Beauty and Human Existence in Chinese Philosophy

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To the medical doctors and nurses
who are most beautiful of all for their heroic and kind
protection of human existence across the world
during the anti-COVID-19 campaign.

Preface

As acknowledged in the world philosophy, Socrates' persistent questioning about "what is beauty" is found difficult to answer, explain and define, which is somewhat corresponding to the Hellenic proverb—"χαλεπα τα καλα" cited at the end of the debate between the two interlocutors in a Platonic dialogue.[1] The question as such gets Hippias trapped on the occasion where he seems feeling at ease to tackle mistakenly "what is beautiful" rather than "what is beauty". Naturally, the answers that he has given in terms of appropriateness, usefulness, beneficialness, and pleasantness are neither satisfactory nor acceptable to Socrates himself. Just imagine, if Socrates happened to stroll into ancient China and directed the same question to some of his Chinese contemporaries, he might encounter a situation that could be paradoxically similar and different. By "similar" herein is meant his Chinese colleagues might tread on the beaten track as Hippias did, and ensue a blurred distinction between "what is beauty" and "what is beautiful" when giving their replies. By "different" is meant that they would talk about "what is beautiful" with reference to attractive object, picturesque landscape, and ideal

[1] Plato, *Greater Hippias* 304e (trans. H. N. Fowler, Cambridge, MA. & London: Harvard University Press, William Heinemann Ltd, rep. 1977). The Hellenic proverb can be translated into English as "Beautiful things are difficult" (H. N. Fowler) or "what is fine is hard" (Paul Woodruff). I tend to render it as "what is beautiful is difficult".

personality, account for the primary aim of "what is beautiful" with reference to teleological pursuit and personal cultivation, and elaborate the rich properties of "what is beautiful" with reference to the fundamental rationales of art making and evaluation in Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism, among other schools of thought. Frankly speaking, it would be hard to predict whether Socrates would leave the country satisfied or disappointed upon hearing all this. Yet, it would be plausible to assume that he would grow curious about it, take up a second reflection, and probably proceed to have a further discussion with other interlocutors during a forthcoming symposium somewhere on his return to Athens.

No matter what would occur at this point, the ontological issue of "what is beauty" differs by nature from the phenomenological one of "what is beautiful", even though both remain open to varied formulations and observations. In respect to the Chinese concept of *mei* as beautiful or beauty, aesthetics as a discipline was translated into *mei xue* that literally means "studies of beauty" or "beautology". The neologism of "beautology" may remind us of its Greek counterpart *kallology* derived from the word *kallos* as beauty plus the suffix—logy meaning study or studies. Generally speaking, *kallos* and its adjective *kalos* bear three basic meanings as such: beautiful and fair when referred to the outward look or appearance of a thing or being; fine and auspicious when referred to serving a good purpose; noble and righteous when referred to moral virtue, good act, right conduct, and spiritual pursuit of some greater and more extraordinary goal than ever. Noticeably, what *kallos* means partly overlaps *agathos* that was used in Homeric epics for the brave and noble virtue of heroes, and employed in later period to signify good and virtuous in a moral sense. To the extent of this explication, one aspect of the *kallos* denotes an object of aesthetic value and moral consideration in particular. In Plato, the idea of *kallos* in itself is taken as the ultimate cause of whatever is beautiful, and the idea of *agathos* in itself is taken as the original cause of whatever is good. These two ideas are interrelated in a metaphysical sense due to the overlapping features of the beautiful and the good.

Regarding the Chinese notion of *mei* as beautiful, it is supposed to bear such major implications as follows: beautiful or good-looking when referred to the appearance or image of a thing or being; fine and inviting when referred to the taste or flavor of food, beverage, and artwork; good

and appropriate when referred to words, deeds, and moral conduct; excellent and elegant when referred to the graceful manners of a well-cultivated person or the virtuous charm of ideal personality.

As to the beautiful as an aesthetic category in Chinese heritage, it usually covers four types of things: (1) beautiful or aesthetic objects such as picturesque landscape, excellent artwork, and so forth; (2) the elementary properties of what is beautiful such as harmonious, moderate, natural, symbolic, suggestive, and heuristic characteristics; (3) aesthetic and moral cultivation of fine taste, good conduct, and personality beauty; (4) fundamental rationales of creating the beautiful in such arts as music, poetry, landscape painting, calligraphy, literati garden designing, and so on. In most cases, these rationales are, respectively, originated from equilibrium harmony in Confucianism, spontaneous naturalnessin Daoism, and subtle void in *chan* Buddhism.

As discerned in Chinese aesthetic tradition, there are far less metaphysical speculations of the beautiful in terms of articulated definitions and conceptual analyses, but far more phenomenological descriptions of the beautiful in terms of art appreciation and criticism. Such descriptions pertain to an organic integration of aesthetic phenomenon and aesthetic welfare, which involves three aspects at least: perceptual apprehension, inward experience, and spiritual freedom. In brief, the perceptual apprehension is pointed to what is appealing to the eye and the ear, the objects of which are visually beautiful and acoustically pleasant in form. By virtue of perceptual apprehension at this stage, human individuals will be prone to perceive and appreciate them in contrast with what is visually ugly and acoustically unpleasant. They will therefore become joy-conscious with an increased awareness of improving the *status quo* of human existence or the quality of life.

