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What Is the Aesthetics in China?

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Abstract. It could be said that Chinese aesthetics merges together three cornerstones (capisaldi) of the Western tradition. It might be intended as the study of beauty in the Platonic sense, because of the vast debate on the topic rooted back in Chinese's ancient times; it could match the sense of aesthetics as intended by Baumgarten, because of the long tradition of Chinese perceptual studies, and it may also be compared to the Hegelian philosophy of art, given the abundance of Chinese artistic manufactures and theories. Chinese aesthetics is distinctive and very different from the Western one. While the latter tries to grasp the inner beauty of things by breaking them and accounts for beauty as an object, Chinese aesthetics considers beauty as a subject, rather aiming at feeling the beauty of things for what they are. Compared to the Occidental tradition, which is rooted in sensation but deviates from sensation to pursue a rational goal, Chinese aesthetics originates from the sensation and adheres to it all the time. Therefore, the Chinese stance makes for a unique and genuine approach to the discipline.

Key words. Aesthetics in China, Yi Xiang (image), Shen Yun, sense of beauty, the aesthetic methodology.

With a time-honored long history, the Chinese aesthetic tradition has got some distinctive features. In terms of its historical development, it may be divided into three periods: 1) the ancient, 2) the pre-modern and 3) the modern¹. The three periods are respectively characterized by a traditional mode, a transitional one and a modern one. Although each mode has its distinctive features, there is a general spirit crossing and connecting all three periods.

Then, what kind of aesthetics is the Chinese one?

¹ The ancient period ranges from pre-Qin Dynasties to the Opium War (1840); the pre-modern period is from the Opium War to the May 4th Movement (1919); the modern period is from the May 4th Movement up to the present day.

1. THE AESTHETICS IN CHINA IS ESTABLISHED ON THE FOUNDATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MAN AND NATURE

In opposition to the aesthetics in the West which is set up on the basis of the relationship between human beings, the aesthetics in China is established on the foundation of the relationship between man and nature. This difference is not caused by aesthetics itself but by cultures. Essentially the traditional Chinese culture was an agricultural one and farming was the main working activity of Chinese people. In farming activities, people focused much on climate, ground features, seasons, irrigation, etc. They accumulated more and more knowledge about the nature and thus, had profound feelings for it as well. Consequently, they developed the concept of “three qualities”², i.e. heaven is the father, ground is the mother and the human beings are their children. By «copying the shapes of different parts of their body and copying the shapes of different things in nature» (Appended Words II), the Chinese people created an abundant and splendid culture, as proven by the development of written language, the Eight Trigrams, religion, philosophy, literature, art, etc. For example, in the traditional Chinese literature and art, the relationship between man and nature was the main theme and many natural images became the main carriers and media to express the feelings and wishes of Chinese. Thus, the landscape poems, the landscape travel essays, the landscape paintings, the paintings of flowers and birds, and the landscape gardens came into being. This is one of the basic features of Chinese literature and art. After reading many Chinese literary works, Goethe realized this as well:

It differs, however, in that with them external nature always lives side by side with the human figures. One always hears the splashing of goldfish in the pond; the birds in the branches are always singing; the day

² “Three qualities” refers to the heaven, the ground and the human beings, which comes from *On Divinatory Symbols in The Book of Changes*. It is a perspective and a method of observing the world in ancient China.

is always bright and sunny; the night is always clear; the moon is mentioned often, but it does not change the landscape; its light is thought of as no less brighter than the day itself. (Kohn [1964]: 92)

This is not only the main feature of Chinese narrative literature but also the one of Chinese lyrical literature. Some distinguished Chinese literary figures express their deep love for nature in their lyrical works. They regard nature as their friend, the most beautiful thing and an aesthetic surrounding from which they can get much pleasure. Such an aesthetic tradition has been developed since the time when Confucius remarked, «The wise finds pleasure in water; the virtuous finds pleasure in hills» (Legge [1991]: 192). Since then Chinese literary figures have had great interest in «observing the modality of landscape and studying the images of grass and trees» (Xie [1998]: 417), and thus they have created a huge number of great literary works. There are many natural images in Chinese writings, traditional popular poetry, Ci, Qu,³ poetic essays and proses (especially those written during the Ming and the Qing Dynasties). They can also be found in music, opera, painting, calligraphy and even buildings and gardens as well. If these natural images were removed, Chinese literature and art would not exist at all. Therefore, we can say that the traditional aesthetics in China has been constructed on the basis of «the aesthetic relationship between man and nature», which is also one of the basic features of Chinese aesthetics as a whole. It consists of many categories and aesthetic thoughts, such as “Qing Jing”⁴, “Yi Xiang”⁵,

³ Ci and Qu are two of the basic literary forms in ancient China.

