

Firewood: Reflections on Some Metaphors in the *Yang Sheng Chu*

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes some reflections on two brief texts from the *Yang Sheng Chu* (養生主), the third chapter of the *Chuang-tzu* (莊子). The main focus is the metaphor of *fire* and *firewood*, understood as trying to articulate two intertwined forms of ending and coming to an end. *Making firewood* has to do with the effort of reaching the universal. The metaphor of *fire* stands for a reality beyond the universal, a reality in constant change—like the shape of fire. This reality must not be seen as independent from the universal. There cannot be any fire without firewood that keeps it burning, and there cannot be any particular beyond the universal, nor any form of access to it, without turning towards the universal. Looking for the universal, the paper concludes, has to be done, and it is the only thing that can be done. What can be done indeed is not everything. Everything else, however, requires that everything that can be done *is* done. This is perhaps the basic idea the metaphor of *fire* and *firewood* tries to explicate.

KEY WORDS

agathon

fire

particular

self

Yang Sheng Chu

end

metaphor

river

universal

Chuang-tzu

1. Getting Stuck

The last two lines of the *Yang Sheng Chu* sum up the distinction between the two forms of reaching an end and reaching for an end the chapter tries to explore throughout:

chih ch'iung yü wei hsin
 huo ch'uan yeh pu chih ch'i chin yeh (Index 8; III/60-61)
 指窮於為薪
 火傳也不知其為盡也

*Finger-pointing ends at making firewood.
 That-which transmits fire does not understand its exhaustion.¹
 (Wu 288)*

The first form of reaching an end discussed here is called *ch'iung*. In its literal meaning the character may be translated as *blocked*, *impoverished*, or *exhausted*. What is meant by this character in the present context may become accessible if we start from its opposite. The opposite of *ch'iung* is *ta* (達). On a literal level *ta* means *to break through*. Implied are on the one hand the idea of a dynamics already defined in its direction, and on the other hand the idea of a certain resistance, understood as a barrier or as turning into a barrier. The character *ta* means the breaking through of such a barrier and the reaching of a defined goal behind it. If such an attempt of breaking through fails, the whole project ends not in the form of *ta* but in the

form of *ch'iung*. The two characters articulate two possible results of a dynamics towards a defined goal at the other end of a field of resistance. The dynamics may either break its way towards that goal or it may get stuck somewhere within the field. *Ch'iung*, as we read it here, means *getting stuck in a field of resistance*.

The term *chih* at the beginning of the quoted text has been translated and interpreted in various ways.² The literal translation of the character as *finger-pointing* has the advantage of not cutting off the metaphorical content too early, thus keeping it accessible as the point of departure for any interpretation. Against the background of what has been said above, it is probably quite safe to say that *chih* articulates the first of the two ideas *ch'iung* and *ta* have in common in their meaning. Finger-pointing always is pointing towards something. On the most literal level we can think of, finger-pointing indicates the definition of a particular goal located in a particular direction. On a level of interpretation slightly more abstract and less literal, we might include the movement towards that goal into the meaning of the term. The character *chih* would then mean the definition of a particular goal and direction and the dynamics guided by that definition.

In the quoted text, *ch'iung* follows *chih*, and that is what the text has to say on *chih*. Finger-pointing, any attempt of trying to reach a defined goal somewhere beyond a given field of resistance, ends in getting stuck. Not getting stuck but reaching the defined goal, is considered something that just does not happen. And that is the first of the two forms of reaching an end and reaching for it summarized by the two quoted lines: If and as long as the project of reaching an end is defining and understanding itself as a dynamics that defines a particular goal and then tries to proceed under the guidance of such a definition, the form of reaching an end will be *ch'iung*.

