Aural-mnemonic architectonics of ancient Chinese philosophical texts: an approach inspired by Soviet sinology and South Asian parallels

Taking inspiration from Soviet scholarship and South Asian parallels, this article proposes a new interpretation of the compositional regularities in certain philosophical texts from ancient China. It argues that such texts are underpinned by mechanisms of aural and mnemonic reinforcement that contributed to the fixation of textual compositions and facilitated the creation of stable discursive spaces for communities distributed in space and time. The sophisticated structural patterning can be seen as a technological alternative to writing and literacy, providing another platform for advanced textuality. Visualisation of the non-linear compositional structures pioneered by Vladimir Spirin, a Soviet scholar of ancient Chinese texts, makes them more comprehensible to the contemporary reader, and this approach holds much potential if combined with modern dynamic hypertext technology.

Keywords: literacy and orality, textual structure, parallelism, pre-Qin philosophy

A List of Abbreviations:

Composition Spirin, Vladimir Semënovich Спирин, Владимир Семёнович. 2006. *Postroenie drevnekitaĭskikh tekstov* ***Построение древнекитайских текстов*** (The Composition of Ancient Chinese Texts). Saint Petersburg: Peterburgskoe vostokovedenie,

DLGW Spirin, Vladimir Semënovich Спирин, Владимир Семёнович. 2014. Dengxizi *kak logiko-gnoseologicheskoe proizvedenie Дэн Си-цзы как логико-гносеологическое произведение* (*Dengxizi* as a Logico-Gnoseological Work). Ed. Artëm Igorevich Kobzev Артём Игоревич Кобзев, Moscow: Vostochnai͡a literatura.

Intricate compositional patterns in ancient Chinese philosophy

There is remarkable structural regularity in some ancient Chinese philosophical texts. It shows itself in the intricate use of parallelisms coupled with such elements as rhymes, repetitions and skilfully interwoven self-referential markers, turning the texts into meticulously ordered compositions. Identifying such structures is an addictive pleasure: the better one establishes the recurring structure-defining components, the more the artful embroidery of the composition reveals its beauty.

Consider a text corresponding to the chapter (*zhang* 章) 31 of the *Laozi* 老子. The citation below is given in the rendering of Mawangdui 馬王堆 *Laozi* A, with the missing characters supplemented from *Laozi* B from the same find. I accompany it with a slightly modified translation of James Legge.[1]

> 夫兵者，不祥之器也，物或惡之，故有欲者弗居。君子居則貴左，用兵則貴右。故兵者非君子之器也，兵者不祥之器也，不得已而用之，銛襲爲上，勿美也。若美之，是樂殺人也。夫樂殺人，不可以得志於天下矣。是以吉事上左，喪事上右。是

1 *Mawangdui hanmu boshu* 1980, vol. 1, pp. 12, 97; Legge 1891, pp. 73–74.

以便將軍居左，上將軍居右，言以喪禮居之也。殺人眾，以悲依立之，戰勝以喪禮處之。

Now arms are instruments of evil omen, hateful, it may be said, to all creatures. Therefore they who have desire do not like to accumulate them.
The superior man ordinarily considers the left hand the most honourable place, but in time of war the right hand. Those sharp weapons are instruments of evil omen, and not the instruments of the superior man; – he uses them only on the compulsion of necessity. Shovels and casual clothes is what he prizes; (weapons) are to him undesirable. To consider this desirable would be to delight in the slaughter of men; and he who delights in the slaughter of men cannot get his will in the kingdom.
On occasions of festivity to be on the left hand is the prized position; on occasions of mourning, the right hand. The second in command of the army has his place on the left; the general commanding in chief has his on the right; – his place, that is, is assigned to him as in the rites of mourning. He who has killed multitudes of men should weep for them with the bitterest grief; and the victor in battle has his place (rightly) according to those rites.

This is the text in its conventional linear representation. Nothing precludes the reading and interpretation already at this stage. It is grammatically consistent and makes sense. However, it is possible to go a step further, identify and visualise the compositional patterns underpinning the text:

Table 1: Visualisation of compositional patterns of the *Laozi*, Chapter 31.

夫兵者,
不祥之器也,
物或惡之,
故有欲者弗居。

君子
居　則貴左,
用兵則貴右。

故
兵者非君子之器也,
兵者不祥　之器也,

不得已而用之，銛襲爲上。

勿美也。是樂殺人也。
若美之，　夫樂殺人,

不可以得志　　於天下矣。

是以
吉事上左,
喪事上右。

是以
便將軍居左,
上將軍居右,
言
以喪禮居之也。

殺人眾,
以悲依立之,
戰勝
以喪禮處之。

Simple tabulation, indentation and highlighting of individual characters (none of them have been modified!) has allowed us to bring to the forefront the patterns of compositional symmetry that

would have otherwise remained concealed. What is perhaps the most unexpected to the contemporary reader is the sophisticated musicality of such composition: a "motive" set by a key word or a syntactical pattern can be picked up in a passage immediately following – or it may be reprised much later in the patterned body of the text.

The *Laozi* is not the only text in which such compositional patterns are manifest. They are frequently encountered in the texts of ca. the fourth to second centuries BC, both transmitted and excavated.[2] Rudolf Wagner has convincingly argued that, without consideration of these compositional regularities, which he calls *Interlocking Parallel Style*, our interpretations are prone to be incomplete, if not mistaken.[3] Wagner's findings have provided inspiration for the work of Joachim Gentz, Wolfgang Behr, Dirk Meyer, to name a few.[4]

Vladimir Spirin and his studies of the composition of ancient Chinese texts

There is a lesser known scholarly tradition focusing on the same intricate compositional practice, which has had some influence on western scholarship (including the aforementioned authors) since the 1990s.[5] It was spearheaded by a Soviet scholar Vladimir Spirin (1929–2002) whose *magnum opus Postroenie drevnekitaĭskikh tekstov* (*The Composition of Ancient Chinese Texts*, hereafter referred to as *Composition*), first published in 1976, presents a comprehensive method of compositional analysis of ancient Chinese texts. Some of the elements of his method are in line with Wagner's, but he was driven by a different kind of ambition, trying to find the universal key to interpretation of ancient Chinese texts. Many of his findings can be questioned, but, as an unconventional thinker, Spirin has offered some valuable insights that have no match in Western European and American scholarship.[6]

From the onset, Spirin was not content with just having described the compositional patterns that he had discovered. He also wanted to explain why they were composed in this way and not another. He anticipated that such an explanation would provide the key for the correct and scientifically justified interpretation of ancient Chinese texts that otherwise appear as obscure and muddled – a frustration very familiar to any sinologist.

