

The timing seems propitious for *Oriens Extremus* to establish a regular section devoted to conceptual history. While firmly entrenched in the study of European history, especially in Germany, the discipline is just at the beginning of a promising career in East Asian studies. The following essay is meant as an introduction to the present state and future prospects of East Asian conceptual history. After a brief overview of the discipline from its origins in Europe to its adaptation in East Asia, it will discuss several theoretical issues and finally present a tentative prospect of East Asian conceptual history.

The history of conceptual history

Conceptual history has been around for well over half a century. Its origins may be traced to the 1930s,¹ when scholars like Erich Rothacker and especially Otto Brunner combined elements of social history with a history of concepts.² Their aim was to counter two dominating tendencies in historical studies, namely (1) the history of ideas that disregarded socio-political contexts,³ and (2) the history of events that had no concern for underlying structures.⁴ In particular, Brunner was concerned with the question of whether in writing history “modern” terms – “state,” “society,” “feudalism” and others – were adequate for interpreting the thought of distant times and cultures and whether this thought was at all fathomable for us. “In Brunner’s view, previous studies of land tenure and authority relationships had been distorted by the use of categories that conformed neither to linguistic usage in the past nor to those actual practices registered by the concepts then in use.”⁵ He concluded that for a “correct” description of past ages, it is imperative “that the terminology it uses is derived, as far as possible, from the sources themselves, so that the meaning of these sources may be correctly interpreted with the help of these concepts.”⁶ Conceptual history, then, was conceived as an ancillary discipline of history.

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- 1 To be sure, the term “Begriffsgeschichte” (“Begriff” being the German translation of Latin *conceptus*) was first used by Hegel, but this remained singular and was of no consequence; cf. Meier 1971, 788. As will be seen (fn. 55), conceptual history differs significantly from Hegel’s approach to concepts.
 - 2 To my knowledge, none of the authors that are discussed in the present article has provided a clear and satisfactory definition of “concept.” For the present purposes, I shall use the word in the general sense of a generic mental image abstracted from percepts or directly intuited from thought (cf. Webster’s 1986, 469, s.v. “concept”).
 - 3 In Germany, *Ideengeschichte* may be traced back to Friedrich Meinecke (1862–1954), while the American “history of ideas” is primarily associated with A. O. Lovejoy (1873–1962), the work published in the *Journal of the History of Ideas*, and with the entries in the *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* (Wiener 1973; for a new edition, cf. Horowitz 2005).
 - 4 Koselleck 2006b, 11; cf. also Richter 1987, 259.
 - 5 Ibid., 251.
 - 6 Brunner 1946, 187; for the entire discussion, cf. *ibid.*, 124–188. Luhmann 1980, 14, provides further references. The need for a language true to the sources belongs to the credo of 19th-century historicism; and it had been stressed as early as 1886 by the godfather of philology, August Boeckh: “Überall kommt es also auf den Sprachgebrauch an; indem wir aus demselben erklären, legen wir die Sprache jedes Werkes so aus, wie die Zeitgenossen sie verstanden haben. Hierin liegt ein sehr wichtiger

Conceptual history became institutionalized in 1955, when the journal *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* was founded, and in 1956/57, when Brunner founded the “Arbeitskreis für moderne Sozialgeschichte.”⁷ In 1971, Joachim Ritter and others began publishing the monumental *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, and one year later Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck started work on the equally imposing *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*.⁸ This lexicon, more than any other work, served to establish *Begriffsgeschichte*, or conceptual history, as an academic discipline, indeed as a central discipline in historical studies. Writes Koselleck:

History as an academic discipline is, perforce, directed at the usage of words dominant in the respective subject matter of its inquiry. No historical research can avoid addressing the linguistic expression and self-description of past and present times as a transitory stage of its study. In some ways the entire source language of the respective periods under discussion is a single metaphor for the history whose understanding is at issue.⁹

The impact of the “linguistic turn” is unmistakable: If language constitutes how we perceive reality or even – although Koselleck never insisted on this – constitutes what reality is, then its importance is radically increased. No longer a mere device for describing the results of historical research, language becomes “first and foremost a reality in which cognition originates. It dominates the process of cognition from beginning to end.”¹⁰ From this perspective, conceptual history becomes the key to all historical studies. No longer isolated in the context of intellectual history (*Geistesgeschichte*), conceptual history “now was to be linked in the GG [*Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*] to changes in the political, social, and economic structures of Europe.”¹¹

This link was even more fully developed by Koselleck’s Bielefeld colleague Niklas Luhmann, who adapted the former’s *Begriffsgeschichte* to his own theory of society, producing a number of theoretical treatises and stimulating case studies under the title of *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik* and *Ideenevolution*.¹² With more theoretical rigor than anybody before him, Luhmann demonstrated that “it is most of all the complexity of the system of society and the contingency of its operations, the change of which is being answered by changes of semantics.”¹³ This inextricable link between social

Kanon der Auslegung; man erkläre nichts so, wie es kein Zeitgenosse könnte verstanden haben” (Boeckh 1966, 106).

7 For details, cf. Conze 1979.

8 Joachim Ritter, Karlfried Gründer et al. (eds.), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, 13 vols., Basel: Schwabe 1971–2007; Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, Reinhart Koselleck (eds.), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, 8 vols. in 9, Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta 1972–1997. For homages to the work of Reinhart Koselleck, cf. Bulst 2007, and Olsen 2012.

9 Koselleck 1972, XIII.

10 Goertz 2001, 13. On Koselleck’s indecisiveness concerning the question of extra-linguistic reality – Derrida’s “hors-texte” – cf. Gumbrecht 2006, 26–31.

