

Applying the Story of *The Dream of the Butterfly* in Creative Design

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Abstract. In recent years, traditional cultural material has been creativity applied to increase the value of artistic designs and expand aesthetic economies worldwide. Cultural creative designs involve extracting and transforming cultural elements and symbols to create new aesthetic meanings in artworks. This study extracts the intangible cultural elements of the Chinese fable, *The Dream of the Butterfly*, through analyzing its literary meanings to provide inspirational concepts for cultural creative designs. The experience in *The Dream of the Butterfly* was a turning point in the life of Chuang Tzu. In response to increasing stresses of modern living, soothing emotional designs have become trendy. The light-hearted writing style of Chuang Tzu and the erratic portrayal of the butterfly are ideal inspiration for creative designs. This study aggregates practices based on theories of cultural creative designs and organizes various interpretations of *The Dream of the Butterfly* through the Chuang Tzu aesthetic theory and by scholars worldwide. The fable was interpreted on three interpretative levels (namely the dreamlike state, the integration between the thing and the self, and the sympathetic circulation of mind and matter) to analyze existing artworks inspired by the fable. Thus, spiritual reflections in the process of creative transformation have been clarified, and a reference for transforming the philosophy of *The Dream of the Butterfly* into creative designs has been established.

Keywords: The Dream of the Butterfly · Cultural creativity · Creative design

1 Introduction

Most of the classical Chinese literary works, which have been handed down the generations over thousands of years, are well-refined masterpieces. Not only do they capture the essence of ancient culture and wisdom, but they also correspond to numerous aspects of creative design. These classical works can be used to create memorable creative designs and enable new generations to experience the distinctive legacy of Chinese culture, thereby achieving cultural preservation. Therefore, this study explored *The Dream of the Butterfly*, a fable from *Qi Wu Lun (Discussion on Making All Things Equal)* in the *Chuang Tzu*. The fable is as follows:

Once Chuang Chou dreamt that he was a butterfly, a fluttering butterfly which was pleased with himself and did not know that he was Chuang Chou. Soon, he woke up and found himself an unmistakable Chuang Chou. However, he didn't know if he was Chuang Chou who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Chuang Chou. There must be a distinction between Chuang Chou and a butterfly! This is called the Transformation of Things.

Through considering the meaning of this work, this study explores the cultural context and design of the Chuang Tzu's aesthetics. It aggregates and analyzes various interpretations of *The Dream of the Butterfly* and existing related artworks to provide a theoretical basis for transformative designs and applications, as well as specific creative design methods. Understanding the realms of *The Dream of the Butterfly* enhances the poetic and artistic moods and aesthetic values of artworks. Therefore, this study examines the applicability of *The Dream of the Butterfly* in modern design to facilitate the preservation of culture and enhance the depth and significance of cultural creative designs.

Cultural design involves creating emotional products through the use of cultural elements to facilitate a spiritual consumer experience that draws on beliefs, memories, or emotions and satisfies consumers' cultural-level psychological needs. An outstanding product can communicate with people through emotional images and inspire their sensations in a similar approach to that of an artwork. According to Norman [13] emotional elements are central to the success of product design, and the soul-touching power of a product is maximized through empathy, which is based on the truest resonance to the life experience of each individual. Thus, creative inspiration from *The Dream of the Butterfly* can provide an empathetic concept for generating artistic and cultural designs.

2 On Applying the Philosophy of *Chuang Tzu*

Given the stresses of modern life, soothing emotional designs have become trendy. This study aims to expand imagination through the fantasy world created by the fables in the *Chuang Tzu*. No matter how treacherous the world has been, plants, animals, and strange, changing worlds constitute the emotional universe in of the Chuang Tzu. The fables are richly imaginative, featuring effective literary techniques, fantastic descriptions of scenery and characters, and minimalistic yet meaningful writing. These fables also exhibit diverse genres, complex content, and charming forms and art that are not restricted to any specific format. This literary achievement is unrivaled among pre-Qin literature, thus making the *Chuang Tzu* an outstanding work when compared to literary works worldwide [12].

