

The Aesthetics of the *Sublime* in Chinese Thought and in *Zhuangzi*

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ABSTRACT

The *Sublime* is an important concept in Western aesthetics, and many great thinkers from ancient times to the present have discussed this topic. So, in Chinese thought, is there a concept equivalent to *sublime*? First, through linguistic analysis and comparative study, this essay will focus on *chong-gao* and *zhuang-mei*, trying to reveal their origins and evolutions, as well as their similarities and differences with *sublime*. Then, through the analysis of the fifth chapter of *Zhuangzi*, this essay will explore the idea of the sublime implicit in *Zhuangzi*'s thought. In conclusion, this essay believes that the aesthetics of the sublime also exists in Chinese thought, especially in the thought of *Zhuangzi*.

Keywords: Chinese Thought, *chong-gao*, virtue, *sublime*, *zhuangzi*

I. INTRODUCTION

First of all, is there also a concept of *sublime* in *Zhuangzi* or in Chinese thought? If not, is there really something like *sublime* in them? Otherwise, isn't the subject itself already a pseudo-problem, even only by its title?

It is normal to ask these questions, and indeed, all these problems come down to a more precise question: since it is about to address the question of the sublime in one of the major Chinese thinkers, who is considered to have lived in the "axial era" (according to Karl Jaspers) when his contemporary counterparts in the West arose, and since the philosophical category of *sublime* arises purely from Western theory, one must first justify the legitimacy of the discourses on "the sublime in Chinese thought", before one can then speak without question about this subject and thus dig without obstacle into the thought of *Zhuangzi* with the aim of finding the treasures with the brilliance of the sublime, until now hardly discovered, which will explode on all sides once brought to light.

II. THE *SUBLIME* IN CHINESE THOUGHT

In Chinese, the word *sublime* translates to the term *Chong-Gao*, so is *sublime* the same as *Chong-Gao*? Or, on the other hand, does the Chinese term *Chong - Gao* share all meanings contain the Western term *sublime*, when one speak of "the sublime in *Zhuangzi*" with this word?

Logically, since this is of Chinese thought, it requires us to start from defining the term *Chong - Gao* which consists of two characters, *Chong* and *Gao*.

According to Xushen (58-147), whose work, *Explanation of Pictograms (wen) and Ideo-phonograms (zi)*, is considered as the first dictionary of Chinese characters, *Chong* describes the appearance of mountains that are extremely large, high and majestic. In fact, *Chong* is an ideophonogram character, its upper part is another character 山 [shān] whose meaning is, precisely, mountains. For the lower part 宗 [zōng], it reflects the pronunciation of 崇 [chóng].

In the case of *Gao*, it is a pictogram character that reminds us, by its own form, of a Chinese building constructed in the manner of superimposing several floors together, therefore big and tall. The latter, *tall*, is exactly the general meaning of the character *Gao*.

Thus, here is what the term *Chong-Gao*, as a set of two words, might mean. Before serving as an equivalent of the Western word *sublime*, this term mainly contained three meanings: high and great, to describe mountains, cliffs or precipices; eminent, superior and illustrious, to qualify characters of high society; noble, distinguished and lofty, concerning ideas or actions which manifest nobility and greatness.

Naturally, by the original meaning of *Chong*, this term applies primarily to mountains. The other senses, either social superiority or moral distinction, proceed by analogy from the original meaning of "high mountains".

However, it is quite interesting that in modern Chinese, paradoxically, *Chong-Gao* is no longer used on mountains or other landscapes. Then, the second case is not seen often, mainly because of deep political developments and great changes in social mentality of the twentieth century. Further, for this same reason, in everyday Chinese language, *Chong-Gao* is generally

used, as an adjective, to qualify the actions of sacrifice and to praise a figure who acts heroically and therefore rise above the mediocre aspects in him, sometimes even at the very risk of his life. During a long period of revolution and propaganda in China, this medium of use of *Chong-Gao* had never ceased to spread everywhere, one can give archetypal examples such as "for the ideal CG (CG represents *Chong-Gao*) of communism" to show our most CG respects for heroes "The idea of the core value of socialism is the common CG faith of the masses", etc. Today, in a consumer society, people have long since started saying "Goodbye revolution, Goodbye CG" ... (In this case, *Chong-Gao* serves as a noun.)