The *Composition* is presented as a consistent augmentative theory where each following element builds on the previous ones. As such, the first chapters of Part One are the easiest to access, while Part Three requires the knowledge and acceptance of the conclusions and assumptions introduced in the previous parts. This explains why the impact of Spirin's work has been mainly limited to the methodological framework introduced in the beginning of the book, where he describes what he calls *the universal parallelism* and provides an impressively rich set of examples of this phenomenon taken from various parts of the ancient Chinese philosophical corpus, including the *Laozi*, *Lunyu*論語 (*Analects*), *Zhongyong*中庸 (*Doctrine of the Mean*), *Liezi*列子, *Wenzi*文子 (*[Book of] Master Wen*), *Hanfeizi*韓非子, *Zhuangzi*莊子, *Mozi*墨子, *Xiaojing* 孝經 (*Canon of*

2 They are common in what Meyer 2012 calls "argument-based texts" in his study of the Guodian manuscripts.
3 Wagner 1980.
4 See the thematic issue of the *Bochumer Jahrbuch zur Ostasienforschung* vol. 29 edited by Wolfgang Behr and Joachim Gentz, published in 2005.
5 See the 1991 (vol. 13) issue of *Extrême-Orient, Extrême-Occident, Modèles et structures des textes chinois anciens : les formalistes soviétiques en sinologie*, edited by Karine Chemla, Viéra V. Lichtmann and Alexeï K. Volkov.
6 For an overview of the studies of Soviet sinologists inspired by Spirin, see Volkov 1991.

Filial Piety). I will not attempt to offer a consistent summary of Spirin's theory here, focusing instead on the points crucial for my argument. A faithful synopsis in French of the first (methodologically the most useful)[7] part of Spirin's book has already been made by Karine Chemla and Alexei Volkov, to which I gratefully refer the reader.[8]

According to Spirin, the analysis of ancient Chinese texts, as it is done conventionally, suffers from excessive subjectivity. Therefore he proposes *structural analysis* as a more scientific alternative. This method prioritises the formal aspects of textual presentation over the headlong interpretation of contents, seeing the scrutiny of textual form as a necessary prerequisite. The main focus of structural analysis is the uniform description and interpretation of the instances of parallelism.[9]

Spirin identifies several formal elements that mark parallelism.[10] *Syntactical aspect* involves full or partial correspondence of grammatical form of parallel passages. *Quantitative aspect* shows itself in "chains of characters of equal size."[11] *Compositional parallelism*, being a form of complex parallelism, consists of a set of smaller syntactically parallel passages. *Formal proximity of content* refers to semantic correspondence of the subject matter in parallel passages. In some passages, *rhymes* may also mark parallelism. Finally, parallelism may be indicated by the correspondence of "*secondary elements*" of textual presentation, such as introductory particles, conjugations, explanations, questions and direct speech.

Let us examine how Spirin applies this method to chapter 16 of the *Laozi*.[12] Having traced the different types of parallelism identified in his taxonomy, Spirin divides the chapter into nine units (1 to 9), each composed of two parallel elements (with the exception of 9 that contains three). Eventually he arranges them in the following tabular form (triangles mark rhymed passages):

Table 2: Spirin's visualisation of compositional patterns of the *Laozi*, Chapter 16.

1 致虛極 守靜篤	2 萬物並作 吾以觀其復	3 夫物云云 各歸其根
4 歸根曰靜 靜曰復命	6 不知常 △ 忘作凶 △	7 知常容 △ 容能公 △
5 復命曰常 △	8 公能王 王能天	9 天能道 道能久

7 Spirin 2006.
Spirin 1991.
9 Spirin 2006, pp. 19–21.
10 Spirin 2006, pp. 24–39.
11 Spirin 2006, p. 27.
12 Spirin 2006, pp. 39–43. Legge 1891, pp. 59–60 translates this passage as follows (romanisation converted to *Hanyu pinyin*): "The (state of) vacancy should be brought to the utmost degree, and that of stillness guarded with unwearying vigour. All things alike go through their processes of activity, and (then) we see them return (to their original state). When things (in the vegetable world) have displayed their luxuriant growth, we see each of them return to its root. This returning to their root is what we call the state of stillness; and that stillness may be called a reporting that they have fulfilled their appointed end. The report of that fulfilment is the regular, unchanging rule. To know that unchanging rule is to be intelligent; not to know it leads to wild movements and evil issues. The knowledge of that unchanging rule produces a (grand) capacity and forbearance, and that capacity and forbearance lead to a community (of feeling with all things). From this community of feeling comes a kingliness of character; and he who is king-like goes on to be heaven-like. In that likeness to heaven he possesses the Dao. Possessed of the Dao, he endures long; and to the end of his bodily life, is exempt from all danger of decay."

知常曰明　　△　　沒身不殆

Unit 1 is identified on the basis of a quantitative match (the same number of characters in each element); units 2 and 3 are compositionally parallel to one another (unit 3 also contains a rhyme); units 4 and 5 contain quantitatively and syntactically matching phrases, in which the smaller elements in each unit are rhymed (靜 – 命 and 常 – 明) and show the unity of content (靜 in 4 and 常 in 5); units 6 – 9 contain quantitatively matching phrases, in which units 6 and 7 are rhymed (常 – 凶, 容 – 公), while units 7 – 9 show the unity of content (容, 王, 道) and are further connected by "consecutive development of argumentative content."

Notably, the arrangement of units within the table is not linear. Units 1, 2 and 3 occupy the first row. However, for the next pair Spirin prefers vertical arrangement, aligning units 4 and 5 in a column. He then reverts to the horizontal arrangement again with the pairs 6 – 7 and 8 – 9. This choice is not incidental. In fact, Spirin believes that only such schematisation can be called *full* as it represents the parallel elements the most comprehensively, revealing the parallelism in content between units 1 and 4 (靜), syntactic parallelism between units 4 and 5 as well as the parallelism in content and rhyme between units 5, 6 and 7.

So far, this approach may appear as an unorthodox, but overall convincing way to illustrate the compositional regularities in the *Laozi*.[13] However, for Spirin the table with three rows and three columns it is not merely an illustration, but a veritable reconstruction of the original compositional form. According to Spirin, ancient Chinese texts were typically inscribed in this grid of the "ninefold canon" (девятеричный канон).[14] At this point, Spirin's theory becomes problematic. It is apparent that he prioritises those elements of parallelism that fit into his pre-imposed tabular layout, discarding other instances of parallelism as "irregular."[15] Where the text refuses to fit the straightjacket of the "ninefold canon," Spirin finds it possible to throw away the inconvenient passages,[16] arbitrarily supplement the text with fragments from alternative recensions of the *Laozi* or such texts as the *Wenzi*, *Liezi* or *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (*The Masters of Huainan*),[17] or swap the positions of the units that he suspects to have been "misplaced".[18]

These methodologically dubious manoeuvres are based on Spirin's firm belief that the "ninefold canon" is an emic practice of textual composition. Examining the texts through this tantalisingly elegant tool, he feels entitled to tweak those of them that fit imperfectly, believing that the result is the most credible approximation to the ancient original.

Where does this belief come from? Is there any firm evidence in support of the "ninefold canon"?

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13 Lackner 1996; 2007; 2011; 2015 has convincingly shown that a similar technique of using diagrams to elucidate the systematic relations between compositional elements of certain ancient philosophical texts was widely employed by commentators in the 12th–14th centuries..

14 Spirin 2006, pp. 54–55..

15 Spirin 2006, p. 41.

16 Spirin 2006, pp. 49–50.

17 Spirin 2006, pp. 50–52; 88–89.

18 Spirin 2006, p. 86.

Was there a “ninefold canon” in ancient China?