The second form of reaching an end summed up in these lines is called *chin*. This character may be translated by *to exhaust*, *to make full use of*. The graph shows a hand holding a brush and an empty vessel. The root metaphor that is in play in all the different meanings of that term works with the idea of using up, making use of or managing to make use of everything there is in a vessel. The contrast

between this metaphor and the root metaphor in play in all the different meanings of *ch'iung* and *ta* is a very strong one. Each of these metaphors articulates a particular correlation between a dynamics and its environment. In the case of *ch'iung* and *ta*, the environment is understood as a barrier and the dynamics as the attempt or even the task of breaking through that barrier. In the case of *chin*, the environment is understood as a vessel and the dynamics, as already has been said, as the attempt or task of making use of what there is in the vessel.

These two root metaphors may again be read as articulating two basic paradigms of approaching and understanding *what-is-there*. According to the text, the first paradigm is doomed to fail. If we understand the dynamics that we are, as an attempt of breaking through, and *what-is-there* as a barrier that keeps us from reaching ends we have defined, the end of everything will be in getting stuck somewhere within that barrier. There is no need, however, to understand ourselves and *what-is-there* in the sense of this first paradigm only. This leads us to the question of how these two paradigms, according to the text, are related to each other.

The second line begins with the two characters *huo ch'uan*, *transmitting fire, keeping the flame burning*. In formal terms, they correspond to *chih* in the first line. They are *chih* again and finally sum up what can and cannot be achieved by finger-pointing. The intriguing side of this last line of the *Yang Sheng Chu* is the fact that *ch'iung*, the first and failing paradigm of reaching an end, nevertheless is affirmed as a necessary one. What keeps not only the two last lines of the book together, but the two paradigms articulated in these two lines as well, is the metaphor of *fire*. Getting stuck, reaching an end in the sense of the first paradigm, is further characterized as *making firewood*. The character *chin*, *reaching an end* in the sense of the second paradigm, refers back to *huo*. What *ch'iung* cannot achieve is *chin huo*, *exhausting fire*. If we understand the reaching of an end in the sense of the second paradigm not just as *chin*, but as *chin huo*, and the text forces us to do so, this second paradigm turns out to be inseparably tied to the first one: No matter

what it may precisely mean to exhaust fire, it will only be possible to achieve or even to try to achieve it as long as there is firewood to keep the flame burning, and the first paradigm—*chih* ending up in making firewood—obviously is seen as responsible for providing this condition. The relation between the first and the second paradigm must not be understood as a relation between a somehow *lower* level that has to be left behind in order to proceed to a *higher* level. The whole rhetoric of turning round, of leaving behind and moving upwards, as we find it in Plato's story of the cave, does not work here. In Plato, the fuller term, the activity less limited, can only be achieved by turning away from the lower and more limited activity, at least for some time. Following the *Chuang-tzu*, a moment of turning away from finger-pointing and of leaving it behind to proceed to the pure project of exhausting fire would be a moment as well when the flame begins to weaken and to die. The appearance of the fuller term, instead of exhausting fire, would initiate the withering of the flame and the collapse of the whole project.³

2. The Self-Dissolving Line

From the end of the chapter I shift back to the beginning. The *Yang Sheng Chu* opens with these lines:

wu sheng yeh yu ya erh chih yeh wu ya i yu ya sui wu ya tai i
 i erh wui chih che tai erh i i (Index 7; III/1-2)
 吾生也有涯而知也無涯以有涯隨無涯殆已
 已而為知者殆而已矣

*In my life there-exist shorelines, and in understanding
 there-exist-no shorelines. With the existence of
 shorelines to follow after the no-existence of
 shorelines is dangerous enough already.*

*He-who already knows such danger, and still makes after
 understanding, is dangerous indeed. (Wu 285)*

