

The Aesthetic Connotation of Techniques Associated with Tao

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Abstract

A lot of fables in Chuang Tzu interpret techniques, where the combination of techniques and “Tao” is aimed at freeing people from mere technical labor and preventing them from being alienated. The fables Ziqing Carved a Bell Stand with Wood and The Cook Named Ding Cuts up an Ox are taken as examples in this paper, in which, just like in other fables touching upon techniques, the unity of Tao and techniques is promoted to facilitate the return of souls to the true nature and accomplish the technical labor with spiritual freedom and pleasure as the ultimate goal. Such a type of labor is an aesthetic enjoyment that unifies the purpose and the law instead of simply a means of survival for human beings. After developing for thousands of years, science and technology have seen jaw-dropping advancement, but the realization of “Tao”, the utmost purpose accompanying techniques, has all gone. Human beings have been constrained and dominated by technology and lost their pursuit of beauty while buried in utilitarianism. With the imprisoned spiritual freedom, one is no longer himself in a natural and true state, but an alienated person in an alienated world. If we endeavor to delink personalities from techniques in the form of Tao-pursuing, promote human aesthetic activities and the realization of self-awareness, with human beings in the driver’s seat of relationships, and strengthen people’s moral characters in the application of technology in an artistic rather than a utilitarian way, maybe we can, theoretically, expect the change of the current alienation of the mankind, gradually find an effective way to realize it, thus enabling human beings to “live poetically” on the planet.

Keywords: Tao techniques, alienation, spiritual freedom

1. CHUANG TZU’S ATTITUDE TOWARD TECHNIQUE

It is believed in academia that Chuang Tzu had two polarized attitudes toward technique. On the one hand, he opposed the use of mechanical

techniques, just as written in *Man in the World, Associated with other Men*. On the other hand, he was a staunch proponent of technology, with masterful skills displayed in several fables. In terms of this contradiction, some scholars regard it as the inherent paradox of Chuang Tzu's theory, while others reckon that the two attitudes are actually on the same page: Chuang Tzu advocated "techniques connected to Tao" and objected to the use of techniques that ignores the pursuit of "Tao". Chuang Tzu was a philosopher with multiple identities. For the role of a social philosopher, the judgment of the "good" is essential, while the aspiration of simply replacing manpower with mechanics to boost the "inclination to instant benefits" is not in line with his requirement of the "good". And for the poet-philosopher, the pursuit of "beauty" is the utmost priority, and only those techniques embracing Tao can be deemed as aesthetic techniques. Therefore, Chuang Tzu's promotions of the "good" and "beauty" don't go against each other. The "techniques connected to Tao" not only elevate skills to the level of enlightenment and realization, free of the "inclination to instant benefits", but also aestheticizes techniques to realize the experience of "beauty".

2. THE AESTHETIC CONNOTATION OF "TECHNIQUES ASSOCIATED WITH TAO"

To begin with, the definition of "Tao" and "technique" should be clarified. As interpreted in *The Great and Most Honoured Master*, "Tao" is deemed by Chuang Tzu as the origin of the world, which produces everything and brings everything back to it in the end, as an inherent nature of the world, converging the interpretation of Lao Tzu's "Tao" at this level. However, the "Tao" of the two philosophers are different when going further, as Chen Guying argued in his *New Comments on Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu* that Lao Tzu's "Tao" is more ontological and cosmological, while that of Chuang Tzu is transformed into a state of mind. In addition, Lao Tzu emphasized the law of the "opposite" and other characteristics of "Tao" such as inaction, gentleness, softness, humility, and modesty, while *Chuang Tzu* completely abandoned these concepts and sought the sublimation of the spiritual realm.[2] Thus, Chuang Tzu's "Tao" refers more to the spiritual realm of human beings and the state of freedom without bondage. Therefore, it can be defined as "the origin of the world, laws, and spiritual realm" and the "technique" is the skill and artistry of the craftsmen mentioned in the fables of Chuang Tzu.

How can "Tao", a metaphysical original concept, be connected to "technique" referring to physical skills and techniques of manual labor and equipment manufacturing, among others. Chuang Tzu noted in *Heaven and Earth*: what is connected to heaven is "Tao", what is connected to the earth is "virtue", what acts in everything is "righteousness", what governs the civilians is "business", and what is capable and professional is "technique". The technique is in line with the business, the business is manifested in

righteousness, and righteousness is in conformity with virtue, the virtue is administered in Tao, and Tao is united with heaven. Though “heaven” and “Tao” are the origin, “technique” comes in the end, they can be connected, thus, “techniques connected to Tao” refer to those in line with the nature of man and all things or that of “Tao”, which is the state of technique uniting the “good” and “beauty” sought by Chuang Tzu.

The fable *Ziqing Carved a Bell Stand with Wood in The Full Understanding of Life* tells a story as follows. A carpenter named Ziqing made a bell stand that astonished other people. The marquis of Lu asked what his secret was. He said “I didn’t venture to waste any of my power before making it, and felt it necessary to fast in order to compose my mind. After fasting for three days, I did not presume to think of any congratulation, reward, rank, or emolument; after five days, I did not presume to think of the condemnation or commendation, or of the skill or want of skill; and after seven days, I had forgotten all about my four limbs and my whole person. By this time the thought of the imperial court and emperor had passed away; everything that could divert my mind from exclusive devotion to the exercise of my skill had disappeared. Then I went into the forest to observe the natural forms of the trees. When I saw a good one, the figure of the bell-stand appeared to my mind, and I started my work. Had I not encountered such a perfect tree, I would have stopped my work; but my Heaven-given faculty and the Heaven-given qualities of the wood were concentrated on it.” Thus, an incredibly masterful bell stand was made through Ziqing’s nature and the natural forms of trees, a pure and simple one just as made by spirits.