⁴ “Qing” (情) and “Jing” (景) are two of the basic categories in the aesthetics in China. “Qing” means emotion or affection, and “Jing” means scenes.

⁵ “Yi” (意) and “Xiang” (象) are two of the basic categories in the aesthetics in China. “Yi” means concept, meaning or idea; “Xiang” means image. Chinese aesthetics stresses on expressing one’s meaning through specific image/s.

“Yi Jing”⁶, “Wu Se”⁷, «expressing emotion or idea by describing scenes», «mingling emotion with scenes», «the changing of one’s thoughts with the natural scenes», «the burst of writing inspiration when observing the nature», etc. These categories and thoughts, held together, have formed the spirit of the aesthetic in China (See Feng [1998]; Feng [1996]).

2. THE AESTHETICS IN CHINA UPHOLDS THE IMAGE OF NATURE

Contrary to the aesthetics in the West which stresses the image of human beings, the aesthetics in China attributes importance to the image of the nature. Ye Lang says, «Beauty lies in image (“Yi Xiang”)» (Lang [2009]: 55) and this holds absolutely true for Chinese aesthetics. The implication of “Yi Xiang” (image) is «mingling emotion with scenes», in which “emotion” relates to “Yi”, meaning “coming from man», while “scenes” relates to “Xiang”, that indicates something coming from nature. So we can see “Yi Xiang” is a precise summary of the aesthetic relationship between man and nature. Therefore, the upholding of “Yi Xiang” is not only the basic characteristics of art in China, but also that of the aesthetics. The following items correspond to some “Yi Xiang” in the art of China: “Yi Xiang” deriving from things in heaven: the sun, the moon, wind, cloud, etc.; “Yi Xiang” deriving from things on the ground: hill, mountain, flower, grass, etc.; “Yi Xiang” deriving from plants: plum, orchid, bamboo, chrysanthemum, etc.; “Yi Xiang” coming from animals: dragon, phoenix, insect, fish, etc.; “Yi Xiang” coming from seasons: spring, summer, autumn, winter, etc.; “Yi Xiang” deriving from directions: east, south, west, north, etc.

⁶ “Yi” (意) and “Jing” (境) are two terms in the aesthetics in China. “Yi” means concept, meaning or idea; “Jing” means the world.

⁷ “Wu” (物) refers to the natural scenes, while “Se” (色) refers to the color of natural scenes.

While appreciating Chinese poetry, Ci, Qu, Fu, prose, drama, novel, paintings or gardens, we will find “Yi Xiang” of nature everywhere. People’s “emotion” or “Yi” is not spoken out directly but implied in “Xiang”. This is what “Yi Xiang” means. It is an aesthetic integration of «the man and the nature», which partly relates to “man” and partly relates to “nature”. After some time, some “Yi Xiang” got stable and turned into formal meaning/s, although carrying abundant cultural connotations. For example, when our friends marry, we usually give them a painting with a couple of mandarin ducks as a gift, which signifies love and happiness. At the birthday party of an elderly person, we usually present him/her a painting with pine, which means health and longevity. This is an exemplar distinction between the aesthetics in China and the aesthetics in the West for Chinese take the “Yi Xiang” of nature as beauty, while the westerners would rather attribute beauty to the image of a man’s body. In Lin Yutang’s words, «Chinese can perceive the beauty in the curves of nature but cannot perceive that in the curves of a man’s body, while the westerners can perceive the beauty in the curves of a man’s body but cannot perceive it in the curves of nature» (Yutang [1990]: 270). Jacques Maritain also thinks that «the interest (of the aesthetics in China) isn’t in the beauty of man’s body but in the beauty of landscapes, flowers and birds» (Maritain [1991]: 27). Both of them have caught a basic feature of Chinese aesthetics.

