also *Xunzi* 5: 18/13-14 (“Fei xiang” 非相).

³⁸ *Mencius* 6B/4 also discusses *li* in terms of speech – *shui* 說, *yue* 曰, and *hao* 號, and Zhu Xi comments that the problem is not *li* but its “name” 以名爲名則不可也. See Zhu Xi 朱熹, *Si shu jizhu* 四書集註 (Taipei: Xuehai chubanshe, 1984), p. 373. But Mencius is probably also the master who gradually replaces an aristocratic sense of decency by more internal considerations.

of “harm 害,” *li* goes along with the avoidance of material discomfort such as disaster, war, famine, cold, death and various types of disorder.³⁹ While the opposition between *li* and *yi* 義 becomes more explicit in some Ru texts, in Mohism *yi* is redefined as the strongest ally of *li*, namely what is “right”, “fair” or “just,” namely, to benefit others.⁴⁰

But considering the positive value of *li* shared by the disciples of Mo and at least some followers of Yang on the one hand, and their nevertheless opposite views on life, on the other, one would have expected some explicit specifications as to what they meant by it, what they called *li*. Both weighed attitudes and actions in terms of *li* and yet, they disagreed on how to live one’s life. Perhaps the Yangists implicitly took over the Mohist view of *li* – its content, not its value – when they referred to it negatively:

Those of our age running after profit ... endanger their bodies, harm their lives, cut their throats, and chop off their heads in the pursuit of *li*. 世之走利 ... 危身傷生, 刈頸斷頭以徇利。

This author identifies *li* with an aim in life that, like a sharp sword, threatens the body 身 in the pursue of political power.⁴¹ Master Zhan He advises the ruler to “give weight to life 重生” so that he would “consider *li* lightly 輕利.”⁴² Although at least some Yangist writers consider *li* the criterion for evaluation,⁴³ they (or other “Yangists,” since they did not defend a view that was sanctioned by an authority, as was perhaps more the case in Mohism) in fact usually reject it in its actual shape. This inconsistency is never made explicit or explained, probably because Yangists were witty storytellers rather than organized debaters. Even when they were quoted in a debate, they did not clarify their

³⁹ The opposition between *li* and *hai* is as old as one of the oldest core chapters of the *Mozi*, namely “Jian ai, zhong”. But even before that, namely in “Jian ai, shang,” *ai* was basically considered in terms of avoiding harm to others. I have argued elsewhere that the opposition *li* versus *hai* (benefit-harm) became to some extent replaced by *li* versus *fu li* (benefit them but not benefit from them). See Carine Defoort, “Mohist and Yangist Blood in Confucian Flesh: The Middle Position of the Guodian Text “Tang Yu zhi Dao,” *BMFEA* 76 (2004), pp. 60–61.

⁴⁰ Whether opposed to or allied with *li*, *yi* 義 seems to have moved away from the visible surface of a decent person’s appropriate behaviour towards less observable calculations or moral convictions.

⁴¹ See *Lü shi chun qiu* 21/4.1; 141/8–9 (“Shen wei” 審爲). As in other passages, the double meaning of *li* – “benefit” and “sharp” – is being exploited. See also Knoblock and Riegel, *Lü Buwei*, pp. 556–57. This point is illustrated with a story in *Lü shi chun qiu* 19/1.2 (“Li su” 離俗). See Knoblock and Riegel, *Lü Buwei*, p. 476. Most Yangist stories in *Zhuangzi* share this negative view of *li*.

⁴² *Lü shi chun qiu* 21/4.4: 141/28 (“Shen wei”). See Knoblock and Riegel, *Lü Buwei*, pp. 558–59.

⁴³ Graham believes that Yangists see *li* as something positive. See his *Disputers of the Tao*, p. 56; also idem, *Later Mohist Logic, Ethics and Science*, p. 282.

use of the term.⁴⁴ Nor did they argue, with a paradox, that “true *li* (a healthy body) is certainly not *li* (running after profit).”

Not only in Yangist writings, but in the whole corpus of early Chinese texts, a clear description of *li* is conspicuously absent. As the emotive meaning of *li* became increasingly positive, one would have expected authors who used it positively to specify what they meant by the term. There was, nevertheless, no strong tendency to create persuasive definitions in terms of “what we call *li* 所謂利,”⁴⁵ or “what can be called *li* 可謂利.”⁴⁶ The reason is, I believe, that although the emotive meaning of *li* had considerably increased, it remained controversial and disputed. It was never undisputedly and unambiguously good or bad such as, respectively, “the Way” and “regicide.” The general concern with *li*, its strong but opposite emotive meanings, and its perceived ambiguity all contributed to the creation of something else, namely paradoxes. They constitute a climax of preceding debates in which some aspects of its meaning were discussed or analyzed. We will now turn to some of these debates by starting from Mencius. Considering his criticism of Yang and Mo, it is relatively safe to take him as a starting point, without risking too many chronological pitfalls and dating uncertainties.⁴⁷

PARADOXES THAT FOCUS ON THE CONTENT OF *LI*

Almost all paradoxes that I have identified are heavily dependent on the opposite emotive meanings of *li*, as was the case in the non-paradoxical passages from *Laozi*, *Guanzi*, and *Fa yan*, quoted above.⁴⁸ Re-

⁴⁴ About the ambiguity in *Liezi* 7 (“Yang Zhu” 楊朱), see below.

