

CHAPTER SIX

TOWARDS A CONCEPTUAL HISTORY OF SOME CONCEPTS OF
 NATURE IN CLASSICAL CHINESE:
ZIRAN 自然 AND *ZIRAN ZHI LI* 自然之理

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I dedicate this paper to the memory of Joseph Needham whose unfailing benign support, candid friendship, and generous hospitality over so many years have meant much more to me than I have ever had the heart to let him know.

There has been some uncertainty among scholars in recent years about how most appropriately to approach the premodern Chinese conceptions of what we these days loosely call ‘Nature.’ The electronic corpus of Chinese texts that is assembled and analyzed in the *Thesaurus Linguae Sericae*¹ offers some material for the preparation of a philologically based answer to this and related questions.²

A. ANALYTICAL DISTINCTIONS

Let me begin with a survey of some of the basic syntactic functions of *zi ran* 自然. It appears that one must learn to distinguish between at least the following syntactically distinct uses of this expression:

1. Intransitive verbal, stative, non-agentive: “be so of itself.”
2. Intransitive verbal, agentive, with a human agent: “practise naturalness.”
3. Intransitive verbal, referring to an event: “emerge naturally.”
4. Deverbal adnominal: “natural.”
5. Deverbal stative nominalisation: “natural state.”
6. Deverbal process nominalisation: “natural process.”
7. Deverbal abstract action nominalisation: “natural conduct.”

¹ Hereafter *TLS*, tls3.uni-hd.de.

² The research notes presented in this paper were inspired by an invitation from Mark Elvin, who kindly provided many helpful comments on it.

8. Deverbal abstract psychological nominalisation: “naturalism.”
9. Abstract subject nominalisation: “what is so of itself > Nature.”
10. Adverbial: “naturally *V*.”³
11. (post-Han) Adsentential: “Naturally, *S*.”

Number 9 of these uses is of special concern in the context of a comparison with some characteristic Greek notions expressed by the word *phusis*, its Latin loan translation *natura*, and the derivatives and loan translations of these words in many other languages of the world.

But, before I turn specifically to this abstract nominalised use, a few notes on the semantics of the expression are in order.

What is *zi ran* is that not intended by humans. Thus, a deliberate “natural” human action would not be *zi ran* in Chinese terms.

非故爲之，
道自然也。

They did not do this on purpose,
it happened by way of a natural process.⁴

On the other hand, human natural endowments *xing* 性 are only redundantly or tautologically said to be *zi ran*:

是以雖有自然之性，
必立師傅焉。

So even if someone has the natural endowments,
one must still establish a teacher for him.⁵

And whatever a teacher adds will never be, or become, *zi ran*.

In a state as yet unconfused by education, humans are *zi ran*:

無滑而魂兮，
彼將自然。

Do not confuse your soul:
then that soul will be naturally as it is.⁶

The etymologically primary meaning of *zi ran* is probably verbal and causative: “cause oneself to be so,” and is hence translatable as “be so of oneself,” “be naturally so.” This notion of causing oneself to be so does

³ *Zhuangzi* 莊子 17.1.23 知堯桀之自然而相非 “know that (sage emperor) Yao and (tyrant) Jie disagree with each other.”

⁴ *Baihutong* 白虎通 ed. *TLS* 6.47.

⁵ *Baihutong* ed. *TLS* 15.115.

⁶ *Chuci* 楚辭, *Yuanyou* 遠遊 ed. *TLS* 1.12.

not involve the deliberate agentive “take the action of causing oneself to be so” or “decide to cause oneself to be so.” “Cause” is used here as in “be the cause one's own ruin.”

Our meaning “naturally” derives etymologically from the non-agentive causative as in:

妖不自作。

Monsters do not arise of themselves.⁷

Compare also

亂所以自作也。

This is how chaos naturally arises.⁸

One notes that *zi* 自 in this meaning is never nominalised, whereas we do have nominalised *zi* “from” in 知風之自 “know the wherefrom > cause of the wind” in the *Doctrine of Mean* and 愛之自 “the wherefrom > cause of love” in *Hanfeizi* 韓非子 20. It is important, then, to note that like *zi*, *zi ran* has highly abstract nominal uses.

B. THE ABSTRACT NOTION OF ZI RAN

The cosmological hypostatization and nominalisation of *zi ran* is nowhere more explicit than in the famous passage

人法地，
地法天，
天法道，
道法自然。

Man takes earth as his model.

Earth takes Heaven as its model.

Heaven takes the Way as its model.

The Way [*dao*] takes naturalness as its model.⁹

And this nominalised notion of *zi ran* is usefully expanded elsewhere in *Laozi* 老子: (聖人) 補萬物之自然. “(The sage) helps along the naturally-being-so of the myriad things (*wan wu* 萬物).”¹⁰ And moreover, in so doing the wise man is then perceived by the people to be

⁷ *Zuozhuan* 左傳 Duke Zhuang 14. ed. *TLS* 3.14.2.3.

⁸ *Xunzi* ed. *TLS* 14.5.2.

⁹ *Laozi* 老子 25, ed. *TLS* 25.2. Liu Xiaogan 2007: 50 argues persuasively in favour of a nominal reading. I follow his thoughtfully abstract suggested English translation “naturalness.”

¹⁰ Ed. *TLS* 64.1.

no longer just “human.” In a paradoxical way he is taken to be unartificially and non-assertively “natural” himself, part of the natural process, no longer a humanly motivated agent outside the processes of nature. He is not, then, perceived to “become Nature.” He is perceived to be “natural.” Hence the verbal use in the famous passage in *Laozi* 老子：天下謂我自然 “all the world regards me as just natural,”¹¹ at which point *zi ran* “be natural” comes to refer to the metaphysical result of the sage’s ability to *wu wei* 無爲 “be non-assertive in action” which goes well into colloquial English as “not trying anything funny.” And from a philosophical point of view it is crucial to realise that in this usage, *zi ran* is exactly NOT “adjectival,” the verb does not ascribe a state but a way of behaving.¹²

More currently, and less paradoxically, human action can relate to this *zi ran* as an hypostatised, almost reified, object, as in *Hanfeizi*¹³: 隨自然 “If he follows Nature/naturalness ...,” together with *Hanfeizi*¹⁴: 因自然 “base oneself on Nature/naturalness,” and *Huainanzi* 淮南子: 反自然 “revert to Nature/naturalness”¹⁵, where the object is clearly nominal, and the reference would seem to be to some hypostatised, abstract notion of “what is so of itself” which one might well be tempted to render in English as capitalised “Nature,” or—perhaps a little over-explicitly—as “naturalness.”

More subtly complex is *Guanzi* 管子¹⁶: 得天之道。其事若自然。 “If one has attained to the Way of Heaven (*Tian zhi Dao*) one’s undertakings will be like natural processes.”

The technical term *zi ran* can be preceded by possessive pronouns, as in *Huainanzi*¹⁷: 因其自然 “base oneself on one’s Nature,” and also in *Shishuoxinyu* 世說新語¹⁸: 所以明其自然故也. “this was because he

¹¹ Ed. *TLS* 17.1.

¹² Note that the fourth century B.C. bamboo strip version of this chapter recently discovered at Guodian 郭店 in the south of China has a challenging variant which involves direct speech: 天下曰：我自然. “Everyone in the world says: ‘We are naturally-so.’” which would seem paradoxically to attribute to the common people themselves that supreme wisdom resulting from sagely non-intrusive rule. And if one is to take this seriously, then according to the fourth century BC *Laozi* the people can not only be made to obey, but also to understand.

¹³ Ed. *TLS* 21.16.4.

¹⁴ Ed. *TLS* 29.1.3.

¹⁵ Ed. *TLS* 9.14.

¹⁶ Ed. *TLS* 2.1.145.

¹⁷ Ed. *TLS* 1.4.9.