In respect to the inward experience, it is associated with cultural-psychological formation that is consisted of cognitive, moral, and aesthetic dimensions. It keeps much more emphasis on inward cultivation instead of epistemological investigation and logical inferring. Grounded on human emotions and free play of intuitive faculties at large, it tends to work during the process of contemplating what is appealing to the mind and the wish. The objects of this category are aesthetically significant, intellectually meaningful, and morally heuristic in kind. With the help of inward experience, human individuals will be enabled to attain insights into the aesthetic, moral, and cultural values of what is contemplated. They are

therefore inclined to feel themselves into them, detach themselves from external bondages, and find out a new alternative to live a worthwhile life.

When it comes to the spiritual freedom, it is related to the free and easy wandering, the becoming of independent personality, and human convergence with nature or the universe. It is largely embodied in the aesthetic transcendence in light of the highest realm of Heaven-Human oneness. On this account, it is pointed to what is appealing to the will and the spirit. The objects in this domain are structurally magnificent or sublime, philosophically enlightening and spiritually illuminating in essence, for example, the great beauty of silence, the heavenly joy of eternal peace, and the starry night over the sky. A serene contemplation of them engages the will and the spirit in a boundless communion with all under the heaven. In this case, it serves to foster spiritual life and preserve physical health at the same time. It is sometimes tallied with the art of breathing exercise so as to nourish and harmonize the dynamic of *qi* (气) as vital energy or living force through the system of meridians within the body. It usually calls for concentration on inward listening, intra-*Erlebnis* and introspection through sitting in meditation. All this entails mental purification, spiritual freedom and aesthetic sublimation or transcendence, so to speak.

Along this line of thought, this book is intended to offer a historical sketch of the Chinese concept of beauty in connection with human existence or human living. In order to render it more readable and accessible, it does not tie itself to a chronological survey of the concept itself as though it was to build up an ivory tower or labyrinth of conceptual progression in the long course of history. Instead, it attempts to examine it by looking into the beautiful in nature and art, and reconsider it in terms of its contribution to human becoming and human existence. As seen in the structure transposed in the table of contents, it sets out to explore the etymological implications of the pictographic character for beauty (beautiful), the dynamic beauty of totemic symbolism, the significant form of painted pottery, the ferocious beauty of the bronze art, the aesthetic education of the rites-music tradition that leads to the beauty or excellence of the ideal personality. Further on, it proceeds to explore the conceptual progression, primary properties, or aesthetic features of what is beautiful in such main schools of thought as Confucianism, Daoism and *Chan* Buddhism, among others. Then, it continues to illustrate through music, poetry, and painting the leading rationales of equilibrium-harmony, spontaneous naturalness and subtle void that are applied to creating, evaluating, and appreciating artworks in distinct genres and styles. All this can

be both traditional and modern from the perspective of inheriting, innovating and creative transformation. As demonstrated in the rise of Chinese modern aesthetics, what has come out of creative transformation or transformational creation are such fruitful theories as poetic state *par excellence* and art as sedimentation. Regarding the last episode of this study project, a discussion of modern changes and transcultural reflections is conducted with particular reference to the four-fold engagement in the beautiful, which provides a new key to the how-to-live concern, say, an aesthetic alternative to enrich and better human living *per se*.

Incidentally, the book in your hand took me a year to finish. A large part of it was written during the special period of the global campaign against coronavirus or COVID-19. It was a hard time for all the peoples, especially for the medical doctors and nurses across the world when they were engaging themselves in the life-and-death struggle in order to save more human lives. In striking contrast to the human weaknesses under whatever conditions and for whatever reasons, those medical staff members demonstrated the best of humanity through such virtues as courage, commitment, dedication, and self-sacrifice, among many others. In my view, they are the most beautiful of all for their kind protection of human existence at the most critical moment ever since the Second World War. Their heroic deeds are deeply stamped in our memory, and stay alive for humankind at confrontation with any possible catastrophes and crises in the time to come. Now the coronavirus is subdued by social capacity, cooperative mechanism, and scientific technology. Yet, a kind of panpoliticovirus as a byproduct grows even more infectious and detrimental, for it is largely rooted in the polluted soil of power-thirsty games, name-dropping conspiracies, self-interested exceptionalism, post-imperialist mentality, racist bias, nationalist hubris, and so on. What should be done with this case? Sure enough, there is no quick panacea for it at all. What can be taken as a long-term alternative is none other than developing more humane compassion, global understanding, and international collaboration for the common good of human community as a whole. Otherwise, the probability of causing more damages and mortalities would arise out of unreasonable chaos and regional conflict on such a trivial planet. At this point, it is needless to ask for whom the bell tolls after anything sorrowful. It is just for all of us at any rate. This being true, let us do what we can do so as to turn away the worst and hope for the best in this regard.