⁴⁵ There are, of course, exceptions, most of them in terms of “what cannot be called *li*,” which assumes its positive meaning. See the self-criticism of duke Cheng’s mother in *Zuo zhuan*, Xiang 9: 242/11: “Through action to harm oneself cannot be called *li* (作而害身, 不可謂利).” See also James Legge, *The Chinese Classics. With a Translation, Critical and Exegetical Notes, Prolegomena, and Copious Indexes*. Vol. 5, *The Ch’un Ts’ew with the Tso Chuen* (1935; rpt. Taipei: SMC Publishing Inc., 1994), pp. 437–40.

⁴⁶ For a positive definition of *li*, see *Shang jun shu* 7: 13/2–3 (“Kai se” 開塞): “What I call *li* is the basis of righteousness. But what the realm calls right is the way to violence 吾所謂利者, 義之本也。而世所謂義者, 暴之道也。” See also J.J.L. Duyvendak, *The Book of Lord Shang* (1928; rpt. San Francisco: Chinese Materials Center, 1974), p. 230. This is rather a persuasive definition of *yi* than of *li*.

⁴⁷ Doing so I try to avoid chronological pitfalls in which I believe many Chinese colleagues fall, assuming e.g. that the whole *Lun yu* or *Zuo zhuan* represent ideas of, respectively, Confucius and the Spring and Autumn period. See, e.g. Huang Chun-chieh, “‘Rightness’ (*i*) versus ‘Profit’ (*li*) in Ancient China: The Polemics between Mencius and Yang Chu, Mo Tzu and Hsün Tzu,” in *Proceedings of the Natuional Science Council, ROC, Part C: Humanities and Social Sciences* 3.1 (1993), pp. 59–72.

⁴⁸ An exception is *Lü shi chun qiu* 22/4.2: 146/27–28 (“Yi xing” 壹行), where both *li* re-

formulated as paradoxes, the first claims that “throwing away *li* (profit) will be *li* (beneficial);” the second believes that “the mind finds *li* (benefit) in casting off *li* (profit-seeking);” and Yang Xiong points out that the sage’s “way is more *li* (beneficial) than (commercial) *li*.” Hence he concludes with the implicitly paradoxical rhetorical question: “What sort of *li* is bigger than this 利孰大焉?”⁴⁹

The genesis of the paradoxes can be traced to earlier stories or statements, among them Mencius’ irritated response to the king’s interest in *li* during his first audience at the court of Wei. When the king politely asks him whether he has brought something “to *li* his state 利吾國,” the old master expresses his disapproval: “Why must the king talk of *li*? 王何必曰利.” Because, if the king talks of “benefiting his state,” the ministers will talk of “benefiting their families 利吾家,” and the people about “benefiting their bodies 利吾身.” The result will be that all layers of society will fight each other for *li*, so that the state will be endangered and its lord killed, which is surely not what the king wants. If, however, one gives priority to humaneness (*ren* 仁) and duty (*yi*), then, according to Mencius, parents will be taken care of and consideration for the lord will be given priority. The opposite has never been the case 未有仁而遺其親者也, 未有義而後其君者也.

When Sima Qian 司馬遷 read this story, he had to put the book down and sigh: “Alas! *Li* is really the beginning of disorder 嗟乎, 利誠亂之始也.” Obviously impressed by the very negative evaluation of *li*, he further interpreted some sayings attributed to Confucius in the same sense.⁵⁰ But when Zhu Xi 朱熹 commented on this dialogue, he remarked that “this explains that *ren* and *yi* have never failed to be beneficial 此言仁義未嘗不利.”⁵¹ Zhu Xi’s point is that, to put it paradoxically: “it is not *li* to speak of *li*.” This commentary is certainly loyal to the spirit of Mencius’ plea, but it abandons the exclusively negative emotive force of the term in this dialog. The different emotive meanings that Zhu Xi attributes to *li* were already explicitly exploited in the

fer to rewards in terms of material gain and both are considered positive, but they differ in degree of strength: “If not for somebody strong and great, his majesty does not inspire awe, and *benefits* do not (really) *benefit*. If his majesty does not inspire awe, it will be inadequate to prevent anything; and if benefits do not really benefit, they will be insufficient to stimulate anything 非強大則其威不威, 利不利. 其威不威, 則不足以禁也, 其利不利則不足以勸也.” See also Knoblock and Riegel, *Lü Buwei*, p. 576.

⁴⁹ *Fa yan* 8: 19/20 (“Wu bai” 五百).

⁵⁰ *Shi ji* 史記 (1959; rpt. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1992) 74, p. 2343, quoting *Lun yu* 1X/1 and 1V/12.

⁵¹ Zhu, *Si shu jizhu*, p. 198.

paradoxes that post-dated Mencius and his strong (although perhaps not exclusive) rejection of it.

The *Da xue*, for example, twice refers to the paradoxical saying quoted above: “A state does not consider *li* (pecuniary gain) as *li* (prosperity) 國不以利爲利.” The whole context closely echoes Mencius’ argument and warns against ministers “working for revenues 務財用,” reliance on “petty men 小人,” and the resulting “calamities and harm 災害.” Since “there has never been a case in which when one was fond of duty, one’s affairs were not carried through to the end 未有好義, 其事不終者也,” one does well to “take duty as *li* 以義爲利.”⁵² A paradox in *Lü shi chun qiu* makes a similar point. In “Shen xing” 慎行, the gentleman is described as one “who is aware of the *li* (benefit) of the *bu li* (unprofitable) 知不利之利” because “in the calculation of his conduct, he considers duty 君子計行慮義,” while the “petty man, in the calculation of his conduct, looks out for *li* (profit) 小人計行期利.” The story illustrating this describes the manipulations of a malicious minister who ends up having his whole family exterminated because “he knew how to harm others but not how others would harm him 知害人而不知人害己也.” As Knoblock and Riegel point out, this chapter argues that “only through ignoring personal *gain* can the knights assure themselves of the more substantial *benefits* of living in a secure and well-ordered state.”⁵³ The authors of these paradoxes largely agree with Mencius, but the world has changed: in the new world *li* deserves at least some respect, and “harm” (*hai*) also has to be considered. Like Mencius, they oppose one (negative) *li* to *yi*; but like the Mohists, they identify the other (positive) one with *yi*!⁵⁴

