

# Different Approaches to Chinese Aesthetics: Fang Dongmei and Xu Fuguan<sup>1</sup>

*Aesthetics without Ethics are Cosmetics.*  
Ulay (1943–2020)

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## Abstract

The article introduces Fang Dongmei's and Xu Fuguan's ideas about aesthetics and examines their different methodological approaches. Fang Dongmei and Xu Fuguan are both representatives of the second generation of Modern Taiwanese Confucianism. The fundamental goal of this significant movement is to re-evaluate and re-examine the profound contents of Chinese thought in contemporary socio-political conditions through a dialogue with Western philosophy. The representatives of Modern Confucianism of the 20th century hoped that the encounter with the Western intellectual tradition would serve as a platform for modernization of Chinese culture on the one hand, and as a way to achieve the recognition of the West for the profound value of the Chinese intellectual tradition on the other. Fang Dongmei was one of the first representatives of this movement who was trained in Western and Chinese philosophy, and hence built his own philosophical theory on the encounter of both, while Xu Fuguan was one of the first who engaged in a dialogue with the West in the field of Chinese aesthetics. The present article illuminates the profound differences in their basic methods: while Fang Dongmei's elaboration upon Chinese art and aesthetics is based on philosophical and poetic approaches, Xu Fuguan's comprehension is grounded on philological, historical and cultural analyses. The author argues that such mutual differences between their ideas show their reciprocal complementarity, which in turn provides a more profound and clear understanding of the specific spirit of Chinese art.

**Keywords:** Fang Dongmei, Xu Fuguan, Chinese aesthetic, the spirit of Chinese art, Taiwanese philosophy, Modern Confucianism

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## Drugačni pristopi v obravnavi kitajske estetike: Fang Dongmei in Xu Fuguan

### Izvleček

Članek predstavi Fang Dongmeijevo in Xu Fuguanovo estetsko misel ter razišče njune različne metodološke pristope. Fang Dongmei in Xu Fuguan sta bila predstavnika druge generacije tajvanskega modernega konfucijanstva. Temeljni cilj tega pomembnega gibanja je bil na podlagi dialoga z zahodno filozofijo ponovno ovrednotiti in preučiti globoke vsebine kitajske misli v sodobnih družbeno-političnih razmerah. Predstavniki modernega konfucianizma 20. stoletja so upali, da bo srečanje z zahodno intelektualno tradicijo na eni strani služilo kot platforma za modernizacijo kitajske kulture, na drugi strani pa kot način doseganja prepoznanja vrednosti in vsebin kitajske intelektualne tradicije s strani Zahoda. Fang Dongmei je bil eden prvih predstavnikov tega gibanja, ki je bil izobražen v zahodni in kitajski filozofiji in ki je na podlagi sinteze med njima zgradil lastno filozofsko teorijo. Xu Fuguan pa je bil eden prvih, ki je vzpostavil dialog z Zahodom na področju kitajske estetike. Članek osvetli razlike v njihovih osnovnih metodah: medtem ko je Fang Dongmeijevo proučevanje kitajske umetnosti in estetike temeljilo na filozofskih in poetičnih pristopih, Xu Fuguanovo temelji na filoloških, zgodovinskih in kulturnih analizah. Članek pokaže, da se razlike med njunimi idejami dopolnjujejo, kar posledično omogoča bolj poglobljeno in jasno razumevanje posebnosti duha kitajske umetnosti.

**Ključne besede:** Fang Dongmei, Xu Fuguan, kitajska estetika, duh kitajske umetnosti, tajvanska filozofija, moderno konfucijanstvo

### Introduction

This article introduces some of the fundamental similarities and differences in the ideas about aesthetics presented by Fang Dongmei 方东美 and Xu Fuguan 徐复观, who were contemporaries and both found exile in Taiwan after 1949. Together with Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 and Tang Junyi 唐君毅 they shaped the second generation of the Modern Confucian stream of thought. In fact, Fang Dongmei did not consider himself to be a Modern Confucian, for he always emphasized that, besides being a Confucian, he is also a Daoist and a Buddhist by heart (Rošker 2014, 157). Although he strove to integrate Western, Confucian, Buddhist and Daoist philosophy into his own philosophical theory, Fang considered Confucian thought to be the most fundamental to Chinese culture and tradition. Irrespective of the question of whether he is proclaimed as Modern Confucian or not, Fang's efforts to rejuvenate and re-evaluate traditional Chinese thought in the process of modernization were in fact based on grounds that were very similar to those which gave rise to the ideas other representatives of the second generation.

