



THE METAPHOR OF THE UNUSEFUL TREE IN CHINESE AND PERSIAN LITERATURE: A COMPARATIVE APPROACH

***Mihai Ionuț FĂT**

***former PKU (Peking University)**

Abstract: *The present study aims to explore the meaning attached to the motif of the unuseful tree found in the Chinese early literature and compare it with similar approaches in both Asian and Western literature that adopted it under the influence of the Oriental one.*

The method of research consists of analysing the earlier sources found in the Shijing or the Book of Songs for example and identify the original form of the concept, before tracing its evolution through time and applying a comparative analysis to an idea that became so common even in medieval Persia or Henry David Thoreau's nature-inspired landscape of thought.

The results can show that the concept became influential under certain social and political conditions that favoured more the use of allegorical expressions, in order to mask and camouflage a disdain for the oppressive subversion of the human nature by forces that tried to impose an artificial mode of being.

Keywords: *Chinese Literature, Zhuangzi, tree, Persian literature, taoism*

Contact details of the author(s): yingxiongtahai@yahoo.com

INTRODUCTION

The motif of the tree is often present in the Chinese literature in particular and the Asian literature in general. It is related mostly to a set of religious beliefs in which it becomes the central element, as a sort of an "axis mundi". Apart from these religious beliefs, the significance of such a symbol, later on took also a philosophical turn in its evolution and became associated to some aspects related to the essence of the human condition, aspects which were further represented in the arts like painting and music.

Without implying an influence of Chinese thought through art and literature or through the aesthetic patterns that were spread across the Silk Route by caravans which exchanged not only goods but also ideas, what comes easily to notice though, is that the only country that exhibits a cultural closeness to China was the medieval Persia. Elements of the Chinese painting landscape



made their way into the well-known and highly appreciated Persian miniatures, a form of art that flourished mostly beginning with the advent of the Tartars in the Persianate world. The influence of Samarkhand, Bukhara and the Central Asian cities, as nodal points of commerce and exchange, could be felt in art, as a medium and propagator for the culture of a realm situated beyond them, the Ancient China with her mystical, outlandish aura and aesthetic ideas that fuelled once the imagination of famous Persian poets like Hafez Shirazi and Baba Tahir (Baba Tahir, 1902, p.14,85). China was a mythical and far away land of beauty, hidden to the scrutiny of the uninitiated, meant to be discovered only by those that sought intimacy with whatever beauty they saw in her.

The gardens of the famous city of Shiraz included once spots of respite and meditative reflection where lyrics about China were written. The scarcity of vegetal life in a place of desert and dust made the oasis-like cities of Persia even more vibrant for those that pursued the aesthetic beauty of the organic nature. The tree was a commodity and was primarily perceived as a life-giving source. In China it was also highly valued as a symbol, as anywhere else in the Asian world, where agriculture was the main source of subsistence. The people were bound to the sustaining earth and drew the nourishment necessary for their daily lives from it.

As the presence of the human element in Chinese poetry is more often suggested rather than described, the realm of the natural world becomes fully represented as a substitute for the human one. Among the literary works of China, the most intriguing and suggestive depiction of a tree is given by the essays of Zhuangzi, a Taoist philosopher and essay writer, in which the tree as a motif benefits from a double significance, an aesthetic as well as a philosophical one. Its presence was meant to enliven the dreary landscape of dogmatic rites and ethical pursuits that a Confucian oriented model of a society was known for. The same purpose can be found present in the idea of a tree in Persian poetry, where it becomes a great metaphor, aiming to turn into an element of a disruptive imagery in a society where the creativeness generated more often by the individual vitality was dampened by the overwhelming tenets of the worldliness and mundanity of the Islamic culture. The same struggle was faced in both society by some literary figures such as that of Zhuangzi in China and Saadi in Persia.

THE CHINESE TREE CULTURE OF ZHUANGZI

According to the author of the first chapter of *Zhuangzi*, the main source of inspiration for the symbolic imagery employed by him in ordering to articulate some well-known concepts that later would form the core of the Taoist discourse was a long lost compendium of strange things, *Zhiguai* 志怪, nothing but an ancient Chinese bestiary, similar in nature with the already consecrated Classic of the Mountains and Seas, *Shanhai jing* 山海經. This ancient Chinese bestiary however was not the only viable ancient source. In analysing the texts, some scholars may have overlooked yet another important source, to which the content of the mentioned works owes more than it can be surmised, the Chinese folklore in its existing forms at that time, regardless whether it was collected or not.

Chinese folklore stands at the foundation of all those extraordinary accounts of strange places and creatures. That is why, however original Zhuangzi as an author may seem to be, the roots of his thought are clearly the result of a process of decantation and distillation of much older elements of folk symbolism. In this respect, delving deeper into that strata of culture is needed. The variety of forms in which it appears were equally adopted by different authors who came into contact



with it. That is why a reader of *Zhuangzi* should also try to think of the slightly different approaches to the concepts, found within the same text, as an expression of that variety of forms that they may have encountered in the folk sources, not being the mere effect of a purely personal interpretation. In this regard, all those stories recounted in *Zhuangzi* have been distorted in order to fit the narrative of a philosophical literary fairy tale. Different in nature from a common folktale, the literary fairy tale has a definite authorship and represents the point of view of one author, although the motifs employed are sourced from the oral folklore. *Zhuangzi* is one particular case of using fairy tales as a starting point for a philosophical discussion. The Chinese early mythology is also referenced in the text. To draw a fair comparison, this may also be the case of ancient Greece where philosophers used their own cultural heritage and their baggage of folk knowledge in order to express their points of view, which was certainly inspired by those anonymous providers.