The dynamics concerned with determining its direction and working out a paradigm for doing so is given a name here. The characters *wu* and *wo* (我) are often seen as signifying two different selves in the *Chuang-tzu*, the *wo*-self being the objectified or non-authentic self and the *wu*-self the authentic one. Putting it this way can only be a first step, however. In the last instance, the self cannot be conceived as a plural. A distinction between two or more selves is usually an attempt of understanding and articulating a complexity of the self that cannot be articulated by one of the terms alone. The distinction between *wu* and *wo* serves such a purpose too. Starting from the *wo*-self and taking it as the objectified or, as I suggest to say, the *spatialized* self, *wu* is what is left when such a spatialization collapses. Starting from *wu* and taking it as non-objective and non-spatial, *wo* is what *wu* has to become in order to act and to get involved with *what-is-there*. The self as a whole as we find it articulated here could be described as the identity of spatialization and its collapse: Without spatialization the self cannot relate to *what-is-there*, act and grow, without the collapse of spatialization it will not be the self that relates to the world, acts and grows. As it is anything from clear what the identity of spatialization and its collapse may precisely be, it is very seductive to fall back on different selves, or perhaps even—as in Buddhism—to cross out the self altogether.

At least in the texts we are discussing here, the *Chuang-tzu* does not allow either one of these two options. The character *wu* in the first line of the text is followed by *sheng*. The text is not focusing on the non-spatial *wu* alone. It is focusing on *wu sheng*, the *wu* as living, growing, being related to the world. The two characters together signify *wu* in its process of spatialization. Making use of the terminology that has been used in the first section of this paper, *wu sheng* can be understood as referring to the dynamics that we are in the process of relating to the world and determining its direction. An adequate paradigm for this process would precisely have to solve the problem of how it may be possible to spatialize *wu*, to determine the direction of its involvement with the world, and to keep any spatialization in a process of collapsing at the same time.

The text, as it goes on, presents the first and, as emphasized twice, dangerous (*tai* 殆) one of two such paradigms. Two terms are characterizing this paradigm, *chih* and *sui*, *understanding* and *to follow*. Why should it be dangerous to follow understanding in the process of getting involved with the world?

To answer this question, we have to clarify in some detail what is meant by *chih* (知). As the meaning of this character in the present context is defined by the characters that follow, we do not have to engage, for that purpose, into a lengthy discussion on the meaning of *chih* in general. The character *chih* is defined as *wu ya*, *without shorelines*. Different from most other readings of the text, we do not take this just as an attribute of *chih*, somehow assuming that we already know what *chih*, apart from having no shorelines, is. Instead, we take *wu ya* as the essential characterization of what is meant by *chih*. Understanding in the sense of *chih*, then, is *that-which-does-not-have-shorelines*. With that, the decisive character turns out to be *ya*. To clarify what it is that-does-not-have-shorelines, we have to clarify what it means to have shorelines. This brings us back to the beginning of the text. In the same way as *chih* is followed by *wu ya*, the two initial characters *wu sheng* are followed by *yu ya*, *having shorelines*. Reading both phrases in the same way, we would have to say that *yu ya* defines what *wu sheng*, the non-spatial self in the process of relating to the world, essentially is.

On a literal level, *ya* means *riverbank*. The phrase *wu sheng yeh ya ya* is juxtaposing *ya* with *wu sheng*. In literal terms, there is only one thing juxtaposed with the riverbank, and that is the river. Juxtaposing *ya* with *wu sheng*, therefore, means using *ya* as a metaphor that tries to understand *wu sheng* as a river flowing along a riverbank. The question is, how this metaphor can be related to the problem we are concerned with here, the problem of how to understand an ongoing process of spatialization and its collapse.

The riverbank, on the one hand, guides the direction of the flowing river, and by a changing profile of resistance it determines the river's speed and strength. On the other hand, the riverbank is modified, changed and redrawn by the flowing river, washing out

parts of the bank here and adding these parts as sediments somewhere else. While being guided and molded, the river is molding and transforming the riverbank. This means, that the riverbank is constantly changing at any given point. This again means, that the river is guided and molded by any given point of its bank *in a constantly changing way*. To fully exploit this phenomenon as a metaphor, it does not matter that this process may often take place on a micrological level only, difficult to notice for the human eye within the span of a person's life. The strength of the metaphor only depends upon the fact that the relation between the river and the riverbank is a process of intertwined modifications and remodifications, no matter on which level—micro, meso or macro—this process is taking place.