11 Richter 1987, 251.

12 Luhmann 1980 and Luhmann 2008; cf. also Luhmann 1998. Luhmann deals with “semantics” which may be defined as “the stock of generalised forms or differences (e.g. concepts, ideas, images and symbols), which can be used in the selection of meaning within the communication systems. [...] Ultimately, however, the focus in Luhmann’s semantic analysis becomes the condensation of meaning into concepts” (Andersen 2011, 253–254).

13 Luhmann 1980, 15. Note that for Luhmann semantics, that is conceptual change, follows social change: “Zu einer konsolidierten Grundsemantik ... kommt es deshalb typisch *nach* der Entwicklung einer Differenzierungsform und für

structure and its conceptual reflection once more underscored the importance of conceptual history. On an operational level, the work of Rolf Reichardt and other scholars who worked on the inventory of French concepts in the revolutionary age has served to lay more solid methodological ground for conceptual history.¹⁴ Reichardt extended the discipline to include “semantic networks” made up of opposite, equivalent, and complementary concepts; he defined relevant source corpora and adopted elements of French *lexicométrie*, adding much precision to the study of concepts.

These seminal works have laid the foundation for a scholarly discipline that is fundamentally *German*. Conceptual history is, in essence, *Begriffsgeschichte*.¹⁵ At roughly the same time, however, historical semantics in a wider sense flourished in various other academic communities. In France, the *histoire des mentalités*, *lexicométrie*, and various pedigrees of historical discourse analysis inspired numerous studies focusing not on key terms but on broader discursive settings.¹⁶ John Pocock and Quentin Skinner are the most notable representatives of Anglo-American studies in historical semantics. Inspired by the works of R. G. Collingwood (1889–1943) and J. L. Austin (1911–1960), they redefined the history of ideas, inquiring into the usage of language in historical contexts. Anglo-American historical semantics deals with speech acts, their context, and the intentions of speakers. Single concepts are not at issue but rather the question of “what to do with words.”¹⁷

Following these pioneering works, several projects of conceptual history have been launched in recent years in the Netherlands¹⁸ as well as in Scandinavia and other European countries.¹⁹ The “History of Political and Social Concepts Group,” inspired by the Bielefeld as well as the Cambridge school, “has focused on deriving theoretical and methodological synergies from a dialogue between these two approaches.”²⁰ It has been holding annual conferences for 15 years and has published the journal *Contributions to the History of Concepts* since 2005.²¹ *Redescriptions: Yearbook of Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory*, edited by Kari Palonen and others in Jyväskylä,²² is another organ of conceptual history which, together with numerous studies, testifies to the vibrant

diese” (Luhmann 1980, 39). This theory of the relationship between social structure and semantics is refined by Stäheli 1998 (cf. fn. 54).

- 14 Rolf Reichardt, Eberhard Schmitt, Hans Jürgen Lüsebrink (eds.), *Handbuch politisch-sozialer Grundbegriffe in Frankreich 1680–1820*, 15 vols., München: Oldenbourg Verlag 1985 ff. (Reichardt et al. 1985).
- 15 On a non-academic level, a glance at the *Wikipedia* entries for the discipline may serve to confirm this. As of March 2013, there are entries in six languages: German (“Begriffsgeschichte”), Russian (“Понятие за история”), Danish (“Begyrebshistorie”), English (“Conceptual history”), Portuguese (“História dos conceitos”), and Swedish (“Begyrebshistoria”), and all of them refer almost exclusively to German literature. There is no corresponding entry in any East Asian language.
- 16 An early call for historical semantics was made by Febvre 1930; for linguistics and history, cf. Samaran 1961, 823–846, for *histoire des mentalités*, *ibid.*, 937–968; for general overviews, cf. Reichardt 1998 and Bödeker 2002, 16–18.
- 17 For introductions to the Cambridge School, cf. Tully 1988, Richter 1995, 124–142, Bödeker 2002, 18–22, and Mulsow and Mahler 2010.
- 18 On these, cf. den Boer 1998, Jongh 1998, Gelderen 1998, and Steinmetz 2008, p. 176.
- 19 For an active international research group, organizing postgraduate research training in conceptual analysis, cf. www.concepta-net.org. On the conspicuous absence of similar projects in the United States, cf. Burke 2005.
- 20 “Overview,” www.hpsc.org/overview [accessed February 2013].
- 21 Cf. the journal’s homepage at historyofconcepts.org.
- 22 www.jyu.fi/yhtfil/redescriptions/index.htm [accessed February 2013].

activity in the field.²³ These recent studies are moreover not confined to the narrow frame of “national” concepts. The ambitious European Conceptual History Project has recently set out “to reconsider the conceptual vocabulary emanating from, or associated with, Europe”; it has announced an eight-volume series entitled *European Conceptual Histories* “dealing with cluster concepts: *civilization, federalism, state and market, historical regions, liberalism, parliamentarism, and planning*.”²⁴ Far from “ebbing away,”²⁵ conceptual history seems set to transcend its old national and theoretical boundaries and break new ground in other scholarly communities. These developments make it “one of the most exciting fields of all historical research.”²⁶

East Asian conceptual history

In Chinese, Japanese, and Korean studies, conceptual history also started to appear around the turn of the millennium. Although shadowy and unclearly defined at first, it has gained contours over the years. It began with the interest in translation and neologisms of the 19th century.²⁷ In Göttingen and Erlangen-Nürnberg, the research project “Wissenschaftssprache Chinesisch – Studies in the Formation of Modern Chinese Scientific Terminologies” led by Michael Lackner studied the translation and adaptation of Western scientific terminology in China between 1840 and 1930.²⁸ Christoph Harbsmeier initiated an international research project on “Concepts that Make History: The Conceptual Modernisation of China in a Historical and Critical Perspective” in 2006 and a book series on “Conceptual History and Chinese Linguistics.”²⁹ In Japan, too, several scholars have dealt with translation and the modernization of language in the Meiji period, albeit not from the specific perspective of conceptual history.³⁰

