

# Introduction

## *Defining “Arche-Semiotics”*

### The Sign, Unscinded

The language of the first men is represented to us as the tongues of geometers, but we see that they were the tongues of poets.

—Rousseau, *Essay on the Origin of Languages*

Rousseau’s proto-Romanticism is embarrassing. It is still useful. Archaic language use is not a compendium of the lays of noble savages, who stood up and could only sing the matins of history. But Rousseau’s theory of linguistic origins did help convert older theological models of postlapsarian language into something that we can recognize as intellectual history. It is a lineage that passes later through Hegel and Marx, eventually through Foucault, among a thousand others. And we should be able to recognize that language about language is a “discourse,” one among many.

When one wants to talk about the origin of that version of linguistics that we now call “semiotics,” it is hard to know where and how to start. The first person who could have named himself a semiotician was C. S. Peirce; the first who could have equivalently named himself a semiologist was Ferdinand de Saussure. And the writings of both are in the style of geometers. Saussure had inherited a technical vocabulary and a diagrammatic tendency from nineteenth-century historical linguistics, while Peirce’s work shows his intimate investment in formal logic and its mathematical precision. If we take the birth of semiotics to be the moment at which the discipline was named, then it was born as a child of Science. Structuralist semiotics could only have succeeded for fifty years in the mid-twentieth century

by assuming that there was a discoverable, highly technical model for the creation of “meaning”; poststructuralist semiotics could only have succeeded over the past fifty years by demonstrating that any such prior model could not function as a technique. Whether they were being built up or torn down, the models by which linguistic “signs” could be associated with “meanings” always were struggling in, through, or against certain ghostly frameworks that seemed to want to impose a modern, technological rigor upon systems of words.

The question is, Do we really need to consider that scientific aura and its attendant technicizing language as a necessary component of “semiotics”? What about the long centuries of thought in which writers talked—at length—about “words,” “meanings,” “symbols,” “ideas,” and, yes, “signs,” without trying to make such discussions sound modern and scientific (or postmodern and postscientific)? Did the poets of the world’s early ages do “semiotics,” or do we have to label their discussions of signs and meaning as something else?

Words are, after all, just words, and one could define “semiotics” in any fashion that convention could be persuaded to accept. I would be happy to apply it to any work, from any society or century, that matches the *Oxford English Dictionary* description: “The science of communication studied through the interpretation of signs and symbols as they operate in various fields, esp. language.”<sup>1</sup> But I would prefer to leave room for works that belonged to a not-very-modern “science of communication.” When in the *Cratylus* Plato seems to end by claiming that the meaning of individual words is somehow natural and inherent rather than arbitrary and conventional, he is making a claim diametrically opposed to Saussure and Peirce. But he is nonetheless speaking of the same subject as they would later do. It wouldn’t do to categorize the *Cratylus* as a theory of “language,” because it is not talking about language in general; instead, it is discussing the specific process by which individual vocabulary words are attached to ideas that refer to objects. We don’t have a good word to refer to that topic other than “semiotics,” even if that label is a modern one.

I do not think that the question of what counts as “semiotics” should depend upon the length of a text. But it does seem like a more dubious categorization when semiotic issues are raised briefly in texts that seem to be about something else. When Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, speaks of the inferiority of recognition “according to signs” (διὰ τῶν σημεῖων)<sup>2</sup> such as Odysseus’s scar, this is hardly a grand theory of semiotics. But it is still a smidgeon of semiotics.