¹⁸ Ed. *TLS* 4.46.1.2.

understood his Nature.” One notes incidentally that in such constructions “naturalness” ceases to be a natural translation.

At times, this kind of discourse identifies natural patterns that come close to what in our parlance would be construed as “regular patterns of What-is-So-of-Itself/Nature.” Thus also *Huainanzi*¹⁹: 夫舟浮於水，車轉於陸，此勢之自然也。 “now a boat will float on water, and a vehicle will roll along on land. This is the nature of these situations.”

In *Hanfeizi*²⁰: 恃萬物之自然而不敢為也 “rely on the Nature of the myriad things and not dare to engage in assertive action,” *Huainanzi*²¹: 因天地之自然 “base oneself on the Nature prevailing in Heaven and Earth > the world,” and *Huainanzi*²²: 隨天地自然 “follow what is so of itself (> the natural laws prevailing) in Heaven and Earth,” the reference is to “what is so of itself” within specified domains.

We may safely conclude that nominalised uses of *zi ran* are already common in pre-Buddhist literature. This nominal concept forms a crucial part of ancient Chinese ways of construing the overall structure of the world. And towards the end of that pre-Buddhist period we have Ruan Ji 阮籍 (AD 210-263) ascribes to *zi ran* an active role as an agent of cosmological development: 天地生於自然 “Heaven and Earth are born from what-is-naturally-so (*zi ran*).”²³ Here, then, *zi ran* is no longer an abstraction, but rather an hypostatised metaphysical entity and physical agent. And one notes as an important detail, that the phrase *zi ran* here still does not refer collectively to the physical world as a whole.

C. THE COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE CONCEPT OF NATURE

It has long become customary to ask such questions as “Does Chinese have the concept of Nature?” and so on. Such a question is problematic. To start with, there is no one clear notion of Greek *phusis*, or of Latin *natura*, or indeed of English *Nature*. A look at the justly famous *Greek-English Lexicon* by Liddell, Scott, and Jones, the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, or indeed the *Oxford English Dictionary* will quickly confirm this. Thus the question may sound natural, but it only begins to make any sense to the extent that it is accompanied by a clarification of

¹⁹ Ed. *TLS* 9.4.4.

²⁰ Ed. *TLS* 21.16.4.

²¹ Ed. *TLS* 1.8.2.

²² Ed. *TLS* 1.13.1.

²³ *Da Zhuang lun* 達莊論, as quoted in Peiwenyunfu #20329; #25991; #38907; #24220; 71, p 21.

what exactly the question refers to. The things and creatures constituting Nature, are *wan wu* 萬物 “the myriad things/creatures,” and the all-embracing term for Nature as the universe of such things would be *tian di* 天地 “Heaven and Earth,” the landscape these things may form and which may be enjoyed as “nature,” would be *shan shui* 山水 “landscape > nature” or, more recently, *feng jing* 風景 “natural scenery > nature.” One could go on along these lines identifying the terminological repertoires, conceptual *systemes de relations sémantiques*, offered by the Chinese language at different stages of its development for the different kinds of meanings of the English word “nature.”

So then, what needs to be discussed are not individual Western words and the presence, or absence, of equivalents elsewhere. Even supposing that a sufficiently clear notion of Nature were to be specified, the appropriate question to ask would still be more like: “what kinds of distinctions did the Chinese language make in the course of its recorded history within the general *semantic field* of *regular patterns to which things are said to conform everywhere?*” Within this semantic field, then, one may indeed usefully compare the distinctions made by different peoples, by different individuals, in different places, and at different times. It is never simply going to be a matter of asking: “Do they or don’t they have the concept X?”

Now it turns out that, in traditional times, Chinese thinkers used a wide range of expressions to refer to the observed or imagined regularities of the physical world of things, including or sometimes excluding the world of human feelings, actions, and social situations. The *Thesaurus Linguae Sericae* (TLS) documents the conceptual history of at least the following:

1. *Ze* 則 *RULE* refers to a rule or regulation for human behaviour, and then, by extension, to the predictable and regular rules followed by all things.
2. *Li* 理 *PATTERN* refers to a regular pattern made by things, and then to the regular pattern made by all things.

天不變其常，
 覆萬物，
 制寒暑，
 行日月，
 次星辰，
 天之常也，

治之以理，
終而復始。

Heaven does not change its constant (patterns):
it covers all creatures,
it controls cold and heat,
it makes sun and moon take their courses,
it gives their order to the stars.

That is the constant (pattern) of Heaven.

Heaven governs things according to Pattern/Principle, and when it has finished it starts again from the beginning.²⁴

3. *Chang* 常 CONSTANT sometimes refers to a recurrent and constant feature manifesting itself in all things. This use is conveniently illustrated by the passage immediately above. Additionally:

天行有常，
不爲堯存，
不爲桀亡。

The movements of Heaven have a constant (pattern);
they do not exist for the sake of [sage-emperor] Yao,
and they do not cease to exist for the sake of [tyrant] Jie.²⁵

4. *Dao* 道 WAY can refer to the structuring force shaping all natural processes regularly gone through by all things.

道常無爲，
而無不爲。

The Way (= Nature!?) constantly engages in non-assertive action,
and there is nothing it does not accomplish.²⁶

5. *Tian* 天 HEAVEN (antonym 人 “human”) refers to regular patterns not imposed by man, but prevailing as if by arrangement on the part of Heaven, not including mechanisms created by human initiative.

故牛岐蹄而戴角，
馬被髦而全足者，
天也。
絡馬之口，
穿牛之鼻者，
人也。

That oxen have cloven hooves and have horns,

²⁴ *Guanzi* 管子, ed. TLS 2.1.9.

²⁵ *Xunzi*, ed. TLS 17.1.1.

²⁶ *Laozi*, ed. TLS 37.1.

that horses have manes and uncloven hooves,
 is a matter of Heaven/Nature.
 That one reins in the horse's mouth,
 and that one pierces the nose of the ox,
 is a matter of human interference.²⁷

6. *Jigang* 紀綱 GOVERNMENTAL MEASURES is primarily about social and political rulers, but refers very occasionally to the place of a thing in the web of interrelations with others.

萬物有紀綱
 All things have a web of rules governing them.²⁸

7. *Tian zhi* 天制 HEAVEN SYSTEM refers to a regular natural régime as if instituted by Heaven and in any case independent of human effort.

天制固然
 “The *system of Heaven* is inherently such.”²⁹

寒暑與和，
 三而成物；
 日月與星，
 三而成光；
 天地與人，
 三而成德。
 由此觀之，
 三而一成，
 天之大經也，
 以此爲天制。

The triad of cold, heat and harmony
 will together create things;
 the triad of sun, moon and the stars
 will together create light;
 the triad of Heaven, Earth and Man
 will together create Virtue.
 From this point of view
 the creation of the one from a triad
 is the overarching pattern of Heaven
 and we consider this as the System of Heaven.³⁰

²⁷ *Huananzi*, ed. TLS 1.10.4.

²⁸ *Jinzi* 計倪子, ed. ch. 1, p. 4b. Quoted in Needham, vol. 2, p. 554ff.

²⁹ *Huangdi sijing* 黃帝四經, tr. Chang p. 282. 3rd cent. BC.

³⁰ *Chunqiu fanlu* 春秋繁露 24 *****REF!

8. *Tian zhi chang* 天之常 HEAVEN'S CONSTANT refers to a recurrent and constant feature manifesting itself in all things as if arranged by Heaven and in any case independent of human effort.

天不變其常，
 覆萬物，
 制寒暑，
 行日月，
 次星辰，
 天之常也治之以理，
 終而復始。

Heaven does not change its constant (pattern).
 It covers the myriad things,
 it controls cold and hot,
 it sets the course for sun and moon,
 it sets the sequence for stars and planets.
 Such is the constant (pattern) of Heaven.
 It governs this according to principle,
 and when one cycle is completed a new one begins.³¹

9. *Tian zhi dao* 天之道 HEAVEN'S WAY refers to recurrent natural processes and constellations as if arranged by Heaven and in any case independent of human effort.