Modern Confucianism is defined by a search for syntheses between Euro-American and traditional East Asian thought. It aims to develop a system of values,

ideas and concepts that could prove itself capable of resolving the social, political, and axiological problems of globalized modern societies (Rošker 2017, 46). According to Cheng Chung-ying<sup>2</sup> 成中英 (2002, 382), within such a specific orientation of the philosophical current of Modern Confucianism, Fang Dongmei, being trained in Western and Chinese philosophy, belongs to the field of so-called synthesizing philosophy, together with Feng Youlan 馮友蘭 and Jin Yuelin 金岳霖.

While Mou Zongsan followed in the footsteps of his teacher Xiong Shili 熊十力 by working in the field of moral and metaphysical philosophy, Xu Fuguan was devoted to practical and cultural philosophy. Tang Junyi, on the other hand, is considered to have combined approaches of both, Mou and Xu. Xiong, Mou and Tang advocated the importance of building an ontological or metaphysical framework in order to properly evaluate and reinterpret Chinese philosophy, while Xu Fuguan emphasized that Chinese philosophy had always been endowed with pragmatic concerns of social realities and therefore did not consider metaphysics or ontology as the fundamental priority or framework that would enable the establishment of its modernization theories. However, Xu's view of the so-called non-metaphysical nature of traditional Chinese philosophy will be discussed in more detail in the last part of the article. In the framework of the present work it is of primary importance to understand his aesthetic views, and to set them into a contrastive comparison with Fang's. Therefore, we shall first take a look at the development and the specific features of Taiwanese aesthetics.

## Aesthetics in Taiwan

Before introducing the life and work of these great Taiwanese scholars in Chinese aesthetic thought, let us shortly summarize the development of aesthetics as a philosophical discipline in Taiwan.

In this context, it is of primary importance to draw attention to the significance of Taiwan in maintaining the continuity in the study of traditional Chinese intellectual history in the second half of the 20th century, a period in which most theoreticians in mainland China were (for political and ideological reasons) forced to limit their philosophical investigations to Marxist and Maoist ideas. The academic work that was carried out in Taiwan during the second half of the twentieth century was thus of vital significance to the further development of modern Chinese philosophy.

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2 Cheng Chung-ying is a representative of the fourth generation of Modern Confucians.

Without the instrumental function of Taiwanese scholars, such research in Chinese language would have stayed suppressed for several decades, which would in turn have caused great harm to philosophical research and the modernization of Chinese philosophy in its core cultural and linguistic setting. In other words, such a continuity that was preserved, sustained and developed by Taiwanese philosophers in researching and modernizing traditional thought allowed for the establishment of numerous important research approaches, methods and paradigms that would otherwise have been forgotten and could not have been developed further in a continuously advancing process.

Aesthetic investigations were, of course, also a vital part of these developments, which has, *inter alia*, led to some special features and characteristics of the uniquely Taiwanese model of Chinese aesthetic theory, which differed in many respects from the aesthetic research developed in mainland China. However, these distinctive tendencies did not form until the second half of the twentieth century, when many Chinese philosophers fled from Maoist rule to Taiwan.

In the first half of the 20th century, aesthetics became the most influential philosophical discipline in mainland China. Starting with Liang Qichao 梁啟超 and followed by Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培, who considered aesthetics as a “healthier” substitute for religion (see Liu 2000, 27; Cai 2018, 243–48) and who applied aesthetics in the curriculum of education, and following the overall trend for aesthetics which emerged in the middle of the century, Chinese philosophers such as Zong Baihua 宗白華, Zhu Guanqian 朱光潛, Cai Yi 蔡儀 and Li Zehou 李澤厚 became the most prominent leaders of the aesthetic movement. Each in his own way, they dove deeply into the study of Western aesthetics and strove to establish Chinese aesthetics as an academic discipline. They introduced traditional Chinese aesthetics on the basis of Western aesthetics, and were familiar with the development of different fields within modern Western aesthetics, such as experimental and scientific aesthetics, the aesthetics of psychology, etc.