And while, as a general rule for intellectual history, one doesn't want to rely on sifting through dribs and drabs to find something interesting, Aristotle's tiny usage here is historically useful, because it gives us a glimpse at a field for a latterly developed semiotics much broader and deeper than pure linguistics. It is not better at being "semiotics" than Aristotle's own extended discussions in the *Categories* and the *On Interpretation*. But it gives a vision of the "sign" as something no longer abstracted and bloodless, but poetically fleshy. The history of a boar's tusk ripping through the hero's calf, and the traces of an epic implication that it left behind in his skin, is a key to the Ithacan's identity. Similarly, we could not have the pathos of the *Iliad* without the deceptive sign of Achilles's armor masking the body of Patroclus. Or the satire of *Don Quixote* without the ironic sign of a cardboard helmet covering the knight's addled noggin. Adulterers need to be given giant A's to wear, and superheroes need to be given S's. Roland Barthes brought such issues into the realm of official "semiotics" with his *Système de la mode* five decades ago; but there was always a secret semiotic impulse buried in identity and narrative, across broad swathes of culture, long before he systematized it. If one goes on like this, it might seem that there is no end to semiotics, that the term might itself be vacated by meaning by being applied to everyone and everything. However, that danger itself has an august pedigree: Peirce himself once infamously wrote that "the entire universe is perfused with signs if it is not composed entirely of signs."<sup>3</sup> And Derrida's still more infamous notion that "there is nothing outside the text" (more literally, "there is no outside-text," *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*)<sup>4</sup> indicates not that only language exists, but that the world is a continuous part of the signifying system of texts, not simply a heap of referred-to objects. Although this study will try to refrain from declaring anything and everything to be signs, to the extent that it goes beyond linguistic theories in its investigation of signs, it is on well-trodden ground.

Even when one restricts oneself to actual language, the limits of signifying are hard to define, and this expansiveness might reasonably seem problematic to those who come to the discipline from analytic philosophy. However, literary scholars will probably be more familiar with the notion that first-person texts (like those that occupy much of this book) can act as external signs of the self, akin to the scars or armor of epic narrative. Genres that thematize direct address to the reader (the lyric, the personal essay, the epistle, the autobiography) by being what they are, necessarily bring along the impression of a speaking subject, and the words thereby take on the character of the external image of that subject. Not everything in such works

is “semiotic”; much belongs properly to the field we would traditionally call “rhetoric.” But rhetoric is a tangle of motives, and the semiotic impulse to representation is buried within this tangle. Consider how this is framed by Philip Sidney in the first sonnet of *Astrophil and Stella*:

Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show,  
 That she (dear she) might take some pleasure of my pain;  
 Pleasure might cause her read, reading might make her know;  
 Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtain;  
 I sought fit words to paint the blackest face of woe,  
 Studying inventions fine, her wits to entertain;  
 Oft turning others' leaves, to see if thence would flow  
 Some fresh and fruitful showers upon my sunburnt brain.  
 But words came halting forth, wanting invention's stay;  
 Invention, Nature's child, fled step-dame study's blows;  
 And others' feet still seemed but strangers in my way.  
 Thus great with child to speak, and helpless in my throes,  
 Biting my truant pen, beating myself for spite,  
 “Fool,” said my Muse to me, “look in thy heart, and write.”<sup>5</sup>

The lyric I, which argues most of this tense-wound contraption, is concerned with rhetoric: the lateral search of model speeches and exemplars with persuasive power. But the sonnet begins and ends in a place of pure expression: a desire to find some words that can externally signify an internally felt emotion. This is in no way “semiotics,” if we mean by that word a “science of communication” akin to that offered by Peirce, Saussure, or those who followed. But there is here a “poetics of communication,” a latent or incipient impulse to semiotics, in which it is assumed that the words on the page are signs of the static thought resident in the authorial Mind. This is no new or radical conclusion: semiotics and poetics have been intertwined since Michael Riffaterre’s pioneering 1978 *Semiotics of Poetry*, a work in which he argued that the poem as a whole, through the hermeneutical process, unifies into a single sign of a larger poetic intention.<sup>6</sup> Even if one moves away from actual lyric poems, however, it should still be possible to read via this kind of poetics of the sign, in search of the signifying subject behind it, without departing too far from precedent. After all, it follows close upon the Derridean critique of logocentrism to note that there is a vast assumption of external, written words being at best a sad replacement for more deeply felt internal meanings pent up inside. But because scholars

in different fields come to the word *semiotics* with different assumptions, it is reasonable to require a clear definition of what one means when one wishes to study premodern discourse around signs.