Then, probably except for the second meaning of the three, they are also main meanings of the word *sublime* in Western languages, especially for the last case. Now, is it not exactly these meanings, already existed for a long time before we tried to find a term corresponding to *sublime*, which led the Chinese scholars and translators of the twentieth century to finally choose the term *Chong-Gao* as *sublime*?

However, if one compare in this way *Chong-Gao* and *sublime*, it should be pointed out above all that there are many differences between *Chong-Gao*, with the above meanings, that is, with its original meanings in traditional Chinese, and *sublime*, as a rhetorical, aesthetic and philosophical category. Or rather, it was only after being used to translate *sublime* that the term *Chong-Gao* suddenly and at the same time gradually took on the meaning of *sublime*. All of a sudden, the Chinese could speak of *sublime* with a term in their own language; gradually, as their search for the theory of the sublime became deeper and deeper, the meaning of the term *Chong-Gao* therefore became more and more abundant.

The important thing is to distinguish the two dimensions of the term *Chong-Gao*. One is like a term that appears constantly in everyday Chinese language to express a moral attribute, like what has been discussed above. The other, as one of the major categories of aesthetics or philosophy, borrowed from Western thought, the term remains exclusively in the professional research of professors and students in the humanities. In the latter case, *Chong-Gao* shares all that the word *sublime*, as a notion of Western philosophy, might imply, provided that users of the term *Chong-Gao* understand fairly well what is meant by *sublime* that they are talking about.

However, if it was by its first dimension that the term *Chong-Gao* was chosen as the translation of *sublime*, this first dimension was not impermeable to *sublime*. On the contrary, the meaning of the Western word *sublime* had penetrated deeply into the general meaning of the Chinese word *Chong-Gao* and thus had

a great influence on the use of this word in the Chinese language, even in everyday life.

Before the Chinese term *Chong-Gao* was established as the translation of the Western term *sublime*, the early Chinese thinkers influenced by Western thought, the most distinguished of which is absolutely Wang Guowei, used the term *Zhuang-Mei* to express their aesthetic theory which had been largely penetrated by the philosophy of the sublime, essentially of Kant and Schopenhauer.

To examine this term, it ought to start once again from the dictionary of Xushen, according to which the character *Zhuang* (壯 zhuàng) means "large" (大 dà). Indeed, the right part of this character, 士 [shì], another character whose meaning is "warrior", allows it to have the proper meaning of "big and strong". Figuratively, it means "brave, magnificent, grandiose, solemn and moving".

For *Mei* (美 měi), which contains meanings like beautiful, satisfied, good or beautiful, it is more interesting. As a compound character, it is made up of 羊 [yáng] (sheep) and 大 (large), meaning "big sheep". What is beautiful and good is not the aesthetic appearance of a large sheep, it is the taste of its meat and its value as a religious sacrifice that give this character's original meaning. According to Xushen and his commentators, *Mei* is like 甘 [gān] (tasty, delicious), and anything that is 善 [shàn] (good, satisfying) can be regarded as *Mei*. It must be recognized that, at the very beginning, the Chinese word *Mei* was attributed with the ethical and pragmatic attribute instead of the aesthetic one. Doesn't this fact have a deep relationship with the important Confucianist tradition of Chinese literature that "writing is to illuminate the truth and therefore to civilize people"?

In the Chinese language, therefore, *Zhuang-Mei*'s proper meaning is "tall and handsome", to praise a man for his physical appearance. Figuratively, it is used from time to time to celebrate a "great and beautiful" phenomenon, a heroic act, for example. Today, as an adjective, *Zhuang-Mei* is generally applied to magnificent, majestic and stunning landscapes that could arouse a moving, intoxicating and even inexpressible sensation.

