A Comparative Study of Zhuangzi’s Tao and Plato’s Idea

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As the sources of Chinese and western poetics, Zhuangzi and Plato represented two different ways of exploring poetics. This paper attempts to make a comparative study of their poetic thoughts from the linguistic perspective based on a comparison of two key concepts in their philosophy, Tao and Idea. As a result, the differences and similarities are analyzed and the cultural and historical reasons for them are given.

Keywords: Tao, Idea, poetics, imitation

Introduction

In the comparative study of Zhuangzi and Plato, Chinese scholars tend to focus on the comparison of aesthetics, while ignoring the similarities and differences in literary theory. We believe that as the sources of Chinese and western poetics, Zhuangzi and Plato represent two different ways of exploring poetics, and both of them have had a profound impact on the poetic traditions of later generations. Therefore, this paper attempts to make a comparative study of their poetic thoughts based on the key concepts in their philosophy, Tao and Idea. It tries to reveal the similarities and differences between the two and how the two different thoughts influence their respective poetic traditions. That also explains why Chinese and western poetics developed into two quite different poetics traditions from the similar source.

Two Key Concepts—Tao and Idea

As far as the poetic ontology is concerned, many scholars believe that there is only the thought of inspiration from things and expression of feelings in ancient Chinese literary theory. That is to say, poetry is the product of the rise and response of sensitive poets under the stimulation of things in the natural surroundings. Therefore, the discussion of the origin of literature is entirely a practical theory. However, in ancient Chinese literary theory, there has always been the pursuit of literary noumenon. This is mainly manifested in the discussion of the relationship between “Wen” and “Tao”, or the discussion of “Wen Tao Theory”. In ancient Chinese philosophy, “Tao” is such a transcendental ultimate noumenon with metaphysical color.

From the ontological point of view, “Tao” and “Idea” put forward by Plato are both metaphysical noumenon, which is not only the noumenon of all things in the universe, but also the root of the development and change of all things in the universe, and is the first existence and the ultimate thing. Zhuangzi’s Tao inherits Laozi’s Tao and holds that Tao is the root and basis of the emergence and existence of all things in the world. Tao is everywhere and never change. Plato divides the world into visible experience world and invisible conceptual world, and the idea is the origin of the world. It is an eternal, unchanging, absolute spiritual entity,
and individual existence is just the replica of the concept. In this sense, the two are interlinked.

Since both of them are the root and basis of the emergence and existence of all things in the world, they are also the root and basis of the emergence of literature. In the pursuit of literary noumenon, ancient Chinese literary theory attaches great importance to “original Tao” and considers Tao to be the origin of literature. Xunzi, a master of pre-Qin Confucianism, first proposes that “all things are one side of the Tao”. That is to say, Tao is the source of all things, and Tao can be found in everything, and the sage is “in charge of Tao”. However, Liu Xie’s understanding of Tao has broken through the humanistic field of Confucianism and has the characteristics of metaphysics. At the beginning of the The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons, Liu Xie points out, “文之为德也大矣。与天地并生者，何哉？夫玄黄色杂，方圆体分，日月叠璧，以垂丽天之象；山川焕绮，以辅理地之形，此盖道之文也” (Lu & Mou, 1995, p. 96). The Tao here obviously goes beyond the field of human relations and society, and is spiritually interlinked with Lao Tzu’s Tao. Here the “Wen” is not limited to the “humanities”, but something that coexists with the heaven and the earth. Later generations of Confucianism also affirm the ontological significance of Tao to literature, such as Han Yu and Liu Zongyuan’s “literature to understand Tao” in Tang Dynasty, Zhou Dunyi’s “literature to carry Tao” in Song Dynasty, and Zhu Xi’s “all literature flows out of Tao”. However, from the analysis of the inner spiritual texture, we believe that Lao Zhuang’s Tao is in line with the artistic spirit of ancient China. The origin of literature is Tao, and Tao is not above literature. Literature is not the carrier and appendage of Tao either. Instead, literature and Tao are integrated with each other.

On the origin of literature and art, Plato (1963) believes that literature and art is produced from the idea, is the copy of the copy of the idea, and is separated from the idea by three layers. He takes bed as an example. There are three kinds of bed. The first is the idea of bed, a real and never changing existence. The second kind is the concrete bed that carpenter makes according to the concept of the bed, which is a copy and a shadow. The third is the bed painted by the painter by imitating the specific bed, which is the copy of the copy, the shadow of the shadow. Therefore it is separated from the truth by three layers. The same is true of poetry. According to Plato, from Homer on, all poets are mere imitators, and when they imitate virtue or all the subjects they write about, they get only images and do not grasp the truth. So Plato lists the sins of the poet, and ultimately expels them out of the Utopia.

In the ontological sense, they are still essentially different. First, Plato negates the perceptual world with the ideal world, which are dual and isolated from each other. The perceptual world is complicated and changeable, and only the idea reflects the essence of things. Idea, Aristotelian substance, Plotinus’ oneness, Christian scholasticism’s God, Descartes’ endowment, Kant’s thing-in-itself, and Hegel’s absolute idea are all what Derrida called “metaphysics of presence”. It is manifested as a pressing that presence exerts to absence, and therefore develops a series of binary opposites, such as rationality/sensuality, mental/substances, subject/object, signifier/signified, essence/phenomenon, voice/text, center/edge, etc. In Plato’s view, the poet is only a superficial and rash imitator, who knows nothing about the object of imitation, and cannot achieve an understanding of the essence of things. Only wise philosophers can achieve true knowledge and enter the palace of absolute beauty through rational thinking. Therefore, the status of philosophy is far higher than that of literature, which needs the guidance and restriction of philosophy, and literature is only the handmaiden of philosophy.