To that end: this book deals with many ancient Chinese texts, which, in various ways, discuss the relationship of signifiers, signifieds, and referents. Some of these texts put forward explicit theories of language that ought to count as “semiotic” if any pre–nineteenth-century text can. Others reference ideas about language en route to discussing matters of self-expression, or philosophy, or theology. Others still do not reference language at all, but discuss nonlinguistic signs, and how they might be used to represent meanings. All of them either theorize or manifest what I have been calling the “semiotic impulse,” even though there are few extended essays dedicated to expounding semiotic theories, and none of those reads like a twentieth-century essay on semiotic theory. Because some of these materials trace the interests of semioticians without sounding like “real semiotics,” I will resort to a neologism, and call these materials “arche-semiotic.”

Freely adapting the *Oxford English Dictionary*, I define “arche-semiotic” as: *a discourse of representation, thematizing the use of signs and names as external carriers of thought, meaning, or identity, which might have prelinguistic existence.*

“Discourse,” and not “science,” because the materials studied in this book echo each other relentlessly, without ever trying to establish a system.

“Representation,” and not “communication,” because most of these materials are less concerned with what makes signs decipherable, and more concerned with how signs can or cannot substitute for realities.

“Might have prelinguistic existence,” because many of the texts studied in this book are deeply conflicted about language and whether or not every name must indeed stand for a thing.

The prefix “arche-,” inspired by Derrida’s concept of “arche-writing,” comes ultimately from the Greek ἀρχή, meaning simultaneously a “beginning” and a “ruling,” and this double meaning points toward two ways in which this kind of “semiotics” differs from normal semiotics. It provides two premises, which are tested throughout this work:

1. *The Subjective Premise:* Arche-semiotics is a semiotics that belongs to the unsystematized subject at the origin of culture, a way of doing semiotics prior to science, and based in the primordial urge to have like things “fit” each other. One of the first steps out of infancy is the understanding that some words correlate to some objects or ideas. One does not need

a complex philosophical architecture to be conscious of the possibility of mistaken correlation. Although there is abstruse philosophy represented in this book, even those works rarely propose technical models of how signs contain ideas. Instead, what comes to the forefront are highly personal, subjective means of matching signs to ideas. Instead of complex and abstract theories of the sign, we find socially or psychologically deeply rooted impulses that signs are critically important—even when they are impossible to explain.

2. *The Historical Premise:* Arche-semiotics is a semiotics that governs culture, a set of discursive practices which shape and mold those fundamental impulses to match into a broader system of expression. Archaic and medieval China is deeply imbued with anxieties over the social representation of the self: when should one reveal one's inner thoughts to the world, and when should one remain silent, put forward no signs and remain silently self-contained? At the same time, it is concerned with religious transcendence, and how certain forms of subjectivity might require either revelation, or perhaps the absence of revelation: a secret buried somewhere beyond representation. As such, the arche-semiotic impulses in these materials can be considered semiotics with an unsystematic history: a set of impulses that can only be recognized as they play themselves out in history.

In these two senses, the prefix “arche-” also fortuitously echoes the text with which this study begins, in chapter 1. The *Dao De Jing* takes its name from the two characters that begin its two books. *Dao* names the Way—something which cannot truly be named, because it exceeds anything to which one could match it. *De* names “moral force,” an innate power of the ruler that transforms his subjects without the need for active implementation of policy. “Arche-semiotics” appears in both senses in ancient Chinese thought: it is everywhere and in everything though never named; and it governs discursive systems that remain present in historically specific social contexts, without necessarily possessing an active program to do anything in particular.

Defined in such terms, the arche-semiotic appears in many different kinds of texts in early China, for many reasons. This study will trace only Daoist arche-semiotics, from roughly 400 BCE through roughly 500 CE, for several reasons.

First and most obviously: any scholarly work needs some limiting principle, and I do not want to try to do everything.

Secondly, during this period of my focus, Daoism has probably the broadest influence on both thought and rhetorical expression of any of China's early schools of thought. Other important arche-semiotic ideas can be found in schools such as Mohism and Legalism, but these virtually vanish from elite discourse. Confucianism had its own arche-semiotics, as did Buddhism when it later arrived in China, but these were often interpreted through the lens of Daoist texts, and had important but more strictly defined spheres of influence.

