

THE ORIGINAL MEANING OF THE CHINESE CHARACTER FOR “BEAUTY”

JIANPING GAO

1

“Beauty” is translated into Chinese as 美 (*mei*) and “Aesthetics” as 美学 (*meixue*) (literally meaning the studies of the beauty). The compound 美学 (*meixue*) is new in Chinese and its origin is due to translation in modern time. But indigenous in China is the word *mei* (beauty), which appeared as early as more than 3000 years ago. The very first question in aesthetics was probably “what is beauty?” The concept of beauty in the mind of ancient Chinese is not necessarily identical with that in the mind of modern people, but an investigation of it may be of some interest to today’s aesthetic inquiry, and, as we shall see, it already attracts attention of some scholars in the fields of both linguistics and aesthetics.

“美” (beauty) is traditionally considered to be composed of two characters: 羊 (sheep) and 大 (large). A large sheep will supply plenty of delicious meat. This explanation comes from *Shuowen Jiezi* (100 A.D.), a pioneering book on the research of Chinese characters:

美 (beauty) means delicious. It is composed of 羊 (sheep) and 大 (large). Among six domestic animals (cow, horse, sheep, pig, hen, and dog), sheep are the major sacrificial offerings. Beauty is identical with goodness.¹

This opinion was accepted by almost all philologists in ancient China, such as Xu Xuan (917–992), Xu Kai (920–974), Duan Yucai (1735–1815), Wang Yun (1784–1854), and Zhu Junsheng (1788–1858), who provided

¹ *Shuowen Jiezi* (literally means “a discription of simply characters and explanation of complex characters”) is a dictionary-like book which was intended to explain Chinese characters on the basis of their forms. It was compiled by Xu Shen (30–124 A.D.). This paragraph is quoted from the entry of the beauty of this book.

authoritative interpretations of *Shuowen Jiezi* in their own generations separately. It remains to be the most influential conclusion even today. Two of the most influential dictionaries of our times, *Ciyuan* (*The Origin of Words*)² and *Zhongwen Da Cidian* (*A Great Dictionary of the Chinese Language*)³, among many other dictionaries, still put “the delicious” as the first meaning for “beauty”. One of the most important Chinese aestheticians, Zhu Guangqian (1897 – 1986), accepted this definition and developed from it a utilitarian concept of beauty by saying that “beauty originated from the flavor of sheep soup.”⁴ Some scholars outside China also accepted this definition. For example, Kasahara Chuji has pointed out: “The most primitive idea of beauty of the Chinese people, generally speaking, originates directly from the experience of the sense of flavor.”⁵ This opinion has been widely accepted from 2000 years ago up to today, from the most prominent philologists to the most important aestheticians, and from China to Japan and perhaps to other countries. However, as we shall see, it is probably a mistake. *Shuowen Jiezi* analyses the Chinese character 美 (beauty) by means of its form in the Qin Dynasty (221 – 207 B.C.), i.e. small seal script. The 美 (beauty) is written thus

It is certainly composed of two characters 大 (large) and 羊 (sheep), which are written respectively as

Modern archeology, however, offers us some much older characters: i.e. shell-and-bone script (*jiaguwen*)⁶ and bronze script (*jinwen*)⁷:

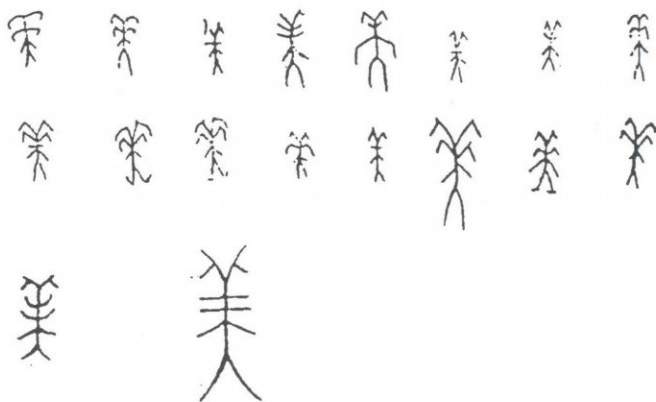
² *Ci Yuan*, (literally means “The Origin of Words, Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1988).

³ *Zhongwen Da Cidian*, (literally means, “A Great Dictionary of Chinese Words”, Taipei: 1967).

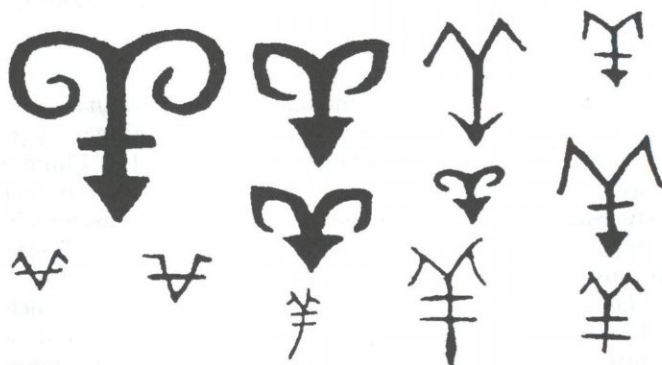
⁴ Zhu Guangqian, *Letters on Beauty*, (Shanghai, 1980) p. 25. Zhu published voluminous books and papers on aesthetics from 1920s to 1980s, as well as translated many important books, such as Hegel’s *Aesthetics* and Vico’s *The New Science*, into Chinese.

⁵ Cf. Kasahara Chuji, *The Aesthetic Consciousness of Ancient Chinese*. Nohon Hoyu shoten 1979.

⁶ Shell-and-bone script was the characters used in the late Shang Dynasty. The Shang Dynasty existed from ca. the 16th century to ca. the 11th century B.C. The earliest characters on bones was written in circa 1395 B.C. (See Hu Houxuan, *A Summary of the Research on the Shell-and-bone Script in Late 50 Years* (The Commerce Press, 1951) p. 66. Shell-and-bone script, therefore, is the writing from c.14th century to c. the 11th century B.C.