From Chuang Tzu’s perspective, in this fable, the craftsman’s “fasting to meditate” is a crucial step in the process toward the simplicity and naturalness of instrument making, in which one should leave profit, fame, ego, and power behind to achieve a natural state, making his inner heart spontaneously return to purity. Regarding the materials, one should “observe nature” to realize “harmony with nature”, meaning that the craftsman should maintain a natural and pure heart to keep in tandem with natural trees and make a brilliant musical instrument by conforming to the laws of the trees and nature. Artificial technical traces, in the creation back to nature, are diluted by combining with the Tao. And in the state of “pure nature”, techniques of “enlightenment” can facilitate simplicity, while the state of “grand beauty” is also manifested. The techniques that retain the natural state of human beings and objects are the methods and channels toward the “grand beauty” deemed by Chuang Tzu.

Chuang Tzu believed that craftsmen with “techniques connected to Tao” boast skills delicately uniting heaven, Tao, and nature, thus providing people an artistic aesthetic experience. In the fable *The Cook Named Ding Cuts up an Ox in Nourishing the Lord of Life*, Chuang Tzu saw the whole process as the creation of an artist, with the completely natural “technique connected to Tao” releasing aesthetic pleasure and spiritual satisfaction.

The cook cut up an ox for the ruler Wen Hui, wherever was touched by his hands, shoulders, feet, and knees, the sound of ripping of the skin was generated, and wherever the knife stabbed in, the sounds were all in a regular cadence, as beautiful and rhythmic as the music in the dance of “the Mulberry Forest” in the period of Tang of Shang and movement of King Shou in the period of Monarch Yao. This is the artistic expression of music and dance given to the implementation of “techniques connected to Tao” approved by Chuang Tzu, which brings an experience of beauty to the audience. Regarding the creator, the Cook Ding, after finishing his work, stood up and looked around, with the knife in his hand, in a leisurely manner, who had both satisfaction and spiritual pleasure. It is concluded that the cook’s mastery is simply because of his pursuit of Tao, and with this ox-cutting technique following nature that outperforms ordinary ones, the cook could achieve the realization of “Tao”.

3. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CHUANG TZU’S TECHNICAL THEORY OF AESTHETICIZATION IN MODERN TIMES

Joseph Needham argued, in his book *Within the Four Seas - The Dialogue Of East And West*, that “actually, the development of all science and technology in China is inseparable from the Taoism”. [5] Indeed, on top of the explanations of techniques in the fables of Chuang Tzu, the craftsmen, carriers of those techniques, are also the protagonists of the realization and enlightenment of Tao. After thousands of years of inheritance and evolution, however, when technological innovation has witnessed incredible development, the realization of “Tao”, the utmost purpose accompanying techniques, has all gone. Freud said, “In the last few generations, human beings have made great progress in natural science and the corresponding technical application... However, it seems that they’ve also noticed that such newly-obtained power to control time and space, the conquer of natural forces, as the aspiration of mankind for the past thousands of years, has not increased the pleasure and satisfaction that they expect from life, nor brought much more happiness, based on which, we should not disagree with the conclusion that the power to conquer nature is not the only prerequisite for happiness, just as it is not the only goal of cultural development.” [6] Since human beings have been constrained and dominated by technology and lost their pursuit of beauty while buried in utilitarianism, they’ve lost in bewilderment. With the imprisoned spiritual freedom, one is no longer himself in a natural and true state, but an alienated person in an alienated world. In Heidegger’s view, the alienated human world is controlled by technology, where desires and nihilism deceive people’s minds and obscure the meaning of existence, making the souls of human beings wandering and unsettled. And he also said that “Technology is a way of showing the Way of Heaven rather than a mere means.” [7] Freud, however, regarded technique

as a non-instrumental way, and in this respect, Heidegger and Chuang Tzu's theory of technique echo each other. The association of Tao and techniques in Chuang Tzu's philosophy is aimed at freeing people from mere technical labor and preventing them from being alienated. In the two fables cited above, together with others involving techniques, Chuang Tzu promoted the unity of Tao and techniques, so as to send the soul back to the true nature, thus accomplishing the technical labor with spiritual freedom and pleasure as the ultimate goal. Such a type of labor is an aesthetic enjoyment that unifies the purpose and the law instead of simply a means of survival for human beings.

"Jaspers stressed that technological alienation is an inevitable path for human beings and argued that the root cause of alienation is not the technology itself but the way people apply technology." [8] How to strike a balance between human beings and science and technology? If we draw on Chuang Tzu's idea of technical aestheticization, delink personalities from techniques in the form of Tao-pursuing, rather than based on the purpose of seeking the arcane "Tao", promote human aesthetic activities and the realization of self-awareness, with human beings in the driver's seat of relationships, and strengthen people's moral characters in the application of technology in an artistic rather than a utilitarian way, maybe we can, theoretically, expect the change of the current alienation of the mankind, gradually find an effective way to realize it, thus enabling human beings to "live poetically" on the planet.

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