Thirdly, Daoist arche-semiotics are the most consistently complex of any of China's early schools. Daoists did not necessarily reject language, and did not endorse a simple skepticism, much less a univocal eremitism. But in important ways, they had a deep suspicion of names, which played out in complex ways, as they employed various strategies that simultaneously delegitimized language and partially redeemed it. Although Buddhism developed comparatively complex arche-semiotic ideas late in this period, Chinese Buddhists developed these ideas by mixing influences from Sanskrit and Pali texts with those of the Daoists, as will be shown in chapter 5.

Finally, Daoist arche-semiotics are the closest to our own time, when the lessons of poststructuralism have been broadly influential. There have been many scholars working in Chinese studies who have already elaborated on the resemblances between early Daoist texts and those of Derrida, and the lessons of this existing scholarship will be a major topic of chapter 2. This book does do something new, by actually tracing Daoist arche-semiotic discourse historically through its many early permutations, and reconsidering the comparisons with poststructuralism in light of that historical experience. But the basic topic is not an innovation of my own; I am able here to build upon the insights of others.

However, before turning to those Daoist traditions, it is worthwhile exploring more how arche-semiotics works in early China. What are the basic issues and orientations that distinguish China from the Western analogues mentioned above? And what is the relationship between ideas about language and more personal impulses around self-representation? These initial, orientating questions can be answered by examining a little-known pre-Daoist text.

## The Subjective Premise: The School of Names

The earliest period of Chinese philosophy is filled with competing classic visions of life, some of which have left their historical contexts far behind

and achieved genuine fame. Confucius is now known the world over, and his later disciple Mencius comes in for only slightly less esteem. Laozi and Zhuangzi, whose works, and their influence, are the subject of this book, are admired (and overmysticized) by the spiritually minded of many times and places. Even Sunzi's *Art of War* has somehow become a topic for rather dubious business-world seminars on how to increase quarterly sales numbers.

Then there are works that have a measure of fame inside China, if not beyond, and whose importance in early Chinese philosophy has been established for centuries. Xunzi proposed a vision of Confucianism which was forgotten for centuries, and then returned. The Mohists, a philosophical movement drawn from artisans and engineers, were utilitarians and social levelers who posed an impressive intellectual challenge to archaic regional kingdoms. The Legalists and their harsh vision of a punitive and technocratic state were considered intellectually unacceptable following the fall of the Qin dynasty with which they were associated, but their methods may have secretly haunted many a later reign officially devoted to more wholesome ideologies.

The *Gongsun Longzi* is a text that fits into neither of those categories. It is virtually unknown to anyone who is not a specialist in early Chinese philosophy; until recent decades, the text has been considered so marginal that even specialists could be excused from reading it. It has mostly been known through important sections in the Daoist *Zhuangzi* which make fun of it—and even then, those who did not know what they were looking at would have been likely to simply think of the *Zhuangzi*'s allusions as effervescent manifestations of that latter work's weird, wild style. And there are good reasons why the work has been ignored for so long: it did not have much influence after the *Zhuangzi*'s devastating critique, and hence most of the text was probably lost. What little survives, in six very brief essays, is probably corrupted from whatever original may have circulated, and is certainly filled with cryptic problems of interpretation.

However, the work is slowly coming into greater prominence among specialists. There have been occasional attempts to grapple seriously with the text since the late nineteenth century, but attention has accelerated since Chung-ying Cheng and Janosz Chmielewski began to analyze the text's logical system in the 1960s.<sup>7</sup> These discussions became more public and central with the works of Graham<sup>8</sup> and Hansen<sup>9</sup> on later Mohist logic and theories of language, so that it is now clear that the *Gongsun Longzi* represents an important historical bridge from the Mohists to the Daoists. As with most early Chinese philosophy, it is named after its author, Gongsun Long, who was one of two leaders of a "School of Names," and that school

was thought of as one of the six major schools of thought in early China, as late as the second century BCE.<sup>10</sup> And the early influence (which it later lost entirely) had been well deserved: the topics in logic, ontology, and semiotics which this text addresses are virtually untouched in any other early Chinese text besides a small portion of the *Mozi*, and the treatment shows a sophistication and precision that can hardly be contained within the highly contextual grammar of early Chinese.<sup>11</sup>

