

XU FUGUAN'S INTERPRETATION OF ZHUANGZI'S AESTHETIC THOUGHT: SOME METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEMS OF HIS COMPARATIVE APPROACH

Téa Sernelj

Faculty of Arts
University of Ljubljana
Aškerčeva cesta 2, SI-1000 Ljubljana, Slovenija
Tea.Sernelj@ff.uni-lj.si

Abstract. *The present article deals with Xu Fuguan's analysis and interpretation of some of the central concepts of Zhuangzi's philosophy, which constitute his aesthetic thought. In Xu's view, Zhuangzi's aesthetic thought relates to the aesthetic way of human life, where beauty applies to the realm of dao in which human beings are able to liberate their spirit and enjoy a way of life denoted as "free and easy wandering" (xiaoyaoyou 逍遙遊). In Xu's view, this is the highest and the most beautiful sphere of human existence, and is as such expressed in art. Xu found in Zhuangzi's concepts of xinzhai 心齋 and zuowang 坐忘, as methods for achieving this highest level of being, some similarities with certain concepts of late 19th and early 20th century Western phenomenology. Although Xu was trying to be careful in drawing parallels between certain Western philosophies and Zhuangzi's thought, he believed that there is some resemblance between them, especially regarding the question of why and in which way human consciousness (or the human heart-mind) is able to perceive the world aesthetically. The article aims to show some methodological problems and inconsistencies in this comparative approach, which underlies Xu's aesthetic theory.*

Keywords: *Xu Fuguan, Zhuangzi, Chinese Aesthetics, intercultural methodology*

Xu Fuguan was a member of the so-called second generation of Modern Confucians, the intellectual current of the new Confucian revival in 20th century China, who was trying to provide a suitable ideational platform for Chinese modernization. Since the ideas underlying such modernization came from the West, the second generation of Modern Confucians were trying to revitalize traditional Chinese thought by means of new influences borrowed from Western systems (Rošker 2014: 68). Their attempt was to make a synthesis of Chinese and Western philosophies, which could provide

a better understanding of both systems of thought (Ibid.). They thus made a profound re-evaluation of Chinese tradition in order to achieve acknowledgement and recognition of their own philosophical tradition through the lens of Western philosophical thought. In this context, the majority of the second generation was mostly dealing with Western philosophy of the 18th and 19th centuries. Xu Fuguan's involvement in the attempt to create such a synthesis is most clearly expressed in his work *The Spirit of Chinese Art (Zhongguo yishu jingshen 中國藝術精神)*, which he wrote in 1966. The

present paper will thus mainly be dealing with Xu's analyses and interpretations included in this work.

As already mentioned in my article on Xu's interpretation of the concept of *you* (遊) (Sernelj 2015: 50), Lee Su San noted that Xu Fuguan's main motivation for writing this work was to bring forward the richness of a long and profound tradition of Chinese culture and art. Considering the fact that strong tendencies toward Westernization prevailed in the East Asian societies of his time, he tried emphasize the need for a new re-evaluation and recognition of the richness and vivid actuality of the Chinese tradition. Through his investigations of traditional Chinese aesthetic thought, he hoped to provide a new platform for young Taiwanese intellectuals and artists, who were, in his opinion, preoccupied with searching for a new identity. In his eyes, this new identity could be founded on a creative fusion of the Chinese aesthetic tradition with certain elements deriving from modern Euro-American and Japanese cultures.

In Xu's opinion, such artists' and intellectuals' unreflective and wholesale acceptance of so-called Western culture was problematic, because it neglected their own traditions. As a Confucian, Xu was trying to bring back to life the beauty and profundity of Daoist and Confucian philosophy. As a traditionalist and great admirer of traditional Chinese art and literature, he had great difficulties accepting the modern art created by Taiwanese artists following Western models. In Xu's opinion, modern art, and in particular avant-garde movements such as surrealism, Dadaism and Cubism, with

their destruction of tradition and seeming disinterest in the idea of beauty, was leading to the destruction of human culture as a whole. He believed that modern art was an expression of a turbulent, grotesque and dismal primitive life that would drag people backwards toward the complete end of civilization (Lee 1998: 309).

Through a profound investigation of Zhuangzi's philosophy, Xu highlighted the fact that certain conceptual contents that were occupying both modern art as well as philosophy in the West, could already be found in Zhuangzi's thought, especially in his ideas of subjectivism and relativism, in his ideal of the integrated individual personality, and particularly in the liberation of the human spirit.

Therefore, the main contribution of *The Spirit of Chinese Art* is Xu's interpretation of Zhuangzi's philosophy through the lenses of phenomenological, ontological and, first and foremost, aesthetic thought. He completed an extensive and profound analysis of the crucial concepts of Zhuangzi's thought, comparing it with the philosophy of some early of the Western aestheticians of the 18th and 19th centuries. His comparative analyses included some relatively unknown thinkers like, for instance, Hamann, Cohen, Schiller, Solger, and Fiedler, but also some of the more well-known names, such as Hegel, Kant, Husserl and Heidegger. Xu aimed to point out that certain notions shaped by these philosophers could be compared to Zhuangzi's aesthetic thought, and vice versa. However, as we will see further on, his comparative approach has certain inconsistencies and shortcomings in terms of methodology.

Is There Such a Thing as Chinese Aesthetics?

