

Daoism Concepts in Kristeva's "Chora"

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Abstract: Kristeva, in her publication *Revolution In Poetic Language*, refers to the concept of "chora" to reconstruct the demolition of emotionality and rationality in humankind. "Chora" is a space constituted of the Semiotic and the Symbolic for the preparation to generate humanity. I noticed that Kristeva's "chora" functions not only in a semiotic way but also interpenetrates into the thoughts of Chinese Daoism. I believe this discovery is beneficial for us to understand Kristeva's psychoanalysis in a different way with some cultural exchanges; in addition, we can come up with a new perspective on the traditional discussion of Daoism from western theories. I first reanalyzed Kristeva's "chora" in a semiotic way. Then I argued that "chora" assimilates Chinese Daoism in two pieces of evidence: "Chora" can be valued as a Daoist matrix where drives or motivations are generated. More, "chora" shares the common features of Laozi's potentiality and Zhuangzi's obscurity.

Keywords: Kristeva, Daoism, Semiotics, Chinese, Philosophy

1. Introduction

"Chora" was a Greek terminology first established by Plato, being described as a metaphysical realm or space that was able to contain all physical or corporeal existences. Unlike Plato, Julia Kristeva, in her publication *Revolution in Poetic Language*, refers to "chora" for her psychoanalysis but guides this concept to a new discourse of semiotics to discuss the profundity of humankind. In this work, she elucidates the giant gap segregating the signifiable and the referent produced from the logical or rational mode of language, then tries to seek the portion which includes the desires and emotions of the body, as well as experiences and intuitions of the subject, in order to form a regular positionality between humanity and nature. Kristeva uses the Semiotic and the Symbolic to redefine the generating of signifiante, arguing that the perfectly proactive humankind happens in the combination of emotionality and rationality in "chora." However, I found that Kristeva's semiotic system of "chora" and Chinese Daoism have some cultural interpenetrations that might contribute to a neoteric understanding of cultural exchanges. I state that Kristeva's "chora" does not only apply to the functioning of semiotics but also forms a Daoist matrix where the chaos is in preparation for being gestated and regulated; also, the "chora" assimilates the Daoist potentiality and obscurity in both Laozi's and Zhuangzi's philosophy. I shall primarily elaborate on my point by explaining "chora" in a semiotic way and then reveal how it corresponds to Daoism with specific evidence of matrix and the issue of potentiality and obscurity.

2. The Analysis of Kristeva's "Chora"

Firstly, I will explain Kristeva's "chora" in a semiotic way. At the end of the prolegomenon of *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva mentions that "this heterogeneous process...then—and only then—can it be jouissance and revolution [1]". By naming it "heterogenous," Kristeva apparently implies that there exists the opposite end, which is called "homogenous." According to Kristeva, "heterogeneous" and "homogeneous" represent the two psychoanalytical statues: the Semiotic and the Symbolic. The heterogeneous process, or heterogeneity, points to "the generating of signifiante" or "signifiante." The "heterogenous," provided by Kristeva, is shown as the type of innate impulses or drives filling in the body which is to motivate desires and emotions [1]. Corresponding to this, the so-called "homogenous" designates the movements compelled or constrained by the capitalist mode or civilized society that coerces the subject to not only abnegate the ability to be a free agent but also obey the promulgated orders [1]. Thus, we may find that both "heterogeneous" and "homogeneous" signify the two sides of human civilizations--- the instinctive and the slavish--- in a sheer way. Regardless of some antediluvian documentaries or mythological archives when human civilizations were in maternal periods, patriarchal civilization has been an everlasting social mode; notwithstanding this, the discourse or articulations from maternal civilization have still been activating to counteract the excrescent power of patriarchal civilization. That is, if we arrange Kristeva's "heterogeneous" and "homogeneous" in the systems of society, we shall manifestly see that the former represents maternal and the latter represents patriarchal. The semiotic "chora," or heterogenous "chora," according to Kristeva, is the container or space where both the Semiotic and the Symbolic generate or negate each other [1]; but the reason for claiming that "chora" subsumes into semiotic is because "chora" designates a primitive stage of time when rationality and emotionality are yet to precipitate. Interestingly, the Symbolic, rationality, or "homogeneous," already exists in the semiotic "chora" and should be seriously counted as a portion of the Semiotic. Briefly speaking, the Semiotic and the Symbolic are unity in "chora" as a primitive stage. In accordance with this explanation, we might notice that anything contrary is nothingness in "chora," and all the processes (generating and negating) taking place in "chora" seem to be chaotic preparations.