A general conclusion can certainly be drawn from analysing all those traditions of old that were much closer to nature than the modern world. It has to do mostly with the worshipping of nature and the analogies that were also found between the natural phenomena and the human world. The human being identified herself with the nature and tried even to emulate it, to establish deeper connections and harness the force that it provides. The early shamanism had that aim and was a clear expression of this tendency. The shaman would communicate with the natural world in many ways, often through a trance that would make him identify with the object of worship and build a bridge of power that would eventually benefit the entire community that such institution was once serving. The shaman is the precursor of later mystics who also sought to establish such connection. Nature mysticism can be considered therefore as a direct successor of the shamanic practices of old. Since "meditation" or "silent sitting" was not structurally adopted by the Chinese religious practice before the advent and spread of Buddhism in China, the existing practices seem to be a reminiscent form of shamanic trance and the mysticism in which it evolved.

The philosophical conclusion that *Zhuangzi* arrived at were not however only a refinement of the old existing tradition within the folklore but also the result of a personal inquiry. In Greece Diogenes of Sinope, the eccentric philosopher that was described as living in a barrel came to a philosophical conclusion without being necessarily associated with any shamanic practice, but he may have been indirectly influenced by it through his Mediterranean upbringing. Therefore, following the thread provided by tradition, while at the same time trying to understand the input of one's personality in shaping ideas is essential in offering a more valid picture of how ancient philosophers lived and thought like. The person cannot completely be taken out of the environment that influenced his behaviour. However, the modernity has brought new challenges and often what the archaic man thought, his principles and manners, cannot be explained only by employing modern means, since the historical paradigm was different. That is why the aid of tradition can often be of great reliance for digging out reasons and motifs that can constitute a ground for that understanding. Out of all Chinese thinkers, *Zhuangzi* is probably the only example of philosopher who succeeded in offering a real glimpse into that past that often eludes our understanding. The way that him and his followers have unveiled in their writings the complexity of human nature is still a good reference for getting a grasp of the problems that their society was facing during those times.

In a society in which wars were prevalent and conflicts of any kind were a daily reality, the various questions were more numerous than the answers given. The role of a philosopher was to formulate those questions, to validate their necessity and then eventually to answer to them or to formulate even more questions. The description of the ills that he would discover in such a society in which war and strife were so common are almost the prevalent part of his written philosophical ruminations. The way to conserve not only one's life but also one's nature in a world of perilous



turmoil was the focus of many Chinese thinkers who offered different versions of what they considered to be solutions. Zhuangzi was the only philosopher, with Yang Zhu's philosophy transpiring also in the pages written by his followers, to have an individualist approach towards the question of self-conservation (Graham, 1989, p.55-56). Before the presence of Yang Zhu as an influence within his school, Zhuangzi was already inclined towards individual contemplation. In the chapter About the Coincidence of Things *Qiwu lun* 齊物論, he mentions how a human subject is entering a trance in which his appearance had changed in such a way that it baffled the only companion present at that time (Wang Xianqian, 2006, p.6). From this one may conclude that the companion didn't really understand the subtlety of that state which he witnessed by observing somebody who experienced it. The level of experience could be only metaphorically expressed in words while the proximity was not a guarantee for understanding. The companion couldn't partake to that experience that he went through. The experience can only be individual in nature, while understanding it can only be possible if the other companions have already achieved that level of awareness. Forming that kind of a community can be attained only if the companions possess already the knowledge necessary, if their system of values is already tuned to that of the other supposed members. In this way, the experience of such a mystic can be easily compared to that of a tree, unmoved and integrated in nature but solitary in his existence, or at least the form of his appearance can be perceived as a solitary one. This sort of existence is untroubled by those problems of identity that common humans have. The tree is useful to the traveler but his usefulness doesn't affect him. He won't be himself processed as a building material. He will not be taken out of his environment to serve another purpose.

The idea of being useless therefore is just a relative one, that refers to a state in which there is no artificial demand for performing his function, one threatening to his very existence. Transformed into lumber, a tree is no more a tree. The logic demands a different approach towards the raw material that resulted from the exploitation of nature. Zhuangzi therefore opposes the exploitation of nature and the abuse against the norm that should be higher than any common human one:

"Huizi has told Zhuangzi: 'I have a great tree, 'Chu' by its name, with a trunk so knobbly, unfit for a carpenter's ink lines to be drawn for cutting and branches small, irregularly gnarled and twisted. Though by the road it stands, in plain sight, the carpenter won't mind. Today what you have said about being great but of no use is merely the view discarded by the many.' " Zhuangzi replied: 'Have you noticed not the lynx and the weasel lying waiting for their prey and jumping up and down all round, only to fall into the trap and caught be in a hunter's net? Here is the great bull, so huge that high as clouds its measure can't be counted. But able is he now to catch a mouse? Behold then this great tree, blamed for worthlessness. Why shan't it stand, placed in the nowhere's land, in the vast deserted wild and why shan't you hang out there, non-active at his side, while wandering away by dreaming at his feet? No carpenter's axe can rob him of a life, cut short otherwise. Unhurt by things remains, at peace in his own suffering.'" (Wang Xianqian, 2006, p.5)¹

¹ My translation. Original text: 惠子謂莊子曰：吾有大樹，人謂之樗。其大本臃腫而不中繩墨，其小枝卷曲而不中規矩。立之塗，匠者不顧。今子之言，大而無用，眾所同去也。莊子曰：子獨不見狸狌乎？卑身而伏，以候敖者；東西跳梁，不避高下；中於機辟，死於罔罟。今夫斄牛，其大若垂天之雲。