The first Chinese thinker who made this term as an aesthetic category was Wang Guowei, born at the time of the end of the Qing dynasty (1877), and committed suicide by throwing himself into the lake of the Summer Palace, the cause of death remaining a mystery. Considered one of the foremost Chinese thinkers whose theories mark the turning point between China's "Modern Age" and "Contemporary Age", and one of the most important scholars who have tried to absorb Western thought into Chinese one to form his own ideas, Wang Guowei contributed to many fields,

especially on aesthetics and literature, which made him renowned as a true master.

Under the influence of the aesthetics of Kant and Schopenhauer, drawing inspiration from their theories of the sublime, Wang Guowei takes the Chinese terms *You-Mei* (beautiful, graceful, elegant, exquisite) and *Zhuang-Mei* to put them corresponding to the pair of *beautiful-sublime* categories, in order to build his own theory of art and literature by reexamining and reinterpreting Chinese thought from this angle of vision. This essay do not intend to discuss how Wang Guowei distinguished these two categories by analyzing Chinese literary texts with impressive style and how he expressed his theory of "spiritual atmosphere" (*yi jing*). For the moment, it suffices to note that, thanks to him, the philosophy of the sublime enters for the first time in the universe of Chinese thought in the form of the term *Zhuang-Mei* and thus becomes a Chinese aesthetic category.

Moreover, the entry of this category into the horizon of Chinese thinkers and its effect of reactivating Chinese thought which was undergoing a critical moment at the time, mark a great difference between Chinese culture and that of Europe. It is on this subject that this essay will make a brief summary now, especially as the possible result of this kind of reflection could also help us to understand the importance of the staging of the term *Zhuang-Mei*, as well as *Chong-Gao*, as an aesthetic category in Chinese thought, and further help us understand the scope of the sublime in *Zhuangzi*.

Behind this initiative, hides a goal linked to historical circumstances: faced with the crisis of the country and especially of Chinese civilization at the beginning of the last century, Chinese intellectuals, considered to be among the most conscientious throughout history of China, have done everything to find their own Messiah, seeking elsewhere, but also within by examining the conscience of their own culture, long touted as the most superior. Among them, Wang Guowei was distinguished by his "aesthetic education". For him, the important thing, among others, is to awaken and cultivate tragic awareness of the Chinese whose characters are too much moderate, gentle or passive, devoid of extreme feelings and possibilities of sublimation, despite the core of the mentality still soaked by Buddhist philosophy.

After having accepted the aesthetics of the sublime of Kant and the "tragic philosophy" of Schopenhauer, Wang Guowei uses the term *Zhuang-Mei* to distinguish it from *You-Mei* and then to construct his theory of literature and of tragedy by commentary on Chinese literary classics like poems and the great novel *The Dream in the Red Pavilion*. Until this time, the term *Zhuang-Mei* became the Chinese equivalent of Kantian sublime, which would be replaced by the other term

Chong-Gao, later, in a broader sense, by subsequent scholars and translators of Western thought.

Certainly, in Chinese thought, before Wang Guowei, there were already aesthetic concepts that could evoke what the term *sublime* can imply. In *Yi-Jing*, there is *Yang-Gang* (strong, active, firm, positive, vigorous), opposed to *Yin-Rou* (soft, flexible, passive, negative); For Mengzi, it is necessary to exercise "the great spirit" (*hao ran zhi qi*); As far as the Taoist discourse is concerned, there is above all the famous *Da-Mei*; ... given these backgrounds, in the next moment, this essay will concentrate on the sublime in *Zhuangzi*.

III. DEFORMITY, VIRTUE AND *SUBLIME* : THE *SUBLIME* IN *ZHUANGZI*

In Plato's Banquet, Socrates is compared to a Silenus. Being both Silenus and a great philosopher, is that fatal or by chance? There is an intimate connection between ugliness and philosophy, according to Kierkegaard, ugliness operates as an ironic ugliness, which is an incentive to dissolve the beautiful sensitive appearance, an incentive to go beyond the beautiful appearance towards the true place of being, towards the true beauty which is intelligible.