As for conceptual history in China, a recent survey noted that “the national scholarly world has not given it sufficient attention: scholars who pursue studies in conceptual history can be counted on one’s fingers.”³¹ However, a first landmark was the publication of Jin Guantao and Liu Qingfeng’s *Studies in Conceptual History*, which discusses a dozen key concepts of modern Chinese politics, the fruit of a decade of research in conceptual history.³² Tellingly, the authors considered it necessary to

23 Cf. the literature quoted in Steinmetz 2008, 176, notes 8–10.

24 Den Boer et al. 2011, p. 111, and 113.

25 Gumbrecht 2006. Although Gumbrecht refers only to German *Begriffsgeschichte*, even this claim seems unwarranted, as evidenced by the ongoing project of the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik* (Ueding 1992) and such recent works as Benner and Oelkers 2004, Toepfer 2011, and others. For further criticism of Gumbrecht’s verdict, cf. Steinmetz 2008, 174–175.

26 Steinmetz 2008, 178. The author calls “Begriffsgeschichte in der Nachfolge Kosellecks eine der wenigen Hervorbringungen deutscher Geisteswissenschaften, die derzeit weltweit beachtet und kritisch fortentwickelt werden” (ibid., 175).

27 For two pioneering studies on Chinese terminology, cf. Lippert 1979, and Liu 1996.

28 Cf. www.wsc.uni-erlangen.de/index.html as well as Lackner et al. 2001 and Lackner and Vittinghoff 2004.

29 Edited by Christoph Harbsmeier, Bjarke Frellesvig, Michael Lackner, Alain Peyraube, Michael Puett and Rudolf Wagner, Leiden 2010ff. The series is, however, not strictly limited to studies in conceptual history. Apart from this, the project has so far organized one panel at the Annual International Conference on Conceptual History in Uppsala (2006).

30 For example, Yanabu Akira 1982 (German tr. Yanabu 1991), Saitō Tsuyoshi 2005, Ishida Takeshi 1984 (German tr. Ishida 2008).

31 Cai and Liu 2012, 60; the article makes a contribution to the case by reviewing some relevant chapters from Hampsher-Monk et al. 1998. For a history of the concept of “concept” in Asia, cf. Sun 2012.

32 Jin Guantao 金觀濤, Liu Qingfeng 劉青峰, *Guannian shi yanjiu: Zhongguo xiandai zhongyao zhengzhi shuyi de*

introduce their work with the chapter “Why turn from the history of thought to conceptual history?” which first explains what conceptual history is all about.³³ Quite recently, Jin Guantao and others launched a journal dedicated to East Asian conceptual history, the first of its kind.³⁴ Another, even more ambitious project is currently being directed by Sun Jiang (Nanjing/Shizuoka). His “Archaeology of Modern East Asian Knowledge (conceptual history)” (*Dongya jindai zhishi de kaogu [gainian shi]*), involving researchers from China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and Germany, is designed to produce a comprehensive dictionary of East Asian concepts from the 16th to the 20th century: an East Asian “Koselleck” of sorts – and significantly, one of the first steps it involves is the translation of selected articles from *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*.³⁵ The project’s journal *Studies on Asian Conceptual History* (*Yazhou gainian shi yanjiu*) publishes theoretical articles as well as case studies in conceptual history.

Finally, in Korea conceptual history has only just started, but it has already started an ambitious project. In 2007, the ten-year “Project for Intercommunication of East Asian Basic Concepts,” funded by the Korea Research Foundation, was launched at Hallym University. It will produce several major publications: the “Korean Conceptual History Series” dealing with basic concepts and of which six volumes have already appeared;³⁶ a series on “Korean Conceptual History of Living Culture,” which treats everyday concepts; a “Conceptual Communication Series” dealing with theory and methods; and a translation series featuring some of the major European contributions to the field.³⁷ While still in an “experimental phase” in which European influences, especially Koselleck’s *Begriffsgeschichte*, loom large, Korean conceptual history is expected to make a substantial and independent contribution to the field.

Problems and theoretical reflections

This thumbnail sketch may suffice to make clear that conceptual history is still far from the mainstream of East Asian studies. One explanation for the belated emergence of this discipline in China (or, by extension, East Asia) has been offered by Jin Guantao and Liu Qingfeng, who argue that conceptual history is an outgrowth of the collapse of (communist/Maoist) ideology. Once it had been freed from its ideological shackles Chinese thought could freely examine its own foundations – which always implies inquiring about, comparing, historicizing, and thus challenging their absolute truth.³⁸ Conceptual history deserves

xingcheng 觀念史研究：中國現代重要政治術語形成, Hongkong: Chinese University 2008. Jin and Liu use the word *guannian shi*, literally “history of ideas,” but it becomes clear from their introduction that they mean conceptual history (which they oppose to “history of thought,” *sixiang shi*).

33 Its goal, as outlined by Jin und Liu, is to examine the shards of the kaleidoscope that used to make up ideology and clarify the concepts that were its foundations (an idea reminiscent of Lovejoy’s unit ideas as the components of thought systems) – and that, albeit in altered interrelation, still determines the way the Chinese perceive the world (Jin and Liu 2008, 1–2).