3. THE AESTHETICS IN CHINA ATTRIBUTES GREAT IMPORTANCE TO “SHEN YUN”⁸

The aesthetics in China pursues “Shen Yun”, while that in the West pursues “essence”. “Shen Yun” is hard to define. In the Southern and Northern Dynasties (AD420-AD589), “Shen Yun” was used to show the beauty in disposition and

⁸ “Shen Yun” (神韵), basic categories in Chinese aesthetics. “Shen” (神) means spirit or the beauty in the mien or air, and “Yun” (韵) refers to the beauty in the lingering charm.

demeanor in the aesthetic evaluation of a man. Later its connotation became rich and was used in the aesthetic evaluation of nature and art. In this condition, “Shen” means the beauty in the appearance or air, and “Yun” refers to the beauty in the lingering charm. Whether used to refer to the beauty of nature, man or art, “Shen Yun” means the inner vitality, spirit and implication of an aesthetic object. It is expressed by such an external form as “Xing” or “Xiang”⁹. But it is hard to express in words the complex meaning that “Shen Yun” has in Chinese art, for it differs from concepts such as “thought”, “emotion” or “meaning” as intended by the western culture and that can, conversely, be explained through the means of language. Li Yu made a good comment on “Shen Yun”: «It (“Shen Yun”) seems to be a thing but not a thing. It hasn’t a shape but seems to have a shape». In factuality “Shen Yun” is something that always sits between two conditions. Not only can it make «the beautiful one more beautiful», but it can also make «the ugly one beautiful as well» (Yu [1995]: 125). It lies in the fragrance and the bright color of flowers, in the sweet singing of birds, in the enchanting air of beauties and in the “Yi Jing”¹⁰ of art as well. So, as one of our forefathers remarked:

The sunshine over mountains, the sound of flowing water, the color of the moon, the fragrance of flowers, the disposition and demeanor of a literary man, the gesture of a beauty, all these are difficult to describe by words but very charming. No man can resist the attraction of them. (Chao [2001]: 33; see Hongdao [1988: 441])

The thing that cannot be described by words but attracts us so much is the so-called “Shen Yun”. Since their aesthetics upholds “Yi Xiang”, Chinese prefer to use their eyes instead of brain when appreciating beauty. Just like what the

⁹ “Xing” (形) means “shapes”, and “Xiang” (象) means “image”, similarly to its meaning in “Yi Xiang” (意象).

¹⁰ “Yi” (意) and “Jing” (境) are two terms in the aesthetics of China. “Yi” means “concept”, “meaning” or “idea”; “Jing” means “the world”.

American scholar Wolfram Eberhard said, «Chinese are “people of the eye”» (Eberhard [2006]: 2). This comment was made when he found that there were so many “Yi Xiang” in the aesthetic culture in China. Besides, what Wolfram Eberhard saw was superficial. The reason for Chinese upholding of “Xiang” (image) is to express “Yi” (meaning, emotion) and they get the sense of beauty in the “Shen Yun” of things. For example, «A beauty has the mien, the spirit, the flair, the emotion and the mind» (Yong [1995a]: 3). This is about the beauty or “Shen Yun” of a beautiful lady. Another example:

Snow has four kinds of beauty: falling upon the ground quietly, this is the beauty of quietness; falling upon the clothes but not sticking to them, this is the beauty of cleanness; covering the bumpy surface but still smoothly, this is the beauty of well-distribution; lighting up a room through windows, this is the beauty of brightness. (Yong [1995b]: 49)

Such is an evaluation of the beauty of “Shen Yun” of snow. From the example above, we can see that giving importance to “Shen Yun” is one of the main features of aesthetics in China.