From now on, I shall introduce how Kristeva's "chora" infiltrates Chinese Daoism with the concept of matrix.

3. "Chora" as Daoist Matrix

I have to primarily clarify my statement since "chora" is initially symbolled as uterus or matrix in both Platonic and Kristeva's views. As Calvin Bedient defines in his article *Kristeva and Poetry as Shattered Signification*, "chora" would be a matrix of drives (initial impulses) where cultures and civilizations have not been involved yet [2]. Distinctly, I am claiming that Kristeva's "chora" sufficiently reaches the level of Chinese Daoism (in a general way) in some perspectives; however, it is not entirely equivalent to the ultimateness of Laozi's Daoism but cryptically achieves the secondary status, which is called, in terms of Laozi, matrix. In *Laozi* or *Daode Jing* (hereafter, I will use *Daode Jing*), Laozi establishes his Daoist philosophy with two prime concepts: the Named and the Unnamed. He mentions, "The Unnamed is the initial point of the universe; the Named is the motherhood of the chaos [3]." The latter portion of this quote would always be perplexing. To comprehend it clearly, I might refer to Wang Bi's annotation: "the Named indicates the status that functions as generating and gestating from the chaos to everything-in-order [4]." Despite Wang Bi's specific interpretation, Laozi's original text is much more worth noticing because sometimes interpretations or annotations sift the utterances that the authors consider less significant. The "motherhood," which in Chinese is written as "mu (mother)," contains unfathomable value and

reverence in Laozi's Daoism. In chapter six of *Daode Jing*, Laozi mentions that "the spot of the motherhood is the fundamental root for the universe [1]". According to scholars' research, the "spot" is described as the uterus of a female, indicating an essential birthplace of everything in this world. Notice that the peculiarity of "motherhood" can apply not merely to animated creatures that are differentiated by sexes but also can it be referred to the phenomenon of generating and occurring. As evidently as we may think, the manifest hallmark of "motherhood" is the femininity corresponding to masculinity, which is heavily emphasized and praised by Laozi. One of the major thoughts in *Daode Jing* is that the concept of submissive, or putting in the way of articulation closer to Laozi, is non-competitive. It is still controversial whether Laozi's submissive philosophy is indisputable to be seen as pessimism, but his entire philosophical system indeed directs to the aspect of negative action. Pohl brings up a statement in his paper, *The Wisdom of the Unsayable in the Chinese Tradition*, which discusses that the main features of Daoism are the non-doing and the non-knowing that relate to Buddhist views as well [5]. But the particular issue he made was that he did not distinguish the different schools of Daoism, meaning that he created a melting pot where Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Liezi were all being thought about for his argument of non-doing and non-knowing. For believing that Laozi's negative action becomes true, I shall continuously claim that the motherhood, feminine uterus, or matrix, unconditionally allows all processes of generating or gestating to happen inside it. Similar to Kristeva's "chora," the Semiotic and the Symbolic are fetuses that cause chaos and violent occurrences that are potentially unavoidable. Thus, "chora" is like a matrix that unconditionally provides a space for birthing.

Nonetheless, we shall not ignore another great feature of the matrix--- the power of regulating principles. This power aims to manipulate the "impulses (chong qi)" mentioned in chapter 42 of *Daode Jing*: "... the impulses finally become united [1]." Corresponding to Kristeva's theory, the "impulses" are the Semiotic and the Symbolic. Both "chora" and the Daoist matrix hold absolute principles that suppress exceeded violence of the Daoist "impulses," or the Semiotic and the Symbolic while in formation. Briefly speaking, the Semiotic and the Symbolic, and the "impulses" are chaotic productions from "chora" or the Daoist matrix, but they are reasonably maintaining harmony due to the power of both.