However, according to Gong Pengcheng (2019, 3), experimental and scientific aesthetics did not gain much attention in Taiwan, and for Taiwanese scholars the psychology of art was not considered a proper method for discussing the “hierarchy” and “structure” of human psychology. Instead, the mainstream of Taiwanese aesthetics from the middle of the 20th century on was actually centred around the aesthetics of the humanities (*renwen meixue* 人文美学). Taiwanese scholars paid more attention to the relationship between beauty and human beings, and that between art and morality, and they often considered aesthetics as the result of human spiritual completion, as well as the basic method of humanistic studies (*ibid.*). And, as we shall see below, this kind of basic attitude can also be

observed in the work of both scholars discussed in this paper, in spite of their many differences.

## Fang Dongmei and His Philosophy of Life (*Shengming zhexue* 生命哲學)

Fang Dongmei (1899–1977) was born into a highly educated family in Anhui Province, as the 16th descendant of Fang Bao 方苞 (1668–1749), a founder of the Tong Cheng Movement of Chinese literature. Allegedly, Fang was able to recite the whole *Book of Poetry* already when he was three years old (Li 2002, 263). He attended the University of Nanjing at sixteen, and later studied and gained his doctoral degree in philosophy in the United States. He was greatly influenced by the philosophy of Hegel, Bergson, and Whitehead, which, according to Li Chenyang (ibid.) is also evident in his interpretation of Chinese philosophy as well as in his own philosophical theory. Fang returned to China in 1924 and taught philosophy at various universities in China. In 1949 he moved to Taiwan and taught at National Taiwan University and Fu Jen Catholic University, and frequently also in the United States as a visiting professor (ibid.).

As already noted, Fang Dongmei integrated and combined Confucian, Daoist, Buddhist and Western philosophical traditions into his own philosophical theory. Following the *Book of Changes*, Fang defined philosophy as the study of the synthesis of the emotive (*qing* 情) and rational (*li* 理) that emerged from the Ultimate Original (*taiji* 太極) and formed human existence. According to Fang, the emotive and rational are mutually determining and interdependent<sup>3</sup> (ibid. 264).

Vincent Shen (2003, 250) claims that Fang characterized Chinese philosophy as a transcendent and immanent metaphysics, composed of three constituents: comprehensive harmony, a doctrine of *Dao* and the ascending of human beings into ever higher realms of existence.

In his philosophy of comprehensive harmony, Fang emphasized the ultimate value of life, beauty, and creativity in philosophy and culture. He placed human beings into the natural world and cherished the aesthetic dimension of human existence.<sup>4</sup>

3 This position is similar to Li Zehou's understanding of the psychology of human nature in the context of his aesthetics, namely the aesthetic metaphysics, where emotion and rationality are blended, and are both transcendent and immanent, sensuous and beyond the senses (Li 2010, 220–21).

4 In this aspect, Fang complements 20th century ethical theory, which tends to neglect the aesthetic dimension (Shen 2003, 264).

Fang's philosophy is based on the concept of life or living (*sheng* 生), which is the vital force of all existence and creation. Fang interprets the concept of creative creativity (*shengsheng* 生生), which often appears in the cosmology of the *Book of Changes*,<sup>5</sup> as a concept of creative creativity that symbolizes this kind of vitality of life (Rošker 2014, 164). Shen (2003, 250) highlights two pillars of Fang's philosophical systems, namely the theory of being and the theory of human nature.

In the theory of being, Fang declares that the nature of existence is multifaceted. Its manifold all-embracing unity includes physical, biological, psychological, aesthetic, moral, religious, and unfathomable elements. They exist in a hierarchical order, starting from the physical and rising to the unfathomable. Then they descend again from the unfathomable to the physical. For Fang, human beings can develop from the basic to higher levels. On the higher levels they can pour their creative forces back to those on the lower levels and reinforce them. This movement from downward to upward represents two cosmic processes that are continuously stimulating and inspiring each other (*ibid.*, 251).

