



Spatial Consciousness in the West and in China: A Philosophical Root of the Knowledge of the World

Weihan Yuan

Qingdao City University, Qingdao 266000, Shandong, China.

How to cite this paper: Weihan Yuan. (2026) Spatial Consciousness in the West and in China: A Philosophical Root of the Knowledge of the World. *Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science*, 10(3), 322-325.

DOI: 10.26855/jhass.2026.03.013

Received: January 29, 2026

Accepted: February 28, 2026

Published: March 31, 2026

***Corresponding author:** Weihan Yuan, Qingdao City University, Qingdao 266000, Shandong, China.

Abstract

Space is a concept that we, as human beings, constantly strive to grasp. The notion of space fuels a long-term debate in the philosophical discipline, where thinkers seek to scrutinize its essence. The emergence of the concept of space was recognized in the West more than two millennia ago, and its interpretation has become increasingly complex and divergent over time. Avant-garde philosophers have sought to scrutinize the essence of space and based their theories upon the concept of *topos*. Meanwhile, the idea of space in ancient Chinese philosophy was a blend of time and space, which derived from mythology to daily life experience. This article aims to highlight the difference between Western and Chinese spatial consciousness in the philosophical field from a diachronic perspective. As a way of conceiving spatial relations in the real world, spatial consciousness will later allow us to better understand both realistic and metaphorical relationships in a dualistic way.

Keywords

Spatial consciousness; Classical philosophy; Dualism

Introduction

Essential in almost every aspect of daily life, the perception of space is a faculty we constantly rely on to find our way, indicate our direction, and even try to locate a passage in a literary work, etc. The notion of space fuels a long-term debate in the philosophical discipline, where thinkers seek to scrutinize its essence. Metaphysical insights have deepened over centuries of research, whether in the West or in China. The consciousness of space emerges through the experiences that humans acquire with their movements in the real world, such as orientation, distance, and movement. Once abstract, the concept of space manifests itself as an idea derived from human experiences, which provides access to philosophical understanding. Despite the differences between civilizations, we share similar spatial experiences while simultaneously maintaining their distinctive ideas of space. Spatial experiences and concepts of space are closely linked to one another, all serving as tools to conceive of the world from a relational perspective.

1. Spatial consciousness in the Ancient West

The emergence of the concept of space was recognized in the West more than two millennia ago, and its interpretation has become increasingly complex and divergent over time. Avant-garde philosophers have sought to scrutinize the essence of space, and their reflections date back to ancient Greece. Philosophical schools are divided in a diachronic way, taking the time of Socrates as a reference point. The post-Socratic school, represented by Plato and his disciple Aristotle, addresses the notion of space by paying close attention to its form and mode of existence. That said, scholars of that era sought to understand in a nuanced way the matter from which space is composed and the form in which

space presents itself. This is a much-debated subject among different philosophical schools; one could even say that it is a debate between the substantial and the abstract, which is clearly marked by an important notion: the *topos*. Similar to the modern notion of position or location, the *topos* in ancient Greece simply represented the object surrounding one or more other objects at a specific place and time. This is indeed the original meaning of the *topos*. If the object being observed changes at the same time, or if the same object is observed at different times, the *topos* also changes (Wu, 2010). That said, the *topos* only exists under certain conditions. Related to spatial experience, the *topos* serves as a reference point to better indicate the location of objects. This differs, however, from the concept of the *topos* in modern science, which indicates a location, a physical or mathematical background, for the existential state and movement of objects to occur.

However, the *topos* is only one of the representations that reveal the notion of space. According to the post-Socratic school, there remains the *void* and the *extension*. The *void* is the state in which nothing exists. Unlike the *topos*, which clearly indicates the places occupied by objects, the *void* demonstrates the notion of space by highlighting the change from having everything to having nothing left. For example, the conference room became empty after the meeting ended; this proves that the room functions as a space. As for the third representation of space, the *extension*, it refers more to the forms of objects, which are differentiated from one another by size (Wu, 2010). Among these three ways of representing space, the *topos* is the concept most thoroughly explored by post-Socratic scholars. Plato, first and foremost in his work *Timaieus*, considers it the intermediary between thoughts and perceptible objects.

According to Plato, the species that makes the universe tangible, represented by the earth, and the species that makes the universe visible, for example, fire, are the two essential components of space. Being round and finite, space is filled without any gaps and is impossible to divide (Plato, 2020). From Plato's perspective, the notions of place and space are somewhat intertwined since they are both based on spatial experiences in real life, and he sees space as a mode of existence where a certain degree of change emerges. The emergence of change signifies that there is a dynamic relationship between space and object. He explains that the elements composing the world, constantly shifting from one state to another, are of a determinate rather than stable quality. Movement is thus considered an intrinsic characteristic of the spatial relationship formed by object and space. Movement is also a fundamental subject in Aristotelian theories of space, especially when it comes to displacement. Unlike Plato, who views space as something material, Aristotle considers the *topos* to be relatively abstract; it could be represented by species that replace one another successively.