The paradoxes thus produce a tension between a commonly known descriptive meaning and a newly invented one. The old descriptive meaning retains or reinforces its negative emotive meaning: the new one acquires a positive one. The identical use of the term *li* causes some momentary puzzlement and forces one to think one’s way through its new content and value. The persuasive force of such a paradox was double: First, as opposed to the old fashioned critics of *li*, the author of such a paradox rides the surge of its emotive success; he does not

⁵² *Li ji* 43.2: 166/20–24 (“Da xue” 大學), quoted above.

⁵³ Knoblock and Riegel, *Lü Buwei*, p. 565, my italics. For the quotes, see *Lü shi chun qiu* 22/1.1: 143/29–30 and 22/1.2: 144/15–16 (“Shen xing” 慎行). See also Knoblock and Riegel, *Lü Buwei*, pp. 566–68; replacing 其 with 期.

⁵⁴ This does not mean that they accepted the Mohist redefinition of *yi*. In the early Chinese context, *yi* was a term with an almost undisputed positive emotive meaning and, as a result, with a very open descriptive meaning. The various persuasive definitions of *yi* would be an interesting topic to study.

complain about the appeal of *li* in his days but thrives on it. Second, he challenges the audience to think about its content and to realize, with him, that some sorts of *li* are clearly more *li* to the person than other sorts: more beneficial in the long run, in a larger scope, or in a deeper sense. Compared to a persuasive definition, the paradox certainly has persuasive force, but it is no definition: it only suggests a content which the audience is invited to spell out.

There were also nonparadoxical ways to deal with positive meanings of *li*. Wang Chong 王充 (27–100 AD), for instance, criticized Mencius for being consciously confusing in his rebuke of the king of Wei. He separates the two descriptive meanings of the term and provides each with an opposite emotive meaning:

Now, there are two kinds of *li*: there is material *li* and there is the *li* of well-being. When King Hui asked: “How to *li* my state?” how did Mencius know that the king did not mean the *li* of well-being? But Mencius went ahead taking exception to material *li*. 夫利有二。有貨財之利，有安吉之利。惠王曰“何以利吾國”何以知不欲安吉之利，而孟子徑難以貨財之利也。

Wang Chong then quotes the *Yijing* 易經 and the *Shangshu* 尚書, which attest to the high value of *li* in the good sense of the term. He then continues:

By acting out *ren* and *yi* one obtains the *li* of well-being. Mencius should have asked king Hui: “What do you call ‘*li* my state’?” If king Hui had said “material *li*,” then he could have straightforwardly answered as he did. But now he didn’t quite know the purport of king Hui’s question but answered straight ahead about material *li*. If king Hui had really asked about material *li*, Mencius would have had a way to prove his point.⁵⁵ But if he had asked about the *li* of well-being, and Mencius answered about material *li*, then he missed the meaning of his audience and he offended the substance of reasonableness.⁵⁶ 行仁義得安吉之利。孟子宜⁵⁷語問惠王，“何謂‘利吾國?’”惠王言貨財之利乃可荅若語。⁵⁸今惠王之問未知何趣。孟子徑荅以貨財之利。如惠王實問貨財。孟子無以驗效也。如問安吉之利，而孟子荅以貨財之利，失對上之指，違道理之實也。

⁵⁵ Emending 無 to 有 as suggested by Liu Pansui 劉盼遂, quoted in Zheng Wen 鄭文, *Lun heng xigu* 論衡析詁 (Chengdu: Bashu shushe, 1999), p. 505, n. 9.

⁵⁶ *Lun heng* 30: 139/20–140/3 (“Ci Meng” 刺孟). See also Alfred Forke, *Lun-heng: Part I, Philosophical Essays of Wang Ch’ung* (New York: Paragon Book Gallery, 1962), pp. 418–19.

⁵⁷ Following Yang Baozhong 楊寶忠, *Lun heng jiao jian* 論衡校箋 (Shijiazhuang: Hebei chubanshe, 1999) 1, p. 343, n. 1, in correcting 必且 to 宜.

⁵⁸ Following *ibid.* 1, p. 343, n. 2, in correcting 設 to 語.

We find the same mechanisms at work as in the paradoxes: the previous wholesale rejection of *li*, as in *Mencius* 1A/1, is now being replaced by a partial rejection; the values of *ren* and *yi* are only opposed to that part, while they are positively associated with the good sort of *li*. Thus, *li* is partially saved from the rejection of moralists; and the traditional values are potentially saved from the rejection of those attracted by *li*. What makes Wang Chong's analysis different from the paradoxes is, aside from his critical tone, the fact that he spells it all out for his audience; hence the reader is not challenged into thinking his way through the paradox. Moreover, his explanation in terms of "material *li*" versus "*li* of well-being" is only one of the possible interpretations, while a paradox remains open.