至長反短，
 至短反長，
 天之道也。

When (the days) are longest they turn round and get shorter,
 when (the days) are shortest, they turn round and get longer:
 such is the Way of Heaven.³²

10. *Tian dao* 天道 HEAVEN(S) WAY sometimes refers to moral rules and recurrent natural processes and constellations as if arranged by Heaven, and in any case independent of human effort. Examples for this are many:

天人同道。

The Heavens and Man have the same Way.³³

滿招損，
 謙受益，

³¹ *Guanzi*, ed. *TLS* 02.01.09; tr. Rickett 1985, p. 6.

³² *Lüshichunqiu* 呂氏春秋, ed. *TLS* 25.1.1.1.

³³ *Lunheng* 論衡, ed. *TLS* 17.5.7.

時乃天道。

Pride brings loss,
and humility gets benefit
—this is the Way of Heaven.³⁴

天道福善禍淫。

It is the Way of Heaven that it brings good luck to the good and misfortune to the licentious.³⁵

11. *Tian dao di li* 天道地理 HEAVEN[LY] WAY EARTH[LY] PATTERN refers to the regulatory natural pattern manifesting itself in Heaven and the patterns imposing themselves on earth.

亂主上逆天道，
下絕地理。

The chaotic ruler will offend the Way of Heaven above,
and below he will break the regular pattern of Earth.³⁶

12. *Tian xing ran* 天性然 HEAVEN NATURE SO refers to what is so by virtue of the formative endowment of things with features as if arranged by Heaven and in any case independent of human effort.

生爲嬰兒，
長爲丈夫，
老爲父翁。
從生至死，
未嘗變更者，天性然也。

Born as infants,
they grow up to be adults,
and they grow old to become old men.
From birth until death,
they never change (this regular pattern):
such is their Heaven-given (natural) endowment.³⁷

13. *Tian di zhi xing* 天地之性 HEAVEN AND EARTH'S NATURAL ENDOWMENT refers to what is an automatic result of the primordial endowment of all things everywhere in the world.

夫萍樹根於水，
木樹根於土。

³⁴ *Shangshu*, ed. *TLS* 3.20.1.

³⁵ *Shangshu*, ed. *TLS* 12.2.

³⁶ *Guanzi*, ed. *TLS* 1.2.163.

³⁷ *Lunheng*, ed. *TLS* 7.4.8

鳥排虛而飛，
獸蹈實而走。
蛟龍水居，
虎豹山處，
天地之性也。

Floating plants take root in water,
Land plants take root in the soil,
Birds fly by stroking the thin air,
Animals run by treading upon solidity.
Alligators and dragons make their home in water,
Tigers and leopards dwell in the mountains.
Such is the natural endowment of Heaven and Earth.³⁸

14. *Tian zhi fa* 天之法 HEAVEN'S LAW refers to the law/pattern model of Heaven.

剛而能柔天之法也。

That the hard may become weak is a natural law/pattern of Heaven.³⁹

15. *Tian di zhi li* 天地之理 HEAVEN EARTH PATTERN refers to the regular patterns of all things prevailing throughout the world.

是未明天地之理，
萬物之情者也。

This is failing to understand the pattern of Heaven and Earth,
and the essential features of the myriad things.⁴⁰

16. *Tian di zi ran zhi li* 天地自然之理 HEAVEN AND EARTH('S) SELF-GENERATION PATTERN refers to the regular patterns prevailing among the self-generating processes everywhere in the world.

貓之食鼠亦然，
天地自然之理，
物皆由之，
而莫知之。

The cat eating mice is also thus.
It is the self-generating pattern of Heaven and Earth.
Things all follow this pattern,
but no one understands it.⁴¹

17. *Tian shu* 天數 HEAVEN('S) NUMBER[S] refers idiomatically

³⁸ *Huainanzi* ed. TLS 01.09.01.

³⁹ Zhu Xi 朱熹 (died 1200) on the *Yijing* 易經, ed. SSJZS 十三經注疏 part 1, 7b.

⁴⁰ *Zhuangzi* ed. TLS 17.1.26.

⁴¹ Zhang Jiebin 張介賓 (1563–1640) *Jingyuequanshu* 景岳全書 ch. 35.

(perhaps with an overtone of inherent ordinal ranking or sequence) to the exactly predictable tendency of things determined by Heaven.

凡舉事無逆天數。

Whenever one does something one should not contravene Heaven's Number[s].⁴²

夫兩貴之不能相事，

兩賤之不能相使，

是天數也。

Of two nobles one cannot serve the other,
of two commoners one cannot take command over the other:
such is the predictable pattern/natural ranking of Heaven.⁴³

18. *Tian zhi ze* 天之則 HEAVEN('S) RULE probably refers to the rules imposed by Heaven, rather than the rules followed by Heaven itself, but the matter will need to be argued out in detail.

因天之則。

(The sage) adapts/conforms to the rules of Heaven.⁴⁴

循天之理從 ... 天之則。

(The sage) goes along with the principles of Heaven ... follows the rules of Heaven.⁴⁵

19. *Chang ze* 常則 CONSTANT RULE refers to the recurrent and unchanging predictable and regular rules followed by all things:

天步有常則。

The displacements in the sky have > follow a constant rule.⁴⁶

20. *Chang li* 常理 CONSTANT PATTERN refers to the enduring pattern followed by all things:

天地長不沒，

山川無改時。

草木得常理，

霜露榮悴之。

Earth and Heaven endure forever,
streams and mountains never change.

⁴² *Lüshichunqiu*, ed. TLS 8.1.6.2.

⁴³ *Xunzi*, ed. TLS 9.3.2.

⁴⁴ *Huangdi sijing* 黃帝四經 3, ed. Yu Mingguang 2006 p. 138.

⁴⁵ *Wenzi* 文子 4, 符言 ed. Peking: Zhonghuashuju, 2000, p. 185, see also *Huainanzi*.

⁴⁶ Zhang Heng (78-139 AD) in *Hou Han shu* 後漢書 ch. 89, p. 5a.

Plants observe a constant rhythm [pattern],
withered by frost, by dew restored.⁴⁷

21. *Wu li* 物理 THINGS' PATTERN refers to the natural pattern that things/creatures make, not necessarily the pattern they actually set out to follow.

願聞其人情物理。

May I hear about man's essential nature and the constant pattern of things?⁴⁸

是以生而有死者，
物理之必然。
處必然之理，
修短之間，
何足多恨。

Therefore, that, having been born, one will die,
is an inevitable/necessary part of the [constant] pattern of things.
One dwells in the principles of necessity,
in the short or in the long space of time
and there is nothing to be resentful of.⁴⁹

22. *Zi ran zhi dao* 自然之道 SELF-GENERATION'S WAY refers to the totality of self-generating processes regularly followed by all things.

雨應龍而來，
影應形而去。
天地之性，
自然之道也。

That the rain comes, responding to the dragon,
and the shadow leaves, responding to the body,
is in the nature of Heaven and Earth;
it is the self-generating Way (of things).⁵⁰

23. *Zi ran dao* 自然道 SELF-GENERATION[‘S] WAY, like its expanded version *zi ran zhi dao* 自然之道, refers to the totality of self-generating processes regularly followed by all things.

氣體偶合，
自然道也。

That the fluid energy and the solid body happen to fit together

⁴⁷ Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 ed. *TLS* 10.1.1 tr. Hightower.

⁴⁸ *Heguanzi* 鶡冠子 9 ed. *Congshujicheng* 叢書集成 p. 51.