If we look at this process from the side of the river, and that is, from the side of *wu sheng* seen as a river, we may first say that the river follows the riverbank as it is stretching ahead of it. On the level of *wu sheng*, this idea of following, of trying to follow the profile of what is there, the profile, as we might say, of the world, can be seen as articulating a process of spatialization. Why spatialization? The idea of a given stretch of the riverbank is a spatial idea. When we try to imagine such a stretch, we imagine its parts one beside the other in a perspective from above. When we try to imagine the river flowing along this stretch, we do it the same way, and there is no other way of doing it. In its attempt of following the profile of the world, then, *wu sheng* is looking ahead by looking at the profile of the world and its own future path along this profile from above. But the flowing river, as just has been said, never is *following* the riverbank. The perspective from above is deceptive. As every single point of the riverbank is constantly changing, it cannot be represented as a line. The dots forming the line would have to be drawn in movement, constantly changing their position with respect to their neighbors and dancing in an irregular and unpredictable pattern. Such a sequence of dancing points would not be a line any more. It would not even be a trembling line. If at all, the riverbank, the profile of the world, could only be drawn as a line blurring itself, as a self-blurring line, a line dissolving itself into a space of grey. The crucial point would be here to draw the

line as *self*-dissolving, not as being dissolved or broken by outside forces. The line would have to be visible at the very moment of dissolving, and the moment of dissolving would have to be visible, if we may say so, as the *truth* of the line. If it was possible to draw something like that, a line self-dissolving in grey and reaching its truth at this very moment, it could be taken as representing the unity of spatialization and its collapse we are trying to understand.

Bringing into play the term *truth* here could lead to some misunderstandings. It seems to be unavoidable, however. At any given moment, any given point of the riverbank is changing the flow of the river and being changed by that flow. This means, that every point is changing from moment to moment and the river flowing by is changing as well. Any correlation between a particular point of the riverbank, changing in a particular way, and the river, flowing by and changing in a particular way too, exists only once. Any such correlation completely exhausts all the possibilities that are or were there at the given moment. The river, arriving at the particular point of the riverbank with a particular speed and strength, changes that point and is changed by it as the balance between the river on the one hand and the shape and resistance of the riverbank on the other hand allow. It could never have been otherwise, but it can be as it is only once. At the next moment, the river will arrive at the same point with a different speed and with a different strength, and the same point of the riverbank will already have a different shape and a different factor of resistance. Any such correlation, existing only once, I call a *moment of truth*.

It can easily be seen, that *ya* does mean a limit, but not a limit in the sense of a lack. Going back again on a literal level of reflection, that-which-does-not-have-*ya* would just be that-which-is-not-a-river. Is it possible to relate this to *chih*? Would it make sense to say that *chih* is that-which-is-not-a-river? According to what has been said, it would mean that *chih* is that which is not constantly changed and changing, not a flow, a self-blurring line, but-something else. Is it perhaps something that does not change, an eternal pattern that could be represented by a map, with shorelines of rivers accurately drawn

into it? Is it perhaps what the cook is looking for, the pattern of the ox as a whole?

3. Making Firewood

Although there is some danger in following *chih*, *wu sheng* obviously is inclined to follow *chih* in spite of this danger. If we read this text together with the two lines discussed in the first section of this paper, the enigma of this inclination disappears. Following *chih* here corresponds to finger-pointing there, to the first and failing paradigm that ends in the form of *ch'iung*, *getting stuck*. As we have seen, the failing paradigm is not a thing that could be left behind. Although *chin huo* cannot be achieved by finger-pointing, there would be no flame any more to exhaust if the failing paradigm would not constantly provide through the process of its failure what the fire needs to keep on burning: firewood. From here, the enigmatic inclination of *wu sheng* to follow *chih* in spite of the danger seems to be quite reasonable: If the failure of following *chih* provides a necessary condition to keep open the possibility of *chin*, the danger of following *chih* is unavoidable.

That-which-has-shorelines, *wu sheng*, has to follow *chih*, that-which-has-no-shorelines, in order to keep the possibility of *chin huo* open. What could that mean? The story of the cook may be of some help here.