Wang Chong's analysis may not have convinced Mencius, for whom the problem of *li* was perhaps also a matter of speaking about it. But according to *Kong Congzi* 孔叢子 (3d c. AD), Mencius' teacher had advocated a view in line with Wang Chong without, however, using his critical tone:

When Meng Ke 孟軻 (that is, Mencius) asked what should be given priority in shepherding the people, Zisi 子思 said: "First *li* them." Mencius then asked: "As for the way a gentleman teaches the people, there is no more than *ren* and *yi*. Why must one speak about *li*?" Zisi said: "*Ren* and *yi* are inherently that whereby one *li* them. If superiors are not humane, then those below will not find their repose; if superiors are not righteous, then those below will take pleasure in causing disorder. This is really the worst sort of non-*li*." 孟軻問牧民何先。子思曰 "先利之。" 曰 "君子之所以教民，亦有仁義而已矣，何必曰利。" 子思曰 "仁義 固所以利之也。上不仁 則下不得其所；上不義 則下樂爲亂也。此爲不利大矣。"⁵⁹

Yoav Ariel remarks that this "passage is not what it seems – a reversal of the well-known argument in the opening section of *Mencius* ... where Mencius forced king Hui of Liang silently to admit that only "benevolence and righteousness" and not "profit" should guide human actions." He explains that the author "does not abandon the basic principles of Confucianism, but rather copes with the analytical criticism of Wang Ch'ung."⁶⁰ This dialog indeed is not (and does not even seem) a complete reversal of Mencius' view, because it retains his insistence on the priority of *ren* and *yi*. What has completely changed, even more

⁵⁹ *Kong Congzi* 6: 13/14-17 ("Za Xun 雜訓"). See also Yoav Ariel, *K'ung-ts'ung-tzu: The K'ung Family Masters' Anthology* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1988), p. 106.

⁶⁰ Ariel, *K'ung-ts'ung-tzu*, p. 173, n 35.

than in Wang Chong's balanced analysis, is the emotive force of *li*, which is now exclusively positive and descriptively defined in terms of the two most crucial Confucian virtues. This complete reversal gives Zisi's answer a tinge of challenge, as do the paradoxes quoted above. Even though this view is attributed to Mencius' teacher, and thus is presented as preceding him, it clearly attests to the growing acceptance of *li* and the influence of Mohist thought after *Mencius*.

PARADOXES THAT FOCUS ON THE OBJECT OF *LI*

The paradoxes that we have thus far analysed are inspired by the fact that the emotive meaning of *li* became more positive after Mencius, but never became exclusively favorable. With its increasing but contested respectability, the concept at least partially gained a new descriptive meaning. Thus far we saw how the content of a favorable *li* was constituted by exactly those virtues, *ren* and *yi*, that were originally considered diametrically opposed to it by Mencius. The majority of paradoxes, however, make another point by focusing on the object of *li* rather than its content. Below we will analyse occurrences of the paradoxes “大利不利” (in *Liu Tao*), “利而弗利” (in *Tang Yu zhi dao*), “利而勿利” (in *Lü shi chun qiu*), and “利而不利者” (in *Xun zi*), tracing their background and reflecting on the implicit ambiguity of *li* as a transitive verb, at least in classical Chinese, of “benefit X” versus “benefit from X.”⁶¹ The point that these paradoxes make agrees with the semi-paradoxical statement by *Heguanzi* that “while benefiting, he does not seize benefit 利而不取利.”⁶² Although the previously discussed paradoxes (from *Da xue* and *Lü shi chun qiu*) implicitly agree with this, their focus was on the content of *li*. Here, it is turned to its object: even material gain is considered good as long as it is given rather than taken.

If Mencius had agreed with the authors of these paradoxes, he would not have criticized King Hui of Wei for wanting to “benefit his state,” unless he considered the scope of a state too small compared with the realm (*tian xia*);⁶³ or perhaps he interpreted the king's question as: “how to benefit *from* my state?” Although this translation could be defended on purely grammatical grounds, I agree with the current consensus that it is not applicable in *Mencius* 1A/1. There is, however,

⁶¹ The latter is intransitive in English but not in classical Chinese. Feng Youlan calls this use “passive” as opposed to “active.” See Fung Yu-lan (trans. Derk Bodde), *A History of Chinese Philosophy* (1937; rpt. Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1973) 1, p. 134, n. 2. See also below.

⁶² *Heguanzi* 9: 11/22 (“Wang fu” 王鈇).

⁶³ This is the argument of Schumacher in *Über den Begriff*, pp. 83–100.

another *Mencius* passage where exactly this argument has been made. In one of the few instances in which Mencius discusses *li* – he prefers not to speak of it – he compares Yangzi and Mozi in their attitude towards “*li* the realm”:

Yangzi chooses “for oneself”: even if he could *li* the realm by pulling out one hair, he would not do it. Mozi stands for “inclusive caring”: if by rubbing his head bald and showing the flesh of his heels, he could benefit the realm, he would do it. 楊子取爲我; 拔一毛而利天下, 不爲也。墨子兼愛, 摩頂放踵利天下, 爲之。⁶⁴

Gu Jiegang argued in 1922 that Yang Zhu has been terribly misrepresented by Mencius. What Yang Zhu meant is that even if he could have *enjoyed the benefit* of ruling the empire by pulling out one hair, he would not have done it.⁶⁵ Thus, Yangzi was not selfishly refusing to help others: he was able to resist the appeal of possessing the whole realm because he realized that, in the end, this would harm his own person. Such concern with oneself was certainly not considered by his followers as a selfish act at the expense of others, but on the contrary, better for them too. Various Yangist texts indicate that the best candidate for rulership is detached from status, power and luxury; he takes care of himself and therefore does not even want the throne.⁶⁶ Gu refers to a passage in *Hanfeizi* 韓非子 (“Xian xue” 顯學) in which someone is described as unwilling to enter an endangered city or a military fight because “he would not exchange one hair of his shin for a benefit as great as the realm 不以天下大利易其脛一毛。” Hanfei’s complaint about rulers who respect such a “man who values life more than anything else 重生輕物” attests to the success of Yangzi’s thought.⁶⁷

In the 1930s, Feng Youlan questioned this interpretation of Mencius’ words: considering the obvious parallel with the Mohist case in the next sentence and the latter’s well-attested ideal of benefiting the realm, “it seems hardly right to interpret this sentence differently.”⁶⁸ Feng’s point is supported by the fact that, even in isolation, the expres-

⁶⁴ *Mencius* 7A/26. See also D. C. Lau, *Mencius* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984), pp 187–88.