Thanks to Spirin’s earlier manuscript *Dengxizi as a Logico-Gnoseological Work* (*Dengxizi kak logiko-gnoseologicheskoe proizvedenie*, hereafter *DLGW*) composed in the mid-1960s and published posthumously in 2014,[19] it has become possible to trace the evolution of this approach. The compositional regularities described in the *Composition* are already highlighted in the *DLGW*, and Spirin’s trademark tables are applied extensively in the analytical commentary that constitutes a larger part of the book.[20] Notably, the theory of the “ninefold canon” is entirely missing from the *DLGW*. However, the alternative explanation of the compositional principles underlying ancient Chinese texts offered in this earlier work is remarkably similar. Using a different terminology and relying on different sources, Spirin explains the compositional intricacies as an artefact of manuscript layout conventions in ancient China.

At this point, it is suitable to review the evidence that Spirin offers in support of these two alternative explanations, starting from the theory presented in the *DLGW*.

One passage that Spirin uses as a source of methodological insight is taken from the chapter “Li wei” 離謂 (Departing from the Import) of the *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋 (*Master Lü’s Annals*). Here is the original text with the English translation by Knoblock and Riegel:[21]

> 鄭國多相縣以書者。子產令無縣書，鄧析致之。子產令無致書，鄧析倚之。令無窮，則鄧析應之亦無窮矣。是可不可無辨也。可不可無辨，而以賞罰，其罰愈疾，其亂愈疾，此爲國之禁也。故辨而不當理則僞，知而不當理則詐，詐僞之民，先王之所誅也。理也者，是非之宗也。
>
> In Zheng it was the custom for people to hang criticisms of the laws from the walls. When Prince Chan ordered that no more be hung, Deng Xi added his own construction of the meaning of the laws. When Prince Chan ordered that no such constructions be added, Deng Xi found yet other devious ways of twisting the meaning of the laws. To whatever orders the Prince issued, Deng Xi had a ready response. His actions obliterated the distinction between what was permissible and what was not. When these cannot be properly distinguished and one makes use of rewards and punishments, the more extreme the punishments become, the graver the anarchy that results. This is precisely what those governing a state should forbid.[22]

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19 Spirin 2014. This book is sold in a bundle with a translation and study of the *Daxue* 大學 (*Great Learning*) by Artëm Kobzev 2014, who prepared Spirin’s manuscript for posthumous publication.

20 See the Commentaries B and C (Spirin 2014, pp. 145–319).

21 Knoblock and Riegel 2000, p. 453; Chen Qiyou 1985, pp. 1177, 1181. Cf. Tkachenko 2001, p. 295.

22 This is one possible interpretation, influenced by Chen Qiyou’s 陳奇猷 (1917–2006) commentary. Earlier commentators, such as Fan Gengyan 范耕研, Yang Shuda 楊樹達 (1885–1956) and Wang Qixiang 王啓湘 interpret the key expressions *xuan shu* 縣書, *zhi shu* 致書 and *yi* 倚 more literally, referring to specific ways of physical positioning of manuscripts composed for public perusal: hung, delivered to the readers or leaned over something. I find this reading preferable since it makes good sense while not drifting away from the letter of the text. However, no matter which interpretation one prefers, it is clear that the main point in the text is the conflict between Prince Chan and Deng Xi, who always came up with a clever way to circumvent the ruler’s orders.

Here is how the same passage is understood by Spirin:[23]

> In the domain of Zheng, many intertwined written records. Zi Chan ordered that no intertwined records be made. Deng Xi [began] to extend them. Zi Chan ordered that there be no extended records. Deng Xi [then began] to prop them from the side. [Zi Chan] ordered that [they would be] flawless. Then Deng Xi reacted to this [by records] that, too, were flawless.

For Spirin, this is a description of the process of manuscript production. The gist of the anecdote is lost, and Deng Xi becomes an obedient subject who composes texts in strict compliance with the ruler's instructions. Spirin understands "intertwined records" as two physically bound bamboo strips, each containing a separate finite idea, arranged either horizontally or vertically. "Extension" means the addition of the third element to the first two. The records "propped from the side" refer to an additional row (or column) added parallel to the first one. This results in a table composed of two rows (columns) with three elements in each, which is not a "flawless" arrangement since the numbers of rows and columns do not match. In order to make them match, an extra row (column) had to be added, which resulted in a perfectly symmetrical arrangement of the text in a table of three rows and three columns (Illustration 1).

Illustration 1: Consecutive steps of the composition of the Dengxizi *units according to Spirin. The division of the passage is borrowed from Spirin 2014, p. 211 (Unit 17).*

From the grammatical and lexical viewpoints, this interpretation is very problematic,[24] not to mention that manuscripts in such cumbersome arrangements would be prohibitively difficult to handle.[25] But it is crucially important for Spirin's approach to the analysis of the *Dengxizi*. He assumes that the first two elements were composed initially as self-sufficient statements, then a "conclusion" was added to them as an extension, then the entire text was extended by one row, and then by another. These are the units into which he divides the chapters in his analytical commentary, based largely on this fanciful interpretation.

Perhaps the extremely speculative nature of this theory was one of the reasons why Spirin decided to leave the manuscript of the *DLGW* unpublished, switching his attention entirely to a new – and more ambitious – interpretation of his basic observations in the *Composition*. This time, Spirin aimed to explain the compositional principles underpinning not only the *Dengxizi* but almost the entire corpus of ancient Chinese texts. However, the evidential foundation underpinning the methodological approach adopted in the *Composition* is hardly more convincing than the theory of the gradual composition of manuscript texts offered in the *DLGW*.

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23 «Во владении Чжэн многие взаимосвязывали записи. Цзы-Чань приказал, чтобы не было связанных записей. Дэн Си [стал] продолжать их. Цзы-Чань приказал, чтобы не было продолженных записей. Дэн Си [стал тогда] подпирать их сбоку. [Цзы-Чань] приказал, чтобы [они были] без недостатков. Тогда Дэн Си ответил на это [записями] также без недостатков.» (Spirin 2014, p. 39).

24 The arbitrariness of the translation of this passage has been pointed out by Artëm Kobzev (Spirin 2014, p. 295).

25 The text of the size of the *Dengxizi* would consist of hundreds of tiny bundles of three strips in each, corresponding to the sub-units of individual chapters. To make it even more complicated, one would have to arrange these bundles in tables of three rows and three columns before reading.

The "ninefold canon" theory is built on three passage from the "Zhongyong" chapter of the *Liji* 禮記 (*Records on the Ritual*), the "Zhu dao" 主道 (Way of the Sovereign) chapter of the *Hanfeizi* and the "Gengsang Chu" 庚桑楚chapter of the *Zhuangzi*.

"Zhongyong" is the only source that mentions the number "nine" (corresponding to the number of cells in Spirin's tables) explicitly. Consider the key passage in James Legge's translation:

> 凡爲天下國家有九經曰　…
>
> All who have the government of the kingdom with its states and families have nine standard rules to follow …

This introduction is followed by the detailed exposition of the "nine standard rules," which I shall not reproduce here. Spirin's interpretation of this passage is different: "For All-under-heaven, every kingdom and every family, there is a **ninefold canon** that says …"[26] Thus, Spirin treats this passage as a self-reflective statement regarding the form of textual composition, not a summarising statement regarding the nine standard rules. Of course, one of the main problems with this interpretation is that the translation of *jiu* 九 as "ninefold" and not simply "nine" is grammatically implausible. To Spirin's credit, he acknowledges this difficulty, saying that his problematic interpretation would appear more credible with additional evidence.[27] However, the other passages that he provides in support of his theory are hardly more convincing.