The cook, as the story goes, tries to see the ox as a whole, and within three years he does not succeed. He is not telling us what exactly happened and what he did after these three years. He is only telling us that then, at the time when he is telling his story, he was not trying to guide his hand by looking for the ox any more. And his hand, as we know, is undoing the ox in a perfect way. Although we do not know what the cook exactly did, he certainly did not turn away from the ox. We have to assume that he kept on looking ever more intensively, and at a certain point the idea of the ox as a whole that had been guiding him until then just disappeared, his hand beginning to move in a perfect way.

The cook did not drop the idea of the ox as a whole. It just disappeared. What made it disappear?

Looking with the utmost concentration, we may say, his eyes gradually became so saturated with what he saw, that the idea lost its charm. The cook realized that he had already seen more than the ox as a whole, not less, and that was the moment when his hand began moving and the guiding idea disappeared. This point of saturation could only be reached because the cook was guided by the idea. Without it, without trying to see the ox as a whole, the ox, that-which-does-not-change, would never have begun to tremble and to blur, and the cook's eyes would always have remained half empty. There never was a guarantee, on the other hand, that the ox would begin trembling and the hand begin moving. Following *chih*, looking for the ox as a whole, is not a method. The risk of just getting stuck is always there. Accumulating firewood does not guarantee its ignition, without accumulating it, however, there would not be anything to ignite.

We could try to say the same thing by making use of the distinction between the universal and the particular. The universal, this at least is one way of using the term, is that-which-does-not-change. It remains the same at different times and in different contexts. The pattern of the ox as a whole is an example for that. According to the *Chuang-tzu*, nothing remains the same at different times and in different contexts, and *chin huo* precisely means to exhaust change, not get somewhere beyond it. To achieve this, as has just been said, we have to look for the universal nevertheless. It was not a mistake to look for the ox as a whole, it was a necessary condition for what was happening afterwards. This means that *chin huo* refers to the particular that lies beyond the universal, at the other side of it, not to the particular in a naive sense and untouched by the problem of the universal. The metaphor of the flame, constantly changing its shape, has to be seen here as a metaphor for the particular in this sense. And again there is no guarantee. Looking for the universal, we may end up in just seeing examples, cases falling under the universal we are looking for. Without looking for the universal,

however, there is no way of getting beyond it.

The cook never explicitly stops looking for the ox as a whole, and if he did, the dance of his knife would immediately get out of rhythm. The metaphor of *fire* and *firewood* does not leave any doubt here. In this respect, this metaphor is far more complex than the metaphor of the flowing river. What this metaphor cannot accommodate is the *wu* in *wu sheng*. The river has no self that is in need of achieving its involvement with the world. To the river, there is nothing to achieve at all, it is just flowing. Different from the river, *wu sheng* has to achieve its involvement with the world, and it can take the flowing river as a model only because it is not like it and never will be. The flow of its involvement will always be an achieved one. The metaphor of *firewood* and *fire* is able to embrace this aspect. Firewood has to be made and provided, and doing so is everything that can be done. *Exhausting change* is not an argument against the universal. Looking for the universal is everything that can be done, and it has to be done, but—and this perhaps is the basic idea this metaphor tries to explicate—what can be done is not everything.

From here, it cannot be a surprise any more that the rhetoric of turning round and moving upwards as we find it in the story of the cave does not work in the present context. This rhetoric, in Plato and elsewhere, is concerned with the effort of looking for the universal, not with the problem of getting beyond it. There is, in Plato too, something beyond the universal. It is the *agathon* or the idea of the Good. Although the contemplation of the *agathon* and a form of involvement with the world guided by it are certainly not the same as *chin huo*, it is quite likely that both ideas try to answer the same question. To explore this further, however, would already be another topic.

NOTES

¹ I am using Kuang-Ming Wu's translation. The words that appear in italics try to match the Chinese text word for word.

² See Wu 298.

³. For a modification of this remark on Plato, see my closing remark at the end of the paper.

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