

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

**Beauty and the Goat: A hypothesis on the relationship between beauty and tragedy**Kostas Terzidis<sup>1\*</sup> Filippo Fabrocini<sup>1</sup> Hyejin Lee<sup>1</sup><sup>1</sup> College of Design and Innovation, Tongji University, Shanghai, 200092, China**Correspondence to:** Kostas Terzidis, College of Design and Innovation, Tongji University, Shanghai, 200092, China; E-mail: [kostas.terzidis@yahoo.com](mailto:kostas.terzidis@yahoo.com)**Received:** January 6, 2025;**Accepted:** March 16, 2025;**Published:** March 21, 2025.**Citation:** Terzidis, K., Fabrocini, F., & Lee, H. (2025). Beauty and the Goat: A Hypothesis on the Relationship between Beauty and Tragedy. *International Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 6(1), 327-333.<https://doi.org/10.25082/IJAH.2025.01.006>**Copyright:** © 2025 Kostas Terzidis et al. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/), which permits all noncommercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.**Abstract:** This article attempts to explore the concept of beauty using Greek and Chinese etymology. In Greek, the word ‘tragedy’ means ‘song of the male goat’. In Chinese, the word ‘beauty’ means ‘big goat’. Why is the goat so important? Is there a reason for the presence of this animal in the definition of aesthetics of two completely different cultures? The article hypothesizes that there may be an archetypal reason: beauty and tragedy are related not only to aesthetics but also to a hidden code.**Keywords:** tragedy, beauty, etymology, goat, code

## 1 Introduction

The study of aesthetics has a long history of philosophical investigations into the nature of beauty, art, intention, and autonomy. In western culture, these investigations can be broadly divided into two categories: subjective studies which includes criticism (Leitch, 2018; Bourdieu, 1984; Siegel, 1955), ethics (Hume, 1987; Dewey, 2018) or psychoanalysis (Freud, 1989; Lacan, 1992) and objective studies which includes autonomy (Leitch, 2018; Gaut, 2003), mathematics (Reber et al., 2004; Orrell, 2012), or computation (Akiba, 2013; Faria et al., 2013). In the former category emphasis is put on artists and their creative mind and in the latter emphasis is put on the resulting object or process. In contrast, aesthetics in China, *i.e.*, ‘the study of beauty’ 美學 was not established as a systematic discipline before the twentieth century and even after that, it was based on western interpretations (Carrier, 2012). Some of its characteristics are the integration and transcendence of objective representation and emotional expression through political, social and cultural ideals, as well as the pursuit of spiritual transcendence (Jiang & Cai, 2018; Arnheim, 1997; Dale, 2004). While these studies are indeed valuable for the study of beauty, it is also equally important to inquire into the ontological identity of beauty itself. What is beauty? Where does it come from? What does it really mean? The scope of this article is to explore the origins of the definition of beauty from a Greek and Chinese etymological perspective.

While aesthetics, as a branch of philosophy, was a term coined to denote the ability to judge according to the senses (Cahn, 2020), etymologically, the word ‘aesthetics’ is derived from the Greek word *αισθητικός*, which means perceived or sensational (Liddell & Scott, 1897, p. 59). However, the definition of beauty differs from, but is often confused with that of aesthetics. While aesthetics is related to perception by the senses (Baumgarten, 2014), beauty is not always related to the senses alone. Articulation, structure, or relationships can play a significant underlying role in the perception, understanding, or appreciation of beauty. Time, as a concept, becomes implicitly involved as it is the underlying principle of the process of interweaving elements into a whole, whose final appearance excites the sense of beauty (Arnheim, 1969). It may be said that, for the mind it is not the result that matters but rather the process behind the resulting final form. This distinguishing characteristic is unfortunately not captured in the definition of ‘beauty’, at least in the English language, as it lends its origin to a Latin root: beauty, as a word, is derived from the Latin word *duonus* (where d->b) (Skeat, 1882, p. 51), which means good or brave (*‘Bonum etiam pro forti dicit’* (*‘It is said that bonum is about the strong’*)) *P. VIRGILII MARONIS Opera Omnia Ex Editione Heyniana, Volume 5, p. 339* (Lewis & Short, 1879, p. 228). *Duonus* is, in turn, cognate to the Greek word *δυνατός* or *δυνωτός* (pronounced *dunotos*) which means strong, mighty, powerful, or potent (Lewis

& Short, 1879, p. 246) (Liddell & Scott, 1897, p. 390). So, in that sense, beauty may be subliminally associated to the awe for might, power, or vigor.