We know very little about Gongsun Long personally. He probably lived from the late fourth to the mid-third century BCE. Near the turn of the first century BCE, the historian Sima Qian recorded him as being originally from the kingdom of Zhao, in northern China (slightly west of modern-day Beijing). He is also recorded as having a political dialogue with Zhao Sheng, a member of the Zhao royal house, suggesting that he may have been the kind of philosopher-advisor that proliferated at Warring States-era royal courts. The third-century *Annals of Lü Buwei* also mentions dialogues with a king of the northeastern kingdom of Yan.<sup>12</sup> And the text of the *Zhuangzi* contains an obviously fictional dialogue between Gongsun Long and a nobody named Gongsun Mou, of the state of Wei. That's about all the biographical evidence we have for this person, outside the text of the *Gongsun Longzi* itself.

One reason that Gongsun Long might have been almost completely forgotten is that, if one takes as “normal” the sound, style, and concerns of the early Chinese textual landscape, the *Gongsun Longzi* is a truly bizarre text. From a purely Chinese standpoint, and using the normal rules of Chinese grammar, one must strain to tell what is being said, and to what end. Here is a representative passage from the most famous essay in the text, the “On White and Horse”:

When a horse is sought, yellow and black horses may both be sent.

When a white horse is sought, yellow and black horses may not be sent.

If a white horse is, in fact, a horse, this is a case of what is sought being identical.

If what is sought is identical, a white [horse] is not different from a horse.

If what is sought is not different, how is there “may be” and “may not be” with respect to yellow and black horses? That “may be” and “may not be” are mutually exclusive is evident. Therefore yellow and black horse are the same in that they “may be” taken to correspond to there being a horse, but “may not be” taken to correspond to there being a white horse. This verifies “[a] white horse is not [a] horse.” (Johnston 273–74)

For the modern Western reader, ancient Chinese texts can often produce a profoundly alienating sense of dislocation—but they rarely dislocate one to this particular stable. Johnston’s translation is excellent, but like any translation to English from classical Chinese, much must be added to make clear some kind of logical relation, which is simply not specified using the meagre grammatical resources of the original. This is a hard enough trick when one is translating poems about actual objects, but the *Gongsun Longzi* proffers a series of minutely drawn lines of argument about conceptual objects’ relation to each other, using a desperately imprecise vocabulary. It is the philosophical equivalent of threading a needle while wearing an oven mitt. One suspects that the historical Gongsun Long who may have been teaching these ideas was able to repeat and explain in a way that made them more reasonable—but at a distance, and through the medium of written classical Chinese, one is exiled from this logocentric safe haven. As will be shown in chapter 2, this language was easy to ridicule—and it eventually survived only for the mainstream Chinese tradition through the ridiculous echo sounded by the *Zhuangzi*.

However, the reason why the text is now understandable, and is coming back into prominence as a half-lost turning point in early Chinese thought, is that it eventually reached readers familiar with Aristotle. The *Organon* has plenty that can still be debated—but it provided for the Western tradition a clear vocabulary with which to debate topics such as the relationship of universals and particulars, accidents and essences. Although there wasn’t complete confusion about the *Gongsun Longzi* for traditional commentators, there was enough confusion that it could never sustain serious interest. But the text started to really make sense in the twentieth century, to scholars who had read deeply in both Chinese and Western philosophy, and could recognize the similarity of Gongsun Long’s concerns to those of the Aristotelian system of logic. By now, there is hardly consensus about the exact positions the *Gongsun Longzi* is taking, but there is pretty much universal consensus about what the topics are, and how the basic logic of the text is intended to

work. One reference text is typical in its sense of discovery: “The moment the reader grasps that Gongsun Long is merely trying to expound on the existence of ‘universals’ as independent entities, the famous white horse discourse presents no difficulty to understand.”<sup>13</sup> And both of these make sense: when one rereads the “White Horse Discourse” while remembering how Aristotle predicates whiteness of objects, the similarity is striking.<sup>14</sup> The death and resurrection of the *Gongsun Longzi* is one of the best arguments for the value of comparative philosophy.

