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XXVII. Jahrestagung der DVCS:

Vom Wesen der Dinge –
Realitäten und Konzeptionen des Materiellen in der chinesischen Kultur

The Ultimate Taste is Bland—Symbolische Prägnanz and Deceptive Simplicity of Chinese Brushstrokes

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I. *Das Ding*: Deceptive Simplicity

[Image: Meißner Porzellan]

Ever since the 18th century, porcelain has been a prominent topos in the European imagination of China and the East.

[Image: Rǔ Ware-1]

Even today, the most precious Chinese *Ding* (thing) perhaps is one of the handful of remaining *Rǔ* ware porcelains □ □ .

These scarce bowls and plates, although exclusively produced for imperial use in the Northern *Sòng* □ □ dynasty, are in fact utensils for daily use.

[Image: Some works that appear simple at first, may linger, and unfold.-2]

They lack embellishments, except for a subtle glaze that renders every change of light visible and transparent.

[Image: Some works that appear simple at first, may linger, and unfold.-3]

Gazing at this stunningly simple greenish-blue masterwork of porcelain, one might want to inquire, what, precisely, makes this material *object* an extremely valuable *thing*? What is the nature of the thing (*Das Ding*)?

If we compare the original *Rǔ* wares with a modern reproduction (or simply porcelains from the market) – an interesting phenomenon occurs: the original *Rǔ* wares appear simple at first, but they linger in the mind and unfold, they are simple, but indeed “deceptively” simple, which triggers our question about “the very thingness of the thing” (*das Dinghafte des Dinges*).

In his discussion on “*Das Ding und das Werk*” in *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes* (1935), Martin Heidegger points out a crucial moment that has determined the very foundations of Western thinking. This moment was when the Greek word that describes the core of the thing to ὑποκείμενον¹ was translated into Latin as *subiectum*. το ὑποκείμενον derives from ὑπο-, beneath, and κειμαι, to lie, rest, repose. It carries a sense of constitutionality, of implied presence. Whereas the Latin *subiectum*, from *sub-* and *iacere*, to throw, is literally to subjugate, *unterwerfen* and carries a sense of activity, of dominance. The Greek refers to *being* as the nature of things, the Latin speaks about *doing*. The consequence of such translation leads the grammatical frame (subject plus predicate) to become the dominant way of Western thinking. It is so engrained in our thinking that we are completely unaware of its consequences. However, the original presence (*Anwesenheit*) of the Greek word is completely lost.

[Image: Heidegger's Rock]

For example, Heidegger asks: what is the nature of a bare thing (*ein bloßes Ding*) such as this Rock (*dieser Granitblock*)? Certainly, we would say it is heavy, massive, colourful, some parts dark, some parts light etc. etc. However, can these accumulated features be identified with the nature of the rock? Precisely here, when we are dominated by this language: the rock is «heavy, massive, colourful [...]» we are *used* to think that is the nature of the rock, and forget about the real origin of this language and this way of thinking – who cares about the rock itself as the thing? Who investigates the conditions from which the rock *appears* to us as this very thing?

II. symbolische Prägnanz

However, deceptive simplicity is such an occasion where meaning emerges at the boundary of language, and we are reminded of Ernst Cassirer's notion of *symbolische Prägnanz* that address this very origin of the thing as a *symbol*. And instead of seeing language as the fundamental symbolic system, *symbolische Prägnanz* denotes a quest for **meaning** (*Bedeutung*) that is the *source* (*Quelle*) of language, but not limited to language: “By symbolic pregnancy we mean the way (*die Art*) in which a perception as a sensory experience contains a meaning which it immediately and concretely represents” (Bredekamp und Lauschke 2011: 50).

The prototype and model of *symbolische Prägnanz* is life itself, i.e. the un-reducible relationship between body and soul: “The relation of body and soul (*Leib und Seele*) represents the prototype and model for a purely symbolic relation, which cannot be converted either into a relation between things or into a causal relation” (Bredekamp und Lauschke 2011). In this case, a porcelain with an aesthetic deceptive simplicity is not simply “a bare thing” (*ein bloßes Ding*), but acquires meaning precisely from lived, individual, personal experience that is *a priori* to language.

¹ From [υ]ποκειμαι, lying close to, beneath, subject to etc. Philosophically, to underlie as the foundation something else inheres.

