

An Analysis of the Mechanism Behind the Aesthetic Realm in “The Butcher’s Art of Cutting Beef”

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Abstract: The fable of “Butchering the Ox” in Zhuangzi’s “The Lord of Life” is not only an example of Taoist thought, but also contains a rich philosophy of life and aesthetic value. In this paper, from the perspective of Taoist philosophy, aesthetics, and Marx’s view of labor, the study analyzes the mechanism of generating aesthetic realm contained in “Butchering the Ox”: explain the logic of generating aesthetic realm, reveal the intrinsic correlation between “Butchering the Ox” and aesthetic realm; analyze the practice of generating aesthetic realm; analyze the method of generating aesthetic realm; explore the Taoist “Butchering the Ox.” The study explores the influence of Taoism’s “virtual quiet”, “divine encounter”, and other ideas on the aesthetic realm, combined with Marx’s view of labor, and analysis of the generation of the aesthetic realm of the law. It is found that the aesthetic realm presented by “Butchering the Ox” is not only the compliance with the laws of nature, but also the affirmation of the value of labor practice, which provides important reference for contemporary individual spiritual cohesion, artistic creation, and labor practice.

Keywords: Zhuangzi; Butcher’s Ox; Aesthetic realm; View of labor

Online publication: August 12, 2025

1. Introduction

The phrase “Butchering the Ox” comes from “Zhuangzi — The Lord of Nourishing Life”; the text is tightly structured with vivid and refined language, which presents the process of generating the aesthetic realm through the depiction of the process of untying the ox in a metaphorical way. Xu Fuguan, in the “spirit of Chinese art,” will be referred to as “the source of ancient Chinese art spirit”, butchering the ox is a technology in the process of artistic creation. This paper is based on “Zhuangzi” text, combined with Taoist doctrine and Marx’s view of labor, systematic combining “Butchering the ox” aesthetic realm of generative logic, generative practice, generative law and other connotations, with a view to contemporary individuals to enhance the spiritual realm of art creation and labor practice to provide ideological reference.

2. Generation logic of aesthetic realm

2.1. The description of “unravelling the cow”, the aesthetic experience is born

Zhuangzi — the Lord of Life” describes the butcher’s “hand touch, shoulder leaning. The foot of the shoe, the knee of the shin not in the sound, together with the dance of the mulberry grove, is in the meeting of the head of the scripture.” Butcher’s action of unlocking the cattle running in the clouds and flowing water, moving as music, beautiful as a dance, to achieve the realm of forgetfulness, the skills will be sublimated into the “unity of heaven and man” ritual performance. After the completion of the cattle action, “stand with the knife, look around for the hesitation, good knife and hide it”, full of aesthetic pleasure. Butchering the ox has a multi-layered metaphor: ox body sinews and bones are like all kinds of obstacles in the world, the blade wandering is like cultivating the heart, the way to break through in accordance with the principles of heaven, “with no thick into there is a” sublimation of the “false self to swim in the world” of the aesthetic realm. As Wang Jianjiang said: “Zhuangzi’s description of the ‘Butcher’s Cow’ is a true fusion of internal and external aesthetics in the history of Chinese aesthetics, but also the beginning of the combination of the realm of life and the realm of art”^[1]. The famous scholar Xu Fuguan believes that “Butchering a cow” is the process of artistic creation from technology, life presents a situation that embodies the spirit of art. “Butchering the ox” can be regarded as “the source of the spirit of ancient Chinese art”^[2].

2.2. “From technology into the road”, the aesthetic self-generation

Butcher said: “I meet with God and not with the eyes”, “Tao” far beyond the needs of the senses, lies in the “God meets”, here the subject beyond the sensory limitations, with the free spirit of the cow’s internal laws. Here, the subject transcends the limitations of the senses and is in harmony with the inner laws of the cow in a free spirit. The realm of “Tao” is generated in the process of continuous polishing, correction, and realization of technology, and “Tao” is not an abstract existence separate from “technology.” Technique is “law”, “Tao” is “law of law”, only “technique” is in only when “technique” is in line with “Tao” can technique be pure and refined. “Technique” is utilitarian and purposeful, a means to achieve “Tao”; “Tao” is the sublimation of “technique.” Sublimation, when the skill reaches the ultimate, the subject will go beyond the utilitarian purpose, into the “self-accomplishment” state of mind. Boo Ding after the ox, “with the knife and stand, for the four, for the hesitation”, this is his technical fluency, the affirmation of their own value, but also the enjoyment of spiritual freedom.