4. CHINESE AESTHETICS IS AN INTEGRATION OF PERCEPTION AND RATIONALITY

The aesthetics in the West is taken either as a study of sensible knowledge or as a part of “philosophy”. It highly values rationality but excludes perception and opposes each term to the other. But Chinese aesthetics is different as it stresses both perception and rationality. Why do we say so? For Chinese, beauty is what can satisfy both the visual and the auditive senses. What can satisfy the visual sense is named “Se” (色), and what can satisfy the auditive sense is named “Sheng” (声). “Se” originally means “color”, then its meaning extended to beauty, sex, and finally got used to refer to all things that can bring visual delight to human beings, such as flowers, beauties, beautiful brocades, paintings, literature, etc. The original meaning of “Sheng” is “sound” or “voice”, but it

was also applied to music and prosody, and eventually it started being used to indicate all kinds of sound or voice that can arouse auditory delight, such as the sound of wind, the sound of rain, the sound of birds, the sound of musical instruments, the voice of children's reading, etc. So in the aesthetics of ancient China, "Sheng Se" was a mere aesthetic object, and the activity of appreciating "Sheng Se" was aesthetic. Certainly, not all "Se" and "Sheng" are beautiful, thus we should distinguish the good from the bad. What Wang Jia¹¹ said will help us to understand this:

I like to listen to the "Sheng" of flowing water, I like to listen to the "Sheng" of a musical instrument, I like to listen to the "Sheng" of the children's reading, I like to listen to the "Sheng" of the creak of oars at midnight. But I dislike to listen to the "Sheng" of a crow's caw, I dislike to listen to the "Sheng" of the attendants of an official to push people to make way for them in the street, I dislike to listen to the "Sheng" of the abacus of a businessman, I dislike to listen to the "Sheng" of a woman's curse, I dislike to listen to the "Sheng" of a man's sigh, I dislike to listen to the "Sheng" of a blind woman folk singer, I dislike to listen to the "Sheng" of scraping the bottom of a pot.

I like to look at the "Se" of the moon at night, I like to look at the "Se" of snow at dawn, I like to look at the "Se" of flowers at noon, I like to look at the "Se" of a beautiful lady, I like to look at the "Se" of liquor. But I dislike to look at the "Se" of fading flowers and that of withering willow leaves, I dislike to look at the "Se" of flatterers, I dislike to look at the "Se" of hypocritical officials. (Jia [1997]: 338)

These reflect Wang Jia's personal aesthetic tastes as well as the general tendency of Chinese to keep in high consideration both visual and auditive beauty. We should say that "Kan"¹² (related to the visual sense) and "Ting"¹³ (related to the auditive sense) are two of the main topics of

aesthetics in China. So Chinese often say: "Kan" mountains, "Kan" water, "Kan" flowers, "Kan" the moon, "Kan" beauties, "Kan" paintings, "Kan" poems, "Kan" drama; "Ting" wind, "Ting" rain, "Ting" the singing of birds, "Ting" music, "Ting" songs, "Ting" stories, "Ting" opera, "Ting" talking and laughing of beauties, etc. We will take Zhang Chao's¹⁴ remarks as an example,

"Kan" mountains upstairs, "Kan" snow in the suburb, "Kan" the moon by a window at night, "Kan" the sunset glow on the boat, "Kan" beauties in the moonlight. All these activities will bring the unusual sense of beauty to us. [...]

"Ting" the songs of birds in spring, "Ting" cicadas' singing in summer, "Ting" the sound of insects in autumn, "Ting" snow's falling in winter, "Ting" the sound of playing chess in the daytime, "Ting" the musical sound of the vertical bamboo flute in the moonlight, "Ting" the sound of pines' shaking in the wind in the mountain, "Ting" the creaking of oars by the river. Only to live like this could I say that I wouldn't waste my life. (Chao [2001]: 8)

This aesthetic spirit in China has been passed on from generation to generation, and the essay *Nine kinds of "Ting"* is a good case in point. This book includes nine chapters: "Ting' Wind", "Ting' Rain", "Ting' the Songs of Birds", "Ting' the Singing of Cicadas", "Ting' the Snoring of Man", "Ting' Peddling", "Ting' Storytelling", "Ting' Songs" and "Ting' Opera" (see Tingwu [2004]).

From these we can see that for Chinese, beauty is concrete and sensible, and thus the aesthetic activity is a sensible one. The Chinese character "Gan" (感) (being sensible) consists of two parts: "Xian" (咸, means all) and "Xin" (心, means heart or mind). "Xian" (咸) means "all", and has two implications as follows: (a) Chinese perceive the aesthetic object not just with their mind but also through the means of all sense organs, such as eyes, ears, nose, mouth, etc., and we would endeavor ourselves completely in the perceptive activity of appreciating the aesthetic object to such a degree that it becomes hard to separate ourselves from

¹¹ Wang Jia, an essayist in Qing Dynasty (1644-1912).