As for his theory of human nature, Fang, like other Confucians, claims that it contains an innate dynamism, which is inherently good and tends toward the fuller development of goodness. Human nature develops according to the hierarchical order of existence (*ibid.*). Fang's philosophy of organicism and comprehensive harmony represents the ontology of dynamic relations. His affirmation of creativity as the ultimate reality demonstrates in itself the interplay between humans and nature.

In his ontology of life, Fang Dongmei believes that although there is an objective (material) world which forms its actual foundation, the dynamic and creative existence of life itself tends to dissolve the merely physical world through its inherent and consistent value system that points to the meaning of life.

In this context, it is important to point out that according to Fang human existence is not merely about survival, but presupposes the search for meaning and purpose. For him, the aesthetic side of culture and art is therefore the expression of human creativity, which is always oriented toward perfecting the deficiencies of the world into which we are thrown (Rošker 2016, 80). Fang Dongmei believes that morality is the essence of life, and at the same time a concrete embodiment of deepest human values (*ibid.*). According to Rošker (2014, 165), he is therefore convinced that the cosmos is endowed with goodness, which not only stems from

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5 Throughout intellectual history, which followed the first appearance of the *Book of Changes*, the expression *shengsheng* 生生 has been subjected to a number of reinterpretations and constituted a part of a long line of commentarial tradition. However, the very principle of creativity is a fundamental focus of contemporary Chinese philosophy (Cheng 2002, 393).



the pragmatic postulates of human co-existence, but is *a priori* a part of its essential structure, as reflected in the sphere of pure aesthetics.

## Fang Dongmei's Aesthetic Thought

Creative creativity, which represents the ultimate reality of the cosmic process as a whole, that begins with the creative movement of life, constitutes a system of comprehensive harmony, and ultimately returns to the freedom of the creative force itself. This process of creative creativity starts with the aesthetic experience through which a free and creative mode of life develops (Shen 2003, 250).

Through the sense of beauty, the cosmic processes and human life can be understood as the complex synthesis of reason (*li* 理) and feeling (*qing* 情). In works of art, and particularly in poetic language, the sense of beauty is articulated through comprehensive harmony. Even though works of art are infinite in their creative intention and imaginative function, they are based on a finite material realization. The resulting aesthetic experience forms the core of Fang's philosophy of life (*ibid.*).

The beauty of the objective world (the beauty of the universe) must be based on the life of the subject in order to produce the meaning of "beauty". The inherently limited objective world as such cannot constitute any "beauty"; only the combination of the two can construct a beautiful world of life. As Fang declared:

Ancient Chinese sages saw the universe as a manifestation of universal life, in which material conditions and spiritual phenomena are fused and integrated into one, without being separated. All values and ideals of goodness and beauty can be realized with the spread of life. Our universe is a garden of morality and also the realm of artistic conception. Here, beauty and morality are united. Thereupon, life and art are also united: The full life is the expansion of power and the expression of beauty. All artistic creations depend on our desire to live and desire to act freely in order to achieve infinite possibilities. Life is art, and art is full of life.

中國先哲把宇宙看作普遍生命的表現，其中物質條件與精神現象融會貫通，至於渾然一體而無隔絕。一切至善盡美的價值理想，盡可以隨生命之流行而得著實現，我們的宇宙是道德的園地，亦是藝術的意境。美與道德，在此合一了。生命與藝術，遂也是合一的：盎然充實的生命就是力的擴張、美的表示，一切藝術創作均仗我們願所欲生，暢所欲為，以實現無窮的可能。生命正是藝術，藝術富有生命。(Fang in Gong 2019, 5)

For Fang, art expresses the merging of the inner essence of things and the inner being of man. He asserts that in this sense, art touches the heart of religion, it reaches the core of philosophy, and in its handling of technique it bears away the results of scientific inventions. The intensified aesthetic experience is a state of inspired love, in which human beings and Nature are spontaneously engaged in a miraculous form of communication (Fang 1980, 154).