In Greek, one of the words for ‘beauty’ is ‘*ωραίο*’ (pronounced *oreo*) and it is derived from the word *ώρα*, which means ‘hour’ (*The English word ‘hour’ is also derived from the same Greek root ‘ώρα’ (Skeat, 1882, p. 279)) (Liddell & Scott, 1897, p. 1768). In that sense, beauty, according to the Greeks, is intrinsically associated with time. In that sense, beauty comes at the right time or on time. As in the Plato’s cave parable, since appearances can be deceiving, beauty should pertain to the mind rather than the eyes. As mentioned earlier, beauty may not be sought in the resulting form per se, but rather in the articulation, structure and relationships that comprise the resulting form whether that is a physical entity or a process.*

In Chinese, the character for beauty is 美 (pronounced *měi*) and it is composed of two radicals: the character for ‘sheep’: 羊 (pronounced *yàng*) placed on the upper side of the character and character for ‘big’: 大 (pronounced *dà*) placed on the lower side. So, according to the Chinese reading as a pictograph, beauty is associated with a ‘big sheep’ (Lindqvist, 2016) (*According to the interpretation of the OnWords (《说文解字》), ‘Beauty means sweet. Also, from the sheep, from big. In animals, sheep is mainly for the food-meat. Therefore, Beauty and Good are of the same sense (‘美, 甘也。从羊, 从大。羊在六畜主给膳也。美与善同意’) see S. XU, 《说文解字》 (OnWords), (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1963)) (Yi Cun-Guo, ‘From Zi Wei (滋味) To Qi Yun (气韵), And Yi Jing (意境): Rethinking of Chinese Traditional Artistic Category System’, Journal of Literature and Art Studies, March 2015, Vol. 5, No. 3: 196-205.) Traditional Chinese lexicography divides characters into six categories according to their structure (六書 (pronounced *liùshū*) means ‘six writings’). The dominant category for analyzing Chinese characters is their composition of radicals representing either a written meaning or a pronunciation hint. For example, the character for ‘ocean’ is 洋 (pronounced *yàng*), which is composed of two parts: 氵 (=water) and 羊 (=sheep). The use of the character 羊 here can be understood as a hint on the pronunciation “yang” and not its meaning as sheep are not normally associated with the ocean. So, according to the traditional Chinese lexicography, at least two options are possible; either the character 美 is associated with something related to a sheep such as food, prize, or abundance or the character 美 is associated with pronunciation (Wang, 2021, p. 2) (Gao, 2001) (Wang et al., 2020) (In this conference paper Wang et al., indicate eleven possible origins of the character 美 all of which relate to taste, appearance, or pronunciation.).*

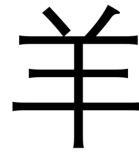
## 2 The Chinese character for sheep

The character 羊 means ‘sheep’ and is widely used in the Chinese language to represent not only meanings associated directly with a sheep but also, strangely, with profound and abstract words. For instance, the characters 漾 (=ripple), 翔 (=glide), 羚 (=antelope), 鲜 (=fresh), 膳 (=meal), or 窯 (=kiln) all include the radical 羊 (=sheep) and could be loosely associated with a physical sheep, but the characters’ 義 (=justice), 羨 (=envy), 羞 (=shame), 佯 (=pretend), 洋 (=ocean) or 差 (=difference) can hardly be associated with a physical sheep either as a meaning or in terms of pronunciation. And yet the character 羊 is present in all of these characters.

What makes the use of the character 羊 (=sheep) problematic is its connection to the word 美 (=beauty). Most theorists and historians have maintained that Chinese culture has a long history of profound knowledge and connotation, and so the use of the sheep does little if any justice to this claim. How can the concept of beauty, one of the most important in any culture, be associated simply to an insignificant, unimportant, and (in this authors’ opinion) certainly not exceptionally beautiful animal like a sheep? Even if size, shape, or taste is associated with a sheep, still that does not explain its association with beauty or other abstract meanings such as justice, shame, or envy as shown earlier. Unless it is not the sheep, but rather another animal closely confused with a sheep. An animal that looks the same but is distinctly different.