His second piece of evidence comes from the *Hanfeizi*. I quote it here with Burton Watson's translation. Spirin reads *jing* 經, translated by Watson as "maxim," as the "ninefold canon":[28]

> 明君之道，使智者盡其慮，而君因以斷事，故君不窮於智；賢者敕其材，君因而任之，故君不窮於能；有功則君有其賢，有過則臣任其罪，故君不窮於名。是故不賢而爲賢者師，不智而爲智者正。臣有其勞，君有其成功，此之謂賢主之經也。
>
> This is the way of the enlightened ruler: he causes the wise to bring forth all their schemes, and he decides his affairs accordingly; hence his own wisdom is never exhausted. He causes the worthy to display their talents, and he employs them accordingly; hence his own worth never comes to an end. Where there are accomplishments, the ruler takes credit for their worth; where there are errors, the ministers are held responsible for the blame; hence the ruler's name never suffers. Thus, though the ruler is not worthy himself, he is the leader of the worthy; though he is not wise himself, he is the corrector of the wise. The ministers have the labor; the ruler enjoys the success. This is called the **maxim** of the worthy ruler.

Spirin divides this passage, somewhat arbitrarily, into nine sections, and argues that the concluding statement "is a direct testimony that 'canon' referred to a ninefold construction" (является прямым

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26 «Для Поднебесной, каждого царства и каждой семьи есть девятеричный канон, который гласит …» (Spirin 2006, p. 34).
27 Spirin 2006, p. 53.
28 Chen Qiyou 1961, p. 67; Watson 1964, p. 17.

свидетельством того, что каноном называлось девятичленное построение).[29] This would only appear convincing to the reader who has already accepted Spirin's argument, his principles of textual division and his interpretation of key terms. For others, the connection with the idea of the purported ninefold division of the "canon" would remain dubious.

The last bit of evidence comes from a passage in the "Gengsang Chu" chapter of the *Zhuangzi* which I accompany with Watson's translation:[30]

> 老子曰：衛生之經，能抱一乎？能勿失乎？能无卜筮而知吉凶乎？能止乎？能已乎？能舍諸人而求諸己乎？能翛然乎？能侗然乎？能兒子乎？兒子終日嗥而嗌不嗄，和之至也；終日握而手不挩，共其德也；終日視而目不瞬，偏不在外也。行不知所之，居不知所爲，與物委蛇，而同其波。是衛生之經已。
>
> Lao Tzu said, "Ah—the basic rule of life-preservation. Can you embrace the One? Can you keep from losing it? Can you, without tortoise shell or divining stalks, foretell fortune and misfortune? Do you know where to stop, do you know where to leave off? Do you know how to disregard it in others and instead look for it in yourself? Can you be brisk and unflagging? Can you be rude and unwitting? Can you be a little baby? The baby howls all day, yet its throat never gets hoarse—harmony at its height! The baby makes fists all day, yet its fingers never get cramped—virtue is all it holds to. The baby stares all day without blinking its eyes—it has no preferences in the world of externals. To move without knowing where you are going, to sit at home without knowing what you are doing, traipsing and trailing about with other things, riding along with them on the same wave—this is the basic rule of life-preservation, this and nothing more."

This passage is an example of an argumentative statement whose integrity is supported by the near-identical framing statements: the opening 衛生之經 ("the regular method of guarding the life") and the closing 是衛生之經已 ("This is the regular method of guarding the life"). However, Spirin chooses to break apart this rather unambiguous passage into two obscure fragments. He takes the first part as an independent list of questions, which he interprets as "the canon of protection of life" and divides it into nine units, fitting the grid of the "ninefold canon":

Table 3: Spirin's visualisation of compositional patterns in the fragment of the "Gengsang Chu" chapter of the *Zhuangzi*.

1 能抱一乎？	2 能勿失乎？	3 能無卜筮而知吉凶乎？
4 能止乎？	5 能已乎？	6 能舍諸人而求諸己乎？
7 能翛然乎？	8 能侗然乎？	9 能兒子乎？

As for the remainder of the passage, which directly continues and responds to the questions in the first part, Spirin chooses to interpret it as a structurally separate unit. In order to do so, he offers a very strained translation of the concluding sentence: "These are the ends [fringes] of the canon of

29 Spirin 2006, p. 54.

30 Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩 1968, p. 785; Watson 1968, p. 253.

the protection of life" (*shi wei sheng zhi jing yi* 是衛生之經已). This is based on a dubious interpretation of the modal particle *yi* 已 as a noun ("end"), and Spirin never explains what the esoteric expression "the ends [fringes] of the canon" means.[31]

Overall, one has to conclude that the evidence provided by Spirin in support of his "ninefold canon" hypothesis is based on a highly questionable and biased interpretation of the sources. The weakness of the "ninefold canon" hypothesis casts a long shadow on the second and third parts of the *Composition,* which take the validity of this hypothesis for granted.

There is another way to test Spirin's hypothesis. If archaeologically excavated manuscripts produced at the time when the "ninefold canon" was a current practice of textual composition provide examples of 3x3 tables, Spirin may be right. However, if the manuscripts furnish no such evidence, he is certainly mistaken.

Indeed, there are examples of ancient Chinese manuscripts that adopt visually complex diagrammatic layout to reflect spacial and cosmological patterns. Could the *Laozi* – the text on which Spirin relied the most extensively – be one of such texts, where the initial form of elaborate visual presentation was lost in transmission? Such a test against material evidence is made easier by the fact that manuscript counterparts of the *Laozi* are attested in several ancient manuscript caches. Two of these caches – Mawangdui excavated in 1973 and Guodian 郭店 excavated in 1991 – can be dated to the first decades of the second century BC and ca. 300 BC, respectively. Notably, while the Mawangdui collection represents a text very close to the received redactions of the *Laozi*, the Guodian manuscripts only contain a limited number of received chapters, suggesting that they represent an alternative textual project relying on some of the source material that we know from the *Laozi*.[32] One would expect that the texts in this typologically early stage of formation would demonstrate the compositional features of the "ninefold canon" more markedly than later manuscripts.

Nevertheless, none of these predictions are confirmed by either the Guodian or Mawangdui manuscripts.[33] They are written in linear form, without any elements of the tabular layout reconstructed by Spirin. The composers of ancient manuscripts do not seem to have been aware of the "ninefold canon" as a form of textual arrangement on manuscripts.

It is therefore important to distinguish between the different forms of sophisticated textual composition in ancient China. Such recent discoveries as the "Chu silk manuscript" (Changsha Zidanku boshu 長沙子彈庫楚帛書) or tabularly arranged "daybooks" from Shuihudi 睡虎地 show that ancient China developed an appreciation for manuscript composition with a complex visual layout.[34] However, the existence of such manuscripts does not mean that all forms of compositional complexity were visual, and the multiple examples of excavated *Laozi* illustrate this point the most convincingly.

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31 «Это концы [обрамление] канона охраны жизни» (Spirin 2006, p. 54).
32 Boltz 1999, pp. 592–596.
33 *Mawangdui hanmu boshu* 1980, pl.; *Guodian chumu zhujian* 1998, pp. 1–10.
34 See the excellent overview in Dorofeeva-Lichtmann 2004, pp. 12–23.