⁴⁹ *Zhoushu* 周書 *Ming di ji* 明帝紀 ed. Zhonghuashuju, 1971, p. 54.

⁵⁰ *Lunheng* ed. *TLS* 41.5.3; Liu 627.

is the the self-generating Way (of things).⁵¹

24. *Li zhi bi ran* 理之必然 refers to “what is necessarily so according to the pattern of things“.

夫事有本末。
知賢愚不肖者本，
貧富貴賤者末也。
得其本則末隨，
趨其末則本末俱廢。
此理之必然也。

There things that are basic, and that are marginal.
Understanding talent and stupidity is basic,
poverty and wealth, honour and baseness are marginal.
When one gets hold of what is basic the marginal follows,
when one scuffles after the marginal everything is lost.
This is what is necessarily so according to the pattern of things.⁵²

25. *Zi ran zhi li* 自然之理 SELF-GENERATION'S PATTERN refers to the regular patterns of all self-generating processes.

The immense importance of this term comes out when Zhu Xi 朱熹 sets out to explain the art of reading Confucian texts, his inimitable table talk on the art of reading:

讀書以觀聖賢之意；
因聖人之意，
以觀自然之理。

The reading of books is in order to get a view of the ideas/thoughts of the sages and worthies,
and on the basis of the ideas of the sages
to get a view of the underlying natural principles.⁵³

Behind the messages of the sages of old, Zhu Xu sees the those natural principles: ultimately, he is a moral naturalist. But as we shall see, the concept of *zi ran zhi li* does not always enter this kind of elevated discourse on the thoughts of the sages. The concept enters Chinese thought in many interestingly varied ways.

In fact, *zi ran zhi li* became something of a standard philosophical term, a keyword, in traditional China from the third century onwards.

⁵¹ *Lunheng* ed. *TLS* 32.32.3; Liu 516.

⁵² Han Yu 韓玉 (graduated 1094) *Lin zhong shu* 臨終遺子書, in *Xian xian jia xun* 先賢家訓, Hong Kong: Zhonghuashuju, 2004, p. 47.

⁵³ *Zhuiziyulei* 朱子語類 ch. 10, ed. Zhonghuashuju 1994, p. 162.

Quite often, though not always, the term is directly relevant to discussions on the various notions of “laws of nature“ in traditional China.

Rather surprisingly, this expression was not mentioned by Joseph Needham in his seminal essay on “Human Law and the Laws of Nature“ in his *Science and Civilisation in China*, volume 2, pages 518-583. It is also absent in Derk Bodde's two important articles commenting on and supplementing Needham's survey, although it surely must have been noticed somewhere else in the extensive literature on the subject.

That the term *zi ran zhi li* is by no means rare or marginal can be seen from the distribution of its occurrences in the great mid-Qing dynasty collection, the *Sikuquanshu* 四庫全書 [Complete writings from the Four Treasuries]:

Philosophers *zibu* 子部 : 670

Classics/scriptures *jingbu* 經部 : 627

Collections and chrestomathies *jibu* 集部 : 311

In the twenty-six dynastic histories, however, I find only 37 examples, but I have looked at these with special interest, because they show how the concept that concerns me entered broad non-technical discourse. I have also worked my way through the 109 occurrences in 70 texts of the Buddhist Tripiaka, and the occurrences of the phrase in 40 chapters of the 480 mostly pre-modern novels I have surveyed so far.

D. THE NOTION OF TRANSCENDENCE

The notion of a creator imposing pattern on the world of things is present in China, though never, as far as I know, the notion that that creator actually laid down “laws“ for the behaviour of his creation. There are only *ze* 則 “rules“, *常則* “constant rules“, and more commonly, as history progresses, *li* 理 “patterns;“ and, indeed, the all-important idiomatic *zi ran zhi li* 自然之理 the history of which we shall trace below. One text, interestingly, *denies* the existence of such fixed rules:

且夫天地爲鑪兮，
造化爲工；
陰陽爲炭兮，
萬物爲銅。
合散消息兮，

安有常則；
千變萬化兮，
未始有極。

Heaven and Earth are the furnace,
the workman, the Creator;
his coal is the *yin* and *yang*,
his copper, all things of creation.
Joining, scattering, ebbing and flowing,
where is there persistence of rule [>where are the rules of nature]?
A thousand, ten thousand, mutations
hat have never begun to end.⁵⁴

Note that we have both the very exciting *zao hua zhe* 造化者 “creator of transformations“ and the more expected *zao wu zhe* 造物者 “creator of things“ in early Chinese texts.

Wang Bi 王弼 comments on the *Book of Changes*:

不見天之使四時，
而四時不忒。

We do not see Heaven causing/ordering the Four Seasons,

but the Four Seasons do not misbehave.⁵⁵

Heaven seems to be treated as an unswerving agent causing the four seasons to take their regular course.

The thought of the creator of the *zi ran zhi li* recurs in the Buddhist Tripitaka. A few representative examples must suffice:

故云。
春種一粒粟。
秋收萬顆子。
人生爲善惡。
果報還如此。
蓋造化自然之理也。

So therefore,
if in spring you plant one corn of grain
in autumn you will harvest a myriad grains.
If in human life you do good or bad
your retribution will again be like this.

This is the regular pattern of the What-is-So-of-Itself (> Nature) of the

⁵⁴ *Shiji* 史記 ed. TLS 84.29.1.

⁵⁵ *Shisanjingzhushu* 十三經注疏 ch. 4, p. 20b.

Creator.⁵⁶

This is from the Ming dynasty, but the same text also appears in a Song-dynasty work, followed there by an interesting further remark:

此理可信。

則淨土之說必可信。

If this Principle may be relied upon,
then the theories of the Pure Land are necessarily also to be relied upon.⁵⁷

This *topos* it would seem to be substantially older than the evidence of it I am here surveying.

We have already noted above how Tao Yuanming 陶淵明, in his own poetic mode, speaks not of laws obeyed but constant patterns conformed to:

天地長不沒，

山川無改時。

草木得常理，

霜露榮悴之。

Earth and Heaven endure forever,
streams and mountains never change.

Plants observe a constant pattern,
withered by frost, restored by dew.⁵⁸

The *chang li* 常理 “constant pattern“, Hightower's “constant rhythm,“ does not identify any law *imposed*. Neither does it refer to any abstract philosophical principle that might summarise or analyse what is at issue, but merely to an enduring and quite regular natural pattern, naturally followed. That seems to be the predominant way in which this matter was conceived in ancient China.

Another relevant way of speaking to keep in mind in the present conceptual context involves the common word *dao* 道 or “Way“:

道常無爲，

而無不爲。

The Way/Nature does not take deliberate action,
and yet there is nothing it does not get done.⁵⁹

That *dao* which practises non-action here in fact comes remarkably close

⁵⁶ *Xuzangjing* 續藏經 (Supplementary Tripitaka) Volume 61, No. 1163 西方直指 a Ming-dynasty work by Yinian 一念, R108_p0484a02(00).

⁵⁷ Taisho Tripitaka, vol. 47, no. 1970 龍舒增廣淨土文, by Wang Rixiu 王日休, T47n1970_p0256c02(01).

⁵⁸ Tao Yuanming, ed. *TLS* 10.1.1.

⁵⁹ *Laozi*, ed. *TLS* 37.1.

to what we would, in the West, construe as “Nature.”

The possibilities are still wide open for detailed philological studies of the nuances in the use of the terminological repertoire within the general semantic field of the invariant regularities of the things of this world. This applies to various Chinese traditions, but particularly to the Taoist and Buddhist traditions. Joseph Needham’s seminal work of 1956 actually remains by far the finest effort in this direction in any language. And it would be entirely in the spirit of the great master that we should try to explore with a much finer focus the varieties of scientific discourse relating to our widely differing, and constantly evolving, Western notions which have come to go under the names of “Nature“ and “Laws of Nature“ in the long course of our intellectual history.