Aesthetics (Chinese or Western) as a philosophical discipline is not solely the study of beauty. It is a philosophical discipline that investigates the activity of the human spirit or human consciousness when enjoying and experiencing beauty (both natural and that of artworks). However, in order to investigate Xu Fuguan's interpretation of Zhuangzi's aesthetic thought, we will first briefly try to elucidate the question of what so-called "Chinese aesthetics" as a philosophical discipline actually is. Because Xu himself did not provide any exact definition of the term, we will thus lean on Li Zehou's and Ye Lang's explanations.

According to Ye Lang, Chinese aestheticians generally agree that aesthetics is the study of aesthetic activities, which are among the spiritual activities that people engage in (Ye 2010: 115). Li Zehou, on the other hand, emphasized that one has to be careful in understanding what these spiritual activities actually are, because they surpass the categories of sense perception, morality and religion (Li, 2006: 20). He argued that this is expressed most clearly in Zhuangzi's promotion of a total unity of the self and the external world. Such an identification of subject and object can only emerge in the creative intuition of "pure consciousness," which cannot be grasped by psychology or logical knowledge. It can also not be categorized as in the realm of religious experiences, but can only be found in the sphere of aesthetics (Li 2010: 82).

However, aesthetics is mainly concerned with the study of beauty, which manifests itself in natural beauty and that of art. Re-

garding the concept of beauty, Ye argued that the *Great Debate on Aesthetics* (*Meixue da taolun* 美学大讨论), which took place in China during the 1950s and 1960s, and which mainly concerned the question of the nature of beauty, provided two answers. Some scholars argued that beauty is objective, while the others maintained that it resides in the mind of the spectator or in the relationship between the mind and the objective world (Ye 2010: 113). The latter answer means that beauty is subjective on the one hand, and on the other that it does not exist *per se*, but is revealed by human consciousness through its aesthetic activities. These activities of human consciousness are connected to our experience, imagination, and transformation of natural and artistic objects into aesthetic objects. Ye argued that the aesthetic activities of mankind turn natural scenes, which are awakened and illuminated by human consciousness, from the mere substance into an idea-image (*yixiang* 意象). In traditional Chinese aesthetics, it is precisely this idea-image which actually defines beauty. This means that beauty can only exist in such idea-images, which represent interfusions of human feelings and the concrete scenes of the external world by which we are surrounded. In this interfusion, human inwardness and the external world form a harmonious unity (Ibid.). In this framework, the aesthetic activity is not defined by conceptual thinking or rational recognition, but is in essence delineated by human experience, and as such necessarily subjective. Ye further claimed that aesthetic activities are not based on recognition, but on pure experience. He emphasized that through our cognitive activities we try to find out the nature and

laws of objective things and to obtain an answer to the question of “what a certain object is.” But in the realm of aesthetic experience, a human subject can establish a communicative state with the world, and thus experience “how the object is” or “how to exist,” and so how to live (Ibid.: 116). Similarly, Li Zehou, on the other hand, also argued that beauty, as the aesthetic object, is inseparable from human’s subjective state of mind; as such, it is – either consciously or unconsciously – a necessary product of the human heart-mind (*xin* 心) (Li 2010: 50).

Zhuangzi’s aesthetic thought deals exactly with this question; therefore, Xu Fuguan defined Zhuangzi’s aesthetic thought as the aesthetic way of life. Actually, in his investigation (see Xu 1966) he did not use the term aesthetics, but rather spoke of the highest spirit of art as embodied in the unity of human spirit and *dao*, which enables the liberation of the human spirit (*jingshen de ziyou jiefang* 精神的自由解放). For Xu, this free human spirit is an expression of the highest spirit of art. The process leading to the domain of this highest spirit is that of artistic creativity.

Xu Fuguan’s Comparisons: Zhuangzi’s “Free and Easy Wandering” (*xiaoyao you* 逍遙遊) Through the Lens of Western Theories

In this context, we have to point out that in China the word for art (*yishu* 藝術), as a general category, did not exist before the beginning of the 20th century, when it came from Japan, after having been translated from English and French. Before that, the Chinese were using only separate and dis-

tinctive words for particular artistic skills, like literature (*wenxue* 文學), painting (*huihua* 繪畫), engraving (*diaokeye* 雕刻) and so on (Xu 1966: 49). Therefore, it is understandable that Zhuangzi himself did not directly write about art or the process of artistic creativity. However, similar to Confucius, Zhuangzi did apply the word artistic skill (*yi* 藝) when discussing the ability of mastering (*gongfu* 功夫) a certain ability, although their goals were quite different. According to Zhuangzi, through mastery of the skills they use in their lives people can achieve unity with the *dao*, and therefore the liberation of their spirit. Confucius, on the other hand, emphasized the significance of the cultivation and education that can be achieved through learning and mastering of the six arts (Ibid.). Zhuangzi thus only discussed “art” as a part of the process of transforming one’s individual spirit (or heart-mind). Xu Fuguan related this process to the prevailing Western aesthetic thought, stressing that:

Zhuangzi’s understanding of this process is different from the founders of modern aesthetics, who from the beginning on take beauty as the goal and art as the object of their reasoning and recognition. (Xu 1966: 49)¹

This argument is quite problematic if we take into consideration the aesthetic thought of some Western theoreticians, such as Kant, Husserl, and Heidegger. In their elaborations, the content of aesthetics is not related solely to the observation (and cognitive recognition) of beauty itself, but also to issues such as the experience of human consciousness in the aesthetic activity,

¹ 莊子則不僅不像近代美學的建立者，一開始即以美為目的，以藝術為對象，去加以思考、體認。

and the feeling of freedom that emerges within (see, for instance, Thomson 2015: 1; Ginsborg 2014; Deranty 2015: 2).