34 *Yazhou guannian shi jikan* 亞洲觀念史集刊, Taipei 2011 ff. Cf. jhiea.nccu.edu.tw/p_intro.html.

35 Personal communication by Sun Jiang, July 2012. An abstract of the project may be found at ias.nju.edu.cn/article.asp?n_id=240 (access: July 2012). For a programmatic overview and a number of case studies, see Sun 2008.

36 For a title list, cf. has.hallym.ac.kr/science_E/science0511.asp.

37 For recent introductions to Korean conceptual history, cf. Yang Ilmo 2012, and Park Myoung-Kyu 2012.

38 A similar claim could be made for the discipline in Germany. It is perhaps no accident that conceptual history fully developed only in the 1950s, after the end of the Nazi regime.

to be ranked among the most subversive and unsettling of scholarly disciplines because it strikes at the very foundations of our worldview. “The sense of history,” Foucault once remarked,

[...] reintroduces to the coming-into-being [le devenir] everything that we considered immortal about man. We believe feelings to be perennial? But they all, and especially those that seem to us the most noble and disinterested, have a history.³⁹

It is precisely because conceptual history is so unsparing in its critical scrutiny of basic notions that it cannot be tolerated by ideologues who uncompromisingly protect their own tenets.

But there may be yet another reason why East Asian scholarship has been reluctant to embrace conceptual history: It runs counter to some firmly entrenched fields which may be considered Chinese, or East Asian, specialties.⁴⁰ Lexicography is a case in point. For centuries, indeed millennia, the Chinese have been producing erudite dictionaries, which take words or rather written *characters* as the basic unit of examination. Beginning with the *Shuowen jiezi*, Chinese (and later Japanese and Korean) scholars have excelled at analyzing the characters’ structure; they have scrutinized the shades of their meaning (namely, the words they represent), documented calligraphic variants, and traced their evolution from the earliest epigraphic forms.⁴¹ In this field, East Asian scholarship is second to none.⁴² However, this strong philological tradition has apparently obscured the difference which is fundamental to conceptual history: that between concepts and words. A concept, generally speaking, is a generic mental image abstracted from percepts or directly intuited from thought (cf. fn. 2). It is certainly not the same as the word that expresses it, much less the character that represents the word. Yet, these categories are still often confused in East Asian studies. Explanations of the Confucian concept *ren* start as a matter of routine with an interpretation of the *character* 仁. Questions concerning the concept of history in ancient China are answered by reference to the *character* 史, which appears already in Shang oracle inscriptions.⁴³ And discussions of the concept of “society” in China often begin by pointing out that the word *shehui* already existed a thousand years ago. Such reasoning, which suggests that given concepts have existed in China practically from the beginning of civilization, is based on a confusion between characters, words, and concepts. The appearance of the *character* 史 (or its precursor) in oracle bone inscriptions does not by any means show that the Shang had a *concept* of history; and the time-honored institution of local associations called *shehui* 社會 was entirely different from the modern concept of “society,” which happens to be expressed with the same word.⁴⁴

39 “Nietzsche, la généalogie, l’histoire”, in Foucault 1994, p. 147 (No. 84): “Le sens historique, et c’est en cela qu’il pratique la *wirkliche Historie*, réintroduit dans le devenir tout ce qu’on avait cru immortel chez l’homme. Nous croyons à la pérennité des sentiments? Mais tous, et ceux-là surtout qui nous paraissent les plus nobles et les plus désintéressés, ont une histoire.”

40 Due to my field of research, the following discussion will focus on the Chinese case.

41 Such studies may be called *etymographic*. *Etymology*, however, which refers to words, that is units of sound, instead of characters, only developed in the 20th century under the influence of Western scholars like Bernhard Karlgren.

42 The most recent *summa* of the field is the twelve volume *Guwenzi gulin*.

43 For examples and a discussion, cf. Vogelsang 2007, 28–29. Incidentally, the argument also suffers from serious epigraphic problems, since the oracle bone character in question may be transcribed as 史, 使, 吏, or 事.

44 The conflation of words and concepts has its roots in the reverence for antiquity. Jiang Shanguo, commenting on the uses of the *Shangshu*, noted that “people who venerate antiquity have the same concept of political institutions which implies nothing but false analogies, exaggerations, and embellishments of ancient government: no matter

Conceptual history, however, rests on the distinction between words and concepts.⁴⁵ While building on the achievements of East Asian philology and lexicography, it demands a decisive break with this long-established scholarly tradition. Or, to put it more bluntly: it demands a break with tradition *per se*. Insofar as any history deals with change in time, it should be wary of allegedly unchanging traditions. Indeed, from the perspective of conceptual history, any “tradition” is itself a concept which was invented at some time. Far from uncritically accepting traditions (and equally far from dismissing them as mere “fictions”), conceptual historians ask when and why a certain tradition was invented. This distrust of tradition would seem to be a defining trait of conceptual history, which sets it apart from the “history of ideas.” While the latter posits “unit-ideas” (Lovejoy) which it supposes remain largely unaltered through time and social change, conceptual history focuses precisely on the changes in the ways the world is described. Conceptual history is not about philosophical but historical semantics.⁴⁶

Another specialty of Chinese scholarship seems at odds with conceptual history: the biographical tradition. In China, great men have always been considered the makers of history. Emperors or party leaders define their age, talented officials direct the course of politics, scholars determine the intellectual outlook, villains lead the world into decay, and virtuous heroes save it. It is no accident that Chinese standard histories revolve around scores of biographical chapters. Conceptual history, however, does not concern itself with heroes and villains, nor does it confine itself to individual thinkers or works, however influential they may have been.⁴⁷ Rather, it is based on the premise that