In shell-and-bone script and bronze script, sheep is written to be



It is obvious that only some of the characters for beauty looked like a sheep in the upper part. Thus, there is not much justification for the conclusion that all the characters for “beauty” have “sheep” as their upper part.

Shuowen Jiezi infers “delicious flavor” from the meaning of “large sheep”, leading some aestheticians to proclaim that Chinese consciousness of beauty originated from the sense of flavor instead of the sense of sight. Now that the very first question at issue is whether the original meaning of the character for beauty came from the sense of flavor or from the sense of sight, I consider that a simple rule could be applied here: the original meaning of a word always appears before its extended meanings. There are now a large number of ancient Chinese texts available. If we examine all these texts, especially the oldest ones, we will clearly see what the original meaning of a character is.

⁷ Bronze script can be divided into inscriptions on the bronze objects of the Shang Dynasty (c. 16th century – c.11th century B.C.) and those of the Zhou Dynasty (c.11th century – 221 B.C.). But what are concerned here is mainly those of the former.

This is, however, by no means an easy job. There are two things must be done. One is to read all these texts and discern meanings of characters for beauty from the context in which the characters appear. Since there are so many ancient texts, this work is obviously dull and arduous. But, it is even more difficult to ascertain when these texts were severally written and compiled. Many Chinese philologists have been conducting research along this line from as early as the Han Dynasty up to now and tremendous knowledge was accumulated. What I have to do is to make full use of the outcomes of their research and make a choice among the conclusions whenever they do not agree one another.

Here is a sketch of my discoveries: In the *Book of Documents*,⁸ the character 美 (beauty) appears twice; neither refers to the “beauty of flavor”. In the *Book of Poetry*⁹ the character for beauty appears 40 times; none of these refer to the “beauty of flavor”. Other ancient books, such as the *Analects*,¹⁰ *Yili*,¹¹ *Zhouli*,¹² *Zhouyi* (*The Book of Change*),¹³ *The Spring and Autumn Annals*,¹⁴ *Chunqiu Zuoshi*

⁸ *The Book of Documents* was considered to be one of the oldest books in China. Some chapters of it were proved to be written in the early years of the Western Zhou Dynasty (c. 11th century B.C.). Although the authenticity of this book was questioned by Chinese scholars from the Qing Dynasty to the early this century, it is highly probable that part of this book was edited or even re-written by people in later generations. Anyway, we still have some good evidences showing that at least part the book was indeed taking shape in the early Zhou Dynasty. Xu Xusheng managed to present a remote history of China in *The Legendary Ages in Ancient Chinese History Books* (Chinese Science Press, 1960), in which a paper by a scientist, Zhu Kezhen was included. This paper proves the written time of *The Book of Documents* by means of certain astronomical evidence, which seems more convincing than barely textual analysis.

⁹ *The Book of Poetry* was allegedly compiled by Confucius (551 – 479 B.C.). Thus it should be a collection of poems or folk songs appeared before or contemporary to Confucius.

¹⁰ *The Analects* was allegedly written and compiled by Confucius's students or student's students. If this was true, the book should take shape in ca. 450 B.C.

¹¹ *Yili* was also allegedly compiled by Confucius, thus it should be emerged before Confucius. Liang Qichao, *The Authenticity of the Ancient Books and Their Dating* “the seventeen chapters available today probably came out of Confucius's hand. The rites in Zhou Dynasty were overlaborate. Confucius sorted them out and thus made them suitable.

¹² *Zhouli* (*The Rites of the Zhou*) was written in the early years of the Warring States Period (475 B.C. – 221 B.C.), and was revised in the Han Dynasty (206 B.C. – 220 A.D.). Zhang Xincheng, *A General Survey of Ancient Books of Dubious Authenticity: Zhouli* is the overall scheme for establishing the country, drafted up by the Confucians who knew the law, rituals and economy in the early Warring States Period. In the early Western Han it was stored in the loyal stacks. Liu Xin saw it during the rule of Wang Mang (9 – 23 A.D.), and published it with his changes.

¹³ *Zhouyi* (*The Book of Change*) roughly consists of two groups of texts. One was written before Confucius and compiled by him and was called *Yijing* (*The Classic of Change*). The other was written by Confucius or the followers of him in the Warring States Period, and

Zhuan (the *Zuo Qiuming's Annotations of the Spring and Autumn Annals*),¹⁵ *Guo Yu* (the *Histories of the States in the Spring and Autumn Period*),¹⁶ *Gongyang Zhuan* (*Gongyang Gao's Annotations of the Spring and Autumn Annals*),¹⁷ *Guliang Zhuan* (*Guliang Chi's Annotations of the Spring and Autumn Annals*),¹⁸ *Daodejing*,¹⁹ *Zhuangzi*,²⁰ *Chuci* (*The Poetry of the Chu*),²¹ *Zhanguo Ce* (*The Histories of the States in the Warring States Period*),²² *Guanzi*,²³ etc., use the character “美” (beauty)

was called *Yizhuan* (*The Annotations to the Classic of Change*) or *Yidazhuan* (*The Great Annotations to the Classic of Change*). Liang Qicao illustrate a more detailed picture on it in his *The Authenticity of the Ancient Books and Their Dating*: “We should date the drawing of Eight Trigrams to the remote past, date the coupling of two trigrams into hexagrams, Guaci (explanation of the text of the whole hexagram) and Yaoci (the explanation of the component lines) to the early Zhou Dynasty, date Tuanci (the commentary on Guaci) and Xiangci (the explanation of the abstract meaning of Guaci and Xiangci) to Confucius, date Xici (Appended Remarks) and Wenyan (commentary on the first two hexagrams, the qian or Heaven and the kun or Earth) to the end of the Warring States Period, date Shuogua (*The Remarks on Certain Trigrams*) and Zagua (*The Random Remarks on the Hexagrams*) to the time between the Warring States Period, and the Qin and Han dynasties. [Thus we can] observe people's mind and outlook on the world and life in different ages.”