2.3. “Things I am one”, the formation of the aesthetic realm

Butcher’s cattle process is to get rid of the object and self, so that the “Tao” can be manifested and the process of operation. From “I” to “self” to “self” to “real me”, to achieve the integration of people and things, the aesthetic realm can be generated in the continuous understanding. The Tao embodies a sense of unity and harmony, or a state of forgetfulness of both things and oneself, as a result of the elimination of the antagonism between things and oneself. This state of “sitting in oblivion” makes the subject and the object no longer in an antagonistic cognitive relationship, but in a symbiotic relationship of “all things and I are one.” According to Xu Fuguan, the experience of manipulating the knife that Butcher described to Wenhui Gong was actually a kung fu process in which he could move from skill to Dao, i.e., from technology to artistic creation, and thus Butcher’s realm was the realm of art and beauty^[3]. Zong Baihua said, “The formation of Chinese artistic mood, both must have Qu Yuan’s lingering sentimental, and Zhuangzi’s transcendental ethereal. The lingering and sentimental, in order to be in love, deep into the core of all things, the ‘get its ring in’”^[4].

3. The practice of generating the aesthetic realm

The characteristics of Chinese art creation are different from the Western “realistic”; it mainly focuses on “writing”, emphasizing the “external teacher of creation, in the source of the heart”, and advocating for nature as a teacher, the so-called “Taoism law of nature.” “Taoism is based on nature.” The generation of the aesthetic realm needs to be through the “Nurturing the spirit”, “heart fasting”, “follow the road”, “divine encounter”, “the spirit of the world.” The generation of the aesthetic realm needs to enter into the state of silence through the practice of “Nourishing the Spirit”, “Mindfulness”, “Following the Way”, “Divine Encounter”, etc., to reach the state of “unity of heaven and man” and the realm of freedom of great beauty.

3.1. “Nurture the spirit”: Aesthetic spirit of concentration

Butcher “every to the clan, I see it’s difficult to do, fear for the warning, as a stop, behavior is late”, in the complexity of the place to remain vigilant, this focus so that its spirit is not lax. This concentration keeps the spirit from laxity. The chapter “Carving the Meaning” says, “Pure and unadulterated, quiet and unchanging, cheerful and do-nothing, and moving with heavenly action, this is the way to nourish the spirit also.” That is to do things to adhere to the concentration of concentration, in practice, constantly exploring the laws of development of things, to “nature” as a teacher, constantly innovate, like a butcher, focus on a particular thing, not for the matter of tired, no distractions in the heart, the life can be “easy to use”, the full extent of the beauty of it.

3.2. Mindfulness: The aesthetic subject of silence

Zhuangzi called the “heart of the fast”: “Zhuangzi — The world on earth” cloud: “If a will, without listening to the ear to listen to the heart, without listening to the heart to listen to the gas. Hearing stops at the ear, and the heart stops at the charm. The gas is also the one that is empty and awaits things. The only way to set up the virtual. The empty one is also the heart fasting.” “One will” means “forgetting oneself”, forgetting sensual desires and selfish thoughts, so that one can return to a state of tranquility. Virtual silence is in a kind of no utilitarian, no purpose, “subject and object dissolution, the thing as one” aesthetic realm. The creation of this realm is rooted in the Taoist philosophical concepts of “virtual tranquility” and “sitting in oblivion”, which constitute the core spirit of Chinese aesthetics.

3.3. Following the Tao: the return of aesthetic nature

“Heaven is the natural law that everything follows, and human beings are animals with rationality and “consciousness.” The so-called “Tao law of nature” also means that people should follow the universe of nature, “sunrise, sunset, and rest”, “What does heaven say? The four seasons are not” (“Analects of Confucius — Yangguo”) natural laws. Butcher followed the physiological structure of cattle, that is, follow the laws of nature this “heavenly principle”, reduce the consumption of thoughts and distractions, such as into the realm of no one else, reached the “selfless” realm, Butcher after the cattle produced by the aesthetic pleasure of complacency, side by side to prove that the Butcher is not forced by the pressure of Jun Wenhui and cattle, but from the heart, into the aesthetic experience of the “way” of the realm, that is, “the unity of man and heaven” in the realm.