¹² "Kan" (看) refers to the visual activities of eyes, just like "to look at", "to have a look", "to see", "to watch", "to observe", "to read", "to appreciate", etc.

¹³ "Ting" (听) refers to the audio activities of ears, just like "to listen to", "to hear", etc.

¹⁴ Zhang Chao (1650-?), an essayist in Qing Dynasty.

the object as our emotion mingles with scenes. Zhuang Zi's dream of the butterflies¹⁵, Libai's invitation of the moon to drink along with him¹⁶ and Lin Daiyu's burying of fading flowers¹⁷: all of these are examples of the highest state of aesthetics; (b) Chinese perceive the aesthetic object as a whole by eyes, ears, nose, mouth and mind, eventually getting all kinds of aesthetic satisfactions, such as the satisfaction of eyes, ears, nose, mouth and heart, etc. This is the Chinese-featured "Five-Senses" aesthetic spirit (see Feng [2008]: 96).

However, the aesthetic activity of Chinese never halts upon perception. It goes from perception to rationality. Confucians stressed "perceiving things", with the intention of subliming the aesthetic activities to the state of improving the morality of the aesthetic subject, and for this purpose they developed the aesthetic concept of "analogy of virtue". Taoists also stressed for "perceiving things", but their intention was to sublime the aesthetic activities to the state of perceiving the spirit of the universe (that is Tao). Then they developed the aesthetic concept of "realizing Tao" from this. The aesthetic concepts of these two parties are different, but they equal in subliming the sense of beauty from perception to rationality. In a word, the aesthetics in China is different from the one in the West as it seeks the sense of beauty by

appreciating the beautiful things. In other words, it is an aesthetics which looks for its answer concerning beauty in the aesthetic subject. Conversely, the aesthetics in the West seeks the essence of beauty by breaking the beautiful things. In other words, it is an aesthetics which looks for its answer about beauty in the aesthetic object. Contrary to the western aesthetics that is based on perception but strays away from it and makes perception and rationality one opposed to each other, Chinese aesthetics is based on perception and sticks to it, turning into a genuine study of perception and an aesthetics that integrates perception with rationality.

5. THE AESTHETICS IN CHINA IS AN INTEGRATION OF "Kuai Gan" AND "Mei Gan"¹⁸

The aesthetics in the West seems to prefer "Mei Gan" to "Kuai Gan" and opposes them one to each other. It claims that "Kuai Gan" belongs to a lower-grade physical sense born out of an instinct both human beings and other animals have in common, while "Mei Gan" is considered a higher-grade psychological feeling that only human beings can have. Chinese aesthetics is different on this aspect. It values "Kuai Gan" highly, even as high as "Mei Gan". In other words, "Mei Gan" just equals to "Kuai Gan" for Chinese, and the relationship between them is overlapping and unitive. In the *Analytical Dictionary of Chinese Characters*, "Kuai" means "being delightful". In ancient Chinese language, "Kuai" is equal to "Le" (乐)¹⁹ and both of them mean "being pleasant or delightful", thus in the modern Chinese we have "Kuai Le" (快乐). So in Chinese aesthetics' terms, "Kuai Gan" is not only intended as a physical sense but also as a psychological one. "Kuai", as one of the catego-

¹⁵ Zhuang Zi (about 369 B.C.-286 B.C.), a philosopher and aesthetician in the ancient China, one of the representatives of Taoist aesthetics. In one of his works, Zhuang Zi says that once he dreamed of becoming a butterfly, but when he woke up, he felt confused at whether he became a butterfly or a butterfly became Zhuangzi himself. This reflects such an philosophical idea of Zhuang Zi that human beings and the other things in the world are mutual transformational.

¹⁶ In the poem *Drinking Alone in the Moonlight*, Li Bai (701-762) regarded the moon as his friend and invited it to drink alcohol along with him. This reflects his deep loneliness.