¹⁴ *The Spring and Autumn Annals*, which was allegedly written by Confucius. Ban Gu wrote in his “A Biography of Sima Qian” in *The History of the Han Dynasty*: “Confucius wrote *The Spring and Autumn Annals* based on *The Records of the History of the Lu State*.”

¹⁵ *Chunqiu Zuoshi Zhuan* was said to have been written by Zuo Qiuming, but it is a disputing issue. It is generally considered to have been written in the early Warring State Period, and revised in the Han Dynasty.

¹⁶ *Guoyu* was also said to have been written by Zuo Qiuming, according to the records of some ancient books, including the *Records of the Historian* by Sima Qian. Some modern Chinese scholars, however, believe that it was written by many historians from 400 – 300 B.C. Cf. Wei Juxian *A Study of Guoyu*.

¹⁷ *Gongyang Zhuan* was said to have been written by Gongyang Gao in the Warring States Period.

¹⁸ *Guliang Zhuan*, was said to have been written by Guliang Chi in the Warring States Period.

¹⁹ *Daodejing* was allegedly written by Laozi (Lao Dan). The *Records of the Historian* by Sima Qian says that Confucius once asked Laozi about the rites (see the *Records of the Historian*, “The Biographies of Laozi, Zhuangzi, Shen Buhai, and Han Fei) then Laozi should live contemporary to or even a little older than Confucius. However, it is still a disputed question about whether extant *Daodejing* was written by Laozi. Tang Lan, Hu Shi, among other famous scholars, believed that it was written by Laozi. Feng Youlan believed that it was written in the Warring States Period (Feng Youlan, *The History of Chinese Philosophy*). Most Chinese scholars now accepted Feng Youlan's opinion.

²⁰ *Zhuangzi* was allegedly written by Zhuang Zhou (ca. 369 – 286 B.C.) and his followers. Thus it took shape in the Warring States period.

²¹ *Chuci* (*The Poetry of the Chu*) was a collection of the poems by Qu Yuan (c.340 – 278 B.C.) and his followers.

²² The author of *Zhanguo Ce* (*The Strategy of the Warring States*) is unknown. *Si Ku Ti Yao* (*Summaries of the Four Categories of Books*) says that it was compiled by Liu Xiang (77? – 6

signifying various meanings, but none of them are the beauty of flavor. The *Book of Mencius*²⁴ uses the word 16 times and *Xunzi*²⁵ more than 70 times, but both of them have only one referring to the beauty of flavor respectively.²⁶ *Mozi* is really an exception. The character 美 (beauty) appears in this book for 40 times, among which as many as three concerning the beauty of flavor. *Mozi* is regarded as having been written by Mo Di (478? – 392? B.C.) as well as his disciples, but this book, as many Chinese scholars have pointed out, took shape as late as the Han Dynasty (206 B.C. – 220 A.D.).²⁷ *Mozi* might be able to preserve the ideas of Mo Di and his students, but the recorders and compilers in the Han Dynasty presumably follow the linguistic convention of his own age whenever they revised or edited the ancient texts (if these texts did exist in the Han Dynasty). Another exception is *Liji* (*The Records of the Rituals*). The character for beauty appears in *Liji* for circa 40 times, five of which indicate the beauty of food. The account for it is similar to *Mozi*. This book was written during a long period from the Warring States Period to the Han Dynasty, namely, it retains some texts of the Warring States period, but was revised, replenished and compiled by the scholars of the Han period.²⁸ The earliest books in which the character for beauty frequently appeared are probably *Lüshi Chunqiu*²⁹ and *Hanfeizi*.³⁰ The character for beauty appeared in *Hanfeizi*

B.C.) from various historical records. Luo Genze guesses that it was written by Kuai Tong, a persuasive talker in the early Han Dynasty.

²³ *Guanzi*, though traditionally attributed to Guan Zhong (? – 645 B.C.), was generally believed not written by him, but by certain Legalists in the late Warring States Period.

²⁴ *The Book of Mencius* was allegedly written by Meng Ke (ca.372 – 289 B.C.), and there is not much disputation on this conclusion.

²⁵ Most chapters of *Xunzi* were written by Xun Kuang (331? – 238 B.C.), except for a few by his students or followers. Liang Qichao wrote: “*Xunzi* is creditable on the whole. Only seven chapters such as...are probably not completely out of the hand of *Xunzi*. They were recorded either by Xun’s disciples or added by people in later generations.

²⁶ *Mencius*: “Which among the sliced and fried meat or *yangzao* (a kind of fruit) is more beautiful?” *Xunzi*: “It is natural to human beings that their mouths like tasty food which is taken as beauty.”

²⁷ Guo Moruo, *The Bronze Age*: “The text of *Mozi* existing today is edited by people of the Han Dynasty.” Luo Genze, *An Investigation of the Texts by the Pre-Qin Philosophers* quoted the remarks by Ruan Diaofu: “*Mozi* became a book as such actually since the Han Dynasty.”

²⁸ He Yisun, *Questions and Answers about the Eleven Classics*: “Question: Who wrote *Liji*?” Answer: “Confucius made remarks. His seventy-two disciples recorded what they had heard. The Confuscians in the Qin and Han period edited them into a book. Most of them are not the original remarks of Confucius. It is only someone else’s remarks under Confucius’s name wherever it refers to Confucius’s remarks.”

²⁹ *Lüshi Chunqiu* is a book written by a group of scholars under Lü Buwei (? – 235 B.C.), the prime minister of the Qin state.

