



Confucian and Daoist Aesthetics

In memoriam Li Zehou (1930 – 2021)

Introductory

In the West, aesthetics became a part of science in the 18th century when Alexander Baumgarten declared it an independent academic discipline for the theory of imagination. Since the arts are creations of the imagination rather than products of reason or intellect, aesthetics is, compared to logic, placed at a lower level of cognition and knowledge (Li & Cauvel: 2006, 19).¹ Therefore, aesthetics still seems to be considered a fringe area of philosophical inquiry. Although the word aesthetics derives from the Greek word αἰσθητικός (*aisthetikos*), which refers to sense perception, it is mainly related to the philosophy of art and artistic production, as well as to the aesthetic judgments that relate to the questions of beauty in works of art.

The Chinese word for aesthetics, *meixue* 美學, which literally means the study of beauty, did not exist until the beginning of the 20th century, when Chinese theorists adopted the Japanese translation of the term from the West. According to Li Zehou (1930 – 2021), who is considered the father of modern and contemporary Chinese aesthetics, a more accurate translation of aesthetics in a Chinese context should be *shenmeixue* (審美學), meaning the study of the process of recognising and perceiving beauty.² In traditional China, however, aesthetics in its broadest sense played an extremely important role in its intellectual tradition. In the Confucian, Daoist, and Zen Buddhist traditions, the aesthetic experience of visual arts, poetry, music, and natural scenes was considered an experience of the highest state of the heart-mind (*xin*), and as such a wholly human experience that also gave people a sense of transcendence, i.e., a higher level of being.³

Chinese theorists developed aesthetics on the level of moral philosophy. In this respect, the questions of aesthetics and art are connected with the questions of human life, the universe, society, cultivation of personality, education and interpersonal relations, so it was inseparable from social ethics and humanistic ideals. True beauty existed in harmony between the individual and society, and between humans and nature. Respect for art and beauty was seen as a means to achieve this harmony. Since traditional Chinese aesthetics discusses issues of human existence, the universe, interpersonal relationships, and society, aesthetic problems in the Chinese tradition are not seen

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Zehou Li, Jane Cauvel, *Four Essays on Aesthetics: Toward a Global View*, Lexington Books, Lanham 2006, p. 19.

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Ibid.

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Ibid., p. 24.

as problems of knowledge, in the sense of finding answers to the question of what aesthetics and beauty are – which was a central theme in traditional Western aesthetics – but are based on the background of humanity and reflection on human relations and society, where philosophy, aesthetics, and life experience are organically connected.

Chinese aesthetics does not deal exclusively with the senses, but integrates reason and feelings. This view is quite different from Western aesthetics, which is defined as a branch of philosophy concerned with the nature of art, beauty and taste, the creation and appreciation of beauty, and aesthetic judgments. Moreover, Western aesthetics differs significantly from epistemology and ethics, because in its conceptual framework art is an autonomous entity, since it deals with the senses. Therefore, art as such is necessarily free from any moral or political intent. On the other hand, moral and ethical implications of traditional Chinese aesthetics have played an important and central role in traditional Chinese society and culture. However, Chinese aesthetics is also concerned with the study of beauty, which manifests itself in natural beauty and the beauty of art. Beauty is revealed in human consciousness through aesthetic activities. These activities of human consciousness refer to our experiences, imagination or transformation of natural and artistic objects into aesthetic objects, namely from mere substance into a unified, meaningful, and sensual world that defines beauty. In this context, aesthetic activities are not determined by conceptual thinking or rational cognition, but are fundamentally limited by human experience. In traditional Chinese aesthetics, it is in the realm of aesthetic experience that human beings establish a communicative state with the world, endowed with creative vitality, in which they comprehend and evaluate their own existence and strive for self-cultivation. In this respect, Chinese aesthetics is also closely related to ontology, epistemology and ethics.