Different from Plato’ Idea, Zhuangzi’s theory of Tao is the unity of subject and object, and there is no distinction between matter and me. Although Tao has metaphysical character, it is not insulated from all things,
and the transcendental noumenal world is not completely separated from the perceptual present world. Instead, Tao is inseparable from the use of utensils and objects. Tao is everywhere. Just as Zhuangzi says, “在蝼蚁”, “在稊稗”, “在瓦甓”, “在屎溺”. Zhuangzi’s Tao is not metaphysics in general. It is experiential rather than speculative metaphysics. Speculative metaphysics is premised on the dichotomy of subject and object, while experiential metaphysics is based on the unity of subject and object. The barriers between mind and matter are broken down and become one. People can enter the realm of “heaven, earth and I coexist, all things and I are one” and the unity of Tao through “heart fasting” and “sitting and forgetting” in spirit. Mind has been integrated with matter. I do not know whether Zhuangzhou becomes a butterfly or a butterfly becomes Zhuangzhou since the subject and object of creation have been integrated with each other and reached a tacit understanding. As a result, the works of art created are natural and there is no trace of artificial creation. Different from the thinking mode of the dualistic opposition of subject and object in Plato’s idea, what we see in Zhuangzi’s Tao theory is the thought of the unity of subject and object, and the unity of thing and me. Zhuangzi’s philosophy is his poetics, and his poetics is his philosophy. Philosophy and poetry, truth and aesthetics are integrated.

Besides, Plato’s idea is created by God and covered with a layer of divine brilliance. In the analysis of the three forms of bed, Plato points out that “As far as God is concerned, he only creates an intrinsic bed either out of his own will, or out of certain necessity, or the idea that makes the bed be the bed, or the entity of the bed”. The rationality contained in the idea has been attached to a pair of wings of theology and put on a layer of mysticism. Plato believes that the poets create poems by divine power instead of skill. The great poets are the inspired spokesmen of God. This is Plato’s mysterious “inspiration theory”, and this mystical “inspiration theory” has also become the pioneer of Western Romantic poetics. Genius, emotion, and imagination claimed by later Romantic poetics come directly from it. In later Christianity, the idea is directly raised to the status of God. At the beginning of the Bible New Testament Gospel of John, it says: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. God became the embodiment of the Logos.

Compared with the mystery of ideas, Zhuangzi’s Tao is self-rooted. It is not the product of God, but the product of nature. Nature means it is what it is, conforming to the laws of heaven and earth. Reflected in literary and artistic aesthetics, Zhuangzi’s natural philosophy has formed the principle of artistic creation and aesthetic standards of advocating nature and opposing man-made things. In literary creation, Zhuangzi emphasizes that we should not be limited by language, but should “forget words”, seek the expression of words and meanings, and enter the field of no words and no intentions. Although it opposes artificial traces, its purpose is to unite with Tao in spirit. In Zhuangzi, we can see that the realization of Tao is carried out through specific technical activities, such as Pao Ding’s solving cattle, Lun bian’s making wheels, Tianjin people steering boats, and so on. Therefore, in addition to nature, Zhuangzi’s philosophy has some lively worldly flavor in which nature and life, art and life are integrated.

**Conclusion**

Zhuangzi is not only a philosophical work, but also an excellent literary work, which contains profound aesthetic and artistic thoughts and becomes the main source of literary theory and creation in China. Similarly, Plato is also more than a literary theorist. However, their respective core categories of “Tao” and “Idea” show profound metaphysical character, which has a far-reaching impact on later poetics and become the source of Chinese and Western poetics tradition. From the ontological point of view, the two have something in common;
however, because they are rooted in different cultural soils, there are essential differences between them, which leads to different development paths of Chinese and Western poetics.

Plato divides the world into idea world and perceptual world according to “idea theory”, and developed the theory of imitation, which can be applied to almost every field of study and becomes a general rule to explain the relationship between correspondence and primary and secondary. In the origin of literature, Plato claims that all arts, including poetry, are the imitation of the imitation of the idea world, and the artists, including the poets, are just imitators who make imitations and know nothing about the object of imitation. While Zhuangzi’s “Tao” is a noumenon characterized by nihility and chaos, it is “self-rooted” that transcends the lower field of “shape, color and reputation” but is not completely separated from the perceptual world. It cannot be spoken, cannot be perceived by human senses, nor can it be recognized by human rational thinking. It can only be understood in experience and practice. People can reach the realm of enlightenment and of being integrated with Tao only through “heart fasting” and “sitting and forgetting”. Therefore, compared with Plato’s rational speculative philosophy, Zhuangzi’s philosophy is a kind of poetic existential philosophy. It is just like what Heidegger (1990, p. 185) says, “Poetic dwelling”. It’s about how you settle down in this complicated world. But no matter it is “Idea” or “Tao”, they all reflect philosophers’ hope to solve the contradictions of the real world in a transcendental world beyond the perceptual world.

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