4. "Chora" with the Daoist Potentiality and Obscurity

By saying the potentiality of Kristeva's "chora," I designate it as if "chora" is full of infinite possibilities driven by, in terms of Kristeva, the kinetic rhythm: "The chora... is analogous only to vocal or kinetic rhythm [1]." It is noticeable that when Kristeva uses the phrases "kinetic" or "rhythm," she brings an implication that "chora" is a living and energetic container, which proves an antecedent necessary to the further statement of obscurity. If I were to define "chora" as motivational with possibilities, I would step forward even to state that "chora" shows its obscurity as well. Since I referred to a metaphor of matrix above, I shall still use it to demonstrate this point. One common feature that "chora," as a metaphysical matrix, shares with a human female uterus is the ability to produce fetuses. However, in accordance with the present scientific studies, a human female uterus will and only will give one biological sex (either male or female) in a usual way; it would be affirmed an abnormality if any other circumstances appear otherwise. Kristeva's "chora," nevertheless, is out of this struggle. Suppose the male represents the Symbolic and the female represents the Semiotic; we have to conceive that "chora" breaks the limits and goes beyond the imaginable boundaries in the process of generation, meaning that it is prospective for "chora" to create something over the Symbolic and the Semiotic. In Laozi's philosophy, this metaphysical matrix is analogized to a hollow valley [2] that accommodates compositions and reactions from the "impulses." Similar to Kristeva's phrase of "kinetic rhythm," the "impulses," understood in Chinese characters, are "chong qi," meaning the wave of chaotic impulse that is primitive and full of energy

in the matrix. A hollow valley, analogized by Laozi, reveals the essential facility to receive and respond to any occurrences in various degrees.

Potentialities of both the “chora” and Daoist matrix, in the end, do not unite but form a cryptic obscurity. When Kristeva keeps using the Semiotic and the Symbolic, her ultimate goal is to indicate the phenomenon of emotionality and rationality. We also find out that the origin of Laozi’s “impulses” is the other two types of “qi”--- “yin” and “yang.” At this time, we shall even correlate Kristeva’s emotionality and rationality with “yin yang” and develop an idea of dualism. Kristeva analyzes the processes of a child from Lacan’s mirror stage with his mother and the castration anxiety of his father. Still, the a priori stages happen in the Semiotic, which is emotionality, and the subsequent steps subsume into the Symbolic, which is rationality. By detailed categorizing, Kristeva seems indubitably segregates both as two distinct characteristics. Turning to the concept of “yin yang,” Laozi borrows the term from *Zhou Yi*, discussing that: “one flow of yin and yang forms the universal principle [6].” Laozi mentions that “yin” is the symbol of femininity and “yang” is the symbol of masculinity; they have to compose a unity in order to give birth. Manifestly, both Kristeva and Laozi tend to be dualists. However, we may also discover monist ideas in their dualist theories. Note that Kristeva never mentions anything about poetry or poetic language while she is explaining “chora” and its following materials; nevertheless, she spends a great length in the next half of her book discussing the functioning of poetry in social structure and how the Semiotic and the Symbolic could be practically applied to the relationship. In the beginning, the Symbolic exists but is hidden in the semiotic “chora,” which is implausible to generate poetic language. Generally speaking, poetic language, according to Kristeva, represents a type of language that refines the break of the Semiotic and the Symbolic in order to rescue humanity, meaning that poetry is capable of undertaking the obligation of connecting emotionality and rationality in perfection. This is an extremely tricky concept that Kristeva herself might not notice. By claiming that poetry is ought to and capable of fixing the gap between the Semiotic and the Symbolic, the articulation may not be conjoining emotionality and rationality as a unit but pulling them back to their initial position in “chora.” When discussing the discourse of poetic language, the Symbolic would indeed be blatantly taken out; but the obligation of poetry works in an opposite way that poetic language does. Putting it clearly, Kristeva shows a dualist concept (emotionality and rationality) and a monist ideology (“chora”) that manifests her obscurity.