A non-visual explanation of the compositional regularities observed by Spirin

By examining Spirin's errors, I do not intend to undermine the value of his work. Quite the opposite – I believe that Spirin discovered something very significant, but as a first step one needs to separate the more valuable insights from the mistakes. A respectful and charitable way to appreciate Spirin's contribution is to find a more plausible explanation of the compositional patterns in ancient Chinese texts, a task that he was not able to accomplish satisfactorily.

The numerous examples provided by Spirin in the opening chapters of his book and in some other publications (as well as by Rudolf Wagner, Wolfgang Behr, Joachim Gentz and Dirk Meyer)[35] show convincingly that these patterns were indeed an influential phenomenon in the textual culture of the period. Spirin's failure – despite all the efforts – to identify their connection with manuscript layout suggests that his discovery has nothing to do with visual arrangement. There does not seem to be much to choose from: if it is not the orderliness of textual presentation on manuscripts, it has to be the rhetorical patterning of an orally performed composition. Although manuscripts with complex visual layout (most notably calendrical, divinatory and cosmological charts) are attested from ancient China, the ones investigated by Spirin seem to represent a different phenomenon, which cannot be explained by the visual arrangement on the manuscript.

Indeed, if we survey the repertoire of features that contribute to the compositional architectonics of Chinese texts – syntactical parallelism, rhythmically resonating chains of phrases of uniform length, "rhyme nets," chains of passages linked together by repetition of words or compounds[36] – it becomes clear that these elements could be revealed fully only in oral recitation, provided the text has already been duly assimilated so as to properly accentuate its compositional elements in speech.

However, the Soviet sinologists of Spirin's generation had a reason to feel allergic to the idea of oral textuality. This may have been in part a reaction to the legacy of L͡iubov' Pozdneeva (1908–1974), an influential scholar of ancient and contemporary Chinese literature.[37] In 1958 and 1959, she published two articles (among which the first is a more substantial contribution) in which she offered a schematic outline of the history of ancient Chinese literature emphasising the importance of what she identified as the "period of oratory art" (период ораторского искусства).[38] According to Pozdneeva, many texts in ancient Chinese literature should be seen as transcripts of speeches. She points out that, in such books as the *Mengzi* 孟子and the *Zhuangzi* and the *Lunyu*, learning is mentioned as something conducted orally and not through written record.[39] She argues that early writing was inconvenient for the recording of substantially long works; the number of written copies was limited, and texts circulated mainly in oral form.[40] The speeches pronounced by the leaders of certain schools of thought were passed down for multiple generations, and eventually they were compiled into books bearing their names.[41] Pozdneeva observes that the speech mediated

35 Spirin 1982; Wagner 2000; Behr 2005; Gentz 2005; Meyer 2005; 2012.

36 See Baxter's 1998 discussion of the characteristic aural features of the *Laozi*. Cf. the enumeration of structure-defining elements in Gentz and Meyer 2015, p. 14. The latter article is also an extremely valuable source of bibliographic references on the subject.

37 The work of Spirin and Pozdneeva are discussed briefly by Behr and Gentz 2005 in the introductory article to the 29 volume of the *Bochumer Jahrbuch zur Ostasienforschung*.

38 Pozdneeva 1958; 1959; reprinted in Pozdneeva 2011, pp. 13–28; 29–52.

39 Pozdneeva 2011, pp. 19–20, 26.

40 Pozdneeva 2011, pp. 18–19.

41 Pozdneeva 2011, p. 19.

by writing is mentioned in texts much less frequently than oral conversations.[42] And when it comes to citations from what we know as written canonical texts such as the *Shang shu* 尚書 (*Venerated Scriptures*), such citations are inaccurate, suggesting that they were memorised and circulated in divergent oral variants.[43] While literacy had already existed in such specific contexts as chronicle-keeping, in many other environments it had not yet displaced oral speech. Books remained peripheral, and oral transmission continued to be predominant.[44]

Pozdneeva's articles suffer from multiple inaccuracies and over-generalisations. Building on a relatively incomplete survey of transmitted sources, and using a somewhat loose terminology, she jumps onto conclusions with far-reaching implications. These deficiencies have been systematically examined by Vitaly Rubin, and I will not dwell on them here.[45] However, Pozdneeva's work is still valuable for reminding us about the importance of oral forms of composition, presentation, and transmission of texts in ancient China.[46]

Pozdneeva wrote her articles before the publication of *The Singer of Tales* by Lord and Parry in 1960, translated into Russian only in 1994.[47] At her time, there was not much theory or thorough research on the early forms of oral textuality that she could rely on.[48] Before Lord and Parry's contribution inflamed the oral-written debate, oral textuality was commonly seen as intellectually unpretentious and compositionally unsophisticated. In fact, Pozdneeva shares this attitude, interpreting orality as a token of a living connection with non-elite forms of textuality, to which, as a Marxist, she felt particularly sympathetic.[49]

For Spirin, to adopt this attitude is to "belittle the level of theoretical sophistication of ancient Chinese sources" (принижать теоретический уровень древнекитайских источников).[50] He argues: "It is impossible to imagine that such texts could be simple copies of live discussions or conversations, or written records of certain dogmas … "[51] To reclaim respectability of these texts, Spirin felt obliged to demonstrate that they were created by sophisticated literate minds. In various instances of the "canon," he saw a confirmation that ancient Chinese philosophical works were constructed along the same principles as mathematical equations, and philosophy in general was underpinned by strict mathematical thinking.[52]

The role of aural sophistication in oral composition and performance: evidence from South Asian traditions

Today, we do not have any reasons to share Spirin's concerns and consider orality as a threat to the intellectual respectability of ancient texts. While the best known example of sophisticated oral

42 Pozdneeva 2011, pp. 19–22.
43 Pozdneeva 2011, p. 21.
44 Pozdneeva 2011, p. 22.
45 Rubin 1962, reprinted in Rubin 1999, pp. 182–190.
46 The essential points of Pozdneeva's argument are reminiscent of what Eric Havelock 1986 argued for ancient Greece.
47 Lord 1994.
48 Among the numerous works on the subject, I shall only mention Ong 1982, David Rubin 1995, Carr 2005.
49 Pozdneeva 2011, pp. 51–52.
50 Spirin 2006, p. 225.
51 «Невозможно представить себе, чтобы такие тексты были простой копией живых споров и бесед или письменной фиксацией каких-то догм … » (Spirin 2006, p. 226).
52 Spirin 2006, pp. 226–229; 1983.

composition is the tradition of Yugoslavian bards that Lord and Parry used to explain the Homeric epics, there are other well-attested systems of oral textuality in pre-literate societies that are more pertinent to our discussion. One example are the sophisticated patterns of Skaldic verse in medieval Scandinavia. The compositions in Skaldic verse relied on the intertwining of rhymes, half-rhymes and alliterations coupled with extremely elaborate system of figurative expressions (*kennings*) served to create mnemonically redundant compositions that could be reliably preserved across generations without any recourse on the still-marginal literacy.[53] But it is South Asia that provides particularly abundant evidence of complex systems of philosophical and scientific inquiry relying on large bodies of immutably transmitted texts – circulating in a purely oral environment.[54]

Firstly, South Asia teaches us not to confound literacy and textuality. In India, the techniques of verbatim oral textual transmission were still in use in the late 20th century, more than 2000 years after the emergence of writing on the subcontinent.[55] Thus, literacy is a convenient vehicle of advanced textuality, but not the only possible one. The pace of adoption of literacy varies depending on specific genres and textual communities; for some communities, the continuing reliance on memorisation and recitation may be preferable even when literacy becomes widespread and easily available.