3.4. Divine encounter: the key to aesthetic experience

“To meet with God and not with the eye” is the key to the aesthetic experience of Butcher’s cattle. Butcher’s cattle skills such as running water full of beauty, the reason why so skillful, not only rely on his skills, but in his pursuit of the “Tao”, “the quietness and indifference of the silent and indifferent, the basis of all things.” (“Zhuangzi —

the way of heaven”) and the butcher’s “God”, is “to meet with God not to see”, God “is obviously not external and beyond the gods, earth spirits, ghosts, but within the life of a spiritual ability, the mind kinetic energy. Xu Fuguan pointed out that the stage of “seeing with the eyes” corresponds to the realm of “to be”, while the stage of “encountering the divine” transcends the senses and arrives at the realm of “not to be” (the realm of “not to be”). The stage of “divine encounter” transcends the senses and arrives at the realm of “no waiting” ^[5].

4. The law of generation of the aesthetic realm

4.1. Unity of lawfulness and purposefulness

Zhuang Zi’s words “according to the reason of heaven” and “due to its inherent nature” objectively reveal how people can achieve freedom in practice. According to Zhuang Zi, there is “art” in “skill.” Zhuangzi — the Lord of Life” cloud: “He section of the intermediate, and the blade is not thick, in order to have no thick into the intermediate, to restore the edge of the edge will have a margin of carry forward.” “Section” is certainly impenetrable, but after all, there is a gap, which provides a world for people to “swim edge”, “swim edge” two words, living out of the solution to the oxen in the natural and beyond the nature of the divine Realm. Butcher’s movements and sounds like dance, music, with aesthetic ornamental, and finally entered the “free travel” stage of materialization, that is, the character of the free realm of unity. Butcher is borrowing skills into the road, with the body demonstration interpretation of what is the beauty of the creative process, this aesthetic experience and creation, to achieve the unity of the law and purpose, the unity of the ultra-utilitarian and ultra-purpose, in order to achieve the “God meets the eye and not the eye to see, the official knows to stop and God wants to walk” free and easy realm.

4.2. The unity of self-existence and self-made things

“Butchering cattle” reveals that artistic free labor, cattle activities are spiritually creative artistic production, and is the unity of law and purpose of the labor process. Butchering in the pursuit of the “Tao” and the free aesthetic realm in the process of self-artistic labor has been affirmed. Mr Feng Qi’s “Wisdom” says a lot about this fable. According to Feng Qi, this parable reveals the process of transforming the self into the self, and the “natural world” into the “world of meaning.” It embodies the creativity of human beings to change the world and the most essential power of human beings, which is in line with the aesthetic concept of “free labor.” What is freedom? According to Mr Feng Qi, epistemologically speaking, “Freedom is the knowledge of necessity and the transformation of the world according to this knowledge” ^[6].

4.3. Unity according to the divine principle and the laws of nature

“Butchery” makes labor an art, i.e., the activity of transforming objective things in accordance with human aesthetic needs. According to Feng Qi, if it is both a realistic and lawful activity and reflects the requirements of progressive mankind, then it is good and good. “The official knows to stop while the god desires to act” is free from the bondage of senses and utilitarianism, and achieves the spiritual state of “the mind travelling with things.” The “complacency” of “standing with a sword and looking around” is the subject’s affirmation of the value of his own existence, marking the “objectification of the essential power of man.” By realizing the unity of the subjective spirit and the objective law of man, and by following the Divine Principle, one can be at ease, and the complacency after the completion of the ox-solving is a reflection of the aesthetic state of freedom.

5. Conclusion

As a classic fable of Zhuangzi, “Butchering the Ox” shows a profound philosophy of life and aesthetic realm with a vivid story. Starting from the aesthetic experience described in “unravelling the ox”, to the aesthetic self-acquisition generated by the technique into the Tao, and then to the formation of the aesthetic realm of the object and self, it contains a rich view of life and the connotation of aesthetics; analyses through the “nourishing the spirit”, “the heart fasting”, “the Tao”, “the aesthetic realm”, and “the aesthetic realm”, and “the aesthetic realm.” It analyzes the practical methods of entering the aesthetic realm through “nourishing the spirit”, “spiritual retreat”, “following the way”, and “divine encounter”, etc., and reveals the law of aesthetic spirit generation according to Marx’s aesthetic concept of “labor creates beauty. The law of spiritual generation. “Butchering the ox” story is very strong, rich in connotation, and can have a multi-faceted interpretation, an important revelation to the present. The real meaning of “Butchering the ox” does not lie in the “Tao” of empty thoughts, metaphysical thoughts, but in the daily practice of the “Tao” of the spirit of practice. The inheritance of this spirit is the light of wisdom that the Chinese traditional culture contributes to the development of modern civilization.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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