The ideal place of existence for such a tree would be a location that has no boundaries and no constraints, in a realm that is governed in the absence of any worldly subordination or any form of "vassalage". The tree has no master other than his own nature which he has to follow and through which he become one with the Way *dao* 道 and its virtue *de* 德. In the chapters belonging to Zhuangzi's followers, the mentioning of the Way together with the Virtue (references to a much earlier philosopher, Laozi) marks a slight deviation from the Inner Chapters *neipian* 內篇 where the realm in which such a tree can be found is one in which nothing resides, where that vast emptiness of solitary existence becomes benign and praiseworthy. Nothing could affect such a solitary thing in the desert of his own existence. By embracing it his mode of being becomes in such a way an unbound, unlimited one. The Way is sufficient in order to provide for him the means to attain self-realisation. Therefore it can be concluded that for Zhuangzi society is not something necessary and at the same time doesn't constitute something that he would intend to discard as too small an entity to be taken into account and afforded importance to. The worst mistake that a creature can commit would be that of associating the sensorial perception of the other with the actual self. The self cannot be known from an image that doesn't have such a function like that of a mirror while mirror-images are often illusions that can enslave somebody, generating a mentality that would alienate him from his true self. Returning to oneself is therefore a return to that state of the loneliness of a tree in which resides the independent strength given by self-knowledge and autonomous perception. For the Taoist thinker, the autonomy of perception means an emancipation from the bondage that the dependency of the senses has created. The idea of a "use" or a "purpose" is therefore seen as a mere trick that can seduce the living things and drain them of their natural energy. Weariness is dominant in realms where folly allows individuals to be trapped by such alluring illusions, while the absence of illusions can be very well illustrated by the empty places as a setting for the lonely emancipated, who are not not worried any longer for the fading nature of their verdure or the advent of an end after being used to death and consumed by the society or their environment. The tree is not an object to sacrifice, nor is he worshipped as a divine being in a ritual that would add to his significance also a religious dimension. Under his shade one may well achieve that level of realisation that can save his own existence. The tree is an abode not through his crown as a protective umbrella but through his non-action *wuwei* 無為 that the uselessness *wuyong* 無用 can be translated as. Those that choose to take shelter under him become thus profoundly changed, effortlessly and naturally. The tree constitutes a refuge and a protection that gives a sense to that unknown vastness of being. Therefore, while the sustained effort of an action can always fail, the tree is meant to prove that non-activity can also become effective, maybe more than the activity can be. The objective, according to Zhuangzi, is to be able to even overcome both action and non-action. The relevant passage from the Outer Chapters *waipian* 外篇 passage provides though a slight criticism regarding Zhuangzi's advocacy for uselessness and non-action through the mention of the unuseful goose that was sacrificed precisely because of her nature of being good-for-nothing and worthless: "Zhuangzi took to the mountains and saw a great tree, branch and foliage lush, which a lumberman would then desist from cutting. When asked the cause, he thus responded: 'His worthlessness it is!' Then Zhuangzi added: 'By not being a useful material, the tree has lived his years by the Heaven bestowed fully.'" Zhuangzi from the mountain down he came and to a friend's house a shelter chose to take. The friend rejoiced and ordered the servant boy one goose to sacrifice and cook for guest's arrival. The boy then asked

此能為大矣，而不能執鼠。今子有大樹，患其無用，何不樹之於無何有之鄉，廣莫之野，彷徨乎無為其側，逍遙乎寢臥其下。不夭斤斧，物無害者，無所可用，安所困苦哉！



1/2025

<https://alss.utgjiu.ro>

which one shall be, the goose that honks or which honks not? The master then replied "The one that honks not then shall it be!" The second day a disciple asked Zhuangzi: Yesterday in the mountains the tree would live its years by the Heaven bestowed fully, not being a useful material, but then today the goose that knows not to honk was sacrificed. Which side is for you then to abide?" Zhuangzi just smiled: Zhou would abide between becoming useful and a worthless naught, which looks as right but in fact it is not, because weariness has yet to be avoided. The Virtue and the Way to rely on while wandering afloat, free from the blame and praise, a mighty dragon sometimes, or sometimes serpent only, a change to follow after tides of time, with none particular to hold. Sometimes upward and downward sometimes, taking the harmony as measure, wandering afloat back to the ancestral source of things, instrumenting things without being instrumental, how can then weariness affect thee? Thus was the norm once for Shennong and the Yellow Emperor. As about the circumstance of things, passed down by rules of kinship worldly affairs, these are too different of a fold, because unity leads to separation, success to ruin, witty sharpness to dullness, ostentation to collapse, action to loss, the able would then be outmanoeuvred by intrigue and the weak tormented, how then is to take sides? A sadness all it is. For the disciple dearly to keep clear in mind, only the realm of the Virtue and the Way is there to hold on to!" (Wang Xianqian, 2006, p.121-122)²

At the same time, as it can be concluded, while the author goes further in developing this argument, it is precisely the lack of that quality that was in the nature of such a bird which would eventually make the owner to sacrifice her in the end. That goose can be understood as altered in her nature and deviated from what she was supposed to be or sound like. This reason is the one that apparently determined the owner to take such a decision. For some a goose that honks could be upsetting and somehow less comfortable a presence, but for the owner that was one quality that natural geese should have, as part of what they really are supposed to be or behave like. The sound that a goose could make was defining to her presence. However, the aim of the author in using this example is to make an argument in support for the idea of a middle path. The option of the middle path shows itself like a soteriological device, revealing a true path of salvation that one should embrace while confronted with making a choice between difficult options. The extremes are regarded as perilous and can have an effect contrary to that desired.