By observing the species that enter and leave a place one after another, Aristotle illuminates the essence of space: a receptacle with the capacity to contain. He simultaneously emphasizes that space is distinct from what it contains. According to him, the *topos* is not only the place where an object exists, but also the place where movement occurs (Aristotle, 2022). The *topos* has six directions in total, the reference points for distinguishing them being human beings themselves or other inanimate objects in nature occupying an absolute position. After detailing the features of space, Aristotle summarized it as something real, independent of bodies, and that every sensible body exists in space. He clarified that space is constituted at the moment when it is one of four elements, including: form, matter, the interval between the extremities of bodies, or the extremities themselves. Although all four elements are suitable for constituting space, Aristotle later admits that only the boundary of a bounded body can be considered as possible space. More precisely, space is the first, unmoving boundary of the container. Here, we must clearly distinguish between form and boundary. According to Aristotle, form is the boundary of the thing of which it is the form; space is the boundary of the body that contains the thing and the boundary of the container. But since the content and the boundary are very often changeable while the container remains constant, it seems that at the position where bodies successively enter and exit, there would exist an interval whose reality would exist outside the body being moved. Nevertheless, this kind of interval does not exist there, since bodies replace and succeed one another in the place where they are transported. As a matter, it would be possible to observe what happens in a resting, undivided, but continuous body; however, because matter is never separate from the thing it forms, it never contains that thing, whereas space constitutes both. In other words, bodies that change alternately in space differ from matter, as a real thing, whose modification could be qualitative.

However, when compared with modern theories of space, Aristotle's theory appears to remain within a macrocosmic framework, taking a relatively absolute view that space is either full or empty, and that the movement within it is a process of change between "having everything" and "nothing existing" or vice versa. But after studying Aristotelian spatial theories, one wonders that once the previous body leaves the *topos*, another, material or insensible, immediately enters it. This shows that, in fact, the *topos* is always full and filled by some body, and the case where

the *topos* is empty never occurs. It seems to us that this way of observing the existence of space or place, which depends on body or emptiness, is rather paradoxical. It should not be overlooked that the Aristotelian notion of space represents a much more advanced spatial thought in ancient Greek times, and at the same time presents a fairly complete system which includes not only the notion, but also the features and conditions of the existence of space.

2. Spatial consciousness in Ancient China

Unlike Western metaphysical thought, the idea of space in ancient Chinese philosophy was a blend of time and space (Tong, 2011). While the concepts of time and space were distinct in ancient Greek philosophy, based on substantial existence, those in China were grounded in the philosophy of mythology. During the animistic period, the ancestors of the Chinese revered natural forces in their daily lives, especially phenomena related to the sun. Taking themselves as the center of the world and the sun as the measure by which to observe it, the ancient Chinese observed the sun's cycle and thus formed the concept of east and west. Gradually, they developed a spatial concept that evolved from one dimension to two dimensions and finally to three dimensions. Meanwhile, the ancestors of the Chinese were accustomed to using tangible objects to symbolize directions; for example, the four animals represent the four directions proposed by astronomers for observing the movements of the stars. Although the mythological idea may seem less scientific or rational, it served to guide the ancestors of the Chinese in cultivating their land by following natural forces. Aside from mythology, the understanding of space in China often arose from daily life, stemming from knowledge of the "heaven". The sky, located above, was initially called the "great heaven" (昊天) to demonstrate its vastness and expanse; emphasizing its blue color, it is also called the "cang tian" (苍天). The sky is further viewed as a vital force that extends without limit (Tan, 2009), and this vital force is called "qi" (气) in Chinese. The concept of qi, meaning air or air current, originated from the observation of clouds and developed further in relation to the wind. When the wind blows through a tree, we only see the leaves swaying in the breeze, without perceiving the wind itself. Here, the wind is, in a way, equivalent to qi, and is therefore endowed with two distinctive characteristics: firstly, it is easily mobile, and secondly, it is formless. Even lacking scientific theories, the ancestors of the Chinese, by summarizing their life and work experiences, gradually developed an understanding of orientation in the natural world. They subsequently grasped the shape of objects, including the square and the circle, marking the beginning of the study of geometry.

The concept of space gradually shifts with daily experiences and enters a philosophical sphere. It is initially proposed in *Guanzi* (Guan, 2019), a collection of sayings by Guan Zhong, the famous militarist of the Warring States period (Spring and Autumn). In the chapter *Zhou He* (宙合), he explored the notion and even the function of space. The character he (合), which originally denotes a square box for containing everyday objects, is applied by Guan Zhong to signify space. Besides this character, another, tuo (橐), which originally means pocket, also represents space in Guan Zhong's theory. All of this demonstrates that Guan Zhong had already grasped that, beyond its vast scope, the most important characteristic of space is its capacity to contain. From then on, the discussion on the nature of space in Ancient China entered a period of qualitative change where the concept of time and space became abstract (Li, 2015).