Since the early 1900s, there have been interpretations of the *Chuang Tzu* by Friedrich Nietzsche, Henri Bergson, existentialism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and deconstructionism, which expand on its philosophy and add new depth; the *Chuang Tzu* has been interpreted from the perspectives of metaphysics, aesthetics, philosophy of art, and ecoenvironmental philosophy [15]. The fables of Chuang Tzu have also attracted the attention of numerous artists and writers over time, because the creative freedom inherent in these fables has considerably influenced aesthetic philosophy and artistic creations among them [11]. The rhetoric and use of rich metaphors in the

Chuang Tzu has broadly influenced the literature of subsequent eras; in particular, the appreciation of the arts and craftsmanship in the *Chuang Tzu* has shaped later literary and artistic works. When aesthetic creators transcend their sense of gains and losses, their spirits and creativity are freed, affording them scope for liberty and pleasure in their artistic creations [20].

Chu [4] claimed that imagination is the fundamental capability required for artists and writers, and that people who lack imagination may only become artisans or literati. Moreover, the breadth of imagination defines the value of artistic works. Arts are appreciated through their creativity, which is founded on imagination. Creativity involves integrating, organizing, and tailoring existing constructs into new order or forms; in other words, artists arrange, organize, and tailor their observations of nature or life experience into coherent works. Imagination also plays a key role in aesthetics. The rich literary grace and beauty of the *Chuang Tzu* arise from its unpredictable, imaginative spaces rendered without the restrictions of specific forms. Plants and animals feature in the emotional world portrayed by Chuang Tzu, corresponding to the current trend in design, which stresses the use of emotional elements.

Chu [4] indicated that Chuang Tzu transferred his emotions to a fish in the *Chiu Shui* chapter (*The Chapter of Autumn Flood*) to share the life of the fish. This interaction between Chuang Tzu and the fish is a form of psychological empathy. In the famous *Fable of Kunpeng*, Chuang Tzu opened an infinite space for the human spirit through the transforming fish and birds in his experiential world. His philosophical writing is “limitless and uninterrupted (*Tian Hsia*, literally *The World*)” and similar to “the water of the Yellow River that descends from the Heaven.” The concept of “tours” employed by Chuang Tzu has profoundly influenced later literary, aesthetic, and artistic works. “Heart tours,” which involve transcending all human relationships and interests in the tangible world and observing things aesthetically, are the core of the psychological activities in traditional Chinese aesthetics. The concept of “the usefulness of the useless” bears a striking similarity with the modern European aesthetic theory of transcending human interests and utilitarianism [2].

In summary, the fables of *Chuang Tzu* have profoundly influenced later literary, aesthetic, and artistic works. The aesthetic psychological activities involved in the fables transcend the human relationships and interests in the tangible world. The observance of the world through this artistic mindset constitutes the core of the psychological activities promoted in the traditional Chinese aesthetics. The school of thought involved in the fables bears a considerable similarity with modern European aesthetic theory, which transcends human interests and utilitarianism. This makes *Chuang Tzu*, which can be used in developing the modern literature, aesthetics, and philosophies, suitable for the theoretical transformation as discussed in this paper.

3 On the Levels of the Realms in *The Dream of the Butterfly*

In this study, three interpretations of *The Dream of the Butterfly* were employed and examined in three artworks. In “On the Annotation Orientations of *The Dream of the Butterfly* and their Utilities,” Lin [9] distinguishes between the mainstream interpretation of the fable adopted in the days of Guo Xiangzhu (Jin Dynasty) and Chengxuan

Yingshu (Tang Dynasty) versus the new philosophical interpretation of *Chuang Tzu* through the introduction of modern European–American aesthetics and the discourse on related aesthetic experience by modern scholars. Although enriching *The Dream of the Butterfly*, the various new interpretations may confuse readers. These diverse interpretations can be categorized into three major orientations, namely the traditional “dreamlike state” interpretation, the integration between the object and the self, and the sympathetic circulation of mind and matter. In this study, these three interpretive levels were investigated according to the characteristics of the related artworks. The decision of how to interpret the key subjects of the fable concerns not only the variations among interpretive approaches, but also the diversity of the interpreters’ understanding of the philosophy of Chuang Tzu. These three levels of interpretations are detailed as follows.