⁶⁵ Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛, “Cong *Lü shi chun qiu* twice *Laozi zhi cheng shu niandai*” 從呂氏春秋推測老子之成書年代, in *Gushi bian* 古史辯 (Taibei: Landeng wenhua, 1987) 4, pp. 493–94.

⁶⁶ See e.g. *Lü shi chun qiu* 1/2.4 (“Ben sheng” 本生); Knoblock and Riegel, *Lü Buwei*, pp. 65–66; and see Defoort, “Mohist and Yangist Blood in Confucian Flesh,” p. 57.

⁶⁷ *Hanfeizi* 50: 151/9–10 (“Xian xue” 顯學). See also Liao, *Complete Works of Han Fei Tzu* 2, p. 301.

⁶⁸ Fung, *History of Chinese Philosophy* 1, p. 134, n. 2. The Chinese version was written in 1931, the English translation in 1937.

sion “*li* the realm” is almost always used in the sense that Feng here attributes to Mencius.⁶⁹ While Gu’s suggestion has not been largely taken up in the field, Feng nevertheless admits that it “is probable that the words: ‘If one would benefit him by giving him the whole realm, and hope thus that he would pluck out one of his hairs, he would not do so,’ represent Yang’s actual doctrine; whereas the words: ‘Though he might have benefited the whole realm by plucking out a single hair, he would not have done it,’ are Mencius’s interpretation of this doctrine.”⁷⁰ The expression “*li* the realm” is thus inherently ambiguous: for Yangzi it means “derive benefit *from* the realm,” for Mozi “benefit the realm.” By literally and correctly quoting Yang Zhu in opposition to the well-known Mohists, Mencius may nevertheless have suggested another interpretation and evaluation.⁷¹

Li tian xia as “Benefit from the Realm”

What interests us here is that the expression “*li* the realm 利天下” could indeed also be understood in this peculiar way. The clearest example is again a very Mohist sounding passage in *Lü shi chun qiu* (“Shi jun” 恃君) about a situation of total chaos without rulers, in which people were on the verge of destroying their own species, until the sages took action.

Sages looked deeply into this troubling situation. Thus, pondering long for the sake of the realm, they thought it best to establish a Son of Heaven. Pondering long for the sake of each state, they thought it best to establish a lord. The establishment of a lord was not done out of partiality for the lord, nor the establishment of a Son of Heaven out of partiality for the Son of Heaven, nor the heads of office out of partiality for the heads of office. Only after virtuous power had declined and the realm was thrown into chaos did the Son of Heaven *benefit from* the realm, the ruler of a state from his state, and the heads of office from that office. That is why loyal ministers and incorruptible scholars at the court criticize their ruler’s transgressions, and on a mission are willing to die for their duty as minister. 聖人深見此患也。故爲天下長慮，莫如置天子也。爲一國長慮，莫如置君也。置君非以阿君也；置天子非以阿天子也；置官長非以

⁶⁹ A clear indication of this current interpretation is also the opposition between 利天下 and 害/賊天下, which never means “derive harm *from* the realm.”

⁷⁰ Fung, *History of Chinese Philosophy* 1, p. 134, n. 2.

⁷¹ Graham, therefore, believes that Mencius did not misrepresent him but that he “may be exposing what he sees as the doctrine’s selfish implications, which Yang Chu is trying to hide.” See Graham, “The Right to Selfishness,” p. 76.

阿官長也。德衰世亂，然後天子利天下，國君利國，官長利官。故忠臣廉士，內之則諫其君之過也，外之則死人臣之義。⁷²

It was only in this period of decline, when the man on the throne started to selfishly “*li* the realm,” that there became a need for loyal ministers and incorruptible scholars with a strong sense of duty 義.

On top of this clear use of “*li tian xia*” there are many other instances in which *li* is used in the sense of “benefit from,”⁷³ or in which *tian xia* is discussed in terms of gaining benefit. Aside from the fragment from the “Xian xue” chapter to which Gu Jiegang referred, Hanfeizi argues in the chapter “Wu du” 五蠹 that Yao and Yu, understandably, wanted to abdicate for selfish reasons: a better life, less labor, and more power. When Yu was ruling the realm, for instance, he “led the people by personally holding plough and spade, till his thighs has no flesh and his shins no hair 禹之王天下也，身執耒耜以爲民先。股無胈，脛不生毛。” Since life was so hard, he was happy to abdicate: “passing on the realm was no big deal 傳天下而不足多也。” Although the term *li* is not used here, the description of their hard lives shows that they did not seize any benefit from being Son of Heaven. “The fact that they gave little weight to resigning as Son of Heaven was not because they were highminded but because their power was scant 輕辭天子，非高也，勢薄也。” If their position had provided them benefit, like that of “a prefect of today 今之縣令” whose “descendants for many generations can use a chariot 子孫累世絜駕，” then they would, like everyone else, have “given much weight 重” to their position.⁷⁴ The *Huainanzi* 淮南子 also argues, in a less cynical tone, that Yao abdicated the throne because he was suffering from it. But the possession of the throne remains a matter of *li*, which Yao “did not privately keep for himself 不私其利.”⁷⁵

In the absence of any syntactic difference in the classical Chinese written sources between the two meanings of the verb *li* – “benefit” versus “benefit from” – there may arise disagreement about the trans-

⁷² *Lü shi chun qiu* 20/1.3: 128/23-31 (“Shi jun” 恃君), my italics. See also Knoblock and Riegel, *Lü Buwei*, pp. 512-13.