For Xu, Zhuangzi's *dao* as cosmic creativity and the essence of all things² is also the essence of the spirit of art. Therefore, he talked about it in the sense of a creative concept of the spirit of art or artistic creativity. As already noted, Zhuangzi himself did not talk directly about art, but rather of the fulfilment of life. Therefore, this creativity is not necessarily expressed in an artwork. However, in Xu's opinion this highest spirit of art, namely the unity with *dao*, is actually the fundamental basis and the precondition for creating any artwork, because Zhuangzi's experience of *dao* connects directly to its realization within the performance of a skill or life activity itself. Therefore, for Xu, in Zhuangzi's philosophy, the comprehension of art and *dao* are inherently connected³ (Xu 1966: 52). Regarding the problem of pursuing *dao* within the skill and the artist's process of creating the artwork, Xu saw these as one and the same, albeit with different goals. For the artist, the goal is in producing an artwork, and as such is limited to this, whereas for Zhuangzi the goal is in living the life of a liberated free spirit. In his analyses, Xu highlighted that such a life, free from all restraints, is Zhuangzi's aesthetic way of life. It is a continuous state

and not a transient one. Such a life is one of the liberated human spirit, or of free and easy wandering (*xiaoyao you* 逍遙遊). It is the ultimate meaning and the highest goal of Zhuangzi's philosophy (Xu 1966: 56).

Zhuangzi claimed that living such a life is possible through the application of two methods: the fasting of the heart-mind (*xinzhai* 心齋) and sitting in forgetfulness (*zuowang* 坐忘). In fact, these two notions are not just methods, but rather ontological and aesthetic concepts, which form a central part of Zhuangzi's philosophy.

As in most classical Daoist discourses, Zhuangzi's *dao* is cosmological creativity *per se*, and hence it is continually creating beauty out of everything that exists:

Heaven and earth have great beauty, but do not speak about it. (Zhuangzi s.d.: *Wai pian, Zhi bei you*: 2).⁴

Moreover, as Zhuangzi shows in an imagined dialogue between Confucius and Laozi, the state of liberated human spirit achieved in the unity with the *dao* brings about pure beauty and delight:

Confucius asked about the wandering (*you*), and Lao Dan replied: this is obtained in the highest beauty and highest delight. When highest beauty is achieved, you can wander in highest delight. This is being the sage. (Ibid., *Tian zi fang*: 4)⁵

As we have seen, the great beauty and great delight are actually the essential characteristics of *dao*. When one is able to comprehend *dao* through persistent work (on learning and mastering a skill), one can discover and grasp its beauty and attain

² *Dao* in this sense is of course not only a concept of Zhuangzi's philosophy, but also represents a central notion of all other classical Daoist works, especially of Laozi's *Dao de jing*.

³ In this respect, Xu focused on the well-known Zhuangzi's story of cook Ding in the section "Nourishing the Lord of Life" (*Yangsheng zhu* 養生主) in the *Inner Chapters* (*Nei pian* 內篇). This story discusses the question of how a person is able to achieve unity with *dao* through the process of mastering a skill (*gongfu* 功夫) or mastering (nourishing) life itself.

⁴ 天地有大美而不言。

⁵ 孔子曰：「請問遊是。」老聃曰：夫得是，至美至樂也。得至美而遊乎至樂，謂之至人。

delight from it. Such beauty and delight are intrinsic to *dao*. People can thus experience *dao* in its wholeness and connection to artistic life, when they are in the state of being a liberated spirit (i.e., free and easy wandering). (Xu 1966: 59)

In this context, Xu has again attempted to compare these ancient Daoist approaches to certain modern aesthetic theories. He stated that in the Western philosophy of art, art is considered as a confirmation and indication of human freedom, because it represents liberation from the finite (or limited) world. In order to show this more clearly, he quoted from various Western philosophers. He pointed out, for instance, that Theodor Lipps (1851-1914) considered the feeling of beauty as the delight (or pleasant sensation) of freedom. Xu also emphasized Heidegger's claim that the freer one's mental state, the more one can obtain pleasure derived from beauty. In this context, he tried to highlight the similarities between modern Western and ancient Chinese aesthetic thought, indicating that all the fashionable and seemingly imported theories of his time were more or less already present in Chinese antiquity.

Xu also noted Hermann Cohen's (1842-1918) understanding of art as the substance or fusion of science and ethics, where art stands above these and has the purpose of generating free activity. In the domain of art, human consciousness is rooted in free activity, which displays spontaneity. In this context, Xu Fuguan also mentioned Ernst Cassirer's (1874-1945) theory, according to which art gives an inward freedom which we cannot obtain in any other way. In his comprehension of art and freedom, Xu found the closest resemblance to Zhuangzi.

Xu also presented an overview of Hegel's⁶ understanding of art and freedom, claiming that in his *Lectures on Fine Art* he emphasized the importance of beauty and art in human lives, when being confronted with difficulties, conflicts, crisis and so on. Art and beauty give people the strength to live and simultaneously act in ways that increase the freedom of the subject, which in Xu's opinion is a very important function of art. According to Xu, Hegel argued in his *Phenomenology of the Spirit* that the highest stage of human spiritual world is the realm of the Absolute spirit, where art exists. Here, Xu emphasized that if we could simply change the name of the Absolute into *dao*, then Hegel's theory would be quite similar to Zhuangzi's understanding of free and easy wandering. Both notions, he claimed, are comparable because they express a realm in which people can be liberated and obtain ultimate freedom within their lives (Xu 1966: 61).