Art, as the embodiment of cosmic feeling and expression of the creative impulse of life, is influenced by the cardinal belief of religion, permeated with the spirit of philosophy, and, especially in modern times, affected by scientific technology (ibid.).

In the context of his theory of comprehensive harmony or the theory of the cosmic pattern of order, Fang provides a metaphysical definition of Chinese art, arguing that it expresses the consistent harmony which is the infinite realm of Nature engulfing the supernatural, to show the miraculous potency of the Divine (ibid.).

On the other hand, Chinese aesthetics and art as such are an expression of an all pervasive flux of life that is infinite in extent. However, for Fang the whole universe is in a process of change, receiving and spending inexhaustible energy. It is *Dao* in its perpetual creative advance which causes all forms of existence to be charged with intrinsic worth. Everything is valuable inasmuch as it participates in that universal life which is immortal due to its infinite ideal of perfection and eternal continuity of creation (ibid., 155), where there is no separation between the material conditions and spiritual phenomena. Matter manifests the significance of what is spiritual, and spirit permeates the core of what is material. In the Chinese conception, the universe represents a fully comprehensive life, an all-pervading vital energy, which constantly creates and procreates (*shengsheng buxi* 生生不息). In this continuous process of creativity, human beings can perceive the great beauty of the universe, and of life within it.

The beauty of the universe is to be incarnated within life and its exuberant vitality. For Fang, the main concern of Chinese art is to express the beauty of life and its abundant vitality in rhythmic movements,<sup>6</sup> which is also the fundamental principle underlying all Chinese art.

Fang argues:

The Chinese spirit of art aims at the liberation of human souls so as to make them speak eloquently the silent poetry. It expresses a conception of the universe, a vision of its wholeness, a liberation from the struggle for

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6 Here, Fang refers to the most fundamental principle of Chinese aesthetics, namely the concept *qiyun shengdong* (氣韻生動).



existence which subordinates everything to human interest and prejudices, a going out of the spirit into the solitudes unafraid and exulting. And yet, profound as it is, as a genuine expression of the charm of life insinuated into natural objects, it has a most direct appeal to human emotion. (Fang 1980a, 162)

For Fang and for traditional Chinese aesthetics in general, the inseparability of beauty and the goodness of the universe refers to the realm of values which urges people to develop their moral personalities to attain the supreme good and, at the same time, to cultivate their artistic talents in order to realize the ideals of perfect beauty (Fang 1980b, 121). For Fang, the spirit of Chinese art and Chinese aesthetics is based on the communion of Confucian and Daoist philosophy.

Fang asserts that Laozi is the typical exemplar in whom philosophical reason and the artistic impulse fuse together most closely, since he regards the modes of creation, nourishment, growth, nurture, completion, and maturity as exhibiting the fundamental characteristics of the perpetual creativity of *Dao* and Virtue (*De* 德). They are spontaneously active, ever giving rise to novelties (ibid., 126). Hence, for him, Daoist philosophy, and in particular Laozi's conception of *Dao* as cosmic creativity, is the basis to understand Chinese art, especially painting and poetry.

Confucius and Confucians looked upon the universe and human life as the interrelated realms of great harmony saturated with pure beauty, and therefore paid much attention to the consideration of aesthetic values (ibid., 129). In this context, Fang interprets the following quote from Confucius on the relation between *Dao*, virtues and art: "To aim at *Dao*, to abide by virtues, to lean on love, and to be well versed in the fine arts." (志於道，據於德，依於仁，游於藝。) (ibid.) Only a person who has an ardent love for the wondrous beauty of fine arts can become a perfect man through apprehension of *Dao* and the cultivation of virtues (ibid.).

Fang also argued that for Confucius music and poetry were the measures of equilibrium and harmony. Music expresses the harmonious union of Heaven, Earth and human beings, while poetry is the embodiment of the cosmic spirit. The chief intention in the contemplation of beautiful things is to feel deeply the creative life in the universe, and to become inseparably one with it by way of sympathy, in order to gain access to the great Harmony (ibid., 131).