Traditional Chinese culture emphasizes morality and ethics, humanness and righteousness (*renyi*), with goodness (*shan*) also being the basis of human cultivation. On the conceptual level, traditional Chinese thought does not emphasize separation and differentiation, reasoning and analysis, or the scientific spirit, as Western culture does, but rather the harmonious connection between human beings and nature, subject and object, individual and community. These basic tenets provide an important conceptual background for understanding Confucian and Daoist aesthetics, which is generally based on the following basic categories and methods:

- a.) The idea of goodness (*shan*) contained in the unity of beauty and goodness (*shanmei tongyi*) represents the embodiment of ethics in aesthetic consciousness, the substance of beauty being goodness. Therefore, traditional Chinese aesthetics highly values works of art that have deep moral and ethical content, and emphasizes the importance of moral and ethical cultivation in aesthetic and artistic performance.
- b.) The concept of the unity of feelings and scenes, or the fusion of the inner and outer worlds, which illuminates a sensuous world full of vital energy (*qi*). In Chinese cultural psychology, human beings perceive all things in interconnectedness and complementarity. The principle of unity of human beings and nature (*tianren heyi*) in traditional Chinese philosophy is rooted in the interdependence and interconnectedness of people and nature, and perceives the functioning of nature as the functioning of people and *vice versa*. In Chinese intellectual tradition, nature is an aesthetic and

emotional category of experience. Many specific concepts in Chinese aesthetics express the fusion of human feelings and scene, external objects and the self.

- c.) Intuition is a basic cognitive method in Chinese aesthetics that emphasizes the combination of human emotion and reason, or rational and sensory perception. This type of intuition is about grounding reason in emotion and *vice versa*.
- d.) Freedom is a key category in Chinese aesthetics. It emphasizes the liberation of the human mind from natural necessities and the transformation of everyday life into an aesthetic way of living. In Chinese culture, the experience of freedom does not exist outside of everyday life, but precisely in all kinds of human actions through which human life can be transformed into an artistic and aesthetic way of living.

However, many Chinese aesthetic categories derive from the *Book of Changes*, which is considered the first and most fundamental work of Chinese philosophy and from which both Confucian and Daoist thought emerged. The *Book of Changes* presents a cosmology based on binary, complementary opposites (for example, *yinyang* with all its attributes) expressed in the visual arts, poetry, and music. The various arts are closely intertwined in Chinese aesthetic tradition, which can be observed in the landscape paintings decorated with calligraphic writings of Chinese poetry. A very important aesthetic category that appears in all artistic genres is suggestiveness (*xieyi*), which proposes a certain meaning through visual images or poetic metaphors, but at the same time leaves room for the viewer's imagination to determine their meaning based on their own individuality, freedom, and life experience. This aesthetic feature is rooted in the Chinese language itself, that is, in Chinese characters that are based on associations and abstractions.

The central aesthetic concept is the concept of vitality and creativity (*qi*) which embodies a specifically Chinese understanding of the world and all its phenomena, including human beings. *Qi* is also an aesthetic criterion that determines the successful completion of a work of art, be it painting, poetry, calligraphy or music. The philosophical-aesthetic category of *qi* itself is based on the balanced transmission of the binary category of *yinyang* in the work of art. This is reflected in the balance of brush strokes, the relationship between stressed and unstressed strokes, the light and dark parts of the painting, and the overall balance of the scene, which encompasses the next basic principle of Chinese aesthetics, which refers to harmony or balance. This harmony is not based on the principle of the golden section, as in Western classical art, but precisely on the dynamic relationship between the individual parts within the scene. This harmonious dynamic, however, is the one through which *qi* is represented. The representation of *qi* in the field of aesthetics also means the transmission or representation of the spirit or essence (landscape or human being) in the work of art.

For this special issue on Confucian and Daoist aesthetics, we have selected articles that deal with their general features and contents, as well as articles that explore specific categories and theories of Chinese aesthetics in general.

The central features of Confucian and Daoist aesthetics represented in classical Chinese painting are discussed in depth in an article written by Yu Huang Chieh, entitled "The Influence of Confucianism and Daoism on the Changes of Chinese Painting: From Figure Painting to Landscape (*shanshui*) Painting". The author emphasises that Confucian aesthetics pays special

attention to music education and poetry, which is inseparable from moral cultivation. Daoist aesthetics, particularly Zhuangzi's, is concerned with an aesthetic way of life that transcends moral implications and utilitarian purposes to achieve spiritual freedom and unity with the Dao. Zhuangzi's aesthetic way of life profoundly influenced Chinese aesthetics and art from the Wei and Jin Dynasties in the fifth century onward. These traits can be seen in the theories of figure painting developed by the famous painters Gu Kaizhi and Xie He, which emphasize the importance of depicting the human spirit in painting. Xie He, however, is known for having established the first theory of painting in Chinese history. The shift from figure painting to landscape painting (*shan-shui*) in the Song Dynasty, advocated by painters Guo Xi and Jing Hao, mean that this became the most important type of painting in the Chinese tradition, which illuminated the Daoist philosophy of life even more profoundly. This kind of painting depicted the beauty of the unity between humans and nature.