3.1 Dreamlike State

In his “Preliminary Study on the Meaning of the Dream in *Chuang Tzu*,” Hsu [7] divided *The Dream of the Butterfly* into the dream phase (when Chuang Tzu dreamed of being a butterfly without being aware of his identity as Chuang Tzu) and the waking phase (after Chuang Tzu woke up from the dream), thereby helping readers distinguish time and place within the fable. However, scholars over time have proposed divergent interpretations and focal points. Some have focused on interpreting the dream phase; some have argued that the waking phase is the true focal point of the fable; others have addressed Chuang Tzu and the butterfly themselves as the center of the entire story. Most of the scholars who interpret the fable through the dreamlike approach have divided the story into the dream and waking phases according to the plot progression and explained both phases as dream states on the basis of the following line: “He didn’t know if he was Chuang Chou who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Chuang Chou.” Accordingly, the dreamlike interpretation approach was designated as the first level of the realm of *The Dream of the Butterfly*.

3.2 Integration of the Object and the Self

According to Chen [2], Chuang Tzu used this fable to describe the state of humans enjoying themselves and doing as they pleased. To Chuang Tzu, the universe is a massive garden, where butterflies fly around joyfully without constraints; humans should similarly roam around the universe with freedom and without constraints. The transformation into a butterfly is a reflection of arts. In other words, the aesthetic experience is used to reflect upon the changes of objects, eliminate the distance between the object and the self, and attain the integration of the two entities. Kao [8] maintained that the sense of infinite space involves first the confusion caused by the environment, then the emotions caused by sensations, and finally the perfect integration between the emotions and the environment. This process of assimilation is caused by the continuation of self, which leads to an expanding world with no barriers. The transformation into the butterfly involves the experience of an object by the self through its mind, a self-metaphor through the use of the object, and ultimately the

elimination of the distinction between the object and the self. According to *The Aesthetics and Literature of Chuang Tzu*, aesthetic experience is a realm of the actualization of the object and the self. When Chuang Tzu dreamed of becoming a butterfly, he did not know whether he was Chuang Tzu who dreamed of being a butterfly or a butterfly that dreamed of being Chuang Tzu. Such is the transition between the object and the self [4].

Whether dreams are real or virtual is explored in *Chuang Tzu*. Chuang Tzu recorded the dream of being a butterfly and analyzed it as in line with his own aspirations (being happy with himself and doing as he pleased). In that dream, Chuang Tzu completed his transformation into a butterfly, and the dream was not only a dream. Therefore, Chuang Tzu was unaware of his identity as Chuang Tzu. When he woke up, he had to recognize that he did not truly become a butterfly. This experience led to a major change in the life of Chuang Tzu [1].

Scholars who have interpreted the fable as the integration between the object and the self generally focus on the aesthetic experience of self-actualization, pleasure, and freedom as described in the lines “flitting and fluttering around,” “happy with himself and doing as he pleased,” and “he didn’t know he was Chuang Chou.” The experience of the integration of the object and the self in the dream was used to directly verify the accessibility of the happiness and free spirit in life. In *The New Discourse on Laotzi and Chuang Tzu*, Chen [2] indicated that the concept of the transformation into the object does not only indicate the process of Chuang Tzu’s transformation into a butterfly but also symbolizes the disappearance of the border between the object and the self, the sympathy between the subject and the object, and thereby their mutual integration. The concept directly refers to the spiritual harmony between the object and the self. Accordingly, the concept of the integration of the object and the self was designated as the second level of the realm of *The Dream of the Butterfly*.

3.3 Sympathetic Circulation of Mind and Matter

The sympathetic circulation of mind and matter, which is an extension of the dreamlike approach and the concept of the integration between the object and the self, is a new concept used to describe Chuang Tzu’s transcendence of the realms of life in *The Dream of the Butterfly* [9]. This concept also describes the absence of independent reality and the attainment of spiritual transcendence and freedom through the overcoming of the borders between life and death and between the self and the others as described in the *Qi Wu Lun (Discussion on Making All Things Equal)*.

In “*True People Do Not Dream and The Dream of the Butterfly: The Preliminary Study on the Meaning of Dreams in Chuang Tzu*,” Hsu [6] interpreted the concept of the transformation into the object through the thorough sympathetic circulation of the object and the self (separation → integration → separation). Hsu [7] emphasized the aesthetic experience of pleasure and freedom in the realm of integration, and the reflection and realization of the subject of the oneness between the dream and reality and between life and death in the realm of separation. This fable signifies these things in the mind of the subject. The interactive circulation between the aesthetic experience and spiritual realization leads to the transformation into the object.