The South Asian evidence also explains why certain oral texts employed sophisticated compositional forms. Generally speaking, texts are difficult to remember in an intact form. One way to increase the reliability of memorisation is to develop supplementary mnemonic layers "on top" of base texts to ensure the accuracy of their transmission. According to Frantz Staal, such techniques were employed for Vedic texts already around 1000 BC.[56] From the later Brahmanic traditions, we know that such training was part of a lifelong professional commitment and started at the age of eight years or even earlier.[57] The Buddhist communities that emerged in South Asia several centuries later developed a new approach: the stylistic devices embedded in their texts facilitated memorisation from the very start, without any need to recur to additional layers of technical mnemonic material.

A systematic survey of such stylistic devices in the Pāli canon using the material of *Dīgha Nikāya* (*Collection of Long Discourses*) has been conducted by Mark Allon. He contrasts the improvisatory oral composition studied by Lord and Parry against the compositional methods in the Pāli canon, which are employed in the production of immutable – or "fixed" – oral texts.[58] The most important feature identified by Allon is the systematic use of repetition. Having examined the instances of repetition in *Udumbarikasīhanāda sutta* (*Sutta on The Lion's Roar to the Umbarikāns*), Allon concludes that up to 87% of this text consists of fragments repeated either verbatim or with modifications (Allon gives a fine-grained classification which I will not reproduce here).[59] Allon

53 I am grateful for this parallel to Heather O'Donoghue (oral presentation at the conference "Navigating the Text: Textual Articulation and Division Across Cultures," The Queen's College, Oxford, 4 May 2019).
54 See in particular Staal's 1986 discussion of the oral environment of the origins of scientific thought in South Asia. See also Ghurye 1950.
55 Staal 1990, pp. 377–378.
56 Staal 1990, pp. 34–39, 369–371.
57 Anālayo 2011, p. 868, fn. 59 citing Kane 1974, vol. 2 p. 274–275.
58 Allon 1997a; 1997b. Cf. Vatri's 2017 methodologically elaborate survey of the oral elements in ancient Greek oratory compositions.
59 Allon 1997a, pp. 50–54.

argues that this feature only appears to make sense if we understand the texts as designed to be memorised and performed in recitation.

On the more basic level, the verbal fabric of the text also appears to have been woven more carefully than the improvisation-focused models of oral composition may suggest. Although the *suttas* are not composed in verse, they prioritise the words "that share sound and metrical similarities," conferring the characteristic "rhythm and homogeneity" to the resulting texts.[60] One striking feature is the tendency to arrange words in strings, with sequences of multiple adjectives qualifying the same noun, adverbs qualifying the same verb or nouns acting as the subjects of the same sentence, etc. The sequence of words in such strings follows what Allon calls the "waxing syllable principle," with the shorter words preceding the longer ones, arranged by the number of syllables in each.[61]

Allon's observations have been further developed by Bhikkhu Anālayo who points out an important difference between the memorisation practices employed in the Vedic communities and those adopted by early Buddhists. The Brahmanic methods of transmission put an emphasis on the immutability of sound of ritually significant texts, while the understanding of meaning was not deemed crucially important. For the Buddhist *suttas* composed in a familiar language, such sound-for-sound memorisation approach was not suitable. Buddhist adepts had to use memory in a constructive way: the meaningful texts were re-constituted in each performance, relying on the memorised inferences.[62] Such inferences had to be made in a highly systematic way to ensure the intact preservation of the *sutta* material, which is "why early Buddhist oral material uses repetition and other mnemonic aids to a greater extent than do Vedic texts."[63] In this way, the texts could be reliably transmitted by the members of the monastic community who had already reached a mature age and had never received specialised training.[64]

The repertoire of such text-structuring devices in the Buddhist tradition is different from Chinese texts. The "waxing syllable principle" would not be applicable in a language with a prevalence of monosyllabic words. Furthermore, the habits of argumentation may have played an important part as the relatively compact texts with ornate parallel structures from ancient China are different from the lengthier and repetitive but more linear texts of the Pāli canon.[65] Nevertheless, it is possible to

60 Allon 1997a, p. 49.

61 Allon 1997a, p. 48.

62 One pitfall that needs to be avoided in this context is the mechanic application of the oral-formulaic theory of Lord and Parry as it was developed for them based on the study of Yugoslavian epic. The relatively fluid oral compositions studied by them are radically different from the fixed oral texts transmitted in the Buddhist communities from a relatively early point in their history, and the modes of performance of texts were different, too. That said, it is better not to think of fixed/fluid as a binary opposition, but rather as a spectrum of possibilities in oral performative practices. During the initial period of existence of the Buddhist *saṅgha*, before a fixed corpus of texts emerged, the practices of oral composition might have been more fluid, shifting towards the fixed state some time later (Gethin 1992). For the architecturally structured ancient Chinese texts, one would imagine a relatively high degree of fixation, but perhaps less than in the Buddhist *saṅgha* which relied on supplementary social mechanisms, such as the collective recitation of textual material that helped to "synchronise" the instances of texts preserved in the minds of individual practitioners.

63 Anālayo 2011, p. 873.

64 Anālayo 2011, pp. 869–873.

65 There is one device that is used extensively in both traditions: numerical lists employed to organise knowledge in fixed categories and structure the textual exposition. Such lists are omnipresent in both the early Buddhist and in early Chinese texts. Although they were not specifically studied by Spirin, I find it justified to consider them side-by-side with other text-structuring elements that he outlined in the *Composition*.

see the sophisticated compositional structures in such texts as the *Laozi* as a similar inference-making device that ensures verbatim memorisation and, consequently, enables perpetuating communities of adepts to create a stable shared discursive space.

One important difference between written and mnemonically focused textuality is the necessity of recurrent performance.[66] In most cases, it is not sufficient to just commit texts to memory. One has to develop a regular routine of recitation so as to keep the memorised texts intact. Obviously, manuscripts are not permanent either, and it is necessary to copy them regularly onto newer carriers in order to preserve them. However, while the life span of manuscripts usually outlasts a human generation and thus creates an impression of permanency, a mnemonically internalised text has to be constantly revisited in the course of the practitioner's life.