Taoist thinkers have long understood that the existence, be it physical or spiritual, is characterised always by choices or options that can be problematic. The choice or option are burdens that the human existence cannot avoid and has to carry to the end. For Zhuangzi the worries can cease to affect, the choice doesn't bother since there is nothing that can induce a need for it. The non-action may as well be treated as a simple convention whose lack of attainment cannot become a

² My translation. Original text: 莊子行於山中，見大木，枝葉盛茂，伐木者止其旁而不取也。問其故。曰：無所可用。莊子曰：此木以不材得終其天年。夫子出於山，舍於故人之家。故人喜，命豎子殺鴈而烹之。豎子請曰：其一能鳴，其一不能鳴，請奚殺？主人曰：殺不能鳴者。打開字典顯示相似段落顯示更多訊息 明日，弟子問於莊子曰：昨日山中之木，以不材得終其天年；今主人之鴈，以不材死。先生將何處？莊子笑曰：周將處夫材與不材之間。材與不材之間，似之而非也，故未免乎累。若夫乘道德而浮游則不然。無譽無訾，一龍一蛇，與時俱化，而無肯專為；一上一下，以和為量，浮游乎萬物之祖；物物而不物於物，則胡可得而累邪！此黃帝、神農之法則也。若夫萬物之情，人倫之傳，則不然。合則離，成則毀，廉則挫，尊則議，有為則虧，賢則謀，不肖則欺，胡可得而必乎哉？悲夫！弟子志之，其唯道德之鄉乎！



source of worry for a tree too familiar with it to notice anything unusual. It is only when one becomes steeped into his own essence that he forgets anything that can remind of some alien-like feature. Therefore the Way and the Virtue are not observable, since all that is so familiar cannot be looked at objectively from an external angle. It is precisely that quality that would rob someone of his natural status and make him an alien to himself that would lead him to forget about things that are naturally meant to be forgotten. A perception that discriminates is a perception alien to her own nature, while forgetting to discriminate is a proof of someone's closeness to the Way. The tree therefore can be such a being bound in a state that allows freedom from worry and discrimination, through becoming emancipated. The middle path is characterised precisely by that state, since it constitutes a non-discriminating position of avoiding the possible extremes. It does not take sides, since taking sides leads to decay. By the common law of nature, extremes always become decadent and easily turn into their opposites. To prevent this falling into the extreme states, an advocacy for a middle path is therefore required.

As it can be noticed, in *Zhuangzi*'s corpus, the significance of the tree undertakes a journey from the realm of "nowhere" to that of the Way and the Virtue in the chapter (...) According to the strictest manner in which the chronology of such texts should be addressed, such transition doesn't belong though to the same context, since the age when the two chapters were written, as Liu Xiaogan has shown, is different, while the intellectual environment would have exerted a different influence on the authors of the texts (Liu Xiaogan, 1987). However, with all the different hues inspired by the presence of elements from the Inner Chapters of *Zhuangzi*, the colour of the Taoist thought remains faithful and coherent through time. The idea of "nothingness" and the empty landscape, the deserted surroundings of an expansive wilderness are not of a nihilistic nature, but hide within elements of a profound significance that has been further formulated in the chapter Mountain Tree *shanmu* 山木. Only a superficial understanding could make one accuse *Zhuangzi* of nihilism or of the advocacy for an extreme state of denial. The deconstructive intention of his metaphors could be a reason to accuse him of a plead for isolationism. In a social context, such attitude may be seen unhealthy and even contrary to some principles that he initially stated. However, the layers underneath this appearance seem to prove otherwise. The society of a tree is formed out of those that can take shelter underneath and detach themselves from their worry-bringing worldly conventions. The inner torment gets healed and the true purpose is found naturally. The natural has no need of expression, since he is also not aware of that need. Words are of no use. When the flow of life changes he also changes with that flow without being subjected to those changes, not being crushed by them. The pristine nature can never fail and can never be prevented from showing her everlastingness while valiantly embracing the change of seasons. Nature doesn't avoid that succession, but becomes the intimate of it. Seasons are part of her own essence and not something external and obtrusive or noticeable to her. Therefore, beyond the veil of change as perceived by outsiders lies an eternal existence never intimidated by the cyclical transformation of things. That eternity can transcend aging and death, becoming and withering and all those processes that consist of flourishing and decay. Nothing in the disintegrating realm of form can affect her well-being. The nature can manage and preserve her life-force within forms that she doesn't attach to. The tree is also set in the realm of the formless, since "nowhere" and "nothing" point exactly to that sort of formlessness that overcomes limitations of time and space. The background is always as expected: traceless and formless. That is why the use of such tree surpasses the normal understanding that is marked by palpable algorithms of knowledge available only in the realm of form as processed by the human logic.

In *Zhuangzi* the role of the mystic inside the society is very similar to that of the tree. The uselessness is only an appearance, a camouflage of a reality beyond. The author draws on an older theme that is present also in the Book of Songs *Shijing* 詩經 in the section dedicated to the songs



from Gui (nowadays Xingyang, Henan). The folk author describes a tree in a similar fashion, while his lyrics seem to be motivated by the same harsh reality faced by the common people in a period of turmoil and social unrest. The author expresses his envy towards a gooseberry tree for the same lack of worry and attachment exhibited by Zhuangzi's tree: "The humid earth yields a gooseberry tree,/luxuriously rich they branches are/ Tender is thy sappling./ For ignorance I envy thee./ The humid earth yields a gooseberry tree/ Luxuriously rich thy blossoms are/ Tender is thy sapling./ For sinlessness I envy thee./ The humid earth yields a gooseberry tree/ Luxuriously rich thy fruits are./ Tender is thy sapling./ For homelessness I envy thee."³ (Chen Junying , 1991, p.389-391)

As it can be concluded, the roots of Zhuangzi's philosophy and literature have much in common with the already existing folklore, being in part an expression and carrier of that folk wisdom, falling at least partially in the category of the Chinese wisdom literature. This is how Zhuangzi is superficially considered by some popularising publications in China.