One of the most important Chinese aesthetic categories is the so-called blandness (*pingdan*), which combines several philosophical dimensions, mainly deriving from the Daoist tradition. Blandness points to the fundamental basis of the Daoist aesthetic way of being, which is determined by the highest form of naturalness, originality, spontaneity, and simplicity, those attributes that we ascribe to the primordial principle (the Dao) of everything that exists. In blandness, all the vitality of life is simultaneously present. It is not a form of nihilism or fatalism, but a reflective engagement with the nature of existence, which is determined above all by the transience of moments and of life itself.

The article written by Fabian Heubel takes an in-depth look at this aesthetic category. "Exercise in Blandness: Philosophical Reflections on Chinese Literati Painting" explores the meaning of blandness in Chinese literati painting by relating it to the discussion of hardness and softness, nearness and farness, discussed in the book *The Spirit of Chinese Art* by Xu Fuguan (1904 – 1982). The author of the article discusses the Chinese aesthetic concept of blandness in relation to his critique of Jullien's understanding and interpretation of the term. For Heubel, however, blandness is a realm in which immanence and transcendence, the finite and infinite, paradoxically communicate. It is an experience of transcendence reconciled with nature and liberated from faith. Heubel interprets the aesthetics of blandness manifested in the aesthetic principles of hardness and softness (*gāng róu* 剛柔), farness and nearness (*yuǎn jìn* 遠近), through specific examples of literati paintings. Heubel's understanding of blandness, however, resonates with that of Xu Fuguan, but takes it a step further and conceives of it as "the point of connection where the finite communicates with the infinite", so that the aesthetic-ethical or *aisthetic* cultivation of energetic transformation (*qìhuà* 氣化) is a constant movement between the world of the corporeal-formed and the spirit-formless, the finite and the infinite, or the immanent and the transcendent.

Chinese aesthetics also deals in great detail with the artistic process. This is meticulously elaborated and largely based on Daoist philosophy. It is determined by the internalization of the knowledge from the past, self-cultivation and reflection of existence and transcendence. At the same time, the transcendent dimension refers to the transformative function of art, which provides insight into the deeper structures of human existence and understanding of the world. In the artistic process, the fusion of the subject with the object is central; it is about the embodiment of unity with the Dao. In this union, the artist merges with the external to such an extent that the artwork looks

as if it were created by the Dao itself. The different stages of the process of artistic creation and the final aesthetic perfection are discussed in two articles written by Wang Keping and Téa Sernelj.

Wang Keping's article entitled "Rethinking the Spirit of Chinese Aesthetics" exposes the fundamental conceptual paradigm of the "Heaven-human oneness" (*tianren heyi* 天人合一) of Chinese aesthetics and discusses its essential spirit in terms of its vital cause (*huoli yin* 活力因), which consists of three aspects – the substantial (*benti xiang* 本体相), the applicable (*yinyong xiang* 应用相), and the fruitful (*chengguo xiang* 成果相). These are inseparable and form a dialectical and dynamic mode in the artistic process that leads to the highest aesthetic attainment of the work of art. The "Heaven-human oneness" is considered by the author to be the highest realm of aesthetic experience and the starting point of becoming fully human in the sense of an inner or aesthetic transcendence. The aesthetic significance and functioning of the three aspects are demonstrated and discussed in detail based on the art of three famous representatives of landscape painting, e.g. Dong Qichang, Shi Tao and Huang Binhong. The three painters and their artistic experiments highlight the enduring vitality inherent in the Chinese aesthetic ethos because of its historical significance and pragmatic relevance. This vitality plays a leading role in artistic practice, persisting over time and evolving through the endless creation and re-creation of established literati painters.

The article "From *shensi* to *jingjie*: the Method of Artistic Imagination and the Highest Aesthetic Realm", written by Téa Sernelj, examines the content, meaning, and historical development of two fundamental Chinese aesthetic concepts and discusses their mutual connection. *Shensi* is an aesthetic method applied in the process of artistic creation. It is related to imagination, the expression of the artist's mind, and the aesthetic emotions evoked by the elevation of natural emotions and the contemplation of life in response to external objects and situations. It was explored by Liu Xie (465 – 522) in his theoretical work on literary writing, *The Literary Mind and Carving of the Dragons*. The aesthetic theory of *jingjie*, on the other hand, was first explored by Wang Changling (698 – 756) in the Tang Dynasty, but was further developed by Wang Guowei (1877 – 1927) and refers to the highest aesthetic realm of artwork. The article argues that *shensi* (the aesthetic method) and *jingjie* (the aesthetic realm) are inseparable in the Chinese *aesthetic* tradition, forming a unique aesthetic theory of artistic production on the one hand, and its transcendent quality on the other.