However, here we come across a significantly greater simplification of the methods and objects under comparison. Xu not only quoted his citations out of their textual contexts, but also did not even consider (let alone provide) any broader scope or background to the theoretical ideas he was discussing. Xu's juggling with words with regard to Hegel's implications of the Absolute and Zhuangzi's notion of *dao* is espe-

⁶ Hegel was writing in a time of intense development of ideas about the arts. Kant had treated aesthetic experience largely in relation to the experience of the beauty of nature, but for Hegel, aesthetics became primarily the study of *art*. For him, it is art in which "consciousness of the Absolute first takes shape" (Hegel 2008: 169). The peculiarity of art lies in the *sensuousness* of the medium in which its content is objectified (see Redding 2016: 3.2.2).

cially problematic. It seems that Xu did not understand the meaning of the concept the Absolute, not only in Hegel's philosophy, but in Western philosophy in general. The concept cannot be interchanged with *dao* in any way, because they are rooted in completely different referential frameworks. The Absolute in Hegel's philosophy is a notion without any counterpart, for it contains all phases of the dialectical process, which is based on the interactions between mutually exclusive contradictions. It is the abstract scheme of a strictly structured formal development with all its stages and transitions. Hegel's Absolute is hence static and unchangeable. The Daoist *dao*, on the other hand, is a unity of all relativizations; it is continuously fluctuating and dynamic; it is the manifestation of a process of correlative complementary change, a harmonious unity of bipolar oppositions which do not exclude, but complement each other, and are also interdependent. As such, *dao* can never exist in isolation from the world it is creating. While Hegel's Absolute has a divine, transcendent nature, *dao* is a concept of immanent transcendence⁷. Hence Xu's attempt to simply exchange these two words to bring out the same meaning in these two thinkers is, in my opinion, a rather severe generalization.

It is of course known that one can find numerous resemblances or similar contents (such as opinions) in the works of Zhuangzi and Heidegger, as well as in many other representative works from the Western and Chinese ideational tradition. However, we have to be extremely careful in constructing

general comparisons. It is important to keep in mind the different ideational backgrounds of Western and Chinese philosophies, and the different referential frameworks in which their respective methodologies are rooted.

Nonetheless, Xu Fuguan concludes that the liberation of free spirit can only be obtained in our heart-mind (*xin* 心). According to him, this achievement is what Zhuangzi termed as *to hear dao* (*wen dao* 聞道) and *to experience* (or *incorporate*) *dao* (*ti dao* 體道). Using terms from the contemporary language of aesthetics, this is the embodiment of the highest artistic spirit (Xu 1966: 62).

Zhuangzi's symbol of this free liberation of spirit is expressed in the character *you* 遊 and it relates to the meaning of amusing oneself or to have fun (*xiyou* 嬉遊) and to play (*youxi* 遊戲). Xu argued that play has no other intention or goal than to obtain immediate feelings of delight, joy and happiness, and that this is in accord with the inherent quality of art. Moreover, the power of imagination is a very important condition for creating the beauty of artworks. The activity of the pure sensation of play is composed of the abilities of imagination, creativity, and personification.

In this context, Xu opposed the arguments of Charles Darwin (1809-1882) and Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), who claimed that the play of human beings and that of animals can be regarded as the same. Here, Xu Fuguan rather agreed with Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805), who considered that "man only plays when in the full meaning of the word he is a man, and he is only completely a man when he plays" (Schiller 2016: Letter XV). Xu argued that there is a profound distinction between ordinary play

⁷ For a more detailed elaboration on the paradigm of immanent transcendence, see Rošker (2016: 131-137).

and the playful creativity in art regarding the conscious display of freedom. However, if we eliminate the aims of seeking knowledge or other utilitarian means, and only experience pure delight (or pleasant sensation), it can be said that the two forms of play truly evolve from the same state of spirit.

Regarding the quote from Schiller set out above (which is one of his most famous sayings), Xu noted Zhuangzi's claim that the sage, or the true man (*zhen ren* 真人) is the one who can wander (*you* 遊) at ease. He or she is a person who incorporates the spirit of art and is simultaneously transformed by it. In this sense, Xu claimed that Schiller's views on the idea of play and Zhuangzi's on *you* are very close (Xu 1966: 63).

However, Xu also warned against the oversimplification which could result from a somehow reductionist view of what Zhuangzi's meant by *you*. For Zhuangzi, it refers not only to the act of playing, but also, and more importantly, to the act of freedom that emerges within such play. Therefore, Zhuangzi made *you* the symbol of the free and liberated human spirit, one free from pragmatic intentions. In this respect, Xu argued, Zhuangzi's notion of free and easy wandering is similar to Kant's concept of disinterest in aesthetic judgment, namely in the judgment of taste. In this context, aesthetic judgement should be bare of any interests or intentions, for we take pleasure in something because we judge it as being beautiful, rather than judging it beautiful because we find it pleasurable. An important characteristic of this disinterest is that it does not emphasize any pragmatic aspects and purposes (Kant 1987: 90).