¹⁷ Lin Daiyu is one of the main women characters in *A Dream in the Red Mansions*, a novel of Cao Xueqin in Qing Dynasty. She is very sentimental when seeing the fading flowers, for she connects them to her own rough fate. Therefore she burys those fading flowers sadly, just like burying herself.

¹⁸ "Gan" (感) means sense. "Kuai" (快) means being pleasant/glad/happy, and "Mei" (美) means beauty. Therefore, "Kuan Gan" (快感) means pleasure, and "Mei Gan" (美感) means the sense of beauty.

¹⁹ "Le" (乐) originally means smile, laugh, but here both "Kuai" and "Le" are equal to happy, glad or pleasant, delightful, etc.

ries in the aesthetics in China, closely relates to “Le”, “Yue”, “Xi”, “Xiao”²⁰, etc. Therefore we can see that Chinese are “Kuai Le” no matter whether rich or poor, successful or not they might be, or even whether they are celebrating their birthday or the Spring Festival. “Kuai Le” has even become a greeting in Chinese. Gradually a kind of happy and optimistic spirit of life has taken shape, becoming a spirit of Chinese aesthetics as well. “Kuai Le” in Confucianism indicates self-confidence and a pleasure which transcends the personal gain and loss, taking «If advanced to dignity, they made the whole kingdom virtuous as well» (Legge [1991b]: 453) as one’s social responsibility. “Kuai Le” in Taoism is optimistic, it transcends the tangling of life and death and enjoys the lifestyle of «letting things take their own courses and letting human beings follow their own fate». Buddhism, originally believing in benevolence and never pursuing personal pleasure, developed the magnanimous spirit of tolerance and optimism after absorbing the self-confidence in Confucianism and optimism in Taoism, and being sinicized and remolded into Zen Buddhism. Confucius said, «They who know the truth are not equal to those who love it, and they who love it are not equal to those who delight in it» (Legge [1991a]: 191). So we can see that “Kuai Le” is the highest ideal of Confucianism. It constitutes the spirit of “Kuai Le” of the aesthetics in China along with the “Big ‘Le’” of Taoism and “the Biggest ‘Le’” of Buddhism. This makes the Chinese one an aesthetics of “Kuai Le” and this may also explain why tragedy has not well-developed in China. In *On “Kuai”*, Jin Shengtang put forward 33 kinds of “Kuai Le”. But later Zhang Chao, being not satisfied with the former 33 kinds of “Kuai Le”, proposed other 34 kinds of “Kuai Le” in *A Continuation of “Kuai”* (see Shengtang [1996]: 99-102; see also Chaowen [1996]: 323-5), one of his articles. Both articles have reflected the spirit of “Kuai Le” of Chinese literary figures. The high value attributed in China to “Kuai Gan” marks an additional

strong difference between Chinese and occidental aesthetics. Lin Yutang has also noted this as well: the westerners awe “Kuai Gan” with the constraint of rationality, so do the Indians who are under the rigid control of the asceticism. Only we Chinese can talk about “Kuai Gan” or “Kuai Le” without hesitation and constraints (Guoliang [1991]: 256). So for Chinese, “Kuai Gan” includes the physical, the mental, the material, the spiritual, the natural, the social, the artistic ones, etc., according to Jin Shengtang and Zhang Chao. Although the forms are different, they are all aesthetic and full of pleasure. From above, we can conclude that in the aesthetics in China, “Kuai Gan” is overlapping and unitive with “Mei Gan”. So the aesthetics in China is an aesthetics of “Kuai Le”.

6. THE AESTHETICS IN CHINA IS A UNITY OF THE PRAGMATIC AND THE AESTHETIC

It has been proved by numerous facts that the consciousness of aesthetics of human beings was originated from the primitive material production activities and related to the man’s desire for life as well as the pragmatic consciousness. The pragmatic consciousness is the cornerstone of the aesthetic consciousness. But the aesthetics in the West had excluded the pragmatic since Plato’s exploration of beauty. Till Kant, he simply took the pragmatic cornerstone in the aesthetics away and made the aesthetic opposite to the pragmatic. Since then, the aesthetics in the West has been far from the pragmatic and turned into a subject of metaphysics. In opposition to this, the aesthetics in China has taken a pragmatic route. Mo Zi²¹ said, «Only man fed well is possible to appreciate beauty» (Min [2008]: 27). Indeed, food, vital for man, is the material and pragmatic foundation of exploring beauty. Without food, man will die, and then what’s the use of beauty? So man needs a foundation for life, only with this can he carry out the aesthetic activities. Mo Zi summarized such an aesthetic rule: «“Zhi” is first and “Wen”

²⁰ Here “Le” (乐), “Yue” (悦), “Xi” (喜), “Xiao” (笑) are words related to happiness, gladness, pleasure, delight and laugh/smile.