Let’s consider the goat. In fact, the character for ‘goat’ is the same with ‘sheep’ in Chinese, and, yet they are completely different animals as far as appearance and behavior is concerned: most goats have horns, many sheep, but not all, are naturally without horns, and goats have beards, sheep do not. Perhaps these two characteristics may explain the character 羊, as a pictograph, that clearly denotes two lines on the top that could correspond two horns and an extension at the bottom that could denote a beard (see Figure 1). But there is something more mysterious, remarkable, and distinct about the goat or, more specifically, the male goat, or, as

called in English, the buck: its deep connection to the Greek culture.



**Figure 1** Chinese radical for sheep or goat (pronounced yáng)

### 3 Tragedy: the ‘song of the male goat’

The word for the male goat in Greek is *τράγος*, pronounced *trágos* (see [Figure 2](#)). Tragic, by extension, is anything related to the male goat. Specifically, tragedy, means literally: ‘the song of the male goat’ ([Burkert, 1966](#)). It is composed of two parts: *τράγος* and *ὠδή* (pronounced ode). *ὠδή* means song (e.g., a component of the words mel-ody, rhaps-ody, parody, or com-edy). So, a question arises necessarily, as to how does tragedy, such a significant, important, and sublime cultural event, relate to an insignificant, unimportant and (in this authors’ opinion) certainly not exceptionally beautiful animal such as a male goat? Most importantly, why is the goat so important to both the Chinese and the Greeks, two of the most ancient cultures in human civilization?



**Figure 2** The word ‘goat’ in Greek (pronounced trágos)

To understand the significance of the goat and its connection to tragic events it is necessary to clarify the concept of tragedy first. The term tragedy differs but is often confused with disaster, catastrophe, or devastation. While all these events are the result of a tragedy, they are not in themselves tragic. As opposed to Chinese tragedy where emphasis is placed on hardship and injustice, Greek tragedy is different ([Tang, 2023](#)). What makes tragedy disastrous, catastrophic, or devastating for the Greeks is its ironic nature. It is in the fact that fate is inescapable and any attempt to flee from it, brings one even closer to disaster. It can be described as that which one can never get, escape, or elude from. Oedipus, Medea, or Antigone were tragic figures not because of what happened to them but rather because of the way in which it happened. Their tragedy is in the irony of never escaping their own fate. Indeed, the word ‘never’ is key in interpreting tragedy because it represents an endless pursuit, a pointless escape, a strive to capture the elusive, or a search for the impossible all of which are ironic, controversial, or unattainable and, as such, tragic.

In response to such an interpretation, the male goat represents a similar unattainable, impossible, or unachievable pursuit for an escape from its own fate. It is the only animal with a strange, atypical, bizarre yet remarkable behavior. During mating, the male goat attempts to escape from his animal nature and mimic human behavior ([Tsatsomirois, 2004](#)) (*‘But the buck is not a silent lover. Those of the readers who come from farming areas would know that the voice of the buck under mating sometimes resembles a whisper close to the ear of the goat and sometimes a hoarse and harsh bleat that resembles an erotic conversation. This ‘erotic conversation’ of the goats may have caused amusement and perhaps imitations from the young shepherds who as a ‘game’ would wear the skins that they used in the night as blankets and pretend to be goats with erotic voices, jumping, songs, or dances.’* (translated from Greek by the author) [Tsatsomirois E, History of the Birth of the Greek Language, Athens: Diaylos, 2004, p. 72-3](#)) (*The noises sound like blubbing, mewing, snuffing, clucking. Goat is ‘a highly vocal and social species’.* See [Briefer, Elodie F., and Alan G. McElligott. ‘Social Effects on Vocal Ontogeny in an Ungulate, the Goat, Capra Hircus.’ \*Animal Behaviour\*, vol. 83, no. 4, 2012, pp. 991–1000](#)). It attempts to engage in a human-like conversation by uttering senseless voices that resemble human conversation and yet, we know, that this is not possible ([Briefer & McElligott, 2012](#)). Intentionally or not, this behavior is quite compelling, profound, if not, metaphysical, when considering the time, place, and the people it was first witnessed by: the shepherds.