As the brief preface is drawing to its close, it would be better to shift to something delightful and fruitful as a result of solid international cooperation. It is about the publication of this study project. Hence I would like to take this occasion to extend my heartfelt thanks to Miss Lin Wang, the editor from Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, and **Connie Li**, the editor from Palgrave Macmillan Press. Without their timely support and assistance, this book could not have come out in print so smoothly as it was scheduled. However, the responsibility for any blemishes that have survived in it is naturally left to the author alone.

Beijing, China Keping Wang
2020

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The autumn of 2019 witnessed my visit to National University of Athens. During my stay at the Department of Philosophy there, I was invited to co-conduct with Prof. G. Steiris a seminar on Chinese philosophy with reference to its Greek counterpart. It was so rewarding an experience that my sincere thanks are extended to all the participants in the seminar for their thought-provoking questions and free discussions related to the lectures given. Moreover, my weekend walking around the brilliantly-lighted Acropolis of Athens gave me much inspiration and joy each time. Sure enough, αγαθοι τα καλα, I believe.

Contents

CHAPTER 1

The Pictographic Character and Totemism

As noticed in the ancient Chinese language, the pictographic character *mei* (美) literally means either beauty or beautiful as there is no distinction between its noun and adjective forms in spelling. When evolved into a notion later in the Chinese history of ideas, it is referred to the beauty of a thing, a being, a scene, an institution, a personality, and the like. Accordingly, it is to be assessed in terms of different kinds of object, pleasure, and good in the aesthetic and moral domains. In short, it is used to express a trifold meaning in aesthetic, ethical, and spiritual scopes, somewhat similar to the Greek concept of *kallos* (*kalos*) in spite of their different modes of thinking.

As observed in the Chinese cultural heritage, some totemic symbols stay alive from past to present, because they embody the conception of what is beautiful that is deeply rooted in Chinese mentality and aesthetic awareness. Typical examples in this regard are *lóng* (龍)and *fèng* (鳳) as are easily available across China today.

The Pictographic Character for Beauty

Etymologically, Chinese language consists of a special system of picture-writing based on pictographic characters. Most of the characters can be divided into certain minimum parts as meaningful units. Take the pictographic character *mei,* for example. Its etymological formation is

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composed of two parts, referred to different but interlinked things. It becomes what it is when the two parts are synthesized together as a whole. According to the first Chinese dictionary called *Shuo wen jie zi*, the explication of the given word follows:

> Mei (美)[means what is] delicious and good. The word itself is made up of yang (羊) as goat and da (大) as big. The goat is one of the six species of domestic animals, and the main supplier of food. Mei as beautiful and shan (善) as good are identical in meaning.[1]

What can be drawn from the statement are four points at least. In the first place, *mei* as beautiful is referred to a "delicious and good" flavor and taste. It entails a human experience of enjoying a meal served with mutton in particular. Secondly, the formation of *mei* reveals an etymological structure of two components: *yang* (goat) and *da* (big), fairly distinctive and observable because the Chinese language is by nature a type of pictographic or picture-writing system. Thirdly, *yang* as a goat that forms the essential part of *mei* as beautiful is one of the six domestic animals including pig, ox, goat, horse, fowl, and dog. As "the main supplier of food" for humankind then, it is of great importance with regard to the possibility of human existence and food enjoyment as well. Last but not least, *mei* as beautiful and *shan* as good share the similar meaning in practical usage under certain circumstances. Take a bid goat, for example, it produces more mutton due to its size and weight. When well roasted, it looks both beautiful and good because of its tempting outlook, flavor, and taste. Extended from this case, the character of *mei* is gradually enriched in meaning. Now it means what is beautiful, fair, and fine when used to describe something artistic and attractive in appearance or form, what is good and auspicious when applied to moral conduct and social norms, and what is delicious and tasteful when employed to depict the food and beverage and their related experience of enjoyment.

According to recent explications from an aesthetic point of view, the Chinese pictographic character for what is beautiful is made up of two minimum parts, which in turn incur two conjectures: one is the big-goat image and the other the goat-man image.

[1] Xu Shen, *Shuo wen jie zi* [The First Chinese Dictionary edited in 121 A.D.] (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1963), vol. 4, p. 78. "美, 甘也, 从羊从大。羊在六畜, 主给膳也。美与善同"。

The Big-Goat Image: Flavor and Taste

The two conjectures are derived from extended implications according to the two separable parts of the character *mei* as beautiful. One of them is the big-goat image that is perceived as beautiful.[2] Based on the pictographic structure composed of *yang* (goat) and *da* (big), it follows such a formula as *yang* (goat) plus *da* (big) makes *mei* (beautiful or beauty).[3] This conjecture is largely originated from Xu Shen's explanation with a stress on the sensuous quality in accord with a primordial experience of enjoying mutton as a delicacy.

Just imagine, some tribesmen around a campfire are roasting a big-goat while chatting and singing in high spirits. When the goat is ready, it presents an alluring color, spreads an appealing smell, and appears in an inviting form that is crisp outside but tender inside. On this occasion, the notion of *mei* as beautiful is referred to the delicious mutton as a kind of nice food for an enjoyable feast. It hints upon an aesthetic impulse of the beautiful outlook of the roasted goat, and gives rise to a vague sense of beauty or aesthetic awareness on this occasion. Accordingly, it also activates the senses of sight, smell, and taste altogether.