²¹ Mo Zi (about 480 B.C.-420 B.C.), a philosopher and aesthetician in ancient China.

is second»²². “Zhi” means being pragmatic, it is the foundation of life; and “Wen” means art or the other entertainments in life, it belongs to the aesthetic activity. The relationship between the pragmatic and the aesthetic is not opposite but unified, thus Mo Zi often talked about aesthetics along with the problems of daily life, such as food, clothing, housing, etc. This is a basic thought in the aesthetics in China which believes that beauty is in the pragmatic. That’s why the aestheticians of China always combine beauty with daily life and the pragmatic. Yes, there are really a few exceptional examples, such as Han Feizi²³ who viewed the pragmatic opposite to the aesthetics. However, it is not typical but individual. With such a belief, Chinese have developed cooking technology and its aesthetics, clothing technology and its aesthetics, building technology and its aesthetics, musical art and its aesthetics, calligraphy art and its aesthetic, etc. So the aesthetics in China does not negate the pragmatic but combines with it very well, which is full of such aesthetic concepts that poetry can educate people, that music can reflect the politics of a nation, that writing can express one’s thoughts, that novels can serve for the social reforms, that beautiful brocade can promote diplomacy, etc. They all demonstrate the pragmatic feature of the aesthetics in China obviously. The ancient Chinese made the following as the aesthetic criteria of landscape paintings: it should be appreciated, it could be travelled by mind, and it could take spiritual pleasure to man. For example, Guo Xi, an artist in Song Dynasty, believed that a good landscape painting should not only be appreciated, but also have such functions: «Man could wander in it» and «Man could live in it» (Xi [1982]: 65). This is an integration of the pragmatic (such as «Man could live in it») and the aesthetic («It should be appreciated»). Certainly here “the pragmatic” is just in imagination, it is still aesthetic by nature. From these we can see that Chinese

tend to combine the aesthetic problems with the experiences of daily life. This is another important characteristics of the aesthetics in China.

7. THE DISTINCTIVE METHODOLOGY OF CHINESE AESTHETICS

The aesthetics in the West transforms all aesthetic questions into philosophical ones by using the rational methodology to deal with perceptual problems. This probably smothers the vitality of beauty, and the originally interesting aesthetic activities are likely to become a little dull, thus paving the way to the death of art or the death of aesthetics. Since the very beginning, that is from Plato to Baumgarten, the aesthetics in the West has been classified into the category of philosophy, which makes it hard for it to develop independently. Comparatively, the aesthetics in China, more fortunately, addresses perceptual questions by perceptual methodology and has more freedom to develop independently, instead of being enslaved by philosophy²⁴. In the traditional Chinese aesthetics, appreciating beauty was a truly happy, interesting and beautiful activity, which generally intended to pursue a mental pleasure. And in the long-term aesthetic practice, Chinese have developed a series of systematical methodology of researching aesthetics, such as “Gan” (感), “Jian” (鉴), “Shang” (赏), “Wan” (玩)²⁵, etc. “Gan” (感) means to appreciate beauty with eyes, ears, nose, mouth as well as the whole body together. For example, when reading a poem, the eyes are used to look at the words, the mouth is used to read the words, the ears are used to listen to the rhythm, the brain is used to think

²⁴ Certainly this is the situation of the traditional aesthetics in China. With the import of the aesthetics in the West, the aesthetics in China has changed greatly on this.

²⁵ Here “Gan” (感), “Jian” (鉴), “Shang” (赏), “Wan” (玩) are the ways/methods of appreciating beautiful things or researching aesthetics for Chinese. “Gan” (感) means to appreciate beauty with sense organ/s; “Jian” (鉴) means to distinguish beauty from ugliness; “Shang” (赏) means to appreciate beauty by being immersed into the world of aesthetic objects; “Wan” (玩) means to play or to entertain oneself.