According to the concept of the sympathetic circulation of mind and matter, Chuang Tzu attained the highest realm of life through the separation, integration, separation circulation of mind and matter. The transformation into the object involves the aesthetic experience in the realm of integration and the reflection and realization of life in the realm of separation. This is a continuous process of circulation between separation and integration. This circulation process enables an individual to continually transcend the realms of life and achieve *Tao* (literally “the way”) [10].

According to Kao [8], the emotional (e.g., internalized images and physical, sensual, and emotional reactions) and intellectual (e.g., conceptual relationships based on representations or symbols) substance of aesthetic experience simultaneously exist in the consciousness of each individual and continuously interact with each other. This enables individuals to fulfill not only personal interests through their experiences but also their personal aesthetic sensibilities. External phenomena are a starting point or a border to the processes and realms of aesthetic experience, and can only be converted to personal experience through internalization. This corresponds to the concept of the sympathy between mind and matter. Therefore, the sympathetic circulation of mind and matter was designated as the third level of the realm of *The Dream of the Butterfly*.

4 Transitioning and Interpreting the Story in Design

According to Chin [3], art is inseparable from constructs, which are acquired through experience and typically generated from the imagination. Continual imagining leads to the generation of multiple constructs, which are then integrated and expressed to form the artistic connotation and appeal of an artwork. Artists must put emotions into everything, giving life to their imagined universe, and construct in line with their zeitgeist, to create extraordinary works and attain the infinite realm in which life and art are one. Regardless whether an artwork is based on dreams, mysteries, satire, or religion, transformations can be traced within the basis of the artwork. According to *The History of Chinese Esthetics*, as evidenced in its evolution from capturing images from observation in the early Qin era to the fusion of subjective thoughts and emotions into objective items and the vital imaginations during the Wei, Jin, Northern, and Southern dynasties, classical Chinese aesthetics involves the exploration of psychological activities in aesthetic creations. Accordingly, the examination of the artworks in this study is based on interpretations of the diverse abstract and specific elements in *The Dream of the Butterfly*.

A fundamental consensus on creative transformations in Chinese philosophies, ideologies, and cultures was preliminarily established through intensive promotion by scholars such as Charles Fu, Yu-Sheng Lin, and Zheng-Tung Wei in the 1980s [15]. These scholars selected *Chuang Tzu*, which contains abundant original philosophical writings and has considerably impacted Chinese philosophy, as the basis of artistic transformation. The writings of *Chuang Tzu* were expanded upon and restated through the employment of modern knowledge. According to Fu, not only should the possible connotations described by the original author be stated, but the maximum potential of the knowledge in the text must be discovered. According to *Innovative Meanings*, transformative creative narratives can be applied to give the Chuang Tzu philosophy a

new life and form. The philosophical techniques of phenomenology, Heidegger's ontology, and deconstructionism can be used to perform the transformative creations based on *Chuang Tzu*. Such creative procedures lead to an expansion of the possibilities embedded within the original works. Thus, the original works are no longer limited to recapitulating their original meanings, but are instead incorporated in a new contemporary perspective, thereby inspiring more creative transformations of ancient philosophies [17–19].

According to Fu [5], the hermeneutics of creativity originated from interpretative studies of the classical philosophical and religious works of *Tao Te Ching (The True Classic of the Way and the Power)*. Because this hermeneutics is a general methodology, it can be applied to continue, inherit, reconstruct, transform, and modernize an ideological tradition (e.g., Confucianism or Buddhism). According to the hermeneutics of creativity, carrying forward ideological and cultural traditions enables modern scholars to develop appropriate attitudes in processing said traditions. This hermeneutics can also be applied in literary appreciation and criticism as well as studies on the history of philosophy and ideas. The theory of interpreting and transforming classical literary works involves the process of reading, interpreting, absorbing, and transforming the said works. Fu maintained that the hermeneutics of creativity involves constructing a comprehensive theory through the appreciation, criticism, and creative transformations of classical works. Generally, hermeneutics encompasses studies of the humanities such as literature and the arts, and incorporates the essences of various European and American philosophies. The process of the transformative applications of classical works can be generalized into the following five levels:

1. *Actual meaning*: what the original author *actually* said. This requires collating and researching the original texts.
2. *Intended meaning*: what the original author intended to say. This requires semantic clarifications, contextual studies, biographical studies, and logical analyses.
3. *Implied meaning*: what the original author could have implied in the text. This requires referencing relevant analyses and interpretations by scholars over time.
4. *Deeper meaning*: what the original author should have said without being aware of it themselves. This may be related to deeper or fundamental meanings under the surface of the text, which require hermeneutical insights to identify.
5. *Creative meaning*: what the original author might say today to preserve the original thoughts in the text. This requires creativity from the interpreters to identify.

Wong [14] suggested that the aforementioned modern Chinese hermeneutics provides true creative opportunities and particularly emphasized the deeper and creative meanings among the five levels of hermeneutics proposed by Fu [5]. These subjective meanings involve transforming the implied meanings as interpreted by other people into one's own contemporary, perceptive creative thinking and incorporating Gadamer's antecedent structure. In other words, works of the past are questioned through the perspective of the present, thereby increasing the possibility of the interactions between the works of the past and the creators of the present. The questioning and transformation of classical works through modern creative design fulfills the concept of embedding modern elegance within the emotional recall of ancient times in cultural and creative industries. An outstanding artwork must be appropriately

interpreted to induce its appreciators into its artistic world. Gadamer described hermeneutics as an envoy of all thinking, thus alluding to its mediating role in creative activities. Yeh [16] addressed hermeneutics as the basis for interpreting and applying classical aesthetics in modern designs. This enables designers to examine the interpretation phases and contents of classical literature corresponding to their creative works. Thus, the applicability of the systematic development of literary interpretation in the transformative designs based on the literature can be expanded, and designers can understand and adjust the interpretative positions of their works.

The artworks investigated in this study can be analyzed and correspond to the interpretative levels of *The Dream of the Butterfly*. Figure 1 shows the metal sculpture created by Pei-Chun Chen, which compares interpersonal interactions to the integration between Chuang Tzu and the butterfly and from seeing others to seeing oneself. The transformation within the work resembles both a ring of flowers and a circle of butterflies. The flowers and butterflies are similar to yet distinct from each other. Such an ambiguous combination is a form of the winding between the dream and the reality. Figure 2 depicts the illustration by Yuan-Chian Liu, which reveals the distinct constructs of Chuang Tzu and the butterfly within the same image. To overcome the restraints of this conventional art style, Liu focused on the frequently overlooked concept of the transformation into the object (the butterfly) by turning the arms of Chuang Tzu into butterfly wings and removing Chuang Tzu's outerwear, which signifies the transcendence of the secular reality. The mist represents the illusory realm of the dream. Thus, the integration between the object and the self was conveyed. Figure 3 illustrates the poster created by Dai-Qiang Jin for an international festival of dance based on the concept of *The Dream of the Butterfly*. A picture that ambiguously resembles either a butterfly or a dancer is used to convey the expression, "Is it the dancer who dreams of being a butterfly, or the butterfly that dreams of being a dancer?" Thus, the state of mind of the dancer and the harmony between the mind and the art are portrayed; the sympathetic circulation between the mind and matter is achieved.



Fig. 1. Dreamlike state (by Pei-Chung Chen 2013)



Fig. 2. Integration between the object and the self (by Yuan-Chian Liu 2015)



Fig. 3. Sympathetic circulation of mind and matter (by Dai-Qiang Jin 1989)

5 Conclusion

The key meanings, structures, and sensory cognitive relationships in *The Dream of the Butterfly* were examined to clarify diverse understandings of the fable by scholars in their own interpretations. Because of these divergent understandings, the fable has been interpreted in numerous orientations, thus enriching its significance. This study investigates the cultural contexts and design of the Chuang Tzu's aesthetics to formulate a theoretical basis for transformative designs and applications. According to the characteristics of the three artworks explored, the interpretative realms of *The Dream of the Butterfly* were divided into three levels: the dreamlike state, the integration between the object and the self, and the sympathetic circulation of mind and matter. Thus, a reference for analyzing the artworks based on the fable was created for practitioners in the cultural and creative industries.

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