On the circular performance of oral texts

Such regular recitation is not merely a means of textual preservation. It is a particular type of engagement with the text, which opens up possibilities not available in a culture of predominantly linear reading. This point is particularly important methodologically, as it may help us avoid mistakes in textual interpretation and analysis. A particularly inspiring analysis of such extended possibilities of textual engagement has been offered by Vsevolod Sementsov (194–986) in his study of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Instead of focusing on the text of the *Gita* as such, Sementsov chose to study "the practitioner of the culture who … employs the text" (мы намеренно избираем в качестве объекта исследования … носителя культуры … применяющего этот текст)[67] according to the prescribed practice of continuous recitation that engenders "ritualised continuous knowledge" (ритуальное длящееся знание).[68] Sementsov observes that the text would gradually reveal itself in the mind of an adept who follows the prescribed practice of regular recitation.[69] It turns out that the *Bhagavad Gita*, in addition to the basic linear narrative, contains several additional layers of meaning, in which ideas and images are connected using the links which only become apparent through recurrent recitation. The interconnected parts in the *Bhagavad Gita* are not always arranged in linear order, and an episode that is presented earlier in the text may be a commentary to the fragment that follows.[70]

Sementsov's work is particularly insightful for the understanding of compositionally sophisticated Chinese texts, which can be difficult to follow through linear reading. Consider the example of "Wu xing" 五行, a long (approximately 1200 characters) text with a complex compositional structure known from the Guodian and Mawangdui manuscript caches, which have also produced the excavated counterparts of the *Laozi*. The "elaborate system of cross-referential links by which the different textual units further explicate one another" embedded into the structure of "Wu xing" has been convincingly identified and discussed by Dirk Meyer.[71] Meyer's observation that "[t]he 'Wŭ xíng' works only as an integrated whole" aligns well with Sementsov's vision of the experience of ritual recitation of the *Bhagavad Gita*, when "more or less substantial parts of the poem assemble

66 For a relevant discussion of medieval European practices of textual memorisation, see Carruthers 1990, pp. 202–212.
67 Sementsov 1985, p. 123.
68 Sementsov 1985, pp. 41–46, 61, 122–123.
69 Sementsov 1985, pp. 41–46.
70 Sementsov 1985, pp. 67–74.
71 Meyer 2012, p. 126. See also the example of self-referential exegesis on p. 121.

into unities that reverberate simultaneously, and the threads of meaningful correspondences stretch across them; some contexts align themselves side-by-side as ‘questions’ and ‘answers’, while others re-establish connections to their organic supplements, continuations, etc. – sometimes at a distance of over several hundred lines.”[72] This parallel allows us to explain the rationale behind the sophisticated compositional form of the “Wu xing” and the function of non-linear connections that permeate the text. The former creates a mnemonic foundation for stable transmission of the text in oral form, while the latter takes advantage of the performative practice of recurrent recitation. The text embodies a complex system of conceptual connections that is difficult to trace at a linear reading but that gradually becomes apparent to those who fully commit the text to memory and perform it at regular intervals.

The physical presentation of “Wu xing” manuscripts seems to support this interpretation. As mentioned previously, the text is inscribed in linear form, and the intricate composition has to be extracted through identification of the patterns of rhythm, rhyme, parallelism, and repetition. The length of the “Wu xing” is such that the full extraction of all such structurally important elements would involve several rounds of parsing, and the reader would have to go back and forth on several occasions in order to fully identify the meaningful compositional patterns and correctly articulate them in speech. In other words, the manuscript text is not suitable for immediate performance; it serves as a kind of an “archival copy” that can be used by a competent reader to recreate the text in its full mnemonic-aural form.[73]

Aural-mnemonic sophistication as an alternative to literacy

The intensification of textual creativity attested from around the fourth–third centuries BC has been described as a consequence of the rise of literacy, but the picture may have been more complicated.[74] Some of the early sources seem to have been shaped, to a large extent, by the practices of textual composition that assume memory as the target medium and recitation as the intended way of performance. However, such texts were picked up – and integrated into – the literary discourse that was rapidly catching up. Most likely, this led to a variety of hybrid forms, in which, for example, texts composed in writing could still be targeted for oral performance and recitation. Being aware of such hybrid forms, one should avoid the radical opposition between orality and literacy. Most realistically, the cultures of literal and oral textuality co-existed and overlapped, but did not fully coincide. Not everybody among the literate was necessarily textualised (in the sense of being closely familiar with formative texts that shape one’s thinking along the expectations of a certain text-based community), and not everybody among the textualised was literate.

72 « … более или менее крупные куски собираются в единства (“звучащие одновременно”), и между ними, что особенно важно, протягиваются нити значимых соответствий; одни контексты располагаются рядом как “вопросы” и “ответы” на них, другие обнаруживают (через сотни стихов) свои естественные дополнения, продолжения и т. д.» (Sementsov 1985, pp. 70–71).

73 This suggestion aligns with Krijgsman’s 2018 recent observation regarding the differences in codicological presentation of the manuscripts with technical texts and those whose structure depends on oral articulation. While the former rely more heavily on punctuation and layout, the latter use such features to a very limited extent. Krijgsman observes the increase of reliance on codicological articulation in non-technical manuscripts during the early empires, which may reflect the decline of the practices of oral recitation and mnemonic transmission.

74 Meyer 2014.

This brings us to the question of the historical causes of the emergence of such sophisticated practices of textual composition in two unrelated ancient societies. For Pozdneeva, who worked in the environment of dogmatic Marxism, the rise of "oratory art" in ancient China could only be explained by the economic progress in slave-owning society.[75] While it may be difficult to accept this argument seriously today, it is very likely that certain (as yet understudied) socio-economic transitions led to the emergence of a social stratum interested in the creation of a shared body of argumentative texts.[76] This stratum may have generated the innovative forms of oral composition and laid a foundation for further cultural elaboration over more than two thousand years to come.

To summarise, writing (understood as a set of standardised graphs that match sound sequences in a natural language) coupled with the practice of training in literacy is merely one of the possible technologies that can underpin advanced textuality, when the same texts are shared by multiple individuals. Sophisticated forms of mnemonically reinforced composition coupled with the practices of individual and communal recitation represent an alternative technological approach. Both can be used to create stable discursive spaces for communities distributed in space and spanning across multiple generations. Like in other examples of alternative technological choice (airplanes vs trains, nuclear power vs fossil fuel, Android vs iOS, etc.), despite the general interchangeability, each technology has its unique feature sets that the alternative cannot fully compensate. Our limited success so far in the description and understanding of sophisticated compositional patterns in ancient Chinese philosophical texts may be largely due to a technological mismatch. Writing is poorly suited for the representation of certain compositions. The non-linear connections in the *Bhagavad Gita* and "Wu xing" briefly discussed above provide one example of meaningful compositional elements in recitation-focused texts that are lost when transposed into – and performed along the lines of – linear writing.

The parallel between the South Asian practices and ancient China may appear far-stretched, but we know, for example, that the *Laozi* was commonly performed in recitation in the late antiquity and the early middle ages.[77] It is possible to think of this practice as an innovative adaptation of an ancient text to a new context of ritualised performance. However, considering the aurally reinforced composition of the *Laozi*, it is more likely that the practice of recitation was contemporaneous with the time of its initial creation.[78]

As observed by Gentz and Meyer, the form in which argument is presented in texts is difficult to separate from the argument itself, and the sophisticated structures of ancient Chinese philosophical compositions reflect the patterns of thought and the argumentative habits of the communities in which these texts were performed.[79] Somewhat counter-intuitively, the complexity of structuring

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75 Pozdneeva 2011, p. 25.

76 To my knowledge, Hsu Cho-yun's 1965 study the best work on the socio-economic transformations in China in the middle of the first millennium BC. Hsu's work largely based on a critical study of the *Zuozhuan* 左傳. The picture waits to be updated with the abundant archaeological evidence discovered over the last decades.

77 Kohn 1998, pp. 152–153.

78 For an interesting account of the "reconstructive meditation" approach to the performance of the *Laozi* in western university classrooms, see Roth 2008. Roth's approach appears to be influenced by his experience of teaching the *Laozi* in the courses on Asian religions. It does not seem to me, however, that recitation of the *Laozi* should necessarily be seen as an inherently religious practice. I am inclined to see recitation as an element of technology of textual preservation, which can be appropriated by the communities of religious faith and practice, but can also be used in non-religious contexts.