⁷³ For some examples, see my “Mohist and Yangist Blood in Confucian Flesh”, pp. 52-53. Sometimes it is a matter of interpretation whether or not one translates this as “benefit from”.

⁷⁴ *Hanfeizi* 49: 145/28-146/1 (“Wu du” 五蠹). See also Liao, *The Complete Works of Han Fei Tzu*, vol. 2, pp. 277-78.

⁷⁵ *Huainanzi* 10: 89/20-21 (“Miu cheng” 繆稱). See also Charles Le Blanc and Mathieu Remi, eds., *Philosophes Taoistes 2, Huai-nan zi* (Paris: Pléades, 2003), p. 448. *Lü shi chun qiu* 21/4.2 (“Shen wei” 審爲) tells about a malicious minister who fails to understand that the realm 天下 should only be a means, not an aim; what counts is one’s body 身. To sacrifice one’s body in order to get the realm, is not understanding the real (descriptive) meaning of *li*. See also Knoblock and Riegel, *Lü Buwei*, 557-58.

lation of such passages, since only the context can give an indication and, more particularly, some closely related terms such as “harm” (*hai*), “righteousness” (*yi*), and “care” (*ai*). But in most of the paradoxes concerning *li*, exactly this ambiguity is being exploited. They are therefore the best proof that *li* in connection to the realm was also considered as “benefit *from* the realm.” In all of them, the *li* with a positive emotive meaning means “to benefit”; the negative one “to benefit from.”

The Pervasiveness of Mohist Thought

Paradoxes with *li* do not occur in *Mozi* – Mohists may have preferred clear answers above intriguing messages. But their insistence on the importance of *li*, as well as their understanding of it in terms of providing welfare, was largely adopted by later thinkers. Debates concerning *li* and, more particularly, the paradoxes focusing on its object attest to this strong influence. I am almost tempted to think that one of the reasons why Mohism disappeared is because early Chinese thought had become so thoroughly Mohist.

We saw that in early Mohism *li* was the highest good, but that it was viewed negatively if its object was oneself rather than others. The paradoxes that focus on the object of *li* combine both views in one expression – benefit others, not yourself – but they add something more: a condemnation of the act of seizing benefit from others. “Benefiting others” is not anymore merely opposed to “benefiting oneself 自利,” but to “deriving benefit from them.” This evolution not only confirms the increasing acceptance of the originally Mohist idea that one ought to work for the material benefit of the realm, but it also throws suspicion on one’s wish to gain from it. I have argued elsewhere that this evolution is also present in the core chapters of *Mozi*,⁷⁶ and in other texts influenced by it, such as *Tang Yu zhi dao*. This short Guodian manuscript from the fourth century bc, generally considered to be Ru, contains three times the paradox “利天下而弗利” in its promotion of the act of abdication as an ultimate form of “benefiting the realm while not deriving benefit from it.”⁷⁷

In the “Tian zhi” chapters, early Mohists compared the exemplary rulers with Heaven’s endless giving without ever asking anything in re-

⁷⁶ See Defoort, “The Growing Scope of *jian*,” pp. 136–39.

⁷⁷ See my “Mohist and Yangist Blood in Confucian Flesh,” pp. 60–63. See “Tang yu zhi dao” 唐虞之道, slips 1, 2, and 20 in the reconstruction of Wen wu ed., *Guodian Chu mu zhu-jian* 郭店楚墓竹簡 (Beijing: Wen wu, 1998). For the influence of Mohist thought on the Ru, see also Benjamin Wallacker, “Han Confucianism and Confucius in the Han,” in David Roy and Tsuen-hsuei Tsien, eds., *Ancient China: Studies in Early Civilization* (Hong Kong: The Chinese U.P., 1978), p. 222.

turn. In *Lü shi chun qiu*, the Earth joins this picture. The author of “Gui gong” 貴公 attributes to the duke of Zhou the advice to “*Li* (provide benefit) without *li* (deriving benefit from) them” 周公曰:利而勿利也,⁷⁸ and continues with an anecdote that concludes as follows:

Heaven and Earth are truly great: they give life (to all things) without considering them their sons, they bring them to completion without possessing them. Everything undergoes their beneficence, receives their *li* but nobody knows where it comes from. 天地大矣: 生而弗子, 成而弗有. 萬物皆被其澤, 得其利, 而莫知其所由始.⁷⁹

Benefiting others is what Heaven and Earth constantly do. They give and never expect anything in return, unlike parents who make demands on their sons and rulers who want revenues from the territories that they possess.⁸⁰

The strongest indication of the pervasive Mohist influence is perhaps its unproblematic acceptance by Xunzi, known as the most fervent critic of the Mohists and their pursuit of *li*. Chapter “Fu guo” 富國 contains a passage wrought with paradoxical statements (lines 1, 3), which can only be translated with confidence thanks to the parallel lines (2, 4), in which “care for 愛” is analogous with the better *li* and “use 用” with the lesser one.