In the concluding section I shall therefore illustrate these possibilities by a survey of the concept *zi ran zhi li* in some Chinese Buddhist contexts.

E. *ZI RAN ZHI LI* IN THE BUDDHIST TRIPITAKA

1. *Physical Nature*

1.1.

動靜者莫有識其主。
 生滅者不自曉其根。
 蓋自然之理著 (read 者) 矣。
 所謂非自然者
 乃大自然也。

That which moves or remains still is never aware of what governs it as a ruler;

that which is born or annihilated does not know its own root.

This, in fact, is a (regular) pattern of What-is-So-of-Itself/Nature.

That which is deemed not according to Nature,
 is still according to overarching/higher “Nature“.⁶⁰

1.2.

A Tang-dynasty work translated by the famous Sankritist monk Yijing 義淨 (635-713) declares:

夫天陽地陰。

⁶⁰ Taishō Tripitaka vol. 52, no. 2103, dated 649,

T52n2103_p0256a08(05): *Guanghongmingji* 廣弘明集, a collection published by Daoxuan 道宣, dated 649.

月陰日陽。
 水陰火陽。
 女陰男陽。
 天地氣合。
 一切草木生焉。
 日月交通。
 四時八節明焉。
 水火相承。
 一切萬物熟焉。
 男女允諧。
 子孫興焉。
 皆是天之常道。
 自然之理。

Heaven is *yang* and Earth is *yin*,
 the moon is *yni* and the sun is *yang*,
 water is *yin* and fire is *yang*,
 female is *yin* and male is *yang*.
 The vital energies of Heaven and Earth combine
 and all plants are born from this;
 the sun and moon interact
 and the four seasons and eight sections of the year become clear thereby.
 Water and fire succeed each other,
 and all the myriad kinds of things mature thereby.
 The male and the female commune,
 and their offspring rises into existence.
 All this is the constant Way of Heaven;
 it constitutes the (regular) patterns of What-is-So-of-Itself/Nature.⁶¹

1.3.

A Tang-dynasty work by Cheg Gua 澄觀 (737-838) states that:

但以生死自天。
 枯榮任分。
 天乃自然之理。

But one regards life and death as coming from Heaven,
 and withering as well as flourishing as depending on fate.
 And Heaven is nothing other than the (regular) pattern of
 What-is-So-of-Itself/Nature.⁶²

⁶¹ Taishō Tripitaka vol. 85, no. 2897, T85n2897_p1424a13(02): *Tian di ba yang shen zhou jing* 天地八陽神咒經, a Tang dynasty work translated by the famous Sanskritist Yijing 義淨.

⁶² Taishō Tripitaka vol. 36, no. 1736 *Da fang guang fo hua yan jing sui shu yan yi chao* 大方廣佛華嚴經隨疏演義鈔, T36n1736_p0106a25(01).

There is something *absolute* about the *zi ran zhi li*, something that does not admit of any semantic **gradients**.

1.4.

A Yuan-dynasty work by Yuanjue 圓覺 makes this last point explicitly:

禍福由天不在人
為天乃自然之理
不容增損故也

Disaster and good fortune come from Heaven and do not depend on man. Their being a matter of Heaven implies exactly a (regular) pattern of What-is-So-of-Itself/Nature. Because it does not admit of more or less.⁶³

1.5.

Our Yuan-dynasty work by Yuanjue continues:

福禍由天。
不在人為。
天乃自然之理。

Good fortune and disaster come from Heaven; they are not in the realm of what men produce. Heaven is nothing other than the (regular) (patterns of) What-is-So-of-Itself/Nature.⁶⁴

1.6.

A Yuan-dynasty work compiled by Xizhong 熙仲 stresses the deterministic aspect:

吾聞有成必有壞。
有始必有終。
有樂必有苦。
略而喻之。
天地自然之理也。

I have heard it said that where there is completion there will inevitably be ruin, where there is a beginning there will inevitably be an ending, and where there is joy there will inevitably be bitterness. I lay this out as an illustrative summary. Such, I say, are the (regular) patterns of What-is-So-of-Itself/Nature in the

⁶³ *Xuzangjing*, vol. 58, no. 1033 *Hua yan yuan ren lun he jie* 華嚴原人論合解, R104_p0238b03382).

⁶⁴ *Xuzangjing*, vol. 58, no. 1033 *Hua yan yuan ren lun he jie*, R104_p0300b18(02).

world.⁶⁵

This must be seen as contrasting with other less metaphysical explanations in terms of *zi ran zhi li*.

1.7.

A Ming-dynasty work by Chuandeng 傳燈 observes:

聲不和而響不順。
形不直而影不端。
自然之理。

When sounds are not in harmony, echoes will not follow harmoniously;
‘when a shape is not straight, the shadow will not be unbending.
That is a (regular) pattern of What-is-So-of-Itself/Nature.’⁶⁶

1.8.

He then repeats his point in a positive form:

形直影端。
聲和響順。
亦自然之理也。

When a shape is straight, the shadow will be unbent;
When sounds are in harmony the echo will be harmonious.
That too is a (regular) pattern of What-is-So-of-Itself/Nature.⁶⁷

1.9.

A Ming-dynasty work by Zhenke 真可 gives a different sort of inevitable pattern:

夫有卷則有舒。
有聚則有散。
有合則有碎。
此自然之理也。

When there is rolled-upness then there will be unfolding,
where there is gathering then there will be dispersal, combination,
fragmentation?
where there is **unison** there will be destruction.

⁶⁵ *Xuzangjing*, vol. 76, no. 1517 *Li chao shi shi zi jian* 歷朝釋氏資鑑, R132_p0160b18(02).

⁶⁶ *Xuzangjing*, vol. 19, no. 348 *Wei mo jing wu wo shu* 維摩經無我疏, R030_p0280b06(04).

⁶⁷ *Xuzangjing*, vol. 19, no. 348 *Wei mo jing wu wo shu*, R030_p0280b09(00).

This is according to the (regular) patterns of What-is-So-of-Itself/Nature.⁶⁸

1.10.

A Ming-dynasty work by Zhenjian 真鑑 uses the term to cover cause and effect:

譬如古鏡。
離垢之後。
更加拂拭。
則淨而生明。
自然之理。

It is like an old mirror:
after you have removed the dust
and you have gone on to wipe it,
then it becomes clean and brings about clarity:
such is the (regular) pattern of What-is-So-of-Itself/Nature.⁶⁹

1.11.

Zhenke 真可 also applies the concept to psychological phenomena:

見此毒物。
內心自慌。
我若懷毒。
心毒形彰。
自然之理。
何必商量。

If one has poison within one
then the mind's poison will show up in the body.
Such is the (regular) pattern of What-is-So-of-Itself/Nature.
What need is there to discuss this further?

When one sees this poisonous thing,
then within one's mind one naturally panics.⁷⁰

2. Logic

⁶⁸ *Xuzangjing*, vol. 73, no. 1452 *Zi bo zun zhe quan ji* 紫柏尊者全集, R126_p0832b05(00). An identical passage may be found in *Xuzangjing*, vol. 25, no. 473 *Jin gang jing shi* 金剛經釋 at R039_p0110a13(00).

⁶⁹ *Xuzangjing*, vol. 12, no. 275 *Leng yan jing zheng mai shu* 楞嚴經正脉疏 See BSK. R018_p0759b18(02).

⁷⁰ *Xuzangjing*, vol. 73, no. 1452, *Zi bo zun zhe quan ji* 紫柏尊者全集, R126_p0967a07(00).

2.1.

A Song-dynasty work by Zunshi 遵式 extends the concept of Nature to the domain of logic:

莊子唯明齊物是則皆是非。
則皆非。
此蓋自然之理。
故天地一指萬物。

Zhuangzi only understood that if the theory that all things are equal is right then all is both right and wrong, and if that is so then all is wrong.