[...] conceptual usage and change are to be established by analyzing materials unusually broad in range, discrepant in origin and appeal, and covering as many social formations as possible. These sources include major thinkers in [...] philosophy, political, social, and economic theory, jurisprudence, theology, and less often, literature. Information about usage of political and social terms by both elite and other groups, strata, and classes is to be gathered from newspapers, journals, pamphlets, reports and speeches in assemblies; in documents originating in governmental, administrative and legal bureaucracies, and in memories, correspondence, and diaries [...] dictionaries [...] as well as apposite entries in encyclopedias, handbooks and thesauri.⁴⁸

The very multitude of relevant sources makes it clear that for conceptual history the particular intentions of historical actors, thinkers, or works are not at issue. Indeed, concepts are never solidified and dissemi-

what institution they talk about, they always treat it as if it had existed ever since antiquity” (Jiang 1988, 146). By the same token, reformers would typically justify the introduction of new concepts by linking them to ancient tradition. Thus the introduction of modern schools in the early 20th century was said to hark back to “schools” (*xuexiao* 學校) in antiquity, the concept of community (*qun* 群) was introduced with reference to *Xunzi*, etc. In all these cases of political rhetoric, the same words were used for different concepts.

- 45 Incidentally, this coincides with the distinction between *ming* 名 and *shi* 實 in ancient Chinese logical terminology: the former meaning the “name” of a concept, i.e. the word that is used to express it, the latter meaning the “intension” of a concept, i.e. its meaning. On this terminology, cf. Vierheller 2011.
- 46 On philosophical *Begriffsgeschichte*, cf. the entry by H.G. Meier in Ritter and Gründer 1971, vol. 1, 788–808. On “unit-ideas,” which consist “in a single specific proposition or ‘principle,’” cf. Lovejoy 1957, 14–15.
- 47 This is emphasized by Jin and Liu 2008, 5. Instead, the authors propose *sentences* containing key words as the basic unit of inquiry for conceptual history. The history of ideas, quite to the contrary, is concerned with “the most influential of early European philosophers” (Lovejoy 1957, 14).
- 48 Richter 1987, 253–254.

nated by individual thinkers, nor does the study of single works suffice to explain the rise or fall of any given concept. The career of concepts may in fact not be reduced to conscious decisions at all. Rather, concepts are subject to an unintentional evolution, being adapted, supported and dismissed by the invisible hand of *society*.⁴⁹ This is a crucial point: Concepts may perhaps be developed more or less independently in discourse, but they cannot remain free-floating.⁵⁰ Nor can they vary randomly in relation to the social structure. Concepts must be compatible with the social context in which they arise and become relevant.⁵¹ Society is the proving ground where they demonstrate their plausibility and usefulness.

This brings us to the very essence of conceptual history. The fundamental premise that concepts and social structures are intimately connected is decisive for the outlook of the discipline. This relation is variable on both ends; it implies mutual influence. On the one hand, concepts reflect and address social structures *ex post facto* or even beforehand, anticipating options to be realized in the future.⁵² They serve as a mirror of the society that adopts them.⁵³ On the other hand, concepts themselves influence society, shaping the way it perceives itself and constituting patterns by “providing models for action and increasing the likelihood of their usage.”⁵⁴ In any case, social structure is the yardstick against which concepts are measured. This clearly sets conceptual history apart from the history of ideas. Unlike “ideas,” concepts are not to be judged by their perceived correspondence to “reality” (which judgment ultimately can only be negative), but analyzed rather with respect to the social preconditions of their success.⁵⁵ It follows that conceptual history does not aim to rectify “inherent confusions” of historical mindsets. It does not study historical concepts

49 In this respect, conceptual history is related to the sociology of knowledge (cf. *ibid.*, 262). Luhmann 1980 even chose the subtitle “Studien zur *Wissenssoziologie* der modernen Gesellschaft” (my emphasis) for his studies of historical concepts. He emphasizes, however, that the mere attribution of knowledge to social classes or groups as practiced in the sociology of knowledge does not do justice to the complexity of the problem (*Ibid.*, 11 and 15).

50 This dual aspect is addressed by Benjamin Elman, who remarks that “intellectual historians of China have rightly defended their discipline against the reductionist strategies employed by social and economic historians” and endorses their “appeal to the autonomy of ideas from their historical context,” but calls it “equally misguided to leap to the implausible opposite culturalist fallacy that ideas, values, and culture alone are determinative in social and economic life, as some recent champions of Pacific Rim Neo-Confucian ideology have suggested.” (Elman 2010, 377–378) However, the program of a “new, constantly shifting, middle ground between ahistorical functionalism and free will voluntarism” that Elman suggests (*ibid.*, 376) does not seem sufficiently precise to tackle the issue.

51 Cf. Luhmann 1980, 17 and *passim*, as well as Koselleck 2006b, who argues that social history and conceptual history are inextricably linked.

52 Such cases have been called “pre-adaptive advances.” However, it would seem that the reverse case is far more common, namely, anachronistic concepts that no longer fit their times. Today, for example, “while history has advanced beyond the confines of the nation-state, we still lack a proper vocabulary to handle this new situation” (Junge 2011, 20).

53 Stichweh 2006, 7, somewhat more cautiously suggests that “a society by its semantics expresses *possible structures* for this society” (original emphases).

54 Stäheli (1998) develops a sophisticated argument based on the psychoanalytical notion of “Umschrieb” or “future antérieure” to support his argument. For another argument based on Foucault’s concept of discourse as “dispositif” which constitutes social action, cf. Stichweh 2006, 4.