The Chinese aesthetic tradition is generally based on a unity of beauty and goodness. This is especially fundamental in Confucian aesthetics, which developed aesthetic thought to be on the same level as moral philosophy. At the forefront of its interest is the beauty of human existence in a moral and ethical sense, and the ultimate goal is the achievement of harmony in human society and interpersonal relationships through self-cultivation and education. The Confucians emphasized the functional character and expediency of art in the context of moral education and self-cultivation, which they regarded as the most important processes for creating a harmonious society based on human reason and humaneness (*ren*). The form and content of art were thus very precisely structured and controlled, as can be seen, for example, in the Confucian distinction between "appropriate" and "inappropriate" music. Music was considered by Confucians to be the highest form of art because its harmonious structure most clearly embodied the integration of human reason and emotion.

It thus not only provided joy and comfort, but also had the ability to shape and balance the social and moral feelings of the people. In this sense, Confucius was the first to emphasize the social significance of beauty and art.

The presupposed unity of the beautiful and the good attributed to the fundamental features of Confucian aesthetics is critically examined in an article written by Wang Yi, Fu Xiaowei, and David Pickus. Their contribution, titled “Is the Unity of Goodness and Beauty the Distinct Feature of Confucian Aesthetics?”, critically challenges the prevailing assumption that the fundamental character of Confucius’ (and Confucian) aesthetics rests on the unity of beauty and goodness (*meishan heyi* 美善合一). With their textual analysis and interpretation of the classical texts, they offer a new reading of the concepts of beauty and goodness that refer exclusively to the moral or ethical dimension, while the complementarity of ritual and music (*liyue* 禮樂) is the actual reference to aesthetic appreciation and its axiological significance within Confucian moral and aesthetic education. The article also highlights the problem of the unreflective adoption of Western aesthetic concepts within the framework of Chinese aesthetics, without taking into account the specific ideational foundations of the two intellectual traditions and their paradigmatic differences, which may lead to certain misunderstandings and generalizations.

Chinese aesthetics has significantly influenced the aesthetics of other Sinic societies. It is well known how Zen Buddhist aesthetics, which emerged predominantly from the fusion of Daoist and Buddhist philosophy, influenced Japanese aesthetics. Less well known is the transmission of Confucian aesthetics to Vietnam. The article that deals with the adoption and adaptation of Confucian (especially Neo-Confucian) aesthetics in Vietnam is written by Phan Thị Thu Hiền and Ngọc Thơ Nguyễn. Their article, entitled “Basic Thoughts of Vietnamese Classical Aesthetics through *Vân đài loại ngữ* of Lê Quý Đôn”, introduces Vietnamese aesthetics developed by the famous Vietnamese philosopher and writer Lê Quý Đôn (1726 – 1784), who is virtually unknown in Western discourses on East Asian philosophy and aesthetics. The authors claim that Lê Quý Đôn’s encyclopaedic work on poetics and aesthetics, *Vân đài loại ngữ*, is the most important and representative work on Vietnamese aesthetics. Lê Quý Đôn developed his own aesthetic theory-based, on the one hand, on a reflective consideration of classical Chinese, especially Neo-Confucian, aesthetics, and on the other hand on the specific characteristics of the Vietnamese national identity. Lê Quý Đôn believed that the beauty of literature and art lies in expressing and evoking emotions and living in harmony with the universe in a simple and natural way.

Unfortunately, there is still a prevailing opinion in Western discourses that Chinese (or non-Western) philosophies lack a coherent and systematic theory, or are even reduced to a mere history of ideas. This assumption is based partly on lack of knowledge and partly on Eurocentric prejudices. When approaching the Chinese intellectual tradition, one must be aware of the fact that it is based on a different methodological framework and uses different methodological tools for dealing with philosophical problems. We sincerely hope that this special issue on *Confucian and Daoist Aesthetics* will provide readers of *Synthesis philosophica* with a deeper understanding and appreciation of the profound philosophical content of Chinese aesthetics.

Téa Sernelj

Editor of “Confucian and Daoist Aesthetics”