Traveling back in time, it is important to understand the fine distinction between humans and animals. If we consider that humans were once animal-like, as far as behavior is concerned, then there must have been a specific moment in time when humans separated from their previous

nature as animals and entered a new world where things just ‘made sense’. As simple, apparent and obvious as the sentence ‘makes sense’ may seem, it is not. It involves an understanding of two distinct moments in time where ‘if’ is followed by ‘then’, so that a logical connection can be made. But most importantly, it needs the use of language as a medium to articulate, express, and verify any logical thought. Language is not only a means for expressing thoughts but also a means for producing thoughts (Chang, 2002). Language encompasses voices, symbols, words, and narrations, but also hidden symbols in the form of codes. It appears that one of those codes is the presence of the goat as a hidden symbol in the word tragedy.

Because this code demarcated the emergence of a different, potent, and powerful way of thinking, it had to be somehow remembered, revered, and celebrated. It is hypothesized here that people may have gathered to see, hear, and enjoy the shepherds’ theatrical stories. Such narrations may have served not only the purpose of informing, teaching, or entertaining the audience, but also as a tribute to a human milestone. Tragedy may be exactly that: a tribute to a hopeless imitation of a small animal who appears to want to escape its own fate and our perpetual narration of that animal’s story to remind us of our own inescapable fate. Because at the end, the power of logic that gave us the ability to distance ourselves from our prior animal state, did also come with a terrible price: the realization of death. One day no matter what, where, who, or how we are, we will die. And that, we have no doubt about. And yet the more we try to escape death, the closer we get to it. Hence, a tragedy.

## 4 Goat as a code

In the semiotics of culture, words are not always associated with concepts that are direct, obvious, and literal, but rather in ways that can be indirect, implicit, and connotative (Torop, 1999). The study of figurative language has a rich set of such indirect word associations such as metaphor, simile, or allusion (Lotman, 1988). These “figures of speech” could be used as means of hiding, enhancing, or mystifying the signified information but also as a concealing, protecting, and remembering mechanism (Dobrovolskij & Piirainen, 2005). As a capsule hidden in time, a word may be codified in a way that it becomes impossible to discern unless a deciphering interpretation is provided. In this study we will use the term “code” to describe the hidden interpretation behind the word “goat”. Because of its mysterious, enigmatic, and perplexing presence in two distant, dissimilar, and profound cultures, coding and decoding may be the most appropriate method of potentially understanding the goat’s central, important, and unusual nature.

This possibility of treating the goat as a code opens up a more intricate relationship between language and thought than has been previously possible. Rather than viewing the goat as a prize, an award, or a sacrificial Dionysian offering (Brockett & Hildy, 2014; Caravassiliadou, 2001), it is far more insightful to treat it as a linguistic code, an universal archetype, or a mental model. It is not about the animal but rather about a critical event. It is about a decisive moment in time where humans made a mental leap entering the world of logical thinking and the goat is its external symbolic representation. It was chosen from all other animals because of its strange behavior. It became a universal symbol that would never change and will always serve as an eternal reminder of that transformation. A transformation that is referred to as ‘tragic’, which literally means ‘that of the goat’. Moreover, that transformation from animal to human is captured in the form of hybrid creatures such as the pan or the fauna both of which are remarkably described as half goat and half human and, like goats, exhibit sexual prowess (Kerenyi, 1951, p. 174).

In response to the symbolism of the Chinese character for beauty (=美), we should be able to see beyond its superficial obvious appearance, that is, a big goat. In other words, it must have been known that the goat is a code and so, it was embedded into their language. If this hypothesis is true, then the possibility of coded information opens up a more intricate relationship for words and meanings than has been previously possible. Rather than assuming that the character 羊 is just what it looks like, *i.e.* a sheep or a goat, the concepts of the ‘unattainable’, ‘never ending’, or ‘unrealistic’ could be used instead. If we do so, then the ocean 洋 (氵 + 羊) becomes the ‘never ending water’, ashamed 羞 (羊 + 丑=clown) becomes the ‘never ending ridicule’, differ 差 (羊 + 工=work) becomes the ‘unattainable work’, envy 羨 (羊 + 次=order) becomes the ‘unattainable order’, sickness 恙 (羊 + 心=heart) becomes the ‘unattainable mood’ and so on.