I find it interesting that Xu did not mention Kant's concept of free play at this point. In Kant's concept it is the harmonious free

play of our imagination and knowledge that provides aesthetic pleasure or delight. In this respect it is worth mentioning that:

Kant's notion of the free play of the faculties (sometimes referred to as the "harmony of the faculties") is probably the most central notion of his aesthetic theory. But what is it for the faculties of imagination and understanding to be in "free play"? Kant describes the imagination and understanding in this "free play" as freely harmonizing, without the imagination's being constrained by the understanding as it is in cognition. (Ginsborg 2014)

In Zhuangzi, the free liberation of human spirit which brings fulfilment and satisfaction is obtained through the attitude of uselessness (*wuyong* 無用⁸) which seems to be quite similar to Kant's notion of satisfaction in disinterest. The meaning of uselessness is a very important concept in Zhuangzi, and is connected with a non-utilitarian attitude toward the world as well as human relations with regard to having concerns and anxieties about them. Moreover, it is the condition for achieving a free liberation of the human spirit. Only by releasing the utilitarian attitude or any kind of intentions is it possible to see *dao* and thus beauty itself. Xu argued that a non-utilitarian approach is necessary in appreciating art. Similarly, one can enjoy wandering at ease in resonance with *dao* only through abandoning any kind of intention or purpose.⁹

⁸ See Zhuangzi s.d. *Nei pian*, *Renjian shi*: 9.

⁹ However, Xu also believed that although this concept is of utmost importance for the liberation of the spirit, it cannot be easily applied to living in society, where people comprehend purpose (*yong* 用) as a kind of joint that holds things together. Xu sees some limitations or negative aspects of Zhuangzi's *you* in this respect, regarding it as a narcissist escape from society.

For Xu, harmony is the fundamental character of art. and therefore it becomes a positive condition of Zhuangzi's *you*. In Zhuangzi, uselessness (*wuyong* 無用) and harmony (he 和) are in essence two aspects of one spirit (Xu 1966: 69).

Because aesthetics is immanently related to ontology and phenomenology, Xu also argued that Zhuangzi's *fasting of the heart-mind* (*xinzhai* 心齋) is actually the philosophy of human consciousness, which, in that respect, has a lot in common with Western phenomenology. He thus compared Zhuangzi's *xinzhai* to Husserl's comprehension of human consciousness.

Xu Fuguan's Interpretation of Zhuangzi's Phenomenology: Onto-Aesthetics¹⁰ of *xinzhai* 心齋 (Fasting of the Heart-Mind) and *zuowang* 坐忘 (Sitting in Forgetfulness)

Zhuangzi's non-utilitarianism, harmony and the demand for freedom are in Xu's opinion the concepts that constitute the basic spirit of art. However, he argued

that Zhuangzi's subject of the spirit of art is actually the human heart-mind, i.e. our inwardness. What Zhuangzi revealed about the heart-mind is in Xu's opinion the spirit of art and the spontaneous achievement of an artistic (or aesthetic) way of life, as well as art itself. In this dimension, which can be experienced through the aforementioned free and easy wandering, the notion of a selfless state of mind (*wuji* 無己) is of central importance. In this context, Xu lays stress upon the following quotation: "If a human being can empty himself of herself, in wandering the world, who can harm him/her?" (Zhuangzi s.d.: *Wai pian, Shan mu*: 2)¹¹. As already noted, this state of ultimate aesthetic freedom can be achieved through the fasting of the mind (*xinzhai* 心齋) and sitting in forgetfulness (*zuowang* 坐忘). To achieve these two states, one has to follow one of two paths. The first is the path of abandoning all physical desires, which are enslaving the heart-mind, so that it can become free from their restraints. This is a direct method to obtaining the usefulness of uselessness, or the purpose of non-purpose (*wuyong zhi yong* 無用之用), because desires themselves derive from the pragmatic orientation. In *xinzhai* no benefits or purposes (*yong* 用) have a place to develop themselves, so the spirit can instantly obtain freedom. The other path to achieving these states of mind is that when we connect with an object we do not allow the heart-mind to engage in analytical thinking, and thus in any kind of judgements about right and wrong, good or bad, which would disturb our heart-mind. In such a way our heart-mind would become able to pursue and

¹⁰ I adopted the term from Sebastian Hsien-hao Liao's article "Becoming Butterfly: Power of the False, Crystal Image and Zhuangzian Onto-Aesthetics", arguing that Zhuangzi's discussion of great beauty is always associated with great or absolute truth. And because his philosophy, firmly rooted in *dao*, which created myriad things and keeps becoming and making them become, and is therefore creativity itself, may be considered an onto-aesthetics. On the other hand, Professor Cheng Chung-Ying also argued that because for Chinese poets and artists beauty is always a harmonious experience and representation of a dynamic creative reality called the *dao*, and called this theory of beauty the onto-aesthetics of beauty and art. His thesis is that Chinese aesthetics is onto-aesthetical and that onto-aesthetics is embodied and realized in the tradition of Chinese aesthetics (Cheng, 2010: 128)

¹¹ 人能虛己以遊世，其孰能害之！

achieve liberation and increase the freedom of spirit through the use of intuition or direct perception (Xu 1966: 72).

In this respect, Xu found some similarities between Zhuangzi and Heidegger, who held that when we psychologically inspect an aesthetic observation, the premise is that the subject can observe it freely (Heidegger 2008: 145). For instance, when we stand in a beautiful location and observe the scenery and experience a sense of freedom, we are able to feel the pure joy of beauty (Ibid.). In Xu's opinion, when Zhuangzi talked about *xinzhai* he talked about freeing oneself from knowledge. When talking about *zuowang*, he talked about freeing oneself from both desires as well as knowledge. In this way the spirit can thoroughly obtain freedom (Ibid.). Xu argued that for ordinary people the so-called "I" means the integration of desires and knowledge, but for Zhuangzi, forgetting this "I" in the *zuowang* actually refers to freeing oneself from physiological desires, as well as what is commonly known as intellectual activity. Here, Xu highlights the following saying:

My connection with the body and its parts is dissolved; my perceptive organs are discarded. Thus leaving my material form, and bidding farewell to my knowledge¹².