1 To benefit from them while not benefiting them provides less benefit than when one only benefits from them after benefiting them. 不利而利之, 不如利而後利之之利也。

2 To use them while not caring for them provides fewer results than when one only uses them after caring for them. 不愛而用之, 不如愛而後用之之功也。

⁷⁸ The same paradox, emended by Yu Yue, occurs in chapter “Shi jun” of *Lü shi chun qiu* 20/1.1: 128/31, which seems inspired by Xunzi’s well-known description of the genesis of human society (in “Wang zhi” 王制), but rather than divisions 分 or a sense of what is right 義, the key to an ordered society is a shared pursuit of benefit: “The reason why groups can be formed is because they together benefited from it. That they benefited from it resulted from being a group, and the Way of rulership was established. Hence, when the Way of rulership was established, benefit results from the group, and the human defence can be completed. ... Although many states in the realm have perished since antiquity, the fact that the Way of rulership has not been abandoned, is because the realm benefits from it. ... What is the way of rulership? It is to *li* and not to *li* them 群之可聚也, 相與利之也. 利之出於群也 君道立也. 故君道立, 則利出於群 而人備可完矣 ... 自上世以來, 天下亡國多矣, 而君道不廢者, 天下利之. ... 君道何如? 利而勿利.” See also Knoblock and Riegel, *Lü Buwei*, pp. 510–11.

⁷⁹ *Lü shi chun qiu* 1/4.2: 4/11–15 (“Gui gong” 貴公). See also Knoblock and Riegel, *Lü Buwei*, p. 71. This attitude is said to describe Lao Dan, which probably refers to *Laozi* 10 “Bring to life but do not possess 生而不有.”

⁸⁰ This cosmic image is further elaborated in *Liu Tao* 2.1: 12/15–24 (“Fa qi”), where paradoxical claims concerning *li* are followed with an evocation of the mechanism of *li*’s mysterious multiplication: “Thus the Way is invisible, its workings are inaudible, its victories incom-

3 To benefit from them only after benefiting them provides less benefit than when one benefits them and does not benefit from them. 利而後利之, 不如利而不利者之利也。

4 To use them only after caring for them provides fewer results than when one cares for them but does not use them. 愛而後用之, 不如愛而不用者之功也。

Now that the reader has thought his way through this cluster of *li* related actions and attitudes, these actions are associated with three varieties of political success.

One who benefits them and does not benefit from them, who cares for them but does not use them, will get the realm. 利而不利也, 愛而不用也者, 天下矣。

One who benefits from them only after benefiting them, who uses them only after caring for them, will protect the altars of soil and grain. 利而後利之, 愛而後用之者, 保社稷矣。

One who benefits from them while not benefiting them, who uses them while not caring for them, will endanger his state (and family). 不利而利之, 不愛而用之者, 危國家也。⁸¹

The point of Xunzi's play on words is the ultimate importance of "care" and of *li* in the good sense. Lines 1 and 3 contain no less than three different *lis*: aside from an emotively positive and negative transitive verb, there is also the noun "benefit" which is simply assumed here to be something desirable, as are "results 功," for someone with political ambitions. The benefit of following Xunzi's paradoxical advice is nothing less than the possession of the throne. On the basis of such a positive statement about at least two of the three *lis*, I cannot agree with Knoblock's one-sided summary of Xunzi's view on "benefit" as something "inappropriate for the upper classes." Far from indicating "the hostility of both Mencius and Xunzi toward the Mohists," this passage is as Mohist as can possible be.⁸²

prehensible. How subtle! How subtle! [...] When the great clarity spreads out, everything is illuminated; when the great righteousness reaches out, everything is *li* (benefited); when the great army goes out, everyone submits. How great, the sage's power. Alone he hears; alone he sees. What a joy! 故道在不可見, 事在不可聞, 勝在不可知。微哉微哉 ... 大明發而萬物皆照, 大義發而萬物皆利, 大兵發而萬物皆服。大哉 聖人之德。獨聞獨見, 樂哉。”

⁸¹ *Xunzi* 10: 47/4-7 ("Fu guo" 富國). See also Knoblock, *Xunzi* 2, p. 133.

⁸² Knoblock, *Xunzi* 2, p. 118 in his introduction to the topic of "benefit" in this chapter.

CONCLUSION

Paradoxes built on the multivalent senses of *li* constitute only a small minority in early Chinese texts. The category of paradoxes is moreover vague, and their translation is usually more straightforward than other passages using *li* in confusing or apparently inconsistent ways. But the analysis of their emotive and descriptive meaning has a relevance that reaches far beyond the limits of the paradoxes alone. First, they can inform the interpretation of other passages concerning *li* which are perhaps less easy to interpret; and second, they attest to the growing influence of Mohism in early Chinese thought.

Let me just give two examples of nonparadoxical passages that could be further analysed on the basis of the various meanings that have been found in paradoxes. There is, first, a story about Shun 舜 in the *Guanzi* in which he is praised, according to Ricketts' translation, for "being able to benefit others with what does not benefit oneself 能以所不利, 利人." He tilled the mountains and fished the marshes, "not for his own benefit but to instruct the hundred surnames. They (in turn) benefited him 不取其利, 以教百姓. 百姓舉利之."⁸³ This interpretation fits well with the majority of paradoxes discussed in terms of their object. But I believe that the point here is that Shun "was being able to benefit others with something he did not draw benefit from," namely the mounts and the marshes. He worked hard on them, but not "to seize *their* benefits. He used them to teach the people and they all drew benefit from it." In other words, Shun's hard work was not for the material benefit that he could seize from it, but for its function as a model for the people. This translation includes the opposition between different objects of benefit but adds an insight concerning its content, namely that the real benefit of one's acts is often less obvious or visible, as is an educating influence, when compared with material goods.