The *Gongsun Longzi* clearly is related to the Mohist tradition, while also expanding on topics that Mohist materials never fully explicated. When one looks for a theory of semiotics in early China, one certainly could extract a semiotics from Mohist materials: the *Mozi* says many things about names,<sup>15</sup> and Graham even finds a semi-corrupted essay, “Names and Things,” buried in the “Great Pick” chapter.<sup>16</sup> But there is no Mohist essay explicitly dedicated to semiotics; in contrast, the *Gongsun Longzi* does have such an essay, “On Names and Entities.” Although brief (like all the chapters of the work), this is the only essay dedicated entirely to semiotics in the early period of Chinese philosophy.<sup>17</sup>

For the most part, it is not a very interesting theory of semiotics—one reason why the essay has never been particularly remarked upon, even within the small field of *Gongsun Longzi* studies.<sup>18</sup> The main middle section of the essay harps upon a notion of agreement that seems rather obvious. Names are a kind of matching. If one says “this” in connection with a referent *this*, then “this” and *this* had better actually correspond to each other, or else there will be confusion. There is in this discussion a kind of pragmatic desire to set the rules for debate, and establish a method, which is inherited from the Mohists. Such a reformist critique of errant language is not inherently weak: a similar program was put forth in much greater detail by Locke in the third book of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.<sup>19</sup> Although that program later came in for withering postmodern critique by Paul de Man,<sup>20</sup> the reformist impulse, whether in Locke or in Gongsun Long, necessarily recognizes the possibility of a failed semiotics in which there are nonsignifying signs, matched with the wrong referents. However, the problem with this semiotics in the *Gongsun Longzi* is that there is maddeningly little indication what might count as determining correctness in correspondence. What is the standard for “matching”?<sup>21</sup> The word the text uses to express a proper correspondence between signs and references is *wei* 唯, here probably best translated as “agrees with.” It is a word that strongly implies subjective assent. That apparent subjectivity does not provide

any solid ground on which to build a complex semiotic theory, but it does suggest a different kind of interest of the *Gongsun Longzi*. We can look to it not for semiotics, but arche-semiotics: not a highly developed theory of the sign, but a revealing statement of the important desires and anxieties that lie behind the desires to get signs “right.”

It would be dangerous to read too much into any one word in a text such as this: some vocabulary in this and other texts had clearly achieved a kind of technical status for philosophical use, but it is extremely difficult to police their possible implications at a distance of millennia. However, the traces of subjectivity are all over this brief text, despite its apparent bloodlessness. The vocabulary that is used to set up this contrast of signs and things shows hints of an obsessive-compulsive personality, who is deeply bothered by the asymmetry of names that do not cover their proper referents.

Consider the opening lines of the essay:

Heaven and earth, and what they give rise to, are things.

When a thing is taken to be the thing which the thing is and there is no “going beyond,” it is an entity.

When an entity is taken to be the entity which the entity is and there is no “being empty,” it is “in position.”

If it goes away from its position it is “out of position.”

If it is positioned in its position it is correct.

It is by means of what is correct that one corrects what is not correct.

It is not by means of what is not correct that one calls into doubt what is correct.

Its being made correct is correcting what it is as an entity.

Correcting what it is as an entity is correcting its name.<sup>22</sup>

At first, this seems to be a somewhat blockheaded kind of pedantry, which wants nothing more than to insist that things are what they are, and that

they aren't what they aren't, and that philosophers should stop making a muddle of things all the time. There is definitely something blockish about the passage, but if one parses the vocabulary closely, it becomes clear that what is being said is more than just a kind of anti-intellectual rant.