Freed from both, one is able to achieve the emptiness (*xu* 虛) and quietness (*jing* 靜) in the selfless state of heart-mind. For Xu, desires need knowledge for their extension, and knowledge usually has desires for the intentions it brings about. As such, they are both often interdependent. Zhuangzi's *zuowang* is the same as Laozi's non-knowl-

edge (*wuzhi* 無知) and non-desire (*wuyu* 無欲). It does not radically or absolutely negate desires, but just prevents them from controlling people's personalities.

Wangzhi is thus a method of eliminating axiological and conceptual knowledge, and what remains is pure perception or consciousness (*chun zhijue* 純知覺). Xu argued that this kind of pure perception (or consciousness) is the aesthetic observation (*meidi guanzhao* 美地觀照) (Xu 1966: 73).

In Xu's view, this aesthetic observation is a non-analytical comprehension of things (*phenomena*) through intuition or direct perception (*zhiguande huodong* 直觀的活動). Such an approach is completely different from the pragmatic one, which aims to seek knowledge. It simply relies on the perception that occurs through the spontaneous activity of the sense organs, which occurs, for instance, through seeing and hearing.

As Zhuangzi wrote:

Do not listen with your ears, but with your heart-mind. Do not listen with your heart-mind, but with your *qi* (vital potential). The hearing stops at ears, the heart-mind stops at symbol. *Qi* (the vital potential) is empty, and therefore able to receive things, and the accumulated emptiness is *dao*. Emptiness is the fasting of the mind. (Zhuangzi s.d. *Nei pian, Renjian shi*: 2)¹³

Xu interpreted the perception of the ears in Zhuangzi's quote *hearing stops at ears* as only hearing, and the perception of the heart-mind in *heart-mind stops at symbol* as only the corresponding perception of hearing. In both cases, Zhuangzi describes non-analytical comprehension. This is even more obvious in the first sentence of the

¹² 墮肢體，黜聰明，離形去知。 (Translated by James Legge.)

¹³ 无聽之以耳而聽之以心，无聽之以心而聽之以氣。聽止於耳，心止於符。氣也者，虛而待物者也。唯道集虛。虛者，心齋也。

passage, which suggests we should “*not to listen with the heart-mind, but with the qi,*” for the notion of the heart-mind is still linked to knowledge. Hence, for Xu, the meaning of *qi* (vital potential) is analogous to the meaning of *xinzhai* (Xu 1966: 74). This mode of perception is an important condition for establishing aesthetic observation (Ibid.).

For Xu Fuguan, explaining Zhuangzi’s *xinzhai* only from the perspective of an individual is not sufficient, and neither is explaining aesthetic observation only through intuitive perceptive activity. The heart-mind, as involved in the *xinzhai*, is the subject of the artistic spirit. In other words, it is the very basis on which aesthetic observation can be established. In order to explain this relation more clearly, Xu tried to compare the notion of *xinzhai* with certain aspects of Husserl’s phenomenology.

Xu exposed Husserl’s method of *bracketing*, or *epoché*, where we put in brackets our so-called natural attitude or our usual way of seeing reality, in order to focus on our experience of it. In this way we become able to explore our consciousness. According to Husserl, our consciousness is always intentional in the sense that it is actional (always doing something) and referential (it is always referring to something). In Xu’s opinion this is not regarded as the experience of our consciousness, but as transcendence, and is in that sense similar to Zhuangzi’s *xinzhai* (Xu 1966: 74).

Here, again, we could argue that it is questionable as to whether Zhuangzi’s *xinzhai* can really be considered as a transcendent state. While the dominant currents of Western philosophy are based on the dualist separation of body and mind, and the unifi-

cation of subject and object can thus only be achieved in the realm of metaphysical transcendence, Zhuangzi’s *zuowang* is rather rooted in a holistic cosmology in which both aspects can be unified in the here and now of worldly life. This is also the focus of the method of *xinzhai*; Zhuangzi does not merely describe a certain (aesthetic) mode of perception, but also suggests in which way this unification of the subject and object can be achieved in our lives.

On the other hand, Xu Fuguan observed that Zhuangzi’s heart-mind in *xinzhai* emerges from the forgetting of knowledge, and is therefore empty and silent. In Xu’s opinion, consciousness in phenomenology emerges from the bracketing or setting aside of knowledge, and is therefore also empty and silent (or calm). For Xu, the *noesis* and *noema*¹⁴ that appear in consciousness are mutually related; they have the same origin and essence, for they are rooted in the unity of subject and object.

In this respect, he rightly noted that from Zhuangzi’s “emptiness and quietness” of *xinzhai* also emerges the inseparable unity of the heart-mind and all other things. Behind Zhuangzi’s “forgetting knowledge” is the activity of pure consciousness, which is – in Xu’s view – the same as the origin of perception in Husserl’s phenomenology (Xu 1966: 74). This view is also highly problematic, for the contents of knowledge, which are in Husserl’s phenomenology put aside (into brackets), can still be applied or referred to, if necessary, for they still form the underlying basis of particular, concrete consciousness. Zhuangzi’s “forgetting,”

¹⁴ For Husserl, the intentional process of consciousness is called *noesis*, while its ideal content is called *noema* (Smith 2013: Chapter 3).

which is the ultimate stage of his *xinzhai* method, aims at something completely different, namely at a different realm of perception, which is comparable to a trance, and in which there are not only no boundaries between subject and object, but also no borderlines separating dreams and the waking state, or even life and death¹⁵. In addition, this is not an isolated state of mind; it is tightly related and constantly communicating with other beings and cosmic entities.