As for Zhuangzi, Fang sees him as a thinker who synthesized the philosophical insights of Laozi and Confucius, focusing upon considerations of Chinese artistic ideals and articulating the principles of comprehensive harmony. Actually, Fang Dongmei's own characterization of Chinese art as the "silent beauty" also derives from Zhuangzi:

Heaven and Earth are permeated with great beauty, but they say nothing about it; the four seasons observe the palpable laws, but they do not discuss them; all things go on in accordance with reason, but they say nothing about it. The sages strive after the beauty of the universe in order to reach the ground of all things. Thus, it is the perfect man ventures to do nothing and the great sage affects to originate nothing, for they take the creative spirit in the universe for their model.

天地有大美而不言，四時有明法而不議，萬物有成理而不說。聖人者，原天地之美而達萬物之理。是故至人無為，大聖不作，觀於天地之謂也。(Zhuangzi s.d., *Wai pian*, *Zhi bei you*: 2 in Fang 1980b, 124)

Fang poetically explains how this quotation from Zhuangzi clearly reveals the basic essence of Chinese aesthetic thought, and this is the very same essence that underlines his entire philosophy of life. The fundamental Daoist concepts, namely *Dao*, creative creativity, virtue, the great, silent beauty, and non-interference (*wuwei* 無為) constitute the very nature of his interpretation of Chinese art and aesthetics. As Fang elaborates, the general nature of Chinese art as the expression of exuberant vitality is metaphysical rather scientific, since it takes things as a whole in conformity with the principle of comprehensive harmony. In their creative works, Chinese artists reveal the integral impressions of the cosmic rhythms of life:

The Chinese artist is an integral mind or creative spirit in whom the metaphysical impulse of a philosopher, the lyrical mood of a poet, the piercing eye of a painter, the dexterous mastery of a carver, the form giving power of a musical composer, and, above all, the beatific vision of an inmost soul are melted into one synthetic whole, marshalling the quintessential reality and beauty of all-pervading life, thus producing a work of art. (ibid., 132)

According to Fang Dongmei, art reflects the essence of beauty. Therefore, the concerns of art have two directions, namely “the beauty of life” (*shengming zhi mei* 生命之美) and “vigorous vitality” (*qiyun shengdong* 氣韻生動). The first is the essence of life (*shengming bentu* 生命本體) and the latter, the creative vitality (*chuangzao huoli* 創造活力). Hence, the essence of beauty is revealed in the artworks. Therefore, “art is a depiction of the energetic flow of the great change” (ibid.), and hence the artworks are able to show the beauty itself. What Chinese art focuses on is not the same as the static sculpture in Greece, which expresses the isolated, individual life. Instead, it focuses on the bright and kind heart (*ren xin* 人心) filled with the flow of life. Generally speaking, the main subject of Fang’s philosophy is the essence of life. In fact, it is a philosophy of value, and beauty is

an inseparable part of his value system. So, the real meaning of its beauty is the beauty that comes out of life itself. For Fang, life itself is the essential foundation of beauty (Gong 2019, 6).

As we have seen, Fang's aesthetics are an integral part of his philosophy of life centred around the notion of creative creativity. However, the aesthetic experience of the creative creativity of the universe (or *Dao*) endowed with vigorous (and harmonious) vitality represents the essence or the spirit of Chinese art. From Fang's poetic aesthetics, one could speculate that his highest aesthetic ideal is to hear the silent poetry of cosmic life within the human life itself.

### Xu Fuguan's Pragmatic Worldview

Unlike Fang's privileged family background, Xu Fuguan (1904–1982) was born in a remote peasant village in Hubei Province. His father was a poor village school-teacher and Xu was the only one among four children who received a proper education. After college, he studied at a military academy in Japan and attended the lectures of the first Japanese Marxist Kawakami Hajime (1879–1946) at the University of Meiji.<sup>7</sup> In 1931, Xu and many other Chinese students studying in Japan protested against the Japanese occupation of Manchuria, causing him to be expelled from the academy half a year before completing his studies. In 1932, Xu started working as a colonel of the Nationalist Party (GMD) in Guangxi and later as a military instructor. In 1942, he was offered the position of an adviser to the Alliance in Yan'an (Lee 1998, 52). After six months of working in this function he returned to Chongqing and became Chiang Kai-shek's advisor, confidante and secretary. Before long, he met Xiong Shili, who became his teacher. Under his influence, he soon moved out of politics and became an academic. In 1949 Xu migrated with his family to Taiwan where he taught Chinese literature at Donghai University in Taizhong.