Among several schools of Chinese Daoism, Zhuangzi is the one who takes metaphysical philosophy as aesthetical literature, stating his arguments and thoughts with phantom rhetoric. In two of his most well-known chapters of *Zhuangzi* or *Nanhua Jing* (hereafter, I will use *Nanhua Jing*), *Qiwu Lun* (Theory of Unity) and *Xiaoyao You* (About the True Liberty), Zhuangzi plays around dualism and monism by affirming and negating statements, which, commonly, perplexes readers. One apparent reason that readers feel difficult to comprehend Zhuangzi is that they always seek something “certain” in Zhuangzi’s Daoism as they prefer and can in Laozi’s Daoism. For instance, I can even contrast Zhuangzi’s dream argument with Descartes’ and declare the significant distinctions in order to see Zhuangzi’s obscurity. Descartes uses his methods of doubt to demolish and rebuild his knowledge to reason the essence of a dream, and he finally declares that he cannot know whether he is in a dream or reality. This conclusion is inevitable and affirmative, leaving no doubts at that time (even though he demolishes this later). For Zhuangzi, dreaming is unknown, but it will be known once he awakens. And awakening is unknown, but it will be known once in a dream. He describes the dream situation: “Once you are in a dream, you will not know it. Another dream takes place in this specific dream, and you will not know it until you awaken. But, do you really know that you have been out of your long dream when you awakened? How funny... Confucius, as a being, you, as a being, are all in a dream; You think I am telling you that you are in a dream? This is a dream as well [7].” As shown here, Zhuangzi’s argument is not rigidly logical

reasoning in terms of western philosophy, and there is no certainty of dualism, saying that a person must either be awakened or dreaming; also, monism does not exist because he keeps arguing the distinction between awakening and dreaming. Thus, what would be the absolute statement for the dream argument of Zhuangzi? The answer is “obscurity.” Under this little passage, Zhuangzi names this obscurity “diao gui (Suspension of Eeriness)”: “Upon this strange utterances, I shall call it ‘diao gui’ [7].” Interestingly, “diao gui” would be a beautiful new name given by Zhuangzi. Still, in fact, this concept has been the tradition of Chinese philosophy, which shall be phrased as “Unsayable and Unthinkable.” In *Nanhua Jing*, Zhuangzi values obscurity as the truth and secret of the universe, which correlates with the concepts of Zen and Hua-yen Buddhism after East Jin. Therefore, Zhuangzi’s philosophical system shares remarkable characteristics with Kristeva’s the Semiotic and the Symbolic in “chora,” which compose and demolish over and over. When Kristeva criticizes formalist poetry as being on a rampage in the aftermath of the capitalist mode, she tries to fill out the blank left by rationality, hoping to define poetry as the perfect combination of the Semiotic and the Symbolic. Nonetheless, a poem is a vivid existence that must be driven by different motivations back and forth. This, in fact, indirectly proves that a poem is a “chora,” and we have to allow the two motivations to wander around in this container without a stable positioning. Thus, obscurity automatically happens under all functions of “chora.”

5. Conclusion

Kristeva’s concept of semiotic “chora” builds a matrix that correlates with Daoism, where the Semiotic and the Symbolic, and the “impulses” are ready for the producing process. Meanwhile, I also proved that Kristeva’s “chora” is similar to Laozi’s potentiality and Zhuangzi’s obscurity, showing that the concept of “chora” interacts with some traditions of Chinese Daoist philosophy. Even though Kristeva’s “chora” is a psychoanalytical concept, we can still interpret it with philosophical associations and discover new possible cultural interpenetrations better to comprehend the relationship between both western and eastern thoughts.

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