Now, is exterior ugliness the pledge of interior beauty? Inner beauty, or virtue, in the broad sense, is *De* in *Zhuangzi*. The term *De*, often translated as *virtue*, is one of the most essential concepts in all Chinese thought, either for Confucianism or for Taoism. For the latter, one can note that *Laozi*, of which the presumptive author is the eponymous master Laozi, is also known under the name of *Dao-De Jing*. In *Zhuangzi*, chapter V is mainly devoted to the discussion of *De*, as the title of this chapter suggests — *De Chong Fu*.

To enhance the effects of these manifestations manifested by those which are filled with virtue, *Zhuangzi* creates a series of deformed figures — such as cripples and amputees — which embody impressive contrasts between hideous appearance and exceptional inner virtue.

This chapter begins straight away with an imaginary conversation between Kongzi, Confucius, and a distinguished man of his time named Chang Ji. As a result, an amputee could even equal the great Kongzi, it is precisely by going beyond form, physical form but also the form of teaching (without words), because the *De*, inner virtue, and communication without words are superior to the forms which are at the same time the limits.

In Chinese, the original meaning of the character *De*, is to ascend, to go up. It is exactly here that *De* meets *sublime*, which comes from the Latin *sublimis*, meaning, in the proper sense, raised in the air. To rise, that is to

say to transcend. For Zhuangzi, it is to transcend earthly thoughts, to transcend mediocre things, to transcend natural limits (life and death), social limits (occasion and fortune), and in the end, limits of oneself, that is to say, feeling and desire. All these acts of surpassing oneself are proof of the pursuit of *Dao*—the independent and constant truth of the universe. Appearance, form, life and death, etc. everything changes all the time. I could not control these changes, but I could strive not to change with these outer things, not to be limited by the ephemeral world. By seeking and approaching the *Dao*, filled in the heart of *De*, one could overcome all differences of form, identifying the beautiful with the ugly, the gain with the loss, life with death. In short, it doesn't matter at all how ugly the body is!

In Kongzi's following words to praise the amputee, Zhuangzi aptly describes this ideal spirit. The first principle, of course, is the *Dao*. Holding nothing but the *Dao*, one does not hold any difference nor depend on any limit, so the mind could frolic in the harmony of *De* and in the universe of *Dao*.

If one amputee who has lost a foot is not ugly or dramatic enough, Zhuangzi also gives us other examples of deformed men who are much more grotesque than Quasimodo in Notre-Dame de Paris, only by his proper names — a misshapen man named 闕跛支离无唇 (clubfoot, hunchback, mouth devoid of lips), another misshapen man called 瓮盎大瘿 (having a large tumor like a jar of water on the neck, goitrous). Zhuangzi told us, after getting used to the shape of their abnormal bodies, the dukes in this history look at the appearance of a normal body as ugly. A bit of an exaggeration, of course, but Zhuangzi is all about emphasizing the superiority of inner virtue over the outer form of man.

Indeed, although the shape of the body is embodied in the man, it has nothing to do with the essence of the man, because it depends only on fate and one cannot control its changes. So one is forced to keep it and endure its limits, so one is forced to live among the crowd. However, one could overcome it by intentionally forgetting it, thus freeing the mind from the limits of form and entering the world of *Dao* and *De*.

IV. CONCLUSION

So far, on the question of form, one can note the great difference between Taoism as a religion and the thought of Zhuangzi as a philosophie. For the first, the central practices are to keep in good shape and to conserve life. On the contrary, for Zhuangzi, the form is rather obstacles that must be overcome in order to pursue the *Dao*, and life, like death, is only a change that one neither can control nor must be taken to heart.

Of course, the sublime in Chinese Thought and in *Zhuangzi*, is much more than what one can talk through this essay, but it has at least offered the fundamental frame and context. This is also the task of this work.

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