This, presumably, is a (regular) pattern of What-is-So-of-Itself/Nature.

Thus “Heaven and Earth“ refers to the myriad things as one collective term.⁷¹

3. *Metaphysics*

The *zi ran zhi li* is what the *Book of Changes* symbolises through its trigrams, hexagrams, and explanations.

3.1.

A Tang-dynasty work by Zongmi 宗密, likewise applies the concept to metaphysics:

天以乾爲用。
運行不息。
應化無窮。
此天之自然之理。
故聖人常法此自然
而施人事。

Heaven uses the QIAN hexagram.

For it to move incessantly,
and to respond unendingly,
is the (regular) pattern of What-Is-So-of-Itself/Nature.

Therefore the sage will constantly take this What Is So of Itself/Nature as his model,
and will thus conduct his human affairs.⁷²

3.2.

⁷¹ *Xuzangjing*, vol. 54, no. 870 *Zhu Zhao lun shu* 注肇論疏 R096_p0250a15(05).

⁷² *Xuzangjing*, vol. 9, no. 245 *Yuan jue jing da shu shi yi chao* 圓覺經大疏釋義鈔, R014_p0410a14(00).

A Tang-dynasty work by Cheng Guan 澄觀 (737-838) reveals another facet of this:

此下明聖人法自然之理
而作易象。

Below it explains how the sage takes the Regular Patterns of What-is-So-of-Itself/Nature as his model, and thus creates the images of the *Book of Changes*.⁷³

The famous Ming scholar Jiao Hong 焦竑 declares the universality of the Patterns established by the *Book of Changes*:

3.3.

竺夏一天下耳。
壇畿所及。
方位所同。
卦乃天地自然之理。
獨不同哉。

India and China make up but one All-Under-Heaven. Wherever boundaries and territories reach, wherever the eight directions are commonly recognised, the hexagrams represent Heaven's (regular) patterns of What-is-So-of-Itself/Nature. Should these hexagrams alone not be shared?⁷⁴

4. Psychology

4.1.

A Ming-dynasty work by Yinian 一念 takes the pattern into the realm of psychology:

常念恭敬觀世音菩薩。
便得離慳。
何也。
蓋以心存恭敬。
則邪心自息。

⁷³ Taishō Tripitaka, vol. 36, no. 1736 *Da fang guang fo hua yan jing sui shu yan shu yi chao* 大方廣佛花嚴經隨疏演義鈔, T36n1736_p0124c06(01).

⁷⁴ *Xuzangjing*, vol. 31, no. 612 *Fa hua jing jing jie ping lin* 法華經精解評林, R093_p0097b12(00). See already the Song dynasty work by Jiehuan 戒環 for a parallel text: *Xuzangjing*, vol. 30, no. 602 *Fa hua jing yao jie* 法華經要解, R047_p0606b11(05).

亦自然之理耳。

When one constantly sets one's mind on a polite respect towards the
Boddhistva Guanyin

then one will be able to free oneself from desires.

Why should this be so?

It is that when one sets one's mind on polite respect

then wicked mental tendencies will of themselves cease:

and that surely is no more than a (regular) pattern of
What-is-So-of-Itself/Nature.⁷⁵

4.2.

A Qing-dynasty work by Chaoming 超溟 provides another perspective
on such self-conditioning:

心生無妄。

心正身端。

自然之理。

Such is the (regular) pattern of What-is-So-of-Itself/Nature.

When the mind generates absence of misguidedness,

then the mind is correct and the person is straight.⁷⁶

The common naturalistic non-Buddhist psychological topos is repeated
over and over again in the Buddhist scriptures of the time.

4.3.

The Qing-dynasty work by Jishi 濟時 elaborates:

樂極生哀。

自然之理也。

When joy reaches its ultimate point it creates grief.

That is a (regular) pattern of What-is-So-of-Itself/Nature.⁷⁷

4.4.

Another example may be found in a Qing-dynasty work by Jishi 濟時:

想輕上飛。

情濁下墜。

此自然之理也。

⁷⁵ *Xuzangjing*, vol. 61, no. 1163 *Xi fang zhi zhi* 西方直指 BSK 19d, R108_p0509b17 (03).

⁷⁶ *Xuzangjing*, vol. 65, no. 1288 *Wan fa gui xin lu* 萬法歸心錄, R114_p0803a14(03).

⁷⁷ *Xuzangjing*, vol. 16, no. 317 *Leng yan jing zheng jian* 楞嚴經正見, R091_p0191b02(03).

When thought is light it flies up;
 when feelings are turgid they sink down.
 This is according to the (regular) patterns of What-is-So-of-Itself/Nature.⁷⁸

4.5

Another passage by the same Jishi 濟時 focusses on the passions:

蓋性本無火。
 由婬習成火。
 火現必燒。
 自然之理也。

The general explanation is that one's (natural)endowment basically has no fire.

It is because lewdness gets practised that it catches fire.

When the fire manifests itself one will get burnt.

Such are the (regular) patterns of What-is-So-of-Itself/Nature.⁷⁹

5. Retribution

Retribution is explained naturalistically as a manifestation of this *zi ran zhi li*.

5.1.

A work by Sengzhao 僧肇 (384-414) sets the theme early on, but certainly not as the first:

報應之道
 連環相襲。
 其猶聲和響順
 形直影端。
 此自然之理
 無差毫分。

The way of retribution
 moves along in interlocking cycles.

It is like sound and echo being in sequence,
 shape and shadow being adjusted to each other.

This is the (regular) pattern of What-is-So-of-Itself/Nature, and there is not the slightest ⁸⁰

⁷⁸ *Xuzangjing*, vol. 16, no. 317 *Leng yan jing zheng jian*, R091_p0177b13(00).

⁷⁹ *Xuzangjing*, vol. 16, no. 317 *Leng yan jing zheng jian*, R091_p0179a09(01).

⁸⁰ Taishō Tripitaka, vol. 38, no. 1775 *Zhu Wei mo jie jing* 注維摩詰經, T38n1775_p0333a13(01). Compare also a Ming-dynasty work by Chuandeng 傳燈

5.2.

A Song-dynasty work by Wang Rixiu 王日休 takes a surprisingly creative approach to the same problem:

譬如人造屋宇
必居其中。
人造飲食
必享其味。
故造如是業。
必受如是之報。
蓋自然之理也。
然則吾今世所爲。
豈可以不慎哉。

It is like someone building a home:
that is where is will have to live.
When someone cooks food
And so when you produce such-and-such karma,
you will receive such-and-such retribution.
and so what one undertake in this generation
one had better be very careful about.⁸¹

5.3.

The linkage between the Buddhist and the older Chinese metaphysics are unusually clear in a Ming-dynasty work by Yinian 一念.

人生爲善惡。
果報亦如此。
蓋造化自然之理也。
世間因果若此。
修出世者。
因果亦然。
安可不信淨土而修之哉。

From birth men do good and do evil,
and the retribution is in accordance with these (acts).
These, in fact, are the principles of the Creator.
Karma and retribution are like this in this world,
and for those who leave this world (to take the Buddhist vows)

which repeats and thus confirms the same text: *Xuzangjing*, vol. 19, no. 348 *Weimo jing wu wo shu* 維摩經無我疏.

⁸¹ Taishō Tripitaka, vol. 47, no. 1970 *Longshu zeng guang jing tu wen* 龍舒增廣淨土文; R030_p0115a16(03). Yinian 一念 reverts to this in *Xuzangjing*, vol. 61, no. 1163 西方直指, R108_p0468a16(04). Cf. also *Xuzangjing*, vol. 61, no. 1163 西方直指 BSK 19d, R108_p0637a08340 for a repetition: the thought was held to be important.

karma and retribution are *also* like this.
How can one fail to believe in the Pure Land and to cultivate it?⁸²

5.4.