²² “Zhi” (质) means being plain or pragmatic; “Wen” (文) means magnificent, gorgeous, very beautiful.

²³ Han Feizi or Han Fei (about 280 B.C.-233 B.C.), a philosopher and aesthetician in ancient China.

about the theme and the implied meaning. Only all sense organs involved could the beauty in a poem be felt and could “Mei Gan” (the sense of beauty) be acquired. Therefore, Hu Yinglin²⁶ summarized that a poem should be «completely beautiful» (Min [2008]: 364-365), that is, it should be beautiful in words, rhythm, emotion and taste. “Jian” (鉴) means to distinguish between beauty and ugliness. The world is so complicated that sometimes beautiful things mix with ugly ones, sometimes different levels and kinds of beauty mix together, and they all need to be distinguished from each other. That’s why Liu Zhou²⁷ said,

Beauty and ugliness always mix together. We should observe and study things objectively to distinguish them. And it is hard to distinguish genuine things from fake ones. Our subjectivities are quite essential on this to analyse them and distinguish them. (Min [2008]: 182-183)

“Shang” (赏) means to appreciate beauty by being immersed into the world of aesthetic objects. That’s why Confucius was so intoxicated that «he couldn’t tell the tastes of different delicious food for a long time after listening to the Music “Shao”» (Legge [1991c]: 199). “Wan” (玩) originally means to play or to entertain oneself. There are different kinds and levels of “Wan”, such as the proper one and the improper one, the elegant one and the vulgar one, the superior one and the inferior one, etc. There is such a saying in *The Shu King*, «By trifling intercourse with men, he ruins his virtue; by finding his amusement in things (of mere pleasure), he ruins his aims» (Legge [1899]: 150-151). This kind of “Wan” has been disagreed and blamed all the time. Certainly “Wan” here is an aesthetic pursuit for freedom and an elegant entertainment of human beings. It is “aesthetic playing”, according to Schiller. We should say that if “Shang” is intoxication, then “Wan” is infatuation. It is based on “being keen

on a thing”, and it is a complete input of emotion, interest, taste, demeanor, disposition and artistic talents of an aesthetic subject. “Wan”, as a kind of aesthetic playing, is a man’s instinct as well as his pursuit of freedom, his elegant entertainment and his aesthetic playing. Just like what Schiller said, «Man only plays (“Wan”) when in the full meaning of the word he is a man; and he is completely a man only when he plays (“Wan”)» (Liyuan [2003]: 163). In Chinese aesthetics, “Wan” focuses on the gracefulness, beauty, unusualness, talent or wisdom of a player, so we should say it is an aesthetic playing that can reflect one’s pursuit for freedom and graceful entertainment, such as “Wan” mountains, “Wan” water, “Wan” the moon, “Wan” birds, “Wan” flowers, “Wan” stones, “Wan” porcelains, etc. When reading essays of Qing Dynasty, we may find several kinds of “Wan” which reflect the player’s talent, wisdom and aesthetic interests. It will help us to understand what aesthetics really means in China (see Gongzheng [2008] and Lizhong [2010]). These creative, elegant and interesting methods of appreciating beauty, such as “Gan”, “Jian”, “Shang”, “Wan”, cannot be found in any other cultures. The methodology in the aesthetics in China is distinctive.

Now, we can see that Chinese aesthetics differentiates itself from the western one becoming a unique aesthetics, with these seven main features. It originates from the basis of the relationship between man and nature. It upholds “Yi Xiang” (意象) and grants importance to “Shen Yun” (神韵). It integrates perception with rationality, “Kuai Gan” (快感) with “Mei Gan” (美感), pragmatism with appreciation, etc. Nevertheless, Chinese aesthetics also has its own distinctive methodology. Such is the aesthetics in China, with its long history and distinctive features. It could only exist and grow up in the fertile cultural soil of China.

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²⁶ Hu Yinglin (1551-1602) is a theorist on poetry in Ming Dynasty (1368-1644).

²⁷ Liu Zhou (514-565) a scholar in Northern Dynasty (439-589).

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