The poem dedicated to the gooseberry tree, apart from being a genuine cry of desperation, can also be understood as a longing for a hermit's life. The independence of the tree is that of a recluse, a person that has forsaken the worldly ties in favour of a unity with nature and the larger universe, much larger than the limited human sphere of existence. The life of a hermit has no family ties. He chose to be oblivious of things that can constitute a source of worry. Its "ignorance" is the "bliss" of the truly wise who abide wisely in a state of detachment and emotional disengagement. The hermit would divorce the world of senses in an ecstatic state that would offer a relief by means of emptiness and absence. The luxuriously rich growth of his verdure symbolises self-sufficiency and plenty while enjoying solitude, as if it was set in the same almost barren landscape like that described by Zhuangzi in his allegory. The tree becomes great not through his appearance and size but through the inner life, as an embodiment of the Way. His virtue manifests itself through representing the actual unity of nature in contrast with the artificial human mode of existence. The mention of wood in the paragraph belonging to the Outer Chapters of *Zhuangzi* is an expression of the artificial humanity that tries to use nature and process its substance, according to her needs. The idea of being used in such a way points also to the aspect of predationism. In the human world the sole thing that governs the human relations is the interest and together with interest comes exploitation and use. In the modern Chinese language the idea of use is expressed by adding also the character *li* 利 "interest" to *yong* 用 "to use". Therefore, even etymologically, there is an intrinsic relationship between the two. Being the only philosopher that criticised the idea of interest as a governing reason in human affairs, Zhuangzi's unique view is somehow an exception to the mainstream textual tradition that was often being censored by different regimes during her transmission across ages.

As a conclusion, Zhuangzi's allegory of the tree is also referring to a hermit ideal and to the innocence of one's solitude. A return to solitude for a human being is therefore a return to innocence. Above all, the tree symbolises a return, a restoration that takes place within one's heart, the inviolable inner space, timeless and formless. Loneliness is an invitation to share the benefits of detachment and stability in a realm of nature in which the tree constitutes one of the many communicating vessels of the whole.

³ My translation. Original text: 隰有萋楚、猗儺其枝。夭之沃沃、樂子之無知。隰有萋楚、猗儺其華。夭之沃沃、樂子之無家。隰有萋楚、猗儺其實。夭之沃沃、樂子之無室。



THE CYPRESS OF SAADI

The *Golestan* of Saadi is one of the most quoted works of Persian wisdom literature the cypress has a special mention. The cypress in Persia, nowadays Iran, is also associated with the idea of death. Perhaps the perennial nature of his verdure is a reminder of eternity. However, in the works of Saadi its significance is more profound, becoming also an allegory, like in *Zhuangzi*:

"Some asked a wise man: Of the few renowned trees that the glory and splendour of God cast forth, none did he call 'free', except the cypress who bears no fruit. What wisdom can then be elicited from that ?

He said that for each tree, fruit becomes ripe at a moment well-known and at a time when there is none, it withers away. But the cypress is nothing like it, all times merry it remains and so truly it is described as 'free'.

My heart, do not cling to transient things, since the Tigris

Shall flow long after the Khalif from Baghdad gone be !

If generous a tree you can afford, be like a date

Or otherwise, if you cannot, turn into a cypress free !" (Saadi, 1963, p.208)⁴

Apart from the immortality and eternity that cypress symbolises, one special quality is emphasised above all others, that of "freedom". The cypress is free from the cyclical transformation of the fruit-bearing trees, free from any kind of regime change inside the human world. The fruit-bearing trees are consumed by their fruition and their entire existence is conditioned by the function they perform, by the season changes they have to endure, while the cypress can harness its own energy and transform it into a vehicle for reaching eternal and unchanging life. That eternity which he represents can be also emulated by human beings. Just like in the Chinese Book of Songs, the author would express his deep wish to turn into such a tree, as a refuge from the calamities of history, as a way to evade the otherwise unavoidable changes that can lead to decay and death. Reflecting on the history of human kind, the erected position adopted by the Homo Erectus can be associated with examples from nature. In this respect, the closest to the human being is the tree in its verticality that defies time and history. While at some point the erected positions can have a defiant quality, the vocabulary of almost any known language associates it with the idea of integrity. Therefore, the tree also has the significance of possessing integrity of character, verticality of morals. While the human

⁴ My translation. Original text:

خواندهاندچادن آبروند، هیچ بت وریده آج وای ع خ مورک خت ن ندین :سیدند: پ فرزانهای یم ف
ست؟ متا ح ن چ ا ارد: نره ا ث ک وررس

د. مرده ش پ م آ ع هی ب گ د وزه آ ت و د آ ولوم، بتی م و بت کین اره م ث ختی ر دنت:
ورس

ت. ادگان ات آن ص ات و ش اتی خ ه وه ست ون ن اچا

ی پ له ب ده ک م گذردای چه م آ
غداد ب شت دواهد گ یغه ب خ ا

یم و ش ک ل ب ن آید، بت ب دت ز
زاد ش آ و ب یاد، چوات ن دت ز



world is marred by transience due to the ephemeral aspects of its pursuits, the vegetal world of the cypress is one that is oriented towards the heaven, looking for ascension. The tree climbs up a ladder while being bound to earth through its roots. Therefore ascension does not exclude earthliness. Thus, only those that can master both qualities represented by heaven and earth can endure. While this is only a premise, the most important condition for attaining that status is to be able to maintain a fruitless state. Fruitlessness is in this case actually the Persian variant of uselessness, that level of being in which conserving ones energy turns from a mere project into a reality. Yielding fruit implies a burden that can be in many ways detrimental to the one that carries it. Whatever one has to offer has a consuming quality, something that would exhaust the one that performs the function, something that would advantage others more than himself.