[Image: Aphasia]

As such embodied concept immanently requires, Cassirer's definition of *symbolische Prägnanz* is not defined once for all; not stated only through arguments, but a movement that allows the arrival of concrete meanings into every single *Thing*. For example, Cassirer visited the clinic of Kurt Goldstein (1878-1965) here in Frankfurt, in order to study the phenomenon of Aphasia. Investigating the cases of those patients who had lost their linguistic capacities enabled Cassirer to establish a more fundamental basis for symbolic function that is *a priori* to language. However, if the *source* of language is a more general symbolic function than the linguistic system, does *symbolische Prägnanz* challenge the oldest philosophical conviction that is based upon a certain unity between language and thinking, manifested in both the Greek concept of *Logos* and in the Chinese *Dào* □ ?

To address this question, we have to return to Heidegger's of how our thinking about the nature of the *thing* is determined by the loss of presence in Greek language through Roman translation. Precisely here, the Chinese brushstroke as a unique embodiment of *symbolische Prägnanz* in calligraphy, painting and poetry presents a conceptual but tangible *Gesamtkunstwerk* that stimulates us to address the nature of *Das Ding* that may transcend the limit of "Western" language, and perhaps to re-consider the relationship between language and thinking, as a phenomenological reading of the 18th century Chinese all-round artist Bā Dà Shān Rén's □ □ □ □ painting "Moon and Melon" *guā yuè tú* □ □ □ □ will show.

III. Brushstrokes of Bā Dà Shān Rén:

[Image: Bā Dà Shān Rén]

Bā Dà Shān Rén is the pen name of Zhū Dǎ (□ □ 1626-1705), a descendant of the royal house of Míng □ dynasty. Ironically, and paradoxically, such an inborn "fortune" also brought him the *privileged* disaster for his life after the *Míng* house was replaced by the *Qīng* □ dynasty governed by the Manchus, which is revealed in Bā Dà's stylistic signature, looking like a combination of both crying and laughing. Such "madness" is often considered as characteristic of his mind, appearing as a wandering monk. Here, however, our phenomenological reading of his paintings will focus on studying **the fecundity (*Prägnanz*) of his deceptively *simple* lines.**

[Moon and Melon – The Line]

One of the most expressive single lines appears in Bā Dà's painting "Moon and Melon". The only connection to the image of *moon* perhaps is the curve of the line. However, following its subtle, thin trace, our eyes re-live the movement of Bā Dà Shān Rén's hand in its shades, hinting at the speed of the motion; its texture, that is fluid at the beginning and becomes dry at the end of the stroke; its variant edges, that indicate the angle at which the brush was held; its thickness that varies with every slightest change of pressure of the tip; its rhythm that is revealed through the internal variations in the continuity of the stroke; its bending and curving that looks like a break but is indeed a non-stop pause

which the eighth century Chinese master poet-painter-musician Wáng Wéi 王維 (701-761) would call "the tail of the divine dragon", a paradoxical "break in non-break" (斷續).

Chinese painting and calligraphy speaks of the "bone" (骨 骨) of every single stroke, a kind of essence of its intent and execution². *Fēng gǔ* 風骨, literally wind-bone, is the combination of the passion and lightness of wind with the precision and strength of bone, and it is masterfully expressed in this single stroke. Technically speaking, composing such a line requires utmost concentration, as it is executed in a single movement without hesitation, but the result is not merely technique, rather a unique expression of the artist's personality at a single moment. The experience of this simple line is in fact complex, due to the complicated circumstances in which Bā Dà Shān Rén lived. It might indeed depict the moon that rose on the very day when he painted it, it might be a very guarded allegory with larger political implications, or it might simply – as Bā Dà himself wrote in the accompanying poem – be a moon cake.

[Moon and Melon – The Poem]

The poem itself reveals a critical, pregnant *moment*:

□ □ □ □ □ □	Dazzling sweetcake, round as the
□ □ □ □ □ □	fat moon, melon season rise–
□ □ □ □ □ □	point less, at the moon cake:
□ □ □ □ □ □	a fool in the fall. Melon, be ripe now, be still.

This is a strange poem. Obviously one wonders what does it mean? The meaning is opaque and ambiguous, but the words are deceptively *simple*.

[Moon and Melon – Another Translations]

Allegorical readings of Bā Dà Shān Rén's work would seek affinities to the fallen *Ming* dynasty. Thus *bīngzi* 餅子 (literally, "little cake") in the first line has been translated as "Ming Cake" (Wang et. al. 1990: 106):

A Ming cake seen from on side
The moon, so round when the melons rise.
Everyone points to the moon-cakes,
But hope that the melons will ripen is a fool's dream.