Through Zhuangzi, Xu also tried to explain the essence of intuition and to clarify how perception can provide us with insights into things. He noted that for Husserl intuition means realizing the essential nature of consciousness, and represents the phenomenological approach that leads “back to the things in themselves”. In this respect, Xu highlighted the disposition of emptiness and quietness of the heart-mind in Zhuangzi’s *xinzhai*. He also pointed out the clearness of the understanding that arises from emptiness, for emptiness and quietness are the common origin of all the things in the world (including all phenomena). Therefore, he stated, pure consciousness can only emerge from emptiness. According to Xu, this discovery can provide a more concrete solution to some of the crucial problems of phenomenology. Precisely because pure consciousness is necessarily empty, both *noesis* and *noema* can appear in it simultaneously. Only if consciousness is empty can we speak about a purely intuitional insight. In this context, Xu stressed that that Western phenomenology

is searching for possibilities of establishing a concept of pure consciousness. He thus rightly raised the question of why, if this is the case, Zhuangzi’s heart-mind in *xinzhai* cannot be seen as the foundation of aesthetic observation (Xu 1966: 79).

Xu’s answer is that the aesthetic consciousness in phenomenology is equal to Zhuangzi’s *xinzhai*. The aesthetic consciousness is observing objects, which become aesthetic objects through this very act. Therefore, observation itself can transform things into aesthetic objects. The precondition for this transformation is, however, that the act of observation must be derived from the unity of the subject and object. Within this unity, the objects are personified and the human being as observer is objectified, albeit the observer is not necessarily aware of this. The unity of the subject and object is possible during the observation because the observed and observer interact directly. If humans can free themselves from the omnipresence of judgements (e.g., through *xinzhai*), they can obtain the state of emptiness and quietness of spirit, and achieve aesthetic observation. However, for ordinary people such experiences can only be transient and momentous. But for Zhuangzi, the heart-mind of *xinzhai* is the subject of the spirit of art (Xu 1966: 80).

Overall, it can be argued that Xu’s comparison of Husserl’s phenomenological approach in exploring human consciousness with the ideas in Zhuangzi is extremely interesting, although Husserl himself did not talk about elimination of our desires and knowledge in exploring our consciousness. As we have seen, he provided the method of bracketing or setting aside the knowledge we have in order to focus on our experi-

¹⁵ See for instance Zhuangzi’s stories about the butterfly’s dream, about the joyful fishes, or about the shadows of a shadow.

ence of things in our consciousness when encountering them. His phenomenology thus provides a method of understanding and exploring our consciousness when meeting the world. As already noted, this is hardly comparable to the elimination of knowledge in Zhuangzi's philosophy of *xinzhai* and *zuowang*.

Here, we could mention that Li Zehou also compared Zhuangzi's elimination of the mind and senses in the process of perception to Husserl's notion of pure consciousness. However, Li clearly stated that the difference between their respective approaches is that Husserl's pure consciousness is epistemological, while Zhuangzi's *zuowang* is an aesthetic notion (Li 2010: 81). Zhuangzi thus seems to provide us with a method to eliminate our desires and knowledge, and transform them into emptiness, in order to achieve the ultimate freedom of our spirit (or consciousness). Although (or perhaps because) this can be regarded or evaluated as aesthetic perception and the aesthetic way of life, it cannot be compared that easily with phenomenological notions or the comprehension of consciousness.

On the one hand, it can be argued that, in a certain sense, Xu upgraded the phenomenological comprehension of human consciousness by illuminating Zhuangzi's notion of emptiness. On the other hand, however, we cannot ignore the fact that in this process Xu eliminated (or simply ignored) the theoretical framework of phenomenology in the comprehension of human consciousness, which is, as Li Zehou pointed out, epistemological. However, in spite of these shortcomings, Xu elaborations of Zhuangzi's *xinzhai* in the context of aesthetic thought is valuable and unique, and thus worth further attention and thought.

Conclusion

Xu's profound and extensive interpretation of Zhuangzi's aesthetic thought is of enormous importance, because he exposed a dimension of this thinker's philosophy which provides a new perspective for understanding the human spirit. However, his methodology of comparative analysis seems problematic, as he did not consider the broader backgrounds of the Western philosophical works included in his research. In order to illustrate their putative resemblance with Zhuangzi's philosophy, he merely highlighted certain parts of the theories, i.e., those which corresponded to the issues he was trying to emphasize in Zhuangzi. On the other hand, we also have to take into account the special circumstances of the period in which his main works were written, and his motivation for presenting these analyses. In the 1960s, the fashionable spirit of Western liberal ideologies (which were largely imported via Japan) overwhelmed the minds of many young people in Taiwan. At that time, attempts to achieve liberation from the constraints of tradition and morality, together with desires to establish a new and better society, molded on the model of Western liberal democracies, prevailed in the (non-socialist) East Asian societies. For Xu Fuguan, these tendencies were extremely dangerous, ignorant and unreflective, for they might have led to a complete Westernization and to the loss of these societies' own ideational traditions (and consequently of their cultural heritage and identity), which he felt were still worth preserving and developing. Hence, through his analyses of Zhuangzi, especially his aesthetic thought, he tried to highlight this ancient thinker's high evaluation of integral

subjectivity, relativism, and, in particular, his methods of liberating the human spirit. Through Xu's (inconsistently elaborated) comparisons of these elements with certain dimensions of Western phenomenology, he hoped to establish a platform worth further

examining and possibly also serving as an inspiration for young Taiwanese artists, who were searching for new ways of developing their art, without being aware that they could draw more from the treasuries of their own aesthetic traditions.