The verdure is also associated with youth. A person that renounces that thing that would drain the life force out of him would endure and remain healthy like an evergreen cypress. The fruitful trees are all bound to a world that would make use of their fruit, while the fruitless cypress, much like a hermit, would remain unbound. In reality, the cypress also has means of reproducing and he would also bare fruit, however mostly the apparent carelessness and aloofness of the cypress was used by Saadi to allegorically express the idea of uselessness. Within the Islamic culture this sort of ascetic purity is a sign of holiness and proximity to God. Therefore, the significance of the cypress in what the human character is concerned is one related mainly to celibacy and detachment from the worldly ties. Only God is the one that could represent the idea of eternity. The apparent eternity of the cypress is a symbol for the eternity of God, it is the embodiment of a holy life according to the will of the Divine. Khalifs may disappear in history, following the tides of time and the ever-changing nature of the historical cycles, but such a humble member of the vegetal world like the cypress would always remain unchanged, unaffected by the apparently sweet but in essence bitter flow of that change that brings lesser joy than the pain that it inflicts..

Like the cypress, the mystic, by being detached from society is not conditioned by the local or temporal realities. He lives in the atemporal dimension of reality. The youthfulness of such a soul therefore is perpetual and the plenty of his inner life would be richer than all the treasures one can amass in their worldly reality or even think of. It is precisely this aspect that would make him closer to God, since the "beloved" of such a person can be only the God that represents those qualities that he would invoke and be faithful to, a living that is moulded after Him. In this way, a parallel can be drawn with the approach adopted by the Chinese version of a mystic who sought communion with the principle thought to pervade everything, the Way 道. Regarding the evolution of mysticism in an articulated form Hodgson remarks: "By the end of the Axial Age, explicit mystical movements were influential in the Greek, the Sanskritic, and even the Chinese spheres, and probably also in Irano-Semitic circles. Except possibly in India, they were mostly marginal to the main cultural currents. But the traditions then established have persisted." (Hodgson, v.2, 1974, p. 201) This view on history, consistent with the well-known one formulated by Jaspers, forwards the idea of an independent yet united front of knowledge that emerged during the Axial Age. The interconnection between different cultural areas becomes in such a way less important, the reality referred to being an expression of the natural evolution of human history. The Post-Axial Age becomes then a pivotal period in which the basic forms of mysticism reached a full-grown maturity and entered the local folklore: "It was very gradually in the post-Axial periods that a developed mysticism came to be taken for granted as a normal ingredient in popular religion." (Hodgson, v.2, 1974, p. 201) In China, like in the Islamic world, such tendencies remained apparently marginal and less dominant, leaving masked traces only occasionally in poetry and other forms of artistic expression. Like the veil that would cover a beautiful face, in Persia mystical elements had donned a veneer of their own by the time when Saadi composed his poetry.



Therefore one may then think of the context in which these verses were written by Saadi. Perhaps he too, like in the case of Chinese poets and essayists, has borrowed certain patterns from the already existing Persian folklore and found deep within the richness of folk wisdom some motifs that could have eventually inspired his writing and poetry. However, the times when Saadi lived were overwhelmingly affected by the Mongol rule that greatly influenced the mood of those intellectuals active during that age. The bloody events, that had a frequent occurrence at the time, were seen as a threat to the human life and thus the yearning for that force that would help one conserve his own life became also reflected in their writings.

The invasions from the Central Asia always had a disruptive effect with regard to the local society in Persia, but at the same time served as new avenues of import for new refreshing elements from alien cultures that otherwise remained inaccessible. The nomads, like rodents during the Middle Ages, were not only a vehicle for plague to spread westward but also one of culture, that was carried unconsciously, much like a rodent would carry a parasitising body and contaminate whoever it came into contact, although in this case with a rather benign effect. Therefore, the Persianate world, in her variety, offered new perspectives for an eclectic merging of thought, art and literature. This symbiotic way of living managed to penetrate not only the conquered but also the conquerors themselves, who later on under the Timurid Ilkhanate became steeped into the Persian culture and managed to blend it with their own. This mutual cultural interpenetration had a far reaching effect that extended as far as China, to the borders of an empire that long perceived itself as impenetrable. Would be tempting to think of China as that well of inspiration that inflamed the Persian imagination, and it indeed can be understood in such a way, taking into consideration all the other influences spreading across the Silk Route. China was the land of forbidden opulence, of imagined riches that were both of material and spiritual nature. China was the last boundary of the physical world, one that can be understood as that last boundary on one's journey before achieving a spiritual realisation. China marked the last milestone before reaching the spiritual realm, the exhaustion of one's earthly ambitions. Beyond her there was nothing material to discover but a spiritual world yet to be explored. In this way, it is perfectly explainable why the poetic visions of the ancient authors of Persia included China in their imagery as a favourite subject of their ruminations. Beyond her there was nothing material to be explored and the shift towards spirituality came natural for the seasoned traveler who would try to embark on this last journey. A decadent society, that became so due to a rule that was always oppressive and earthly indulging, pushed the literati to find a way to escape the shackles of the material bondage imposed on them. That is why, even according to some oral traditions of Islam, poets were always considered dangerous to the regime, since they represented the dissident voice of spontaneous resistance. The poetry, especially the one that was oriented towards matters spiritual, metaphorically revealing of subtleties regarding the inner life of free individuals, was the weapon of imagination against any sort of tyranny and, in spite of the accuses, an effective dispeller of naivety, a demystifier of political grandeur and a sharp edge of a blade that boldly gashed through the arguments of unquestioning minds. Precisely this quality elevated her to a revered golden status in Persia and elsewhere. The yearning of the poet for a world different than the one he can find in reality is an expression of agony, bedecked with lyrical representations which donned an allegorical dress, only to be doffed with the help of the critical mind of the real decipherer of his pain, without belittling the aesthetic beauty of the way by which the language would yield that agony manifest. The struggle of the poet was more with that apparent meaning of words, understood by the uninitiated who would take offence and charge poets of impunity. The insolence of a rebellious poetry would reverberate through centuries while the conformity of literary behaviour would lead only to oblivion and lack of posterity. This was known to many a poet that tried to leave a mark behind, a mark which would eventually surpass their mortality and serve as a guiding