³⁰ *Han Feizi* was written by Han Fei (280? – 233 B.C.), an important Legalist writer. The authenticity of this book is generally creditable.

around 70 times, 10 of which refer to the beauty of food. *Lüshi Chunqiu* describes the food from different parts of China and uses the character for beauty for as many as seven times in a single paragraph. Both *Lüshi Chunqiu* and *Hanfeizi* are books written at the end of the Warring States Period. I have also read books copied on silk in the Han tombs at Mawangdui³¹ and found that neither of the two versions of *Daodejing* (*Laozi*) in the tombs use character for beauty referring to the beauty of food or flavor. In all of the other silk-books in the tomb, only one, *Wuxing* (*The Five Agents*, a book or a chapter from a lost ancient book), use the character for beauty twice to refer to delicious food (since this text is not mentioned by other ancient books, we have no direct evidences to decide its written time, but from the philosophical ideas appearing in it I suppose that it was written at the end of the Warring States Period or later).

That when and by whom the ancient Chinese books were written is a very complicated question. The versions of the books existing now were usually compiled, revised, replenished by many scholars in the separate period of the history. What I stated above is only a simple sketch to the whole picture and there is no room for me to describe it at length in this paper. This simple sketch, however, is sufficient for us to get a primary division as follows:

(1) In the Western Zhou Dynasty (ca.11th century – 771 B.C.), the Spring and Autumn Period (770 – 476 B.C.) and even in the early Warring States Period (475 B.C. – ca.380 B.C.), Chinese people by no means considered that delicious food can be “beautiful”.

(2) In the middle Warring States Period (ca.380 – ca.280 B.C.), they began to mention the beauty of food occasionally.

(3) In the late Warring States Period (ca.280 – 221 B.C.), the beauty of delicious food began to be frequently talked.

The details of the sketch and the division of the historical phases put forth above are still open to dispute, but it becomes evident that the fundamental fact is indisputable, i.e. the beauty of flavor is not the original meaning of the word. The argument put forward by Xu Shen and his followers is not tenable.

Besides the facts given above, I am fortunate in obtaining further evidence in two books which are comparable to today’s dictionaries. One of them is *Erya*, the other is *Guangya*. *Erya* took shape from the Warring States period to the Han Dynasty.³² It offers two groups of synonyms to “beauty”,³³ but none of

³¹ Silk Books from Mawangdui Tombs of the Han Dynasty.

³² Zhang Xincheng, *A General Survey of Ancient Books of Dubious Authenticity*: *Erya* should be a dictionary before and in the Han Dynasty. It was gradually accumulated and added, not by a single person.

them is relevant to the beauty of food or flavor. *Guangya* was compiled in the Three Kingdoms Period (220 – 280 A.D.). It also records a group of synonyms to “beauty”, which is quite different from those provided by *Erya*.³⁴ There are many words in the latter group referring to delicious food or flavor in *Guangya*. The differences between these two books obviously caused by the fact that they edited in different ages. *Erya* was edited earlier, hence it does not explain beauty to be “delicious”. *Guangya* was edited in a later period when the “delicious” must have already become one of the major meanings of the character for beauty. *Guangya* was also edited at a time after *Shuowen Jiezi*, therefore it was possibly influenced by the latter.

Now we reach a conclusion that the beauty of delicious food is by no means the original meaning of beauty. From this judgement we may also infer that the character is not composed of large and sheep. Any deductions from it with regard to aesthetics will, therefore, be groundless.

2

I am not the first person to challenge the opinion of “large sheep being beauty”. In China, there are at least three opinions opposite to that of “large sheep”. The difference between mine and theirs are, first of all, not in the opinions themselves, but in the approaches. What I have done above is to try to find the characters for beauty from ancient Chinese books and study their meanings in particular contexts, hence getting sufficient evidences for my conclusion, rather than guess their meanings merely in accordance with forms of the ideographs. Now, I am going to continue my discussion by commenting these three opinions. These opinions are:

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尔雅·释诂上》：唯唯，藐藐，穆穆，休，嘉，珍，祗，懿，懿，美也。《尔雅·释训第三》：委委，佗佗，美也

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广雅》卷一上：腴，媿，醜，髮，臙，臙，臙，臙，醜，皇，翼，滑，黨，賁，膚，熹，琇，甘，珍，旨，姁，燕，將，英，臙，媿，女媿，豐，玊，美也。

(1) One part of the character “美” refers to its meaning, and the other part of it refers to its pronunciation. Its representative is Kong Kuangju and Ma Xulun;³⁵

(2) Imitating a man wearing feathers on his head. It was suggested by Wang Xiantang and Kang Yin.³⁶

(3) Imitating a man wearing sheep horns or a sheep on his head. It was put forth by Xiao Bing.³⁷

Among these three opinions, I am first going to comment on “imitating a man wearing sheep horns”, then “imitating a man wearing feathers”. I will neglect the opinion of the first opinion listed above, because it has already proved to be groundless by Chinese philologists and almost no books mention their ideas thereafter and no influence it has exerted on the aesthetic society.

While we say that “large sheep” is a traditional opinion in China, and is mainly held by philologists but accepted by some aestheticians, “imitating a man wearing sheep horns or a sheep” is now a prevailing opinion in China, especially in the aesthetic society. One of the leading aestheticians now in China, Li Zehou (1930–), approves of it, though with some hesitation.³⁸

Xiao Bing put forward in his paper many arguments, two of which will be discussed in this paper:

(1) 大 (large) in inscriptions on bones and tortoise shells (shell-and-bone script) and inscriptions on bronze objects (bronze script) actually illustrates a man. Thus 美 (beauty) illustrates a man wearing horns or head of a sheep rather than being composed of two characters for “large” and “sheep”.

(2) The man who was wearing horns or head of a sheep was the chief or sorcerer of a primitive tribe. He was playing a ritual dance of totemism or sorcery.