The word translated by Johnston as “entity” is *shi* 實, with a root meaning of fullness—and which by extension can mean the fruit as the fullness of the flower, or the “actual.” This is what is identified as the logical result when a thing sits in its own thingness and does not “go beyond” (*guo* 過): the thing is “actual,” but also more literally “full.” This seems to be describing the relation of an object prior to cognition (*wu* 物) with a potential of that object being correctly imported into cognition (*shi* 實).<sup>23</sup> Using Saussurean terms, we might compare this to the relation of “referent” to “signified.”<sup>24</sup>

When the signified is in and of itself merely still itself, without “being empty,” it is “in position.” “Being empty” is *kuang* 曠, a word that can mean wide-open spaces, but which could also simply imply unfilled positions, or gaps; “in position” is simply *wei* 位, the most basic indicator for a given space, whether physically or socially defined. The implication seems to be that every signified should occupy its own cognitive spot, not leaving gaps and also not dispersing out in endless play. Although the language here is hardly clear (using “full” to indicate cognized objects, if that is in fact what is being done here, is hardly a standard use of the vocabulary), the harping on “position” seems to require that *shi* really be indicating something internal to cognition. The only other option is nonsensical: that physical objects stop being what they are if one moves their physical position. Assuming, then, that the text wishes to stress that signifieds must each properly stick in their own spots, neither leaving gaps nor encroaching on their neighbors, we can start to see the implication of an unexpressed structure. There is certainly none of the intellectual foundation on which Saussure’s structures are built: no contrast with historical linguistics, no *langue/parole* distinction, not even a glimmer of understanding that sign-systems might be conventional rather than natural. But one does feel as if there is the same underlying impulse to draw diagrams—a quasi-visual, quasi-mathematical desire underlying this nascent system.

The next lines, focusing on the “correct” (*zheng* 正), confirm the desire for a positionally pleasing semiotics. The notion of “correcting names” (*zheng ming* 正名) dates back to the *Analects* of Confucius, and is arguably the oldest semiotic concept in Chinese philosophy. But here, the notion of what counts as “correct” derives more from the Mohists than from the

Confucians. This particular language is not to be found in the *Mozi*, but the word *zheng* is used in the *Canon* of actual carpentry measurements, and is related to famous passages comparing logic to a compass and T-square. And thinking about the category of the “correct” in this Mohist fashion, as a quasi-artisanal tool, makes the passage entirely straightforward. One judges a faulty doorway by the T-square, which shows it not to be built at right angles; one doesn’t use the shoddy construction to judge the T-square. And hence the metaphor of “position” also becomes lucid: if a signified fills its spot just so, flush with its neighbors, then we can call it “even,” that is, “correct.” And once that is done, the passage from signified to signifier is simple, almost automatic. “Correcting what it is as an entity is correcting its name.” If one guarantees that the raw object, once it has passed into consciousness as an “entity” (or signified) is positioned just right among other possible entities, then the corresponding “name” (or signifier) will automatically spring into the correct position as well.

As a semiotic system, this has huge gaps. The downplaying of the name, the lack of any consciousness as to what might count as correspondence, and indeed the inappropriateness of the ruling metaphor of physical orderliness in describing language all make this argument a target for easy critique. And indeed it will come in for very heavy critique in the *Zhuangzi*, as will be explained in chapter 2.

As a bundle of arche-semiotic impulses, this is much more interesting. The value-laden metaphors of fullness and gaps, placing things in the right positions and making them flush with their surroundings: these metaphors make the language imprecise, paper over central questions, prevent this from being interesting as a *theory of naming*. But they make it fascinating as an *impulse to naming*. Evidently, for Gongsun Long, naming is a field that offers both anxiety and satisfaction. Gaps, unevenness, crookedness are how he imagines objects badly conceptualized, which will not produce significant words. Straightness, evenness, properly positioned spaces are how he thinks about objects that have been well conceptualized, and their orderliness automatically results in felicitous names. As has been described above, these master metaphors come out of the Mohist tradition, and its roots in working-class artisans’ methods of measurement. But it also reflects a more basic psychological impulse, which gains an almost aesthetic pleasure from evenness, and is roused to anxiety by disorder.

This book will not venture into actual psychology: it has too much else to do. It is enough to note how powerfully a subjective perspective lurks beneath the surface of this seemingly abstract text. The “subjective premise” posited above is demonstrated first in the early text, which seems most to

be aiming at an abstract system. In the texts that fill the rest of this book, the subjective presence of authors, their ideals, and their anxieties will often be much easier to see. But what should be remembered from this example of the *Gongsun Longzi* is that a heavy presence of the author's subjective hopes and fears does not make a text un-semiotic. It makes it arche-semiotic.