The renowned philosopher Zhuangzi also offered his perspective on the concept of space, stating that by assuming the formless, we can know the truth of the universe, or the truth of the Dao (道). He indicated that the existence of space is conveyed by objects that possess form, and the fact that they have no fixed location means that space could extend without any limits. Furthermore, the concept of wu (无), meaning non-being, is shared by the atomists of ancient Greece mentioned above, who believed that space was a void resembling the atom. In essence, the state of non-being is a temporal and spatial concept developed by Zhuangzi through which he elevated a concrete and real concept to that of the transcendent and spiritual (Li, 2021), from the finite to the infinite, from the substantial to the insubstantial, from the human to nature. The concept of non-being is proposed to demonstrate that existence is not always formal, and the idea of being is also proposed to indicate that existence does not depend on actual form. These two concepts indicate that instead of comparing or verifying quantitative distinctions through sensory consciousness, we must rather understand space from a relative and abstract perspective. This relativity means not only that the characteristics of space and time are relative, but also that being and non-being are also in a relative relationship, that is to say, they are transformable into one another.

Another scholar of that era who further explored the theory of this relative relationship was the philosopher Lao Tzu. In expounding his thoughts on being, he simultaneously revealed, somewhat by chance, the nature and

fundamental function of space. According to Lao Tzu, wu (无) is indeed the origin of Tao, which serves as the decisive premise of you (有). There is no being devoid of non-being. Wu (无), immaterial and invisible, signifies that the form of the Tao is elusive; you (有), material and existential, indicates that the function of the Tao is real (Lao, 2016). Through the examples cited above, we discover that they also reveal a spatial relationship: containment. The chariot could not move without placing the axle in the hollow hub; the mud could not serve as a container if it were made solid. If we build a house in which the doors and windows are placed side by side without any gaps, it is impossible for us to live in it. On the one hand, as Lao Tzu proposed, space could not be filled to be usable; on the other hand, this unified-opposite relationship has manifested itself in the container/contained relationship within space through everyday experiences. In other words, the relationship between being and non-being, the you (有) and the wu (无), is reflected by a relationship closer to life, more concrete: a relationship of inclusion, between the container and the contained in a spatial or abstract way.

What led to a deeper exploration of the nature of space at that time was, of course, the Mohist school. In his classic work, Mozi, he not only proposed the concept of a frame of reference but also the relationship between change and movement; dialectics were already germinating within this philosophical school. He demonstrates his understanding of the nature of space through the character yu (宇), which signifies specific space, precisely speaking, various places or orientations (Mo, 2024). According to Mozi, space is the form of partial spaces; the orientation and extent of space are distinguished by different places. As for the four orientations, they are all discerned by reference to the home, because in Chinese civilization, which is based on agriculture, the land and the hearth are always considered the center of everything; everything is geared towards the home. Mozi's theory of space provides a positive glimpse into a highly advanced scientific environment of that era. This reflects that Chinese thought is a thought that relies on the frame of reference to reveal the nature of the self.

3. Conclusion

As a fundamental concept in philosophy, space remains a subject of intense philosophical inquiry. While Western and Chinese philosophers base their theories on diverse everyday experiences, they all agree that spatial consciousness is essentially relational consciousness, which emphasizes the role of two components that constitute space: either the *topos* and its contents, or the wu (无) and you (有) that bring space into existence in a metaphysical way. This dualistic perspective later allows us to better understand less realistic relationships in various fields, most importantly language.

References

- Aristotle. (2022). *The physics* (p. 81). Commercial Press.
- Guan, Z. (2019). *Guan zi* (p. 80). Zhonghua Book Company.
- Lao, T. (2016). *Tao te ching* (p. 43). Yuelu Press.
- Li, X. C. (2015). The evolution of the temporal-spatial concept in ancient China. *Journal of Lanzhou University (Social Sciences)*, 3, 27-33.
- Li, Y. M. (2021). The temporal-spatial concept in Tchouang Tseu. *Hubei Social Science*, 5, 121-126.
- Mo, Z. (2024). *Mo zi* (p. 229). Zhonghua Book Company.
- Plato. (2020). *Plato's dialogues* (p. 413). Commercial Press.
- Tan, C. L. (2009). *Philosophy of space* (p. 5). Jiuzhou Press.
- Tong, D. F. (2011). A first probe into the time-space view in myths. *Journal of Minzu University of China*, 5, 58-63.
- Wu, G. S. (2010). *Spatial concept of Greece* (p. 2). Renmin University Press.