The sense of smell herein overlaps the sense of taste in spite of the fact that the former appears more objective and the latter more subjective. However, both of them pertain to the aesthetic experience and appreciation of what is "delicious and good." In Chinese language, the word for both taste and flavor is *wei* (味) that is more significant in the history of Chinese aesthetics and art theory (including culinary art). More often than not, flavor is deployed as a sensuous and artistic standard, and applied to evaluating works in poetry, painting, and music, not to speak of the rich diversity of cuisine styles all over China. At this point, flavor is mixed up with taste to the extent that it demands an artwork to be

[2] It is expressed in Chinese as *yang da wei mei* (羊大为美). According to the structure of the pictographic character *mei* (美), it is composed of two separable parts or characters known as *yang* (羊) and *da* (大). *Yang* (羊) as goat is placed in the upper part, and *da* (大) as big in the lower part. When put together, they make the character *mei* (美) as beauty or beautiful. As for its English translation "the big-goat image as beauty," it means two things in the main: the etymological root of the character *mei* that is made up of goat and big, and the semantic implication of the character *mei* that is related to the beauty in the big-goat image (i.e. the image of the big goat itself or the big goat roasted for a feast).

[3] The formula in Chinese is 羊 + 大 = 美.

rich in flavor as an appealing power, and meanwhile expects the viewer to cultivate a good taste in light of aesthetic sensibility. That is why the viewer tends to comment on a painting by saying that it has some flavor or something tasteful (*you wei*). By "something tasteful" is meant that it is artistically engaging and suggestive owing to its aesthetic attraction and worth. This is also relevant to assessing a theatrical performance, natural scenery, and so forth. Hence there is a crucial principle of art criticism in terms of "purifying the mind and tasting the image."[4] It is proposed by Zong Bing (375–443 A.D.) in his essay about the art of painting landscape. Hereby the word "tasting" (*wei*) means appreciating and evaluating the image of the painting in one sense, and contemplating and apprehending the truth of the Dao in the other. The idea as such underlines his doctrine of spiritual detachment (*chang shen*) as a kind of inward cultivation for artistic creation and aesthetic contemplation.

Insofar as the Western notion of taste is concerned, it is often rendered in Chinese either as *qu wei*, *xing wei* or *pin wei*. Literally and, respectively, it purports at interesting, inspiring and appreciating taste or flavor, often used to denote either the power of aesthetic judgment or the engagement in aesthetic experience. Yet, it is thus emphasized in terms of the Chinese notion of *wei* as a result of cultural tradition, perceptual convention, and language habit.

All this serves to prove this point: what is beautiful as a thing like a big-goat comprises visual and sensuous pleasure at least. The visual pleasure comes from the tantalizing image of the big-goat well roasted, and the sensuous pleasure from the delicious flavor and taste of its meat. These two kinds of pleasure are perceived as goods to satisfy the bodily needs. Today, they may be utilized to meet the aesthetic needs of daily life if the cooking of mutton is up to the high standard of culinary art and also served in an artistic setting. On this account, it is etymologically defined that the big-goat image is beautiful according to the first conjecture mentioned above.

Of course, the interpretation given is grounded on the etymological source of the pictographic character *mei* as beautiful. The old form of this character was found amidst the oracle bone inscriptions. At that time, the ancient Chinese would have a crude sense of beauty or no matter how

[4] Zong Bing, "*Hua shan shui xu*" [Preface to Painting Landscape]. "澄怀味象……夫以应目会心为理者, 类之成巧, 则目亦同应, 心亦俱会。应会感神, 神超理得。" "圣贤暌于绝代, 万趣融其神思。余复何为哉, 畅神而已。神之所畅, 孰有先焉。".

simple, naïve, or obscure it was, because they were already exposed to the picture-writing system as an evidence of their primordial abstractive thinking and creative capability at an elementary stage. Historically, the oracle bone inscriptions came into maturity during the Yin and Shang Dynasties (1600–1046 B.C.), much later than the earliest inscriptions on bones and potteries, which are recognized as writing signs and verified in 1960s by archaeological findings at Jiahu of Henan province in China. These signs can be traced back to the Neolithic era over 9000 years before.[5]

Talking about the big-goat image as beauty from an aesthetic perspective, we should not overlook the living reality of *homo sapiens* during the prehistorical phase prior to the emergence of picture-writing system in oracle and bone inscriptions. At that time, the primitives seemed to have some aesthetic impulse to the beautiful aspect of the roasted goat concerned as they did with other kinds of food. What interested them more than anything else were food and children owing to their paramount importance. Insofar as in the reality according to common sense, if man the individual is to live, he must have food; if his race is to persist, he must have children. As James Frazer has well said,

> To live and to cause to live, to eat food and to beget children, these were the primary wants of man in the past, and they will be the primary wants of men in the future so long as the world lasts.[6]

Nevertheless, "the primary wants" could not be what they were alone. They would go with other things involved. Other things like the aesthetic impulse to the beautiful food, say, the roasted goat, may be added to enrich human life then, even though they were not as important as the two basic needs concerned. Generally speaking, food is for preserving life, and children for generational reproduction. The need of food is the first priority and preconditions the need of children. With the advancement of human culture and civilization, the need of food entails a practical

[5] Xueqin Li, Garman Harbottle, Juzhong Zhang & Changsui Wang, "The Earliest Writing Sign Use in the Seventh Millennium BC at Jiahu, Henan Province, China," in the *Antiquity*, Mar. 2015.