However, Xu did not consider himself a philosopher, but a historian and sociologist, dealing mainly with the intellectual and political history of China, as well as with literary critique and Chinese art and aesthetics. Xu addressed these problems through hermeneutics and precise philological analysis. In the field of Chinese aesthetics, his fundamental work is *The Spirit of Chinese Art* (*Zhongguo yishu jingshen* 中國藝術精神) written in 1966, in which Xu highlighted the artistic, aesthetic and spiritual value of Chinese art and culture through its comparison to Western aesthetics.

7 At that time Xu was impressed by Western ideas such as communism and socialism, which greatly influenced his socio-political views (for details see Sernelj 2019).

In facing the urgent need to modernize Chinese culture and society at the beginning of the 20th century, most of the Modern Confucians emphasized the importance of building a new ontology that could serve as the basis for the Confucian renewal. As already mentioned, Xu Fuguan was practically the only representative of the second generation of Modern Confucians to consider that metaphysics and ontology were not appropriate instruments for understanding ancient Chinese thought, and even less so for the development of its interpretation, because its pragmatic nucleus had never led to the composition of a structured and coherent metaphysical system, as had been established, for instance, by the ancient Greek philosophers (Bresciani 2001, 338).

Xu struggled to explain the precious cultural heritage of China to his contemporaries, and argued that the primary concerns of traditional Chinese culture were the practical social needs of people's daily lives. In this sense, he saw Confucianism as the main representative of Chinese cultural heritage. And since Chinese culture was preoccupied with human behaviour and the activities of daily life, it did not feel any need to develop a metaphysical system in order to expound upon its humanistic spirit (*ibid.*).

For Xu, the application of metaphysics onto Chinese thought would thus be superficial and damage its genuine humanistic nature.

Xu suggested that ancient Chinese philosophers developed the idea of ethics based on the “divine or heavenly” essence of human beings directly from the “primitive” state of religious and mythological society. He argued that we could not find anything similar to the Western metaphysical tradition in Chinese philosophy; even more, one of the basic characteristics of Chinese philosophy lies in its paradigm of immanent transcendence, which means that everything that appears in the abstract sphere, can—at least potentially—also exist on the physical level. Xu Fuguan suggested that Chinese philosophy and the corresponding heart-mind culture should be considered as a *mesophysics* rather than metaphysics—not only because of the above mentioned characteristics of Chinese philosophy, but also because of the physiological basis and the manifold implications of the heart-mind's ability to make moral and axiological judgments.

For Xu, the real Confucian thought is to be found in the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語) and in *Mencius* (*Mengzi* 孟子), that are centred around ethics and moral behaviour, and not in the *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong* 中庸), which deals with the metaphysical dimension of Confucian thought. Nevertheless, in their re-evaluations and re-appropriations of Confucianism in the process of modernization, other Modern Confucians were mainly occupied with the latter. However, Xu

argued that the true accomplishments of the Chinese history of thought were to be found in ethical philosophy and aesthetics (Bresciani 2001, 340).

He emphasized that Western cultures present their ethical systems as relying on metaphysical foundations or the religious doctrine and the idea of revelation (ibid., 341). Because Chinese thought and culture are not based on such foundations, but instead concerned with earthly matters, namely with the improvement of human beings and society, it could help Modern Western cultures with their presupposed moral decline and general ethical crisis.

Xu saw the innate characteristics of Modern Western culture (e.g. technical instrumentalism, logical positivism, behaviourism as well as psychoanalysis and Modern art in general), with its so-called abolishment of traditional ethical values, as a danger and threat to humanity as a whole (Lee