### The Historical Premise: A Treasury of Traces

There are five substantive essays, presumably deriving from original writings of Gongsun Long, which comprise the *Gongsun Longzi*. Then there is a sixth, biographical essay, "A Treasury of Traces," which relates a small amount of biographical information about Gongsun Long, and narrates several anecdotes about him of dubious veracity. Unlike some early Chinese philosophical writing, these materials presented as biography are frankly admitted to be collected secondhand. The title, *jifu* 跡府, says as much: *ji* (a word that will reappear throughout this book) means either a footprint or a hoofprint, something left behind which one can track. *Fu* had many possible meanings, ranging from storehouse to royal residence, but the original center of its meanings seems to have been a library or a records depository. By naming this chapter "A Treasury of Traces," a later editor would have been confessing to collecting for storage representations of a person who was absent. The "trace" is a sign of that absence—but a very personal absence, not simply the Derridean trace of absconded meaning.

As the biography opens, Gongsun Long is represented through his writings, rather than what we might think of as "actual biography":

Gongsun Long was a dialectician of the Six Kingdoms period. He abhorred divergence and disorder with regard to name and entity so, because of the abundance of his talent, he fashioned the *Shoubai* ["Preserving the White"] discussion. Taking things as examples, he used the *Shoubai* argument to say that white horse is not horse. With respect to "white horse is not horse," he said that "white" is what names color and "horse" is what names form. Color is not form and form is not color. In speaking of color it is not valid to combine form. In speaking of form it is not proper to attach color. Now to join [them] and take [them] to be one thing is wrong. . . . He wished to extend this debate as a way of correcting name and entity, and so transform the empire.<sup>25</sup>

For a historian, this is useless, telling us nothing other than that he lived in the mid-third century BCE. For a textual critic, this confirms that the redactor of the text lived at a considerable remove from Gongsun Long, apparently knowing as little about him as we do. For a philosopher, the text confirms that early readers could at least understand the most famous *Gongsun Longzi* essay at the most basic level, even if they could not necessarily have understood concepts of universals or predication. Such issues are worth noting, but are hardly revelatory.

Reading for arche-semiotics, we can draw two slightly more interesting conclusions. First, despite the fact that his semiotic essay was not as famous as “On White and Horse,” it was perceived by later readers that the relation of names to objects was at the heart of Gongsun Long’s philosophical project. And this was apparently a project driven by those same anxieties that make arche-semiotics a highly subjective field. “He abhorred divergence and disorder with regard to name and entity”: “Abhorred” (*ji* 疾) can imply physical illness as well as mental anxiety; “divergence” (*san* 散) implies looseness and scattered objects, leading to the kind of “disorder” (*luan* 亂) that could be moral or political chaos as well as physical messiness. It seems that the obsessive-compulsive anxieties of the “On Names and Entities” were not lost on early readers.

The second conclusion is more general. By presenting a summary of Gongsun Long’s doctrines as an adequate substitute for actual biography (and indeed by calling his biography a *fu*, “records depository”), the editor is revealing the degree to which early writers would have conceived of philosophical texts as the outer “traces” of a subjective personality. This may have been inevitable, given the conventions on naming texts after their authors. We can know Gongsun Long through the *Gongsun Longzi*, just as we can know Lao Dan through the *Laozi*, Zhuang Zhou through the *Zhuangzi*, Han Fei through the *Hanfeizi*, and so on. Texts become the outer signs of personalities, and while we should not assume that early readers did not take seriously the philosophical content of these texts, there was also a sort of categorization of subjective personality types that happened through the evaluation of writers’ actual published texts. We know Confucius as an upright moral idealist, not just as a name attached to theories of ritual and social order. We know Zhuang Zhou as a crazy, humorous troublemaker, not just as a writer of allegories about abstracted naturalness and spontaneity. And even Gongsun Long, about whom we know nothing other than his text, appears as an anxious character determined to fix language by separating things that don’t belong together.