[6] Cf. Jane Ellen Harrison, *Ancient Art and Ritual* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1913), p. 50.

craft, producing such things as beautiful delicacy, beautiful wine, beautiful dinnerware and the like; meanwhile, the need of children leads to somatic aesthetics, generating such notions as beautiful girl, beautiful boy, beautiful spouse, and so on.

In antiquity, productivity was low and backward. Food and children were often in short supply but in great demand, thus growing into something vital and sacred. Under such circumstances, they "were what men chiefly sought to procure by the performance of magical rites for the regulation of the seasons. They were the very foundation-stones of that ritual from which art, if we are right, took its rise."[7] Coincidentally, the Chinese character of *mei* as beautiful also implies something related to magical ritual as is to be clarified subsequently.

The Goat-Man Image: Rituality and Spirituality

Compared with what is stated above, the other conjecture is presumed to be the goat-man image as beauty.[8] Grounded on the pictographic structure segmented into *yang* (goat) and *ren* (man), it descends from such a formula as *yang* (goat) plus *ren* (man) makes *mei* (beautiful or beauty).[9]

In brief, the conjecture of the goat-man image as beauty springs from the hypothesis, if not imagination, of ancient rituals in tribe culture. In the formula given, *ren* as man is assumed to be a big man (*da ren*) not only in size and age, but also in power and divinity. The goat-man image as such is intended to signify a big man wearing a goat head over his shoulder. The man could be either a shaman or tribe chief, the two roles of which

[7] Jane Ellen Harrison, *Ancient Art and Ritual*, p. 50.

[8] This conjecture is initially proposed by Xiao Bing (1933-) and shared by some others. It is expressed in Chinese as *yang ren wei mei* (羊人为美), which is an extended explication of the pictographic character *mei* qua beautiful according to the study of ancient rituals. Structurally, the character *mei* is composed of two separable parts or characters known as *yang* (羊) and *da* (大). Hereby *da* as big is perceived as the image of a man standing apart with a broad shoulder that appears like a big man (*da ren* 大人). When put together, the character *mei* as beautiful arises out of the upper part y*ang* (羊) as goat and the lower part *ren* (人) as man standing apart with a broad shoulder. The English translation "the goat-man image as beauty" denotes two things at large: the etymological root of the character *mei* that is made up of goat and man, and the semantic implication of the character *mei* that is pointed to the beauty in the goat-man image (i.e. the image of a big man wearing a goat head as a totemic symbol over his shoulder).

[9] The formula in Chinese is 羊 + 人 = 美.

would be integrated into one according to Shamanism. The goat head could be an animal specimen, and used as a symbolic totem worshipped. Respected as a quasi-religious, spiritual, and political leader, the goat-man was believed to possess magic power to communicate with the divine spirits, and pray for secret oracles or prophets. This man would perform a special role of dancing and murmuring incantations when it came to celebrating, praying, and mourning rituals at a sacred spot. Afterwards he would pass on what occurred to his mind as oracles or prophets to the tribal members. Such oracles or prophets would be decisive with regard to their fortunes and misfortunes, requirements and imperatives, immediate events and future happenings, among others. All this was mystical and mysterious, pertaining to the synthesis of quasi-religious ritual and spiritual divination. To the extent of such an occasion, *mei* as beautiful is referred not only to the image of the goat-man, but also to his magic power characterized with rituality and spirituality.

From my point of view, the beautiful dimension of the goat-man gives rise to visual, audio, and spiritual pleasure at large. The visual pleasure is drawn from the mystical image of the big man or tribe chief who is wearing a goat head over his shoulder, the audio pleasure from his singing and dancing when performing the rituals or prayers, and the spiritual pleasure from both the shaman-like communion with the divinities and the gratification of the spiritual needs in the tribal community. To the extent of this interpretation, the goat-man image may appear beautiful to the eyes of primitives in general.

Moreover, as shamanist tradition is fairly strong and consistent throughout Chinese history, the goat-man could be seen as a shaman with magic power who was originally called *wu*. In a tribal community, a shaman would occupy a very important position, as he would play a role like a prophet, fortune-teller, a quasi-divine messenger with deities, spirits. and late ancestors. He could be powerful and influential for certain. In many cases, the shaman and the chief were one in the tribal community. As the Chinese character *wu* (巫) as shaman is phonetically and semantically pointed to *wu* (舞) as dance, both of them are allied with ancient dancing as one of the ancient rituals. With respect to the goat-man, he is alleged to perform the goat dance, a kind of beast dance. This hints on the primitive form of dance as a genre of art to some extent, which is associated with a diversity of events and ends in the living activities and experiences of the primitives.