With regard to Xiao Bing’s first argument, I would like to point out that, as I mentioned above, it is questionable whether the upper part of 美 (beauty)

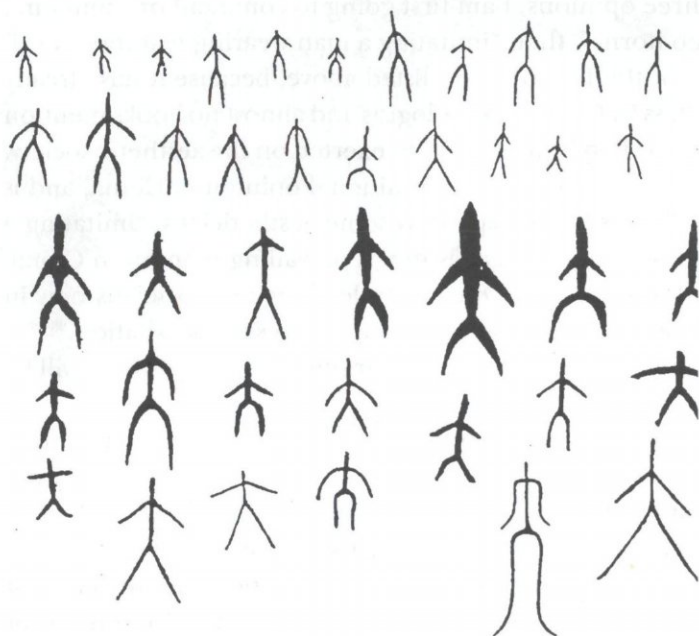
³⁵ Kong Kuangju, *Inquisition into Shuowen* should be explained as following (sheep) in its meaning and following (big) in its pronunciation. Ma Xulun, *Exegesis of Suowen Jiezi*: “In my mind *mei* must be following the meaning of (large), and following the pronunciation of *yu*.”

³⁶ Wang Xiantang, *Collect Interpretations of Bronze Script*. Kang Yin, *The Sources and Development of Characters*.

³⁷ Xiao Bing, “From ‘Beauty of Big Sheep’ to ‘Beauty of Sheep and Man’”, *Beifang Luncong*, 1980 No. 3.

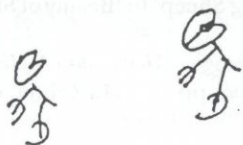
³⁸ Li Zehou and Liu Gangji, *Zhongguo Meixueshi (A History of Chinese Aesthetics)*. Vol 1, pp. 79-82. Li Zehou, *Chinese Aesthetics*, pp. 2-10. Li Zehou, *Four Lectures on Aesthetics*, pp. 34-35. Li Zehou declares that he prefers the opinion and phrases it in rhetoric, but also acknowledges that further research is needed.

refers merely to “sheep”. The forms of the characters for beauty in shell-and-bone script and bronze script show that some look like horns in the upper part, some look like feathers, and some look like something else. We have no reason to claim that all of them are merely horns, let alone horns of sheep or head of sheep. I agree with Xiao Bing’s opinion that the lower part of 美 in shell-and-bone script and bronze script illustrates a man. This judgement was not first suggested by Xiao Bing or me, but by some Chinese philologists. The following are characters 大 (large) in shell-and-bone script and bronze script:



However, I cannot agree with Xiao Bing on that this man is the chief or sorcerer of a primitive tribe. He did not give any evidence to support his argument. The story of a man playing ritual dance of totemism will turn out to be nothing else than his personal fancy.

There are few evidences of totemism in shell-and-bone script and bronze script. One example in shell-and-bone script which may be regarded as keeping a sense of linkage with totemism is the name of a god 羗 (Jun), whose head looked like that of a bird in the writing of shell-and-bone script:



But I would like to point out here that first he was already a god rather than a totemic animal (they belong to different stages of mental development) and second, the totemic animal was a bird rather than a sheep or other horned beasts. I will develop these two arguments later, but now the totemism and its appearance in China require more discussion.

The “classical” representatives of the conception of totemism are James G. Frazer *É*ile and Durkheim.³⁹ They put forward an “evolutionary” theory on totemism which believed that human culture was essentially unitary and universal, developing everywhere through the same stages. If we could identify a people who were “frozen” into an earlier stage, we would observe modes of thought and action that were directly ancestral to our own. This “classical” conception of totemism suffered “classical” critique as early as 1910. Alexander A. Goldenweiser pointed out that totemism appeared less as an institution or religion than as an adventitious combination of simpler and more widespread usages.⁴⁰ I do not intend to become involved in the quarrels with regard to totemism itself and the “evolutionary” theory. I would like only to say that when Frazer talked about the totemism in China in his four huge volumes of book *Totemism and Exogamy*, he made use of wrong evidences. He believed that many family names of Chinese people contained traces of totemism,⁴¹ which was a total misunderstanding. However, in order to avoid unnecessary disputation, I am ready to make concession to agree that this mistake does very little to undermine the credibility of the book as a whole, since the author mainly based his conclusion on the primitive peoples of Australia and only briefly mentioned China. I am also ready to accept the pronouncements that totemism is a kind of belief which appeared in a particular historic stage when social structures were in the form of clans and economic life was in the form of hunting and collecting. It is still very easy for us to explain why there are few evidences of totemism in the archeological discoveries in China: The cultural remains of ancient China available now were produced in a historic stage much higher than that of totemism.

Turning back to the discussion of the Chinese character for beauty, we can narrow the range of discussion on totemism to the time when the characters appeared rather than all Chinese history. As I put forth above, the earliest occurrence of *mei* 美 available are shell-and-bone script and bronze script, which have mostly been unearthed from the ruins of the Shang Dynasty.

³⁹ The more recent writings on totemism, e.g. by Sigmund Freud and Claude Lévi-Strauss, seem of no direct relevance to our discussion.

⁴⁰ Goldenweiser, Alexander A. “Totemism: An Analytical Study”, *Journal of the American Folk-Lore* 23 (1910):179-293.

⁴¹ J. G. Frazer, *Totemism and Exogamy*. Vol. II, pp. 338-339.

The Shang Dynasty lasted 600 years from the 16th century to the 11th century B. C., but shell-and-bone script unearthed only in Anyang, the so-called Yin Ruin. The Shang Dynasty moved its capital many times, with the last and longest capital in Anyang (Some scholars now argue that Anyang is not the capital of the Shang Kingdom, but its “Archives”, but this difference of opinions does not affect our reasoning). Thus shell-and-bone script available now go back to the latter half of the Shang Dynasty. According to some specialists, the earliest shell-and-bone script was written in the 14th century B.C. It is a time when agriculture already replaced collecting natural products (agriculture appeared in China as early as 8000 years ago), at least in the Shang nation;⁴² animal husbandry also took the place of animal hunting;⁴³ there existed a strong central government, with a huge administration, army and prison, etc. instead of clans and tribes in primitive society. With regard to the spiritual life of the Shang people, the shell-and-bone script tells us that there is God (帝) in the heaven, who can issue orders for wind, rain, the victory or defeat of a war, etc.⁴⁴ Such a God can never be produced in an age when totemism dominated the spiritual life of a people.⁴⁵

Although the facts are very clear, I am still going to make another concession, i.e. to agree that after the end of the totemic life of a nation, traces of totemism would remain in the cultural life of a nation for a very long time. The outcome of the most advanced thinking could have coexisted with the oldest one in the same community. Some modern Chinese scholars proclaimed that they have discovered some vestiges of totemism in ancient China. According to them, however, the totem of the Shang people is a bird rather than a sheep. *The Book of Poetry* says,

The Heaven decreed that the black bird,
Flew down to generate the Shang people,
Who would live on the vast land of the Yin.⁴⁶

Evidence can be found in other ancient books. The *Records of the Historian* says that the mother of Qi, the earliest ancestor of the Shang people, is Jiandi. She became pregnant after swallowing eggs of the black bird and then gave birth to Qi.⁴⁷ In *Lüshi Chunqiu*, a beautiful story was developed based on this

⁴² Archeological evidences show that ancient Chinese began their agricultural life as early as 8000 years ago, whereas the Shang Dynasty existed only from 3500 to 3000 years ago.

⁴³ Even sheep was a sort of domestic animal.

⁴⁴ cf. Chen Mengjia, *A General Introduction of Bone Characters of the Yin Ruins*.

⁴⁵ Cf. L. Lévy-Bruhl: *La Mentalité Primitive*.

⁴⁶ *The Book of Poetry*, “Black Bird”.

⁴⁷ Sima Qian, *Records of the Historian*, “The History of the Yin (Shang)”.

record. This record coincides with archeological discoveries. According to archeologists the tribes of eastern primitive China worshipped birds. The Shang people originated from the east. It is very probable that they once worshipped a kind of bird; sheep never enjoyed such a position in the whole history of the Shang people. It is evident that Xiao Bing's arguments are totally wrong.

The story does not end with our doing away with Xiao Bing's opinion. A new version of the totemic idea on the character of beauty emerged as if the self-contradiction of Xiao Bing's opinion had already been sensed. The new idea connected the character of beauty with another character 羌 (*qiang*). *Shuowen Jiezi* explains the character 羌 as shepherds in the west. From this, a story has been produced: sheep or goat played an important role in the economic life of the Qiang people. They worshipped sheep or goat and took it as their totemic animal. A sort of totemic dance was developed and the dancer would wear horns of sheep or sheep on their head. The Qiang people contributed dancers to the ruling family and nobles of the Shang nation. The dancing of those dancers was considered by the Shang people to be so beautiful that they created the character of beauty after these dancers. It seems to be an interesting story, but it is not proper to take it as a scientific conclusion without giving any evidence.⁴⁸

(1) Since the Qiang nation had already gone in for animal husbandry, its civilization was, though lower than that of the Shang people, much higher than that of the typical totemic peoples in Australia and North America, whose economic lives were mainly based on hunting and collecting. It is, therefore, hardly likely that the Qiang people would still take sheep or goat (even if they had done so in the remote past) as totemic animal.

(2) Suppose a dance of totemic meaning to the Qiang people still existed in the times of the Shang Dynasty (though it seemed impossible), this dance would not keep the same meaning to the Shang people. A cultural phenomenon constantly occurred in the history: a symbol that was religiously significant to a nation would lose this significance and gained simple or "pure" aesthetic meaning to another nation. The Shang people had their own beliefs and were proud of their civilization. They would never accept the cult of a people whom they regarded as barbarians. They could enjoy the dance of the Qiang people, but would never worship it. Even if all these stories are true, therefore, we still cannot say that the Shang people had totemism in mind

⁴⁸ Li Zehou and Liu Gangji, *A History of Chinese Aesthetics*. Vol 1, pp. 79-81. Li Zehou, *Chinese Aesthetics*, p. 2.

when they were creating the character of beauty. Needless to say, almost all evidences are against this story.

3

We have discussed two opinions on the origin of the concept of beauty in ancient China, and revealed that they are obviously against the historical facts. Besides them, there are some other opinions about the character 美 (beauty) in China. However, only the two discussed above have been accepted by aestheticians and regarded by them as having certain connections with the origin of aesthetic consciousness of ancient people. It might stimulate us to consider why the farther an opinion falls short of facts, the greater the opinion exerts an impact on the aesthetic society. Thus I would like to say something here before other opinions occupy our attentions.

“The beauty being composed of large and sheep” is an opinion deeply influenced by the philosophy and aesthetics of Confucian school. It is seen clearly from the judgement “beauty is identical with goodness” by *Shuowen Jiezi*.⁴⁹ Contemporary Chinese aesthetics, especially after 1949, has been developing in the framework of Marxism rather than Confucianism. Marx and Engels, however, did not write aesthetic monographs. Although their aesthetic ideas were implied in their writing on other subjects, they did not articulate it systematically. When Chinese people constructed their Marxist system of aesthetics, therefore, they had to feed in something from other sources. What they would supply were inevitably elements of Confucianism, even though some of those Chinese Marxists proclaimed themselves against Confucianism. Thus a utilitarian tendency naturally appeared in their understanding of beauty. They were willing to locate the origin of “beauty” in their daily life. Thus “large sheep” perfectly meets this need. No matter how difficult it is for us to accept an opinion such as this after discussions above, it is fair to say, this opinion played an active role for a period and once served as a weapon in struggling against a more dogmatical aesthetic thought. The reason for this is that, although this opinion bears a strong shade of utilitarianism, it still stresses the relation of beauty to human beings, rather than regarding beauty as an attribute of objects without any connection with human beings.⁵⁰ However, since it does not agree with the new discovery of

⁴⁹ Goodness is the translation of Chinese character 善 (shan), which also means virtue. I am going to write another paper to discuss the relation of beauty to goodness (or virtue) in ancient China.

⁵⁰ Cf. The so-called “great discussion of aesthetics” in China in 1950s and early 1960s

archeology and prevailing aesthetic ideas, this opinion has gradually been losing its strength, though it still appears in various dictionaries as an opinion of philology.⁵¹

Xiao Bing appeared as a challenger in the disputes on the origin of the character of beauty. He is not the first to question the conclusion of “large sheep”,⁵² but the first, it seems to me, to make the traditional conclusion on the origin of the beauty a matter of disputation in the aesthetic society of China.

Xiao Bing’s totemistic pronouncement on the origin of aesthetic consciousness emerged in the nick of time to extricate some Chinese aestheticians from such a predicament, i.e. the need of, after repudiating the conception of “beauty of flavor” as the origin of aesthetic consciousness, finding a new utilitarian conception to take its place. Totemism is a good choice. Totemism, from our perspectives, is perhaps no more than a superstitious belief, but in the mind of the primitive peoples, it is a belief, according to Frazer and Durkheim, of tremendous consequence to their acquiring a means of livelihood, selecting sexual mates and consequently establishing social structures. This opinion, therefore, is rapidly accepted by some aestheticians with Li Zehou as their representative. Li Zehou stresses that beauty exists in human society. He also accepted the idea that a utilitarian evaluation of an object comes ahead of an aesthetic one,⁵³ which was suggested by, among others, Russian Marxist G. K. Plikhanov. It seems, therefore, natural to him that, in primitive society, totemism and utilitarian conception of aesthetics are combined together.

The aesthetic views of Li Zehou are important in the contemporary China. It shows that Chinese scholars have been trying to get some real discoveries in the general framework of Marxism and the coverage permitted by the

among Zhu Guangqian, Li Zehou, Cai Yi (1906-1991), and many other important Chinese scholars.

⁵¹ Plato condemned in his dialogue *Hippias Major* the idea that delicious food could be beauty, too.

⁵² That the character 美 (beauty) looks like a man wearing feathers on his head appeared earlier than that of Xiao Bing. But since it has little influence on aesthetic society, I would like to comment on it later.

⁵³ I merely plan to present specific discussions on some of his specific ideas in this paper. Li’s idea is the most influential one in China, and, even those who are challenging his ideas agree that Li’s idea is the most worthy to converse with. If this discussion has any potential theoretical meaning, that is beyond the limit of this paper. I put this issue to Prof. Li, and he considered what I was trying to do it is to add a new floor to the great mansion of human ideology. Is it possible that such a new floor provides aesthetics a new point of departure? Only a careful researching work can prove that, rather than an emotional criticism.

authoritative ideology. The endeavors they have been making should never be forgotten by history. But we cannot stop at the place where he reached.

China is a country ruled by Confucianism for more than 2000 years. Although there have occurred many anti-Confucian movements in China in this century, Confucianism would stubbornly come back in varied appearances. It could sometimes appear in the form that a thinker himself sincerely tries to break with the Confucian tradition and considers himself to be creating an entirely new idea, but his idea turns out to be one which filled with the worn-out spirit of ancient times. In this paper we cannot discuss the issue of tradition and innovation in general, but have concentrate on the origin of aesthetic consciousness. The concept of “large sheep” regards the beauty of flavor as the origin of aesthetic consciousness, in order to come to a conclusion that “beauty shares the same sense with goodness”. This idea is central to the aesthetics of the Confucian school (here I refer to the ideas of the Confucian school, rather than Confucius’s personal points of view with regard to aesthetics). The concept of “beauty imitating a man wearing horns of a sheep” explains the origin of aesthetic consciousness with totemism. This view has revised the disgusting aspect of the opinion “large sheep” with its directly utilitarian shade. It stressed the spiritual and cultural features of the origin of the aesthetic consciousness, while kept the essential position of Confucian aesthetics: “beauty shares the same sense with the goodness.”

It is still a hard mission now in China to go beyond Li Zehou’s aesthetics in an active, progressive direction (rather than somebody criticized Li Zehou in a dogmatist way by barely quoting some words or sentences from Marx or Engels, Lenin, Stalin, or Mao Zedong). The aesthetic thought of Li Zehou embodies the ideological characteristics of a transitional period. It is difficult to complete such a transition of thought and culture before the social transition is completed. His ideas will still dominate Chinese aesthetic field for some time to come. In the new century, many Chinese scholars, especially young scholars, will challenge the last representative of Chinese traditional aesthetics. However, to predict this process goes far beyond the scope of this paper. What I can do now is only to limit my discussion to the origin of aesthetic consciousness.

4

Now it is the time to present my proposition on the origin of the character *mei* 美. Before I get down to it, I have to offer a short comment on another opinion mentioned above, i.e. that the character 美 (beauty) looks like a man wearing feathers on his head.

The conception of “wearing feathers” was suggested by Wang Xiantang and Kang Yin.⁵⁴ It agrees with some characters for beauty in shell-and-bone script and bronze script, but mismatches the others. These two philologists do not give further evidences for their proposal. Thus, it appears to be no more than a conjecture based merely on the form of the characters.

It seems to me that two pieces of evidence can be exploited in supporting this conjecture. One is that almost all primitive peoples prefer to adorn themselves with feathers. Another is that the Shang people may have taken the bird as their totemic token in a period long before the establishment of the Shang Dynasty. But these two evidences are far from enough to lead to a conclusion.

Before I present my pieces of evidence to support a conclusion, I would like to summarize my standpoint in commenting on the above ideas. I totally reject the opinion of “large sheep” and the idea of “the beauty of flavor”. I reject the practice of attaching totemism to the opinion that the character 美 “looked like a man wearing horns of a sheep”, but I do not totally reject the opinion itself. Namely, I agree that, the character 美 could be imitating “A man wearing horns of a sheep”, but it would not be implying the sense of totemism. I question the opinion that the character 美 looked like a man wearing feathers because it is short of evidences, but acknowledge its right to exist as a conjecture.

After making the judgements above, I would like to put forth three groups of evidences favoring my conclusion.

First, the original meaning of a word should appear in the context of the oldest books, whereas the extended meaning of this word should appear in later books. Among all the ancient books I studied above, three were surely written before Confucius, i.e. the *Book of Documents*, *Yijing* (the earlier parts of the *Book of Change*) and the *Book of Poetry*. In the *Book of Documents*, beauty appears twice, once in “Shuo Ming”, another in “Bi Ming”. The first refers to the beauty of political affairs and the second refers to the beauty of clothes. Since “Shuo Ming” turns out to be an apocrypha and was written probably as late as the Eastern Jin Dynasty (317 – 420 A.D.), we can leave it out. Another ancient book, the *Book of Change*, is constituted of many parts written at different time. Since the character 美 does not appear in those parts written before Confucius, we can leave them out, too. 美 appears in the *Book of Poetry* for 42 times, most of which refer to the beauty of man and woman. Only twice does it refer to the beauty of objects, and both references are in the “Quiet Girl”.

⁵⁴ Wang Xiantang, *Collect Interpretations of Bronze Scripts*. Kang Yin, *The Sources and Development of Characters*.

One refers to the beauty of the red stem of plant, another to the beauty of a shoot. Still, the author added such a sentence: "It is not the shoot that is beautiful, it was given me by a beautiful girl." We can, therefore, give a primary conclusion that, the earliest meaning of beauty refers to the beauty of men or women, or those in beautiful clothes.

Second, since the original meaning of beauty might be the beauty of human beings, the character "美" must look like a man or woman wearing certain ornaments. As I mentioned above, these ornaments might be horns of sheep, ox and some other animals, or feathers of certain birds. I propose, however, that the Chinese character of beauty imitates a man with some coiffure rather than some particular ornaments. Archeology tells us that as early as in the ruins of the Yangshao Culture (the Neolithic Age, about 6000 – 8000 years ago), many hairpins were unearthed. In Banpo near Xi'an, there are 715 pieces of hairpins unearthed, 113 of them are in the type of "T". In the ruins of the Shang Dynasty, where shell-and-bone script was unearthed, we have much more evidence to show that the ornaments were highly developed. The Shang people had very exquisite jade hairpins and the jade men unearthed also show that they have various hair styles.

Now let us see two characters:



It is obvious that these two characters look like a man wearing neither horns of a sheep nor feathers of a bird.

Since we have found many evidences showing that the Shang people have highly-developed ornaments for the head and other parts of the body (fig 1),

Figure 1:



I propose that the character for beauty might imitate a man with some hair style or with some ornaments on his head. We have seen that all the characters for beauty are similar on the under part which refers to a person. But the upper part of each of those characters looks quite different. I acknowledge that some of them look like person wearing horns and some of them look like men wearing feathers, but there are still some of them that look like neither of those above. The point is that, if this character can be written in different ways, the Shang people might have no unanimous idea on it. They agreed on merely one thing, i.e. that the beauty is a person wearing something. No matter what the “something” is, the only requirement is that, it makes the person beautiful.

To wear some ornaments or have some hair styles is not the only way to make a man or a woman beautiful. But, since ideograph can only supply a symbol, whereas it is difficult to illustrate a person with ornaments on his or her neck, wrists, or waist, or to illustrate him in certain clothes, the easiest way is to draw some lines presenting the hair style or the ornaments on the head.

To repeat my ideas presented above: Though I have proposed that the character for beauty in ancient China might imitate a man or a woman with some ornaments on his head or of some hair style, I still do not take it as an absolute conclusion. I also agree with those who believe it might imitate a man with horns or feathers on his head. What is really significant, however, is that, since the Shang people wrote it in different way, it implies that they might diverge on which ornament were more beautiful, and each of them might write according to the way they believed to be more beautiful.

From these arguments, we can reach a conclusion, which is very simple, but is significant to aesthetics: the Shang people wrote the character *mei* 美 simply by imitating a beautiful person. They imitated such a person simply because they thought a human being was possible to be beautiful. This is the sign of the origin of their aesthetic consciousness, not for the cause of religion, nor for the cause of direct feeling of mouth or tongue.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ This paper was written in the 1982 in Chinese and, after rejected by several journals, was published in an unimportant journal in 1988 in the end. I am delighted to know that *Hanyu Dacidian* (*The Great Dictionary of Chinese Words*, published in 1993) explains the first meaning of *mei* as *meiguan* “Good looking”, rather than “delicious” as given by *Ciyuan* and almost all the other important dictionaries. However, such a significant change has yet to be noticed by aestheticians in China.