A Qing-dynasty work by Zhang Shicheng 張師誠 uses a biological comparison:

故云
春種一粒粟
秋收萬顆子
人生爲善惡
果報還如此
蓋造化自然之理也
此理可信則淨土之說必可信

Thus it is said:

When in the spring you plant one seed of grain,
in the autumn you reap ten thousand grains.

Man, while alive, does good and evil,
and retribution is in accordance with this.

In fact, this is the Creator's (regular) pattern of What-is-So-of-Itself/Nature.
[The general reason for this is that?]

If this principle is reliable then the theories of the Pure Land are necessarily reliable also.⁸³

The *zi ran zhi li* are to be trusted.

5.5.

An unconditional assertion of this occurs in a closely similar passage from the Qīng writer Zhang Shicheng 張師誠:

故云春種一粒粟。
秋收萬顆子。
人生爲善惡。
果報還如此。
蓋造化自然之理也。
此理可信。

When in the spring you plant one seed of grain,
in the autumn you will reap ten thousand seeds.

Man, while alive, does good and evil,

⁸² *Xuzangjing*, vol. 61, no. 1163 *Xi fang zhi zhi* 西方直指 BSK 19d, R108_p0167a18(06).

⁸³ *Xuzangjing*, vol. 62, no. 1185 *Jing zhong jing you jing* 徑中徑又徑 BSK, 106,R109_p0216a17520.

and retribution is in accordance with this.
 This, in fact is the Creator's (regular) Pattern of
 What-is-So-of-Itself/Nature.
 This Principle may be trusted.⁸⁴

6. Ethics

Moral or ethical norms are placed in a naturalistic context, but with varying qualifications:

6.1.

A Later Han work by an Shigao 安世高, and translated between 148 and 170 sets the pattern of “naturalistic“ ethics:

佛言。
 爲佛弟子。
 可得商販營生利業。
 平斗直尺。
 不可罔於人。
 施行以理。
 不違神明
 自然之理。

The Buddha said:

“When one acts as the disciple of the Buddha
 it is permitted to engage in trade and to manage a business for profit
 One must give fair measure of volume or length (of cloth),
 and one must not be deceitful towards others.
 To behave towards others according to principle,
 and not to offend against the higher spirits,
 that is the (regular) pattern of What-is-So-of-Itself/Nature.⁸⁵

And yet, the Buddhist sage undertakes to offend against this Pattern which makes carnivorous animals carnivorous, and cruel tyrants cruel, and hunters murderous. Of all these we are told that they “arise from Heaven and Earth.“

6.2.

An extraordinarily revealing but difficult passage from Táng-dynasty

⁸⁴ *Xuzangjing*, vol. 62, no. 1185 *Jing zhong jing you jing* 經中經又經 R109_p0431b03(00). A similar passage may be found at *Xuzangjing*, vol. 62, no. 1185 *Jing zhong jing you jing* 經中經又經, R109_p0846a08(02).

⁸⁵ Taishō Tripitaka, vol 14, no. 492, T14N0492 *Fo huo Anan wen shi Fo ji xiong jing* 佛說阿難問事佛吉凶經, T14n0492bp0755c13(07).

work by Zongmi 宗密 elaborates:

苟噉肉者皆性。充厨者皆命。則虎豹之性。
 性非命乎。苟命是天命。性是天性。
 則食物害生。非虎豹之不仁也。
 畋獵殺伐。非聖人之不義也。
 反噬反逆。非梟鏡之不孝也。
 磔酷亂虐。非桀跖之罪也。
 斯皆出於天地。非物之所爲也。
 由是觀之。不仁不義不孝不慈。
 乃天地自然之理。天地之理。而聖人違之。

If one is carnivorous by inborn nature,
 and if it is fated that one fills one's kitchens with meat,
 then this is by the inborn nature of tigers and leopards.
 Is inborn nature not fated?
 If fate is fate from Heaven,
 and inborn nature is from Heaven,
 then the eating of other creatures and the harming of life
 is not a matter of tigers and leopards not being kind-hearted.
 When they go on various hunts
 that is not because the sages have no sense of justice.
 If they bite each other and are recalcitrant against their parents
 these are not matters of the buzzards being unfilial,
 If they are cruel and oppressive,
 this is not the crime of [the tyrant] Jie or the Robber Zhi,
 these forms of behaviour all come from Heaven and Earth,
 they are not the work of the creatures themselves.
 From this point of view,
 inhumaneness, injustice, lack of filial piety, and lovelessness (in creatures)
 are *nothing other than* the (regular) patterns of What-is-So-of-Itself/Nature
 from Heaven and Earth.
 (It is) these patterns of Heaven and Earth
 (that) the sage offends against.⁸⁶

7. *Buddhology*

A wide variety of Buddhist truths are argued for in terms of them being in accordance with inherent principles of “Nature.”

7.1.

⁸⁶ *Xuzangjing*, vol. 9, no. 245 *Yuan jue jing da shu shì yi chao* 圓覺經大疏釋義鈔, R014_p0831b03(03).

Nagarjuna places his metaphysics in a naturalistic context:

是故無常生無常。

此任自然之理。

Thus the non-constant will engender(only) non-constant things,
and this fact is based on (任 is surprising) the (regular) patterns of
What-is-So-of-Itself/Nature.⁸⁷

7.2.

Even more striking is the statement in a collection of texts made by Daoxuan 道宣 dated 649:

夫萬法萬性皆自然之理也。

夫惟自然。

故不得而遷貿矣。

故善人雖知善之不足憑也。

善人終不能一時而為惡。

All the dharmas and all natural endowments are (regular) Patterns of
What-is-So-of-Itself/Nature,

and, exactly because they are natural,

one cannot get to change them.

Therefore, although a good person knows that goodness is not enough to
rely on,

the good person cannot go ahead and do evil at (just) one (critical) point.⁸⁸

7.3.

According to a Tang-dynasty work by Daoye 道掖 the what is naturally
so is also necessarily so:

既被善惡業牽。

即我不自在。

我不自在

故無我也

自然之理者。

道理必然也。

外道自然也。

亦云理其然矣。

⁸⁷ Taishō Tripitaka, vol. 31, no. 1616 T31n1616 *Shi ba kong lun* 十八空論 A work by Nagarjuna, Longshu 龍樹, translated by Paramartha, Zhandi 真諦 (around 557-569 AD), T31n1616_p0866c17(04).

⁸⁸ Taishō Tripitaka, vol. 52, no. 2103 *Guang Hong ming ji* 廣弘明集, T52n2103_p0254c09(09).

When one is being pulled by the good and bad deeds (of the past)
 then the “I” is not free.
 When the “I” is not free
 then there is no “I”.
 This being according to the (regular) patterns of
 What-is-So-of-Itself/Nature
 means that, according to the Principles of the Way, it is necessarily so.
 It is what the heretics call Nature,
 and about which they also say: it is so by virtue of Principle.⁸⁹

Karmic regularities are explained as naturalistic regularities in a wide range of sources.

7.4.

In a Tang-dynasty work by Zhihong 志鴻 we find:

故得聲傳苦滅。
 自然感應。
 故言因緣相召。
 自然之理不亡。
 Thus, when one obtains the true message, bitterness disappears.
 In a natural fashion, there is a response to a stimulus.
 This is why it is said that karmic factors attract each other
 The (regular) patterns of What-is-So-of-Itself/Nature are unfailing.⁹⁰

Under certain psychological conditions the *zi ran zhi li* becomes luminously clear.

7.5.