79 Gentz and Meyer 2015, p. 11.

may have facilitated the engagement with the text for the contemporary audiences. The complex – but familiar – rhetorical patterns helped them to navigate through the flow of oral presentation, providing a clear idea of where the argument is heading, at what point of the exposition one is currently located and whether or not one has assimilated the argument integrally. The "mnemonic" elements of textual composition therefore served multiple purposes, not only ensuring the stability of texts, but also facilitating the delivery of complex argument and promoting the spread of common patterns of reasoning.

Despite the lasting influence of such compositional and performative practices, in imperial China they appear to be a legacy carried over from an earlier era. From the medieval period onwards, the histories of literacy and textuality largely overlap.[80] However, for the pre-imperial period they should be examined separately. The task is complicated by the fact that all our evidence on mnemonically and aurally reinforced textuality survives through written media. Nevertheless, with some methodological precaution, the situation is not desperate. The exact balance between the different technologies of textuality in specific texts may become clearer as we advance our knowledge of compositional forms and rules of rhetorical performance and learn to recognise the characteristic traits of the different textual technologies.

The patterns of intricate aural-mnemonic composition constitute one important element in the repertoire of mnemonic tools in ancient China, but not the only one. For example, a separate study would be necessary to examine the use of stimulating visual imagery, such as the fantastic creatures in the *Shanhaijing* 山海經 (*Canon of Mountains and Seas*), which may have served similar mnemonic functions to European bestiaries.[81] By the fourth century BC, the Chinese textual culture has reached a remarkable degree of complexity and diversity, and each of the literary devices employed by it deserves a separate scrutiny. Despite the importance of the mechanisms of aural-mnemonic reinforcement, it would be mistaken to see them as the universal key to the reading, interpretation and explanation of the entire wealth of ancient texts. The discussions in Soviet sinology teach us an important lesson of modesty, cautioning us against over-generalisation and partiality towards individual aspects in the fascinatingly rich (and at times contradictory) textual culture of ancient China.

Conclusion

Spirin's close engagement with ancient Chinese philosophical compositions in the 1960–70's led him to discover several important structural patterns. He observed that two closely parallel elements are often accompanied by a third "odd" one.[82] He further noticed that this "2+1" pattern is often reproduced on a larger scale, so that groups of parallel passages form higher-level parallel structures. He also observed that the compositional order often transcends the boundaries of purely linear parallelism, and the arrangement of the text in two parallel streams fails to account for all the compositional intricacies. This frequently occurring tripartite division (with its "micro" and

80 The specific extent is unclear and it may still be necessary to develop a more nuanced view for the early medieval period, which I am not ready to discuss now.

81 Carruthers 1990, p. 127.

82 In this summary, I offer my speculative reconstruction of Spirin's observations – in his published works, he always presents these observations through his theories, which, as I have shown above, are questionable.

"macro" dimensions) and the non-linearity of composition led him to adopt the 3x3 tables as the most comprehensive way to visualise his findings.

This invention is perhaps Spirin's highest achievement – and also the cause of his methodological downfalls. Sadly, the unfounded speculative interpretation of the regular structural patterns as manuscript conventions has hindered the due appreciation of his findings.[83] In particular, Spirin's elaborate classification of the different types of the "ninefold canon," although not very useful in its original presentation because of the mistaken theoretical assumptions, is insightful nevertheless, demonstrating that the rhetorical patterns (that he had mistaken for manuscript layout conventions) followed a fixed set of rules that can be identified, formally described, and applied in our interpretation of texts.[84] Critically rethinking Spirin's classification of the variant forms of the "ninefold canon" as an inventory of rhetorical forms may bring us to a new understanding of the practices of textual composition and performance in antiquity. It will equip us with another powerful tool of inter-textual analysis and comparison, allowing us to distinguish between philosophical texts designed for different performative contexts and possibly targeting different audiences.

There is another sinological problem in which Spirin's work provides a valuable fresh insight. While our knowledge of the sophistication of composition in ancient Chinese philosophical texts is slowly, but steadily growing, it is also becoming increasingly esoteric, restricted to a community of experts who enjoy discussing the structural complexities. At the same time, the predominant majority of readers content themselves with elementary grammatical and syntactical analysis, which inevitably produces imprecise and speculative readings – and reaffirms the fallacious perception of ancient Chinese philosophy as a source of inherently vague revelation. If the understanding of the sophisticated compositional patterning proposed in this article is correct, it was originally designed to facilitate – and not to complicate – the accurate assimilation of argument, but the shift from aurally and mnemonically reinforced performance to linear reading largely obliterated this assistive mechanism. Spirin's apt visualisation reminds us that there are ways to make the ancient structures more transparent and comprehensible to the modern reader, without obliging him to read volumes of difficult technical material. Obviously, any visualisation of the aural and mnemonic patterns will always remain an approximation, as these qualitatively different media of textual performance will never match perfectly. However, the technological arsenal that we have in our disposal today is much more powerful than what Spirin could employ in the middle of the last century. In fact, contemporary technology has already freed us from the confines of two-dimensional linear representation of texts, and hypertext has already encroached upon our habits of linear reading, shifting us towards more interactive patterns of engagement with written argument. For ancient Chinese philosophical texts, the dynamic hypertext has a great potential to visually substitute for the patterns of ancient oral recitation, highlighting the semantic links and recurring elements, making rhymes and alliterations transparent to the reader with little specialised training, while visualising the overall argumentative flow with its non-linear intricacies.[85] Obviously, this is not an easy task, as the experiments in visualisation have to go hand-in-hand with the efforts towards systematic

83 Cf. the overviews of the impact of Spirin's research by Volkov 1991; Kobzev and Dëmin 2014. None of the publications surveyed by them fully reproduces Spirin's framework, taking his work as a source of inspiration rather than strict methodology.

84 This classification has been summarised in Spirin 1991, pp. 43–45, 56.

85 On the hypertextual qualities of the *Laozi*, see Hans-Georg Moeller 2006, pp. 4–5.

inventorisation of the structure-defining textual elements and the reconstruction of the ancient modes of engagement with the text. However, it is difficult to imagine another way to remove the air of amorphous fogginess from ancient Chinese philosophical works and to reveal the persuasive beauty of their orderly reasoning to the general reader.

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論中國先秦哲學文本的構造

該論文受到前蘇聯漢學以及南亞早期佛教文獻的啓發，把先秦哲學復雜的文本結構看作一種與口頭演述相關、增強記憶效率的創作手段，使觀衆能夠不參考抄本而牢固地記住相傳文本確切的內容。這種採用復雜結構以增強記憶效率的口傳文本可能曾經扮演過與書寫文本同樣的角色，兩者都可以用來創造有持續性的爭論空間，使更多觀衆能夠共同參與跨越空間與時間的討論。前蘇聯學家B.C.斯皮林使用圖表形式再現哲學文本結構的方法極具啓發性，如果與最新的動力超文技術相配合，可以更好地幫助當代讀者理解中國古代哲學文獻的邏輯和意義。

關鍵詞：口頭傳統與書寫文化，文本構造，排偶文本，先秦哲學

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