55 Cf. *ibid.*, 1–2. Incidentally, this is precisely where conceptual history differs from Hegel who proposed to test the validity of concepts against the “real” object: “Nennen wir das *Wissen* den *Begriff*, das *Wesen* oder das *Wahre* aber das *Seiende* oder den *Gegenstand*, so besteht die Prüfung darin, zuzusehen, ob der *Begriff* dem *Gegenstande* entspricht” (Hegel 1979, Einleitung, 77).

[...] with a view to a clearing up of their ambiguities, a listing of their various shades of meaning, and an examination of the way in which confused associations of ideas arising from these ambiguities have influenced the development of doctrines, or accelerated the insensible transformation of one fashion of thought into another, perhaps its very opposite.⁵⁶

Conceptual history does not take the haughty position that has all too long characterized Oriental studies: It does not “measure the past according to the yardstick of the present,”⁵⁷ attempting to demonstrate the flaws and deficiencies of historical concepts. Quite to the contrary, it traces their very logic and plausibility, even necessity, by relating them to the socio-historical milieu that generated them. It is for this very reason that conceptual history cannot be dissociated from social history.⁵⁸ It proceeds from the tenet that concepts do not arise and persist accidentally or by mistake but only as an integral part of social reproduction. However unreasonable they may appear from a researcher’s perspective, they can be plausibly explained by reference to their social context.⁵⁹

Conceptual change occurs only within society. If one takes this thought seriously, it follows that external influences can never directly determine concepts in a given society. If external “reality” is not at issue for conceptual history, neither are discourses outside the society under consideration. This is not to say that external influences do not matter – they do, but only in the sense that they provide an impetus, the effects of which ultimately depend on society’s internal workings, not as a determining factor. Just as concepts may be developed in an autonomous discourse, they may also be imported. But in either case, they must first prove to be congruent with the social structure in order to gain currency.⁶⁰ Concepts are always adapted, not just adopted. Japanese and Koreans never simply “imported” Chinese or, later on, Western concepts. Nor did the Chinese simply appropriate the latter from the Japanese without further ado.⁶¹ If this were the case, conceptual history would be reduced to lexicography, simply registering the transfer of a term from one conceptual pool to another. Such an approach, however, does not do justice to the significance of conceptual change. Instead, conceptual history by its very logic must proceed on the assumption that society itself must have provided the seedbed for a concept to germinate; without such a

56 Lovejoy 1957, 14, with reference to “philosophical semantics.”

57 Elman 2010, 373, referring to “contemporary intellectual and social history.” Elman claims that “a simplistic version of Lovejoy’s approach still enjoys such preeminence in Taiwan and the United States that the history of Chinese thought remains largely separated from its social, political, and economic context” (ibid., 376).

58 Nor from sociology; in fact, a sociologically informed theory of society would appear to be a *conditio sine qua non* of conceptual history. However, with the notable exception of Niklas Luhmann (for English introductions, cf. Luhmann 1996, Luhmann 2012), none of the researchers in the field of conceptual history seem to have bothered with it.

59 This does not imply “societal monism” in the sense “that any element in a society is related to the other elements within that society in such a way that it can only be understood through also understanding them, and through understanding the society as a whole” (Mandelbaum 1965, 47). In any differentiated society, one will have to take social systems as a basic unit of analysis: for example, political concepts may well be understood without recourse to artistic, familial or religious discourse. This contrast with the “history of ideas” which attempts to trace unit-ideas “through more than one – ultimately, indeed, through all – of the provinces of history in which it figures in any important degree, whether those provinces are called philosophy, science, literature, art, religion, or politics” (Lovejoy 1957, 15).

60 Cf. Jin and Liu 2008, 176–177, for a similar view.

61 Nor were China’s neighbors in earlier Imperial times simply “Sinicized” just by dint of their supposedly inferior culture. Often enough they were not. In any case the specific way Chinese concepts were adapted to suit a given social structure and their impact on this structure deserve close study. Conceptual change is always contingent upon the society that supports it.

seedbed, it would have withered or been carried away without a trace. The question, then, is just what turn of the plough shaped the soil so that it could be fertile for a given concept.⁶² In other words, what were the social preconditions that allowed a concept to gain validity? What specific qualities did they impart to the concept? And how did the concept in turn affect the social structure?

Of course, this does not mean that external discourses may be neglected altogether.⁶³ Conceptual change in Europe and Japan, for example, may be valuable as a background – a pre-history, so to speak – of Chinese concepts that were adapted from Europe via the Japanese. While this background cannot provide causal explanations for conceptual change in China, it may serve as a frame of comparison that helps to put indigenous developments into perspective. Like all comparisons, it provides clues for analysis: By what groups and in what contexts was a certain concept used? What other concepts were related to it? What were its complements, symmetrical, or asymmetrical counter-concepts⁶⁴ and what was the tension between them? And, finally, how did this differ from the usage in question? The comparative perspective provides us with a wealth of possible questions and it constantly reminds us that conceptual history cannot treat concepts in isolation. Concepts derive their meaning by drawing a distinction to other concepts; “they become specific only by being concatenated with other more abstract, more specific, or plainly opposite concepts.”⁶⁵ Conceptual history needs to take the entire conceptual network, including associated and counter-concepts, into account.

Future prospects

Having discussed the history of conceptual history, its theoretical assumptions, and the problems that may have delayed its introduction to East Asian studies, the final part of this paper will deal with its prospects going forward. There are clear currents in the discipline at large and discernible ways in which East Asian studies might not only adapt its methods but also make its own specific imprints on the field.