REFERENCES

- Cheng Chung-Ying. 2010. A Study in the Onto-Aesthetics of Beauty and Art: Fullness (*chongshi*) and Emptiness (*kongling*) as Two Polarities in Chinese Aesthetics. In Ken-ichi Sasaki (ed.), *Asian Aesthetics*. Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, pp. 128-138.
- Deranty, J.-P., 2015. Existentialist Aesthetics. In E. N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2015 Edition). Available at: <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2015/entries/aesthetics-existentialist/> (Accessed: 03 September 2016).
- Ginsborg, H., 2013. Kant's aesthetics and teleology. In E. N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2014 Edition). Available at: <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2014/entries/kant-aesthetics/> (Accessed: 20 August 2016).
- Hegel, G. W. F., 1975. *Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. by T. M. Knox, 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Hegel, G. H. W., 2008. *Philosophy of mind: Translated from the encyclopedia of the philosophical sciences*, trans. by W. Wallace. New York: Cosimo.
- Heidegger, M., 2008. On the Origin of the Work of Art. In D. F. Krell (ed.), *Basic Writings*. 1st Harper Perennial Modern Thought Edition. New York: HarperCollins, pp. 143-212.
- Kant, I., 1987. *Critique of Judgment*, trans. by W. Pluhar. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Lee Su San, 1998. *Xu Fuguan and New Confucianism in Taiwan (1949-1969): A Cultural History of the Exile Generation*, Dissertation. Rhode Island: Brown University.
- Li Zehou, and Clauvel, J., 2006. *Four Essays on Aesthetics*. Oxford: Lexington books.
- Li Zehou, 2010. *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*. Hawaii: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Liao Hsien-Hao, Sebastian, 2014. Becoming Butterfly: Power of the False, Crystal Image and Zhuangzian Onto-Aesthetics. In R. Bogue, Hanping Chiu, and Yu-lin Lee (eds.), *Deleuze and Asia*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 1-29.
- Redding, P., 2015. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. In E. N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2016 Edition). Available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2016/entries/hegel/> (Accessed: 20 August 2016).
- Rošker, S. J., 2014. The Philosophical Sinification of Modernity and the Modern Confucian Paradigm of Immanent Transcendence (內在超越性). *Asian Studies II* (XVIII) 1: 67-81.
- Schiller, Fr., 2016. Letters upon the Aesthetic Education of Man (1794). In *Modern History Sourcebook*. Available at: <http://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/schiller-education.asp> (Accessed: 27 August 2016).
- Sernelj, Téa. 2015. Xu Fuguan's Comparison of the Concept You in Zhuangzi's and Kongzi's Aesthetics. In *Contemporary East Asia and the Confucian Revival*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 43-59.
- Smith, D.W., 2013. Phenomenology. In E. N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2013 Edition). Available at: <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2013/entries/phenomenology/> (Accessed: 20 August 2016).
- Thomson, I., 2015. Heidegger's aesthetics. In E. N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2015 Edition). Available at: <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/heidegger-aesthetics/> (Accessed: 20 August 2016).
- Xu Fuguan, 1966. *Zhongguo yishu jingshen* 中國藝術精神 (*The Spirit of Chinese Art*). Taizhong: Donghai daxue.
- Ye Lang, 2010. Several Inspirations from Traditional Chinese Aesthetic. In Ken-ichi Sasaki (ed.), *Asian Aesthetics*. Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, pp. 112-118.
- Zhuangzi 莊子, s.d. In *Chinese Text Project*, Pre-Qin and Han. Available at: <http://ctext.org/zhuangzi> (Accessed: 20 August 2016).

ZHUANGZI ESTETINĖS MINTIES INTERPRETACIJA XU FUGUANO DARBUOSE: KELETAS LYGINAMOSIOS PRIEIGOS KEBLUMŲ

Téa Sernelj

Santrauka. Straipsnyje aptariama, kaip Xu Fuguan interpretuoja keletą pagrindinių Zhuangzi estetiškos minties sąvokų. Xu nuomone, Zhuangzi estetiškos mintis susijusi su estetiniu žmogaus gyvenimo būdu, kur grožis taikomas *dao* sričiai, kurioje žmonės gali išlaisvinti savo sielą ir džiaugtis „laisvu ir lengvu klajojimu“ (*xiaoyaoyou* 逍遙遊). Pasak Xu, tai yra aukščiausia ir gražiausia žmogaus egzistencijos sfera, įgaunanti išraišką mene. Zhuangzi sąvokas *xinzhai* 心齋 ir *zuowang* 坐忘, kaip šio aukščiausio būties lygmens pasiekimo metodą, Xu laikė panašiomis į kai kurias XIX ir XX a. Vakarų fenomenologijos sąvokas. Nors Xu stengėsi atsargiai vesti paraleles tarp Vakarų filosofijos ir Zhuangzi mąstymo, jis manė esant jų panašumų, ypač klausimu, kodėl žmogaus sąmonė gali estetiškai suvokti pasaulį. Šio straipsnio tikslas yra atskleisti tokios lyginamosios prieigos, glūdinčios Xu estetiškose mintyse, metodologinius keblumus ir prieštaravimus.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: Xu Fuguan, Zhuangzi, kinų estetika, tarpkultūrinė metodologija

Įteikta 2016 m. rugsėjo 3 d.