A Song dynasty work by Fantian Yanqi 梵天彥琪, dated 1219, uses the metaphor of a sort of mental optics:

痕垢淨盡。
 則鏡光無礙。
 心法消亡。
 則真性廓然。
 此自然之理明矣。
 When the dust of impairments has been cleaned away,
 then nothing stands in the way of the light from the mirror.
 When the immediately transmitted truths (which do not come from the

⁸⁹ Taishō Tripitaka, vol. 85, no. 2778 *Jing ming jing guan zhong shi chao* 淨名經關中釋抄, T85n2778_p0514c26(00).

⁹⁰ *Xuzangjing*, vol. 41, no. 732 *Si fen lü sou xuan lu* 四分律搜玄錄 R095_p0370a18(01). Commentary: 亡。無也。

Scriptures) have disappeared,
 then the true nature comes fully into its own.
 This is where the (regular) patterns of What-is-So-of-Itself/Nature become clear.⁹¹

7.6.

A Song-dynasty work by Jingxiao 景霄 propounds an uncompromisingly materialistic theory of morality:

此並因緣相召
 自然之理不妄者。

This is the mutual attraction of a pair of karmic forces.
 An example of how the (regular) patterns of What-is-So-of-Itself/Nature are never arbitrary.⁹²

The famous *li* 理 of the philosopher Zhu Xi 朱熹 are to be construed as *li* 理 of *zi ran*.

7.7.

A Yuan-dynasty work by Yuanjue 圓覺 asserts that

朱子曰。
 宇宙之間。
 一理而已。
 天得之而爲天。
 地得之而爲地。
 張之爲三綱。
 紀之爲五常。
 此理無適而不在。

Zhuxi said:

In the universe

there is only one principle, and that is all.

Heaven gets it so as to become Heaven;

the Earth gets it so as to become Earth.

One expands it so as that it becomes the Three Webs, (Net-controlling cords > Principles)

and one makes it into guidelines and it becomes the Five Constants.

These principles are nowhere absent.⁹³

⁹¹ *Xuzangjing*, vol. 65, no. 1292 *Zheng dao ge zhu* 證道歌註 FKS, R114_p0899a06(00).

⁹² *Xuzangjing*, vol. 43, no. 737 *Si fen lü xing shi chao jian zheng ji* 四分律行事鈔簡正記 R068_p0282a07(00)/.

⁹³ *Xuzangjing*, vol. 58, no. 1033 *Hua yan yuan ren lun he jie* 華嚴原人論合解, R104_p0154b16(00).

7.8.

The passage that follows in the same book confirms one's suspicions:

儒者于此。
 因其自然之理。
 而成自然之功。
 若夫釋氏。
 惡此理之充塞無間。

The scholars in this regard,
 basing themselves on the (regular) patterns of What-is-So-of-Itself/Nature,
 complete their Task of Nature. [? perfect the achievements of Nature?]
 As for the Buddhists
 they hate the fact that this principle prevails everywhere.⁹⁴

Even technical truths about the *dharma* pronounced by the Buddha are given this kind of “naturalistic“ legitimation:

7.9.

A Ming-dynasty work by Chuandeng 傳燈 is an illustration:

一切諸法。
 亦復如是。
 無在無不在。
 夫無在無不在者。
 佛所說也。
 夫無在無不在者。
 萬法自然之理也。

All *dharmas*
 are also like this:
 they are nowhere present and nowhere not present.
 Now, that they are nowhere present and nowhere not present
 is what the Buddha explained.
 Now, for the *dharmas* to be nowhere present but nowhere absent,
 is a (regular) pattern of What-is-So-of-Itself/Nature regarding the myriad
dharmas.⁹⁵

7.10.

The Ming-dynasty work by Deqing 德清 argues that the Buddha's epiphany in the world was due to the working of natural causes:

故菩薩現身。

⁹⁴ *Xuzangjing*, vol. 58, no. 1033 *Hua yan yuan ren lun he jie*, R104_p0154b18(00).

⁹⁵ *Xuzangjing*, vol. 19, no. 348 *Weimo jing wu wo shu* 維摩經無我疏, R030_p0268b18(00).

此感應道交自然之理也。

Thus that the Bodhisattva emerged in person,
this is the result of the Principle interaction of stimulus and response
according to the Regular Patterns of What-is-So-of-Itself/Nature.

This was the interaction between the Way of stimulus and response (on the one hand) and the (regular) pattern of What-is-So-of-Itself/Nature (on the other).⁹⁶

7.11.

The Qing-dynasty work compiled by Xinyuan Huolian 心圓火蓮 contains a passage comparing moral inadequacy to a sickness:

夫不善猶疾病。
攻之則病去。
不攻則日甚。
故衲僧相求。
非特取樂也。
將以改不善也。
不善不去。
則道眼不明。
自然之理也。

Now failure to be good is like a disease.
When one attacks it, then the disease disappears,
but when one does not deal with it then it gets daily worse.
That is why the monks seek each other out.
It is not only to take their pleasure with each other.
They wish thereby to correct their failures to be good.
When this failure to be good is not got rid of
then the Eye for the Buddhist truth has no clear sight.
That is a (regular) pattern of What-is-So-of-Itself/Nature.⁹⁷

7.12.

A Qing-dynasty work by Wang Gengxin 王耕心 talks in the same way about a failure in contemplative concentration:

遂致不能專一。
則念佛之外。
雖別涉善念。
亦當與惡雜諸念同名妄念。
乃自然之理。

⁹⁶ *Xuzangjing*, vol. 31, no. 611 *Fa hua jing tong yi* 法華經通義, R049_p0955b07(04).

⁹⁷ *Xuzangjing*, vol. 85, no. 1592 *An hei dou ji* 揩黑豆集, R145_p1021a11(01).

Then one gets to the point where one cannot focus,
 so that one thinks of things other than the Buddha.
 Even if one touches upon other—good—thoughts
 one will certainly also, by the same reckoning, think in disorderly fashion,
 together with them, thoughts that are intermixed with evil.
 for that is the (regular) pattern of What-is-So-of-Itself/Nature.⁹⁸

7.13.

Finally, a Qing-dynasty work by Zhixiang 智祥 sees intellectual interaction in the monastic community as another aspect of pattern-principle:

先舉大法綱領要旨。
 審問大眾。
 看眾中有會其意者否。
 學者因不會其意。
 故出眾請求利益。
 遂形之而有問答。
 此自然之理也。

First one raises the main meaning of the great web of the Buddhist dharma,
 and one asks the *sangha* about it,
 so as to see whether in the *sangha* there are those who understand the
 thoughts or not. [its purport ?]

If a student does not grasp its purport
 he then steps out/forward from the community to seek useful instruction.
 Then things take form and there is a dialogue.

This is a (social) (regular) pattern of What-is-So-of-Itself/Nature.⁹⁹

I have found that non-Buddhist pre-modern literature, including the Daoist Canon, the 26 dynastic histories, neo-Confucian philosophical literature, and in particular vernacular pre-modern narrative literature provide ample additional evidence of traditional Chinese preoccupations with this key notion of *zi ran zhi li*. Moreover, many of the remaining 23 concepts that I have identified within the same semantic field mentioned above will deserve detailed study from the point of view of conceptual history if we ever wanted to arrive at any substantiated general statements on Chinese “concepts of Nature“ based on more than anecdotal evidence from selected texts and arbitrarily selected terms. Our history of ideas must be solidly based in broad philological and

⁹⁸ *Xuzangjing*, vol. 22, no. 401 *Mo he a mi duo jing zhing lun* 摩訶阿彌陀經哀論, R032_p0595b14(04).

⁹⁹ *Xuzangjing*, vol. 64, no. 1266 *Chan lin bao xun bi shuo Fu: Zhang Zhao zhuan xin fu* 禪林寶訓筆說 附張照撰心賦, R113_p0761a01(01).

philosophical fieldwork. Our work on Chinese intellectual history is never going to be any more reliable than our philosophical as well as philological grasp of the relevant key concepts in the wide range of contexts, and of the wide variety of sources on which such an intellectual history must be founded.