Such dance can be deemed as a budding ritual and a spiritual activity alike. It bears two leading features: rituality and spirituality. Rituality grows out of the attentive performing and watching of the repeated mode of the goat dance for practical interests and spiritual ends. Spirituality is quasi-religious and shaman-oriented by nature. It comes from such emotions as admiration, reverence, fear, and faith extended to the goat-man who is believed to possess magic power. It works to enhance the communal cohesion and solidarity among the tribesmen and tribeswomen in particular. Rituality and spirituality are, formally and teleologically, interrelated with and even interdependent upon one another.

At this point, the goat dance may turn out to be a reminder of the Greek word *dremenon* for "rite done," which is claimed to set out the historical transition from *dremenon* to drama through miming. With particular reference to such plays as the *Birds*, *Frogs*, and *Wasps* by Aristophanes, we can see men as actors imitating birds and beasts, dressed in their skins and feathers, mimicking their gestures.

> If we look at the beginning of things, we find an origin and an impulse much deeper, vaguer, and more emotional… The beast dances found widespread over the savage world took their rise when men really believed, what St. Francis tried to preach: that beasts and birds and fishes were his "little brothers." Or rather, perhaps, more strictly, he felt them to be his great brothers and his fathers, for the attitude of the Australian towards the kangaroo, the North American towards the grizzly bear, is one of affection tempered by deep religious awe. The beast dances look back to that early phase of civilization which survives in crystallized form in what we call totemism. "Totem" means tribe, but the tribe was of animals as well as men.[10]

Quite naturally, this depiction leads us to imagine the attitude of the Chinese tribesmen toward the goat despite that there were many other tribes worshipping other beasts (e.g., bear, eagle, snake, imagined dragon, phoenix, etc.) across the vast area of ancient China. Yet, the Chinese tribesmen tend to go beyond their intimate and affective relationship with the goat in this specific case. They are liable to worship it because they may be unable to distinguish the goat and the goat-man at the early stage. In their eyes and minds as well, the two entities are combined into one

[10] Jane E. Harrison, *Ancient Art and Ritual*, pp. 45–46.

under certain conditions of ritual praxis. As a rule, the tribesmen have their admiration, reverence, love, and even fear for the goat-man as a great shaman with magic power. When they are going out for a hunt, a harvest, a journey, a battle, or any event that has caused their deep concern and enthusiasm, the goat-man will react to the goat dance and pray for a good result on behalf of the tribal community. When they return from all these events triumphantly and delightedly, the goat-man will repeat the performance, probably in a modified manner but in a happy mood. It can be envisioned that in front of the rest of the tribesmen, women, and young children sitting around the campfire at night, there arises the prime time for the goat-man to demonstrate the goat dance as the primordial form of action art under the ritual umbrella. It is definitely an involving celebration saturated with festive ambiance. As it is well put,

> The cause of this worldwide custom is no doubt in great part the desire to repeat a pleasant experience; the battle or the hunt will not be re-enacted unless it has been successful. Together with this must be reckoned a motive seldom absent from human endeavor, the desire for self-exhibition, self-enhancement. But in this re-enactment, we see at once, lies the germ of history and of commemorative ceremonial, and also, oddly enough, an impulse emotional in itself begets a process we think of as characteristically and exclusively intellectual, the process of abstraction.[11]

To my understanding, the process as such can be allegorically likened to a hotbed, employed to hatch the upcoming birth of totemism, ritual, and art altogether during the early phase of human civilization.

Nowadays, one aspect of the goat-man legacy might be hidden in a transformed engagement in gig festivals around a bonfire at a sparse prairie under the moonlit sky, so appealing and inviting in an aesthetic and social sense. However, the goat-man as a totem or shaman is hardly available owing to its extinction in the course of history. What we often encounter across China today are such symbols as *lóng* and *fèng* due to their persistent existence and popularity. These two symbols were stemmed from ancient totems worshiped among varied clans and tribes during and after prehistorical times.

[11] Jane E. Harrison, *Ancient Art and Ritual*, p. 42.

The Dynamic Beauty: Two Totemic Symbols

As mentioned above, totem means tribe made up of animals and men. More specifically, it is a symbol of one group, mainly in order to distinguish one group from the other. From a totem one can draw interferences about an ethnic group's myths, historical records, and customs. In primitive eras, it was believed that certain natural objects or animate beings had a blood connection with their ethnic heritage. Therefore, a kind of animal or plant could be used as the image or sign of the ethnic group. Totem could be seen as a personified worship object at large.

As read in Chinese totemism and mythology, the *lóng* (龍) as so-called dragon is assumingly originated from the prototype image of snake. This cold-blood animal was found too difficult to subdue, because it was and still is more adaptable to the living environment, more intelligent to hide itself in secret places, and more powerful to attack its rivals of other species. Hence the primitives took it as a worship object. However, the story of the totem has been developed continuously. In more cases, the *lóng* is perceived as an imagined animal with divine and unique power. It is described as mystically visible and invisible. That is, it is alleged to show itself off when flying into the sky on the Day of Spring Equinox, and to hide itself up when going under waters on the Day of Autumnal Equinox. It is bestowed with the supernatural power to produce clouds and rainfalls. Its totemic image has become more complicated than it came out first during the process of its fictional development.