In the wake of several groundbreaking works, conceptual history seems to be lingering at the threshold of a new phase. While German, French, and Anglo-American schools took little notice of each other for decades, each nurturing its own specific strengths and weaknesses, the need for mutual inspiration has been keenly felt in recent years. As early as 1983, Reinhart Koselleck himself suggested that *Begriffsgeschichte* needed to be expanded in the direction of discourse analysis.⁶⁶ Melvin Richter, one of few scholars with profound knowledge of both the German *Begriffsgeschichte* and the Anglo-American history of political and social concepts, has argued forcefully that both schools would profit from each other’s methods.⁶⁷ One may add that the sophisticated approach by Niklas Luhmann, which has been all but ignored outside of a small circle of specialists, would certainly add exciting new perspectives to the

62 The question why a certain *word* instead of another was chosen for a given concept (for examples, cf. *ibid.*, 177, and Yanabu Akira 1982) is merely a peripheral aspect of this.

63 I am grateful to Axel Schneider (Göttingen) for impressing this point on me.

64 On these, cf. Koselleck 1989, 211–259, Koselleck 2006a, 274–284, and Junge 2011.

65 *Ibid.*, 27. This, of course, is the credo of structuralism. While fully agreeing with this, conceptual history moves beyond structuralism by introducing historical change into the picture.

66 Cf. Bödeker 2002, 13–14. Steinmetz 2008 proposes calling the broadened field of conceptual history “historical semantics.”

67 Richter 1995, esp. 124–160.

field.⁶⁸ French discourse analysis remains a stimulating approach, and even the somewhat timeworn *lexicométrie* may experience a revival in the age of electronic databases, especially in East Asia.⁶⁹ Moreover, there is a need to broaden the scope of conceptual history by taking into account those “substructures of thought” that do not find clear-cut linguistic expressions: the study of metaphors as developed by Hans Blumenberg has yet to be fully integrated into conceptual history.⁷⁰ Even more urgent, several scholars have expressed the need to include images, symbols, and other visual material into the study of conceptual history.⁷¹ Chinese history provides an abundance of material for such inquiries. For instance: Which concepts of life and afterlife does the Mawangdui silk banner convey? What worldview is expressed in Han tomb art? How are changes in the concept of art reflected in modern Chinese painting?

East Asian history not only offers a vast reservoir of untapped sources for conceptual history but also the possibility to significantly expand the discipline’s temporal horizon. Concepts, being created, stabilized and modified through communication, undergo constant variation, mostly subtle and unnoticeable, but sometimes abrupt and thoroughgoing.⁷² Naturally, such phases of radical change are the most interesting for historians. Researchers in the field have therefore usually focused on the period in which this change has accelerated to an unprecedented degree, namely, modernity. Koselleck was especially concerned with “the dissolution of the old and the emergence of the modern world” over a century he called the “Sattelzeit,” 1750 to 1850, in which all values were transvalued;⁷³ Luhmann was primarily interested in the emergence of a functionally differentiated, that is, modern, society; Jin Guantao and Liu Qingfeng regard the period from 1830 to 1930 as crucial; and Sun Jiang defines the Ming/Qing transition, namely the 17th century, as the beginning of the period under consideration. However, such temporal delimitations should not be taken as inherent in conceptual history.⁷⁴ Conceptual change is an ongoing process. In principle, any historical period may be placed under scrutiny. Especially the long and well-documented history of China would seem to offer fertile ground for

68 It would especially give research solid grounding in a highly evolved theory of society (cf. fn. 58).

69 Witness Jin and Liu 2008, who make extensive use of quantitative analysis to support their arguments. Their method, however, has not gone unchallenged: see the criticism by Zhang Zhongmin 张仲民, “Shujuku yu guannianshi yanjiu” 数据库与观念史研究, *Dongfang zaobao – Shanghai shuping* 东方早报·上海书评 2010/5/23, the rejoinder by Jin Guantao and Liu Qingfeng, “Jianda Zhang Zhongmin xiansheng dui zuozuo de pinglun” 简答张仲民先生对拙作的评论, *Dongfang zaobao – Shanghai shuping* 2010/5/30, and the surrejoinder by Zhang Zhongmin, “Guannianshi yanjiu yinggai zenme zuo” 观念史研究应该怎么做, *Nanfang dushi bao* 南方都市报 2010/09/05.

70 Cf. Zill 2002; Gumbrecht 2006, 15–17, deplors the exclusion of metaphors from Ritter’s *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, Bödeker 2002, 23, notes their stealthy reintroduction into the work. For recent studies in “metaphorology,” cf. Steinmetz 2008, p. 178, n. 14, Kroß and Zill 2011, and Schäfer 2012.

71 Cf. the contributions in Hampsher-Monk et al. 1998, part III “Concept and Image,” 129–238.

72 Andersen 2011, 255–57, identifies “seven different possible forms of conceptual shift: 1. The concept may remain constant while the counter-concept changes. 2. The concept may have changed while the counter-concept has remained the same. 3. Both concept and counter-concept may have been displaced. 4. Concept and counter-concept may be the same but the tension between them may be different. 5. The concept may be the same but may have moved to the position of counter-concept. 6. The concept may have lost its counter-concept, which results in the creation of an empty category with unspecified counter-concept, which can be occupied later. 7. Concept and counter-concept remain the same, but the meaning dimension within which the distinction is defined may have shifted.”