The second intriguing debate that could be reconsidered after the analysis of meanings of *li* is the one between Mohists and Yangists in the "Yang Zhu" chapter of *Liezi*, the only extant one in which Yangists are called to defend their views. It starts off with Yang Zhu stating that since "Bocheng Zigao would not *li wu* at the cost of one hair, he renounced his state and retired to plough the fields 伯成子高不以一毫利物, 舍國而隱耕." Usually 利物 is translated here in the sense of "benefit everything/everyone," but it could also be read in a more Yangist fashion as "benefit from everyone." Yang Zhu further claims that

⁸³ *Guanzi* 66: 154/26-27 ("Ban fa jie"). See also Rickett, *Guanzi, Vol. I*, pp. 146-47.

“A man of ancient times, if he could have *li tian xia* by the loss of one hair, would not have given it 古之人損一毫利天下, 不與也,” and he concludes that “Since no one would lose a hair, and no one would *li tian xia*, the realm was in good order 人人不損一毫, 人人不利天下, 天下治矣.” In both sentences, *li tian xia* is usually translated as the Mohist ideal of “benefit the realm,” as if Yang Zhu did not want to benefit others out of extreme selfishness. But I believe that the more Yangist translation of “benefit from the realm” also makes sense. The realm would then be at peace, according to the author, if nobody harms himself in order to possess the throne. Perhaps the expression “*li* the realm” is ambiguous here, as it may also have been in *Mencius* 7A/26. This ambiguity was maybe caused by the fact that rivals quote each other’s slogans in a hostile discursive context, which gives the whole passage a paradoxical twist.⁸⁴

Aside from informing the interpretation of other passages, the analysis of *li* paradoxes furthermore attests to a pervasive and increasing absorption of Mohist thought. The value of *li*, which was originally associated with Mohism became part of the basic moral discourse. Most remarkable is the fact that the emotive force of *li* turned positive: not only *Xunzi* occasionally spoke very highly of it, but also *Yijing* and *Shangshu* are regularly quoted for their positive remarks on *li*. There was, however, also a sustained aversion against it. This continuous and perhaps even growing opposition of the two emotive meanings not only explains the relative absence of persuasive definitions of *li*, but also inspired the use of paradoxes. As many authors became (partly) influenced by Mohism, they incorporated the opposite emotive meanings of *li*. This, in turn, sharpened attention as to which aspect of *li* was to be praised and which one not. One minority trend was to identify as its content those virtues that were the original rivals of *li*, most importantly *ren* and *yi*, opposed in the paradoxes to a content of mere material profit. The majority trend was still more positive about *li*, even in the sense of material benefit, but distinguished between its object: to benefit others was fine, not to benefit oneself. A further evolution, also generated in Mohism, was that the ruler should not even derive *li* from others, just as Heaven does not demand anything in return for its endless generosity. Other aspects of the descriptive meaning of *li* – the quantity, scope and status – turned out less important in para-

⁸⁴ *Liezi* 7: 41/18–42/1 (“Yang Zhu” 楊朱). See Graham, *The Book of Lieh-tzu* (1960; New York: Columbia U.P., 1990), pp. 148–49, p. 149 n. 1. Graham admits that there are two opposite readings but he believes that this dialogue was written by a Mohist author. I doubt this and I hope to make this dialogue the object of further research.

doxes and debates.⁸⁵ As a result of all these meanings and evolutions, the ambiguity of *li* is not only present in its paradoxes or contradictory passages, but in the whole corpus of early Chinese texts. It attests to the pervasive influence of Mohist thought: its acceptance as well as its rejection. While the early Mohists mostly argue in favor of the value of *li*, those authors influenced by them show us its potentially complex content.

Living persons who have influenced our lives also remind us of the complexity of benefit. For many of us in the field of Chinese studies, one such influential person is Nathan Sivin, whose scope of beneficial influence has been exceptionally broad. His successful collaboration with colleagues moreover proves that the quantity of benefit grows as one shares it. As for the object of *li*, Sivin has shown how conferring benefit upon students and colleagues also means greater benefit to oneself. And finally, the content of the benefit that I received from Nathan Sivin was much more than he probably realizes: I did not only learn from his incisive comments during my doctoral research on *Heguanzi*, but also from his own work and, most importantly, from the impressive model that he embodies of a fine teacher who “benefits while benefiting others.”

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

PEW *Philosophy East and West*

All references to primary sources are in the form of “chapter: page/lines” based on “ICS: The Ancient Chinese Texts Concordance Series” edited by D.C. Lau et al. (Hong Kong: Shangwu, 1992–), except for *Laozi*, *Lunyu*, *Lü shi chun qiu*, and *Mencius*, which commonly use other referencing schemes. E.g., *Mozi* 49: 111/32 refers to chapter (or *pian*) 49, namely “Lu wen,” page 111 of “ICS The Ancient Chinese Texts Concordance Series,” line 32.

⁸⁵ The *quantity* of *li* and its miraculous potential to grow was sometimes indirectly related to its object. The idea that the *scope* of *li* ought to be large, was generally assumed but not made a topic of controversy. The social or cultural *status* of *li*, finally, was not discussed in the paradoxes: the aristocratic reticence to speak about it disappeared and was replaced by more internal activities such as “thinking about” and “considering” *li*.