reminder for more rebellious literary souls. A poet is a spectator that draws conclusions like Saadi, a philosophers engaged in spontaneous lyrical contemplations.

Saadi's poetry was later adopted by the famous figure of American civil disobedience, Henry Thoreau, for whom the autonomy and emancipation of the human being from under the tyranny of the majority was a matter of philosophical import, often intensely discussed in his works, especially *Walden*. He looks at nature in the same manner that Zhuangzi did, as a model of inspiration and quotes massively from James Ross (1759-1881)'s translations of Saadi's *Golestan*, integrally rendering the English translation of the poem describing the cypress: "They asked a wise man, saying: 'Of the many celebrated trees which the Most High God has created lofty and umbrageous, they call none azad, or free, excepting the cypress, which bears no fruit; what mystery is there in this?' He replied: 'Each has its appropriate produce and appointed season, during the continuance of which it is fresh and blooming, and during their absence dry and withered; to neither of which states is the cypress exposed, being always flourishing; and of this nature are the azads, or religious independents. Fix not thy heart on what is transitory; for the Dijlah, or Tigris, will continue to flow through Bagdad after the race of Khalifs is extinct. If thy hand has plenty, be liberal as the date-tree; but if it affords nothing to give away, be an azad, or free man, like the cypress.'" (Thoreau, 1886, p.77)⁵

Following the same key as found in the translation, Thoreau comments with confidence: "The very simplicity and nakedness of man's life in the primitive ages imply this advantage at least, that they left him still but a sojourner in nature. When he was refreshed with food and sleep, he contemplated his journey again. He dwelt, as it were, in a tent in this world, and was either threading the valleys, or crossing the plains, or climbing the mountain tops But lo! men have become the tools of their tools." (Thoreau, 1886, p.35)

The lifestyle of such a "sojourner in nature" is close to the ideal that both Zhuangzi and Saadi shared, the ideal of a wanderer. Although the former was not a poet but a mere essayist, his works have always been in their content very much near to the aspect of a poetical composition and their expressiveness in metaphor and allegorical use of the language is an obvious step towards the lyrical, which makes them virtually kindred in nature. Thoreau was a poet, although he wasn't known for his rather exceptional poetry, but for the eloquence of his philosophical discourse regarding politics and his eccentric attitude towards the structure and system of the society in which he lived. Thoreau was a distrustful person, distrustful towards authority that he never saw as legitimate. He distrusted modernity and the course of human progress. He aimed to return to the state of a Golden Age of human existence that was altogether lost under the heavy pressure of society's organising tendency, a pressure that would destroy the natural man and turn him into an artificial being. This engineering project of modernity was for Thoreau a subversion that was against nature and led to the enslavement of the human kind. For Thoreau nature was the real, the palpable while most of the humans chose to live in an imaginary bubble of their own creation through which they envisioned a new kind of reality, less real and less natural in essence, that would be eventually dangerously materialised in the future. The sojourner would be the one who would abandon the

⁵ The translation can be found identical with that quoted by Thoreau in the Ross rendition published in 1823 according to the note on the translator included in the 1890 edition: "The translation of the Gulistan was dedicated to the Chairman and Directors of the East India Company; and was published in 1823." (Saadi, Tr. by James Ross, *Golestan*, London: Walter Scott, Ltd, 1890). The influence of the British translations from Persian on Thoreau becomes evident through this example which reveals a link between him and the Oriental literature. To presume that Thoreau was attracted to the Oriental mysticism is still far from reflecting a certain reality. His interest in things Asian must have been spurred by the prospect of finding a validation for his own political views.



imaginary and immerse into the real by ways of contemplation. He would not content himself with imagining things, he would try and seek in nature the seeds from which his ideal grows. Saadi's cypress was obviously an earlier validation of his own ideal. Since his ideal was timeless, such comparisons would not confine themselves to some relative coordinates, like time and space. He found in Saadi's poetic expression the cypress to be a symbol of changelessness and evergreen-ness. The way that Saadi describes the tree yields a meaning close to that understood by Thoreau from the Ross translation. The tree was after all a metaphor of the self.