73 Koselleck 1972, quote: p. XIV.

74 For a similar point, cf. Steinmetz 2008, p. 179–80, who singles out the 20th century and the entire pre-modern period up to the 18th century (!) as “neu zu erschließende Zeiträume.”

conceptual historians. Beside long periods in which social and conceptual change was barely conceivable, there were quite a few periods in which they dramatically escalated:

- the Chunqiu and Zhanguo periods (8th to 3rd centuries B.C.), in which a stratified society emerged and all “classical” Chinese concepts were formulated for the first time⁷⁵
- the Wei/Jin period (3rd to 5th centuries A.D.), in which the formation of a new “aristocratic” order and the spread of Buddhism was accompanied by entirely new views of the world
- the Tang/Song transition (8th to 12th centuries), which saw the re-emergence of a centralized system and the concomitant invention of new traditions
- the Ming/Qing transition (16th to 18th centuries), in which the spread of print culture undermined many time-honored concepts
- the late 19th/early 20th century, when the formation of a modern society went hand in hand with the revamping of almost the entire conceptual inventory
- the present social transformations in China, which would seem to be attended by equally significant conceptual change⁷⁶

Add to this the long histories of Korea and Japan and one may get an idea of the riches in store for East Asian conceptual history. *Oriens Extremus* plans to tap these riches by providing a platform for studies in conceptual history covering a host of cultures and epochs.⁷⁷ In doing so, it will be less ambitious and systematic than the above-mentioned projects led by Jin Guantao/Liu Qingfeng and Sun Jiang. Rather than rivaling them,⁷⁸ it aims to supplement them in several ways. Based in Germany, *Oriens Extremus* specifically invites contributions informed by the European tradition of conceptual history. The theories and methods developed by European scholars over half a century certainly deserve to be applied to East Asian material – not in order to claim methodological hegemony, but with a view to testing and refining approaches that have been developed using a very limited corpus of sources. East Asian conceptual history will not be restricted to Koselleck’s selection of 120 “Grundbegriffe,” but will make its own choices. Nor will it necessarily be restricted to “concepts” that find linguistic expression. Instead, it offers the opportunity to treat semantics in a broad way, taking images, symbols, and other generalized forms into account.

Moreover, the historical changes of certain European concepts are well worth comparing to their East Asian counterparts – not with the objective of finding the selfsame phenomena and simply confirming the European perspective, but rather in an effort to sharpen the eye for specific differences and the distinctiveness of East Asian concepts. Does Koselleck’s diagnosis of “democratization,” “temporalization,” and “susceptibility to ideology”⁷⁹ hold true for East Asian concepts on the threshold of modernity?

75 And not only those: for the concept of “stupidity,” cf. Schwermann 2011, for that of “history,” Vogelsang 2007.

76 Cf. Cai and Liu 2012, 60, and Andersen 2011.

77 The editors are aware of the criticism directed against the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* precisely because of its broad range over time. It is not feasible, or so the critics argue, to trace a concept from ancient Greece until modern times with equal depth and attention for details. Therefore, the aim of *Oriens Extremus* is not to provide full coverage of certain concepts, but to encourage clearly delimited case studies that do not transcend the competence of their authors.

78 Quite to the contrary, the editors of *Oriens Extremus* are very grateful to Sun Jiang who has offered his support in this project. The forthcoming issues will doubtless profit greatly from his advice and contributions.

79 Cf. Koselleck 1972, XVI–XVIII.

Or is the tripartite scheme proposed by Jin Guantao and Liu Qingfeng – (1) selective assimilation of foreign concepts using traditional terms, (2) wholesale adoption of original foreign concepts, (3) revision and “Sinification” of new concepts⁸⁰ – more adequate for understanding the East Asian case?

In posing such questions, conceptual history will heighten the awareness for the problem that stood at the beginning of conceptual history in Germany and that has long beset East Asian studies, namely, whether to use Western or indigenous terms. The problem will likely turn out to be somewhat more complex than it is usually understood, for even indigenous terms have a history that needs to be taken into account. In fact, Chinese terms used to describe Chinese history may turn out to be even more deceptive *faux amis* than Western terms whose alien origin is obvious. The use of the source language is not an advantage *per se*. No matter whether historians use contemporary or source terminology, they will have to define their terms and relate them to the object under investigation.⁸¹ In other words, they will have to consider the history of concepts. If it is true that “the social reality of the past could be accurately described only after historians had retrieved the meanings of concepts actually employed during the period under investigation,”⁸² then conceptual history will turn out to be more than an end in itself, but an invaluable tool to all research in East Asian history. To be sure, analyzing the correlation between concepts and social structures will certainly not enable us to “think like” members of the historical society in question. While conceptual history cannot bridge the gap that separates us from historical societies, it will nonetheless give us a more precise measure of the distance that lies between them and us.

We are just at the beginning of this undertaking. East Asian studies still has a long way to go, and many studies will be needed in order to explore this new field of research in earnest. Publishing such studies, *Oriens Extremus* does not prescribe a theoretical framework for conceptual history but gives full latitude to different approaches to the field. Nor does it aim to assemble articles that will add up to a reference work or to even approach comprehensiveness. *Oriens Extremus* will not attempt to plough through the wide field of East Asian conceptual history in its entirety. The journal’s endeavor is to select specific concepts or periods that allow researchers to dig single furrows, length or crosswise, perhaps digging deeper here or there, and to thus reclaim some of the large land that has all too long been left uncultivated.

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80 Jin and Liu 2008, 6–8.

81 Cf. Brunner 1946, 187–188: “Nichts aber wäre falscher als zu glauben, daß historische Arbeit die modernen Begriffe entbehren könne. Nur müssen sie selbst in ihrer geschichtlichen Bedingtheit erkannt werden.”

82 Richter 1987, 251, summarizing Otto Brunner’s position.

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