As described in the *Book of Mountains and Seas* (*Shan hai jing*), there were a number of archetypal images of *lóng* (龍) in distinct colors and shapes. One of them lived as the god of Zhongshan Mountain in such a mythical manner:

> When it opens its eyes, it is day; when it closes them, it is night; when it blows, it is winter; when it exhales, it is summer. It does not eat or drink or breathe; when it does breathe, its breath is the wind. Its body is a thousand miles long.…It is red, and has the face of a man and the body of a snake.

Such an incredible and monstrous *lóng* may embody the Creator of the universe and the prehistorical ancestor of Chinese nation. Meanwhile, it may symbolize a common ideological or conceptual system of many clans, tribes, and tribal alliances over the indefinite period of time across China.

Recent research in this sphere tends to arrive at a tentative but more agreeable conclusion:

> The lóng that has become the symbol of the Chinese nation is mainly a snake, to which parts of other animals have been added. It has the body of a snake, the legs of a deer, the paws of a dog, and the scales and whiskers of a fish. This may indicate that ancient China's clans and tribes, whose totems were mainly snakes, had conquered and assimilated other clans and tribes, in the course of which the snake totem incorporated the features of other totems and gradually evolved into the "dragon."[12]

As claimed in Chinese tradition, the *lóng* would be an overriding totem in North China, and the *fèng* (鳳) an important totem among various tribes in East China. The advent of the *lóng* was a bit earlier than that of the *fèng*. As noted in the documents available, the *lóng* as an imagined animal is allegedly composed of dear-like horns, camel-like head, hare-like eyes, snake-like neck, clam-like belly, carp-like scales, eagle-like claws, tiger-like palms, and ox-like ears. It is assumed to be collective of different totems from different tribes in the remote antiquity. The *fèng* is also an imagined creature and chiefly described as phoenix, a bird of divinity. It resembles in some way the rooster image in rich colors and also boasts a natural gift of singing and dancing. Amidst all the descriptions there are two most popular ones given below:

> The fèng (鳳) as phoenix is a supernatural bird. Heaven says it has the breast of a wild goose and the rump of a unicorn, the neck of a snake and the tail of a fish, the scales of a dragon and the back of a turtle, the chin of a swallow and the beak of a chicken; it possesses all the colors and comes from the country of gentlemen in the east [China].[13]
>
> In the great wilderness…there were nine gods who had the faces of humans and the bodies of birds. They were called the Nine Phoenixes.[14]

[12] Li Zehou, *The Path of Beauty: A Study of Chinese Aesthetics* (trans. Gong Lizeng, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 6.

[13] It is cited from a translated quotation from Li Zehou, *The Path of Beauty: A Study of Chinese Aesthetics*, p. 7.

[14] Ibid. Cf. *Shan hai jing* [Book of Mountains and Seas]. It is a collection of Chinese legendary stories and myths in antiquity.

In the long course ranging from the Paleolithic Age via the Neolithic to the early slave society of the Xia and Shang Dynasties, the two totemic symbols had gone through a process of deification, transformation, and enculturation. They were gradually imbued with other meaning and significance. According to the cosmological vision of the Yin-Yang school in Chinese thoughts, for instance, the *lóng* is used to signify the Yang whereas the *fèng* used to indicate the Ying. Moreover, both of them are presumed to herald peace over the world, and symbolic of good fortune in a positive sense.

In any case, the two totems underwent a process of change with the passage of time. They became moralized to the extent that the *lóng* symbolized the supreme nobility while the *fèng* the highest virtue. Thus, they were often used metaphorically to mean a number of things such as the imperial features of the emperor, the outstanding talents of individuals, the great bliss and good fortune, among others.

As detected in the residues of Chinese totemism, the *lóng* and *fèng* are granted as badges or logos peculiar to the royal family. Their transfigured images are ubiquitous in different shapes, sizes, and materials as seen in the Forbidden City and many other historical sites. The *lóng* in the image of dragon often appears together with the *fèng* in that of phoenix, which are deployed as royal symbols. The former stands for the emperor who was proclaimed to be the "real dragon and heavenly son" (*zhen lóng tian zi*) with mighty power while the latter for the empress of nobility and graceful charm. When they are circulating around one another, they are perceived as an auspicious sign and a mystical synthesis of harmonious and dynamic beauty. All this is also denoted in such old but still popular sayings as "the dragon is playing with the phoenix" (*you lóng xi fèng*), "the dragon and phoenix together accomplish the auspicious" (*lóng fèng cheng xiang*) and "the flying dragon with the dancing phoenix are all dynamic and magnificent" (*lóng fei fèng wu*).

As a result of the expressiveness and impressiveness of its image, the *lóng* is used frequently to illustrate the hexagrams in the *Book of Changes*. It is passed on from past to present, conducive to the *lóng* culture and folk art. For instance, the majority Han people in China claim themselves as the offspring of the *long*, for they worship and appreciate the dynamic beauty of the flying dragon. They have also transfigured the *lóng* or dragon dance in varied styles. Such dance is performed with massive collaboration when celebrating some nationwide festivals such as Chinese New Year and Lantern Festival nowadays.