From a subjective human point of view, would seem appropriate to attach the meaning of the tree in the poem to some individualised form of humanity. The tree is the individual emancipated self, outside time and space. This idea of timelessness was expressed plainly by Thoreau in an article that he published in a form of a literary criticism to the classical latin satire. Thoreau wrote a small but dense essay on Aulus Persius Flaccus (34AD-62AD). While engaging the meaning of the line : "Securus quo pes ferat, atque ex tempore vivit." he comments:

"The life of a wise man is most of all extemporaneous, for he lives out of an eternity that includes all time. He is a child each moment and reflects wisdom." (The Dial, July 1840, p.120)

The interpretation of Thoreau has some stoic undertones, given the fact that Persius was also under the spell of that stoicism, so characteristic for the latin literati of that period of imperial decline. The choice to lead a spartan lifestyle, marked by simplicity and austerity, is somehow similar to the stoic attitude towards life, especially the social life. Thoreau has been criticised and even supposed to have a form of autism that transformed him into a society-rejecting individual. Much like Diogenes in Greece he removed himself from the social sphere of activity without becoming a satirically outspoken author like Persius. He still continued his pursuit of literary achievement with the purpose of offering himself as an example of something that should be followed, with a story serving as a didactic material for his readers. The stoic Diogenes was no more different than the wandering Zhuangzi who also embraced a life of solitary contemplation and who often features in his works characters apparently stricken with madness. Solitude was not only of an external nature. The inner solitude is what makes a person transcend all boundaries that some type of attachment or another may have imposed on the individual self. The bondage is broken when the external solitude becomes internalised as a permanent state of being. That is the moment when the timelessness is achieved, when the extemporaneous nature of the self is realised.

CONCLUSIONS

Although the possibility for ideas to travel is not to be entirely excluded, in this case there is also a common foundation to be considered for the adoption of a concept regarding the tree representing some aspects of mankind in all cultures. Although there can be different influences that can inspire the use of the concept in different contexts, the essence and the need for these associations and adoptions has been always a latent reality ready to take definite shape under certain historical and cultural conditions. The tree has always been a great metaphor, omnipresent across literary geographies. His symbolism was always close to humanity and the general human aspirations. The tree-worshippers of the past never conceived of the tree being outside its natural setting. Its use, at that time, was only that of religious worship. The trees were always protective elements like umbrellas that form canopies to shelter underneath the lost creatures of the wild, including humans. Long-lived and enduring trees were always considered as symbols of everlasting life, bearing in the natural world, the closest resemblance to a human silhouette. They also represent



the part of nature that remained unprocessed by the industrial machinery of mankind, unaffected in its nature by the artificial nature of the human endeavour. It had no use for human industry, since it embodied on earth those values with a significance above the mundane. While he drew nourishment from the subterranean world, his canopy would be reaching for the stars. As an "axis mundi" whose symbol can be thought to be, it was meant to vertically unite the ascending successions of the realms of existence. That cosmic tree had no purely practical, human use. It rose above the material world and embraced the high spheres of the Heavenly.

The tree's motionless state is the expression of natural non-action. Therefore he constitutes a witness of change that never gets transformed by what he witnesses. In the Persian culture, due to his evergreen foliage it is often associated with soul's afterlife, being often a guardian of cemeteries and graveyards, a reminder of death and the netherworld, but a positive element nevertheless, representing freedom. For Saadi it was an escape, the symbol of freedom sought by conditioned humans. In *Zhuangzi* it had the same meaning. Thoreau also adopted the concept and praised those qualities that he also urged humanity to acquire.

The existential coordinates given by the mundane have no effect on the elevated state of communion with everything that the tree achieved by abiding to his own nature without diluting his own essence and compromising his existence. In contrast, in order to achieve greatness human beings have compromised themselves and their nature was altered by the greed and thirst for material advancement, while the tree remained fundamentally faithful to his own.

Politics was a human invention, so was the entire structure of the society. There are rules and regulations that have an effect only in a human-governed world while the employment of features from the vegetal realm in order to express such ideas implies also an escape from society, a change of paradigm, meant to free one from the shackles of artificial conventions, time being also such a convention that is applicable only to a concept-formulating human world.

The growing branches of a tree are symbols of transcendence and expansion while the evergreen meant continuity. Within these qualities can be found some that both common people and philosophers share as part of their core beliefs and constitute a way of looking at the natural world that humanity in general was very fond of. Trees were worshipped even before a religious significance was attached to them, precisely because, imaginary or not, they represented an ideal and a principle beneficial to humanity in general. Their existential solitude or their solitary refuge represented a defiant expression against the tyrannical oppression imposed by various types of mass ideology on the individual at various points in the history of humanity at large and can be regarded as a symbol of independence and individual autonomy.



REFERENCES

- Baba Tahir, the Persian text edited, annoyed and translated by Edward Herron Allen and rendered into English verse by Elizabeth Curtis Brenton (1902), *The Lament of Bābā Tāhir*, London: Bernard Quaritch.
- Chen Junying 程俊英, Jiang Jianyuan 蔣見元 (1991), *Shijing zhuxi*, 詩經注析, Beijing: Zhonghua shuju.
- Graham, A. C. (1989), *Disputers of the Tao: philosophical argument in ancient China*, La Salle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company.
- Hodgson, M. (1974), *The Venture of Islam*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Liu, Xiaogan, 劉笑敢 (1987), *Zhuangzi zhexue ji qi yanbian* 莊子哲學及其演變, Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui kexue chubanshe.
- Saadi, Tr. by James Ross (1890), *Golestan*, London: Walter Scott, Ltd.
- Saadi, Ed. Mohammad Javad Mashkour (1963), *Gulistân-e-Sa'dî*, Tehran: Eqbal.
- Thoreau, H. David (1886), *Walden*, London: Walter Scott.
- Thoreau, H. David (July 1840), *Aulus Persius Flaccus* in *The Dial*, Boston.
- Wang, Xianqian (2006), *Zhuangzi jijie* 莊子集解, p.5 in *Zhuzi jicheng* 諸子集成 v.2, Beijing: Zhonghuashuju.