But most importantly, ‘beauty’ should also relate to the ‘unattainable’. It should not be

associated with food, prize, or abundance because that would be too naive, superficial, and materialistic, and therefore, incompatible to a deep, profound, and spiritual culture such as the Chinese (*Yi Cun-Guo, op.cit, 196*). Beauty should not be sought in the resulting shape, form, or object but rather, as the Greeks suggest, in the timing or in the timeless process of making. It should be sought at the ‘never ending’ process of creativity, which will raise, elevate, or exalt you and therefore make you ‘great’ or ‘big’ (*Similarly, the Greek word for ‘beauty’ is ωραίο which is derived from the word ώρα (hour) which, in turn, is derived from the verb αείρω, which means to raise, elevate, or elate.*).

Similarly, the word ‘fine arts’ or ‘painting and sculpture’ in Chinese is 美术 (pronounced měi shù). The first character is 美 (pronounced měi), which means beautiful, and the second is 术 (or 術 in traditional Chinese) both pronounced shù, which means method, skill, or technique. In Greek, the word for art is τέχνη (pronounced techne) (*Also the root of the words: technology, technician, or technique*). Interestingly, τέχνη is cognate to the word τίκτω (pronounced τίκτω), which means ‘to give birth’ (Liddell & Scott, 1897, p. 1548). However, the word τίκτω refers to the male’s action and not to the female’s response (which is referred to in Greek as ‘genesis’) (Liddell & Scott, 1897, p. 1548). So, in both Greek and Chinese cases, art may be associated with creativity through techniques and methods. Interestingly, it is during copulation that the male goat produces these bizarre human-like voices.

## 5 Conclusion

Etymologically, the character for ‘beauty’ in Chinese means ‘big goat’ and the word ‘tragedy’ in Greek means ‘song of the goat’. While the common use of the goat across these two cultures could be connected to food, taste, or prize, it could also be connected to a deeper and more profound quality of the goat. Greek and Chinese language both possess qualities that permeated throughout time and have become the roots of many intellectual concepts (Efstathiou, 2004; Tsitsipis, 2007). Our hypothesis is that this may be due partially to their hidden meanings, subtleties, and symbols embedded within etymology. In that sense, comparative etymology may play a major role in extracting, revealing, and understanding such hidden meanings.

While most languages function as platforms for human communication of ideas or feelings (*The Merriam-webster dictionary defines language as ‘a systematic means of communicating ideas or feelings by the use of conventionalized signs, sounds, gestures, or marks having understood meanings’.*), there are a few languages that go beyond that. Their structure, form, or articulation allow words to denote hidden meanings that cannot be explained through conventional means. These hidden meanings are represented in the form of codes. Unlike computer codes that map information from one form or representation to another, language codes are hidden, concealed and overlooked concepts that, until decoded, are interpreted as resembling familiar things (Planer & Sterelny, 2021; Nofre et al., 2014). Like a parasite, a code has a resemblance to the host word that can be carried through generations and yet allows it to hide and stay dormant and undetected within its host word. The interpretation of a code appears to involve a drastic leap in reasoning in which a concept is formed based on an apocalypse, epiphany, or revelation to uncover a different path to its hidden concept, as attempted to show in this paper. Such a revelation can be of paramount importance as it may open a new set of possibilities for understanding, comprehending, and communicating but also for assimilating, filtering, and synthesizing alternative concepts. Beauty, as seen through the Greek and Chinese code of the goat, may be one of these codes.

Perhaps, the word ‘code’ itself may reveal exactly that: the code of the code. The English word ‘code’ is cognate to the Greek word κώδιον (pron. kodian), which means skin of an animal (Liddell & Scott, 1897, p. 864) (*Κώδιον (pron. codion), which means skin, is derived from the verb κύω or κύπτω (pron. kyo or kypto), which means to bend forwards or by extension be curious, research, or watch carefully.*). Is it possible that this skin is not the skin of any animal, but rather a specific one, perhaps a goat?

## Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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