CHAPTER 2

The Pottery and Bronze Art

The early sense of beauty in tangible objects is embodied in the painted pottery during the New Stone Age. Many objects of this kind are excavated out of some Neolithic ruins across China, among which the Yangshao and the Majiayao are most famous. These two sites are situated along the Yellow River region, and separated apart by a distance of over 900 km. The archaeological finds therein not only reveal a cultural linkage, extension, and change, but also an involving expression of realistic images and human feelings. For instance, some of them evince the transition from concretization to abstraction or from representation to expression; some manifest the pragmatic wisdom and living experience of the primitives; and some display evident hints and traces of the primordial dance performed by the primitives. They all appeal to modern viewers owing to their expressive and significant form.

What came into being after pottery was the Bronze art that could be traced back to the Xia Dynasty (e.2070–1600 B.C.) and Shang Dynasty (e. 1600–1040 B.C.). Comparatively speaking, the bronze art was technically refined and widely produced during the Zhou Dynasty (1046 B.C.–256 B.C.). Used as ritual vessels, power symbols, food containers, and so forth, many bronze works consist of such artistic elements as unique forms, grotesque patterns, and engraved characters in pictographic styles.

K. Wang, *Beauty and Human Existence in Chinese Philosophy*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-1714-0_2

The bronze art signifies not simply a historical phase, but also a miracle of human invention. According to the legendary stories, the casting of the Nine Vessels in the Xia Dynasty is hypothesized to be the outset of the Bronze Age in China proper. The hypothesis is supported by increasing evidences from the archeological finds in Erlitou, Longshan and elsewhere in modern Henan province. The maturity of the bronze art is largely verified by a huge number of objects unearthed in the area of Baoji and Xian in Shan'xi province. This area used to be the capital district of the Zhou Dynasty. Now it is called "the home of bronze ware." The year 2010 witnessed the opening ceremony of Baoji Bronze Art Museum, where there are over 7500 vessels on display apart from the growing number of new archeological finds. A rich collection of bronze artworks is available in other big museums of many megacities like Xian, Shanghai, Luoyang, Beijing, and the like. Moreover, a new style of bronze art in Guanghan of Sichuan province was discovered in late 1920s, and excavated at a large-scale in 1980s. It is dated back to the period from 2800 B.C. to 1100 B. C. The Sanxingdui Museum was accomplished and opened to the public in 1997. All these museums located near the historical sites receive millions of visitors every year from home and abroad.

The Expressive and Significant Form

All arts, from past to present, are based on the development of formal relations aligned with shapes, figures, colors, lines, patterns, and the like. This being true, beautiful form or formal beauty derives from the "will to form" through creative arrangements of the parts into an organic whole, which features a relevant degree of regularity, symmetry, proportion, diversity in unity, and so forth. As regards pottery, for example, it is plastic in its most abstract essence. As it is well put,

> pottery is the simplest and the most difficult of all arts. It is the simplest because it is the most elementary; it is the most difficult because it is the most abstract. Historically it is among the first of the arts. The earliest vessels were shaped by hand from crude clay dug out of the earth, and such vessels were dried in the sun and wind. Even at that stage, before

> man could write, before he had a literature or even a religion, he had this art, and the vessels then made can still move us by their expressive form.[1]

Again, what moves us is their form, their "expressive form" that arouses the human emotions of living experiences, such as wonder, admiration, sympathy, and empathy. If we look into the prehistorical or historical context of pottery objects of different kinds, their "expressive form" can be identified with their "significant form" at large. According to Clive Bell,

> significant form is the only quality common and peculiar to all the works of visual art that move me, and I will ask those whose aesthetic experience does not tally with mine to see whether this quality is not also, in their judgment, common to all works that move them, and whether they can discover any other quality of which the same can be said.[2]

The "significant form" as the only quality arises out of the combinations and arrangements of lines and colors, their relations and quantities and qualities in such works of visual art as pictures, sculptures, buildings, pots, carvings, textiles, and so forth. These works provoke a particular kind of aesthetic emotion different from other ordinary feelings. Derived from and identified with the "significant form," this aesthetic emotion is the essential quality common and peculiar to all works of visual art that vary with each individual, move the person who contemplates them, and distinguish themselves from other classes of objects that cannot arouse the same emotion mentioned above. Moreover, the emotion and quality alike involve aesthetic judgments as matters of taste. They are therefore subjective and indisputable in principle. Bell sees the "significant form" as the combinations and arrangements of lines and colors that move us in a particular way. He firmly believes that this aesthetic hypothesis has a merit as it "does help to explain things."[3] Actually, it once brought forth a historic effect soon after its advent, and became a catchphrase widely applied to art criticism over the first quarter of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, a closer examination of it leads us to find it falling into a

[1] Herbert Read, *The Meaning of Art* (London: Penguin Books, 1st ed. 1931, rep. 1961), p. 22.

[2] Clive Bell, *Art* (Kindle edition, 2012), p. 6.

[3] Clive Bell, *Art* (Kindle edition, 2012), p. 8.