I believe the original ambiguity ought to be preserved, just as the author wrote them to preserve his own life. Instead, I focus on the *parallels* in the first stanza between the moon and the cake, to reflect

² For a more detailed illustration of "bone" in Chinese calligraphy and painting, see Kwo 1981: 63.

the aesthetic effect that we have observed through the lines, especially the *Prägnanz* of the shapes embodied in the adjectives such as “round” and “fat”. The structure of the intertwining curved lines in this painting is reflected in the verb *rise* of the second line. Moreover, the subtle, embedded ambiguity of the third line is *transposed* through my rendering of the Chinese *zhǐ* 指 (*pointing*) into *point-less*, an apparent negation of the semantics, in which I however reference the famous *Chán* idiom: the purpose of pointing at the moon is not to see the finger. This ambiguity is intensified when I convey the poem’s sensitive mentality through translating a seemingly “foolish” word (蠢 , donkey year) into “a fool [...], be still”, a gesture that Bā Dà’s peculiar shapes of the “moon” and “melon” silently evoke.

[Image: The Non-Metaphorical]

Notice that in my translation, I intentionally avoid to decode allegories such as *Ming cake* that restrain our reading to specific autobiographical details of the painter, nor do I suggest a literal interpretation of Zen Buddhism of the poem.³

My translation, to a large degree, is based upon a reading of Bā Dà’s own writing, i.e. the calligraphy (*shū fǎ* 書法) of the poem. I, therefore, *perceive* the poem as an embodied, personal *handwerk*, more than a conceptual understanding of the words. While gazing at the way Bā Dà wrote 圓, 月 and 蠢 in a sharp contrast to 圓 and 月, I interpreted the cake to be “round” and the moon to be “fat”. Notice his strange way of writing “donkey year” (*lú nián* 魯年) – this seemingly clumsy and utterly idiosyncratic way of writing perhaps reveals his fundamental ironical attitude towards “enlightenment”, which is also evident in the way he writes the “time words” such as “time” (*shí* 時) and “year” (*nián* 年). My translation strives to *preserve* the ambiguity of the poem by emphasizing the perceptual elements of the cake and the melon: the shape, the taste, the light and etc. which allows the poem itself becomes a canvas, rather than “one face” (either philosophical or historical), since for Bā Dà Shān Rén, such ambiguity is not simply a linguistic game; it is indeed *Lebenswissen fürs Überleben*.

From interpreting this little *Gedicht*, we may also realize calligraphy is not merely a linguistic sign; it is a unique “body”, as *symbolische prägnanz*, for the tradition of Chinese poetry, which is determined by the very nature of Chinese language, written through brush, sometimes together with personal seals of the author.

[Image: The Seals of Bā Dà Shān Rén]

For example, the poem is parenthesized by three stamps: on the top right we see *kǒu rú biǎn dān* 口如扁担 蠢蠢 to indicate the clumsiness of his uttering; the stamp beneath his idiosyncratic signature is *kě dé shén xiān* 可待神仙 蠢蠢蠢蠢 to express the elusiveness of his existence; and then his stylistic stamp *bā dà*

³ From a purely Buddhist perspective, a consistent reading of the poem in terms of Buddhist ideas and metaphors is indeed possible. (Dennis Schilling, personal communication. 2016)

Interestingly, this non-metaphorical approach is also at the core of Martin Heidegger's quest on the nature of *Das Ding*, when he points out how *familiarity* with language allures us to accept the grammatical form as a common way of thinking:

Was uns als natürlich vorkommt, ist vermutlich nur das Gewöhnliche einer langen Gewohnheit, die das Ungewohnte, dem sie entsprungen, vergessen hat. Jenes Ungewohnte hat jedoch einst als ein Befremdendes den Menschen angefallen und hat das Denken zum Erstaunen gebracht.

(Heidegger 1935, 2012: 9)⁶

Heidegger: *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerks*

To be exposed to such unfamiliarity – or *das Unheimliche* — out of the familiarity is precisely what deceptively simple brush stroke of Bā Dà Shān Rén's painting and the color of the Rǔ ware evoke. If we follow Heidegger that the grammatical construction of Western languages (subject plus predicates) may indeed establish a *habit* of thinking that creates a general, comfortable, and convenient perspective but erases the fundamental connection between both language and the thing, then we may turn to Chinese aesthetics, embodied in the language of brushstroke and its non-metaphorical, non-dialectic poetics, to recover what has been, over millennia, lost in translation.

Thank you

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⁶ What we experience to be natural is likely just habituation to a long habit, that has forgotten the oddity of its source. That oddity however has at one time struck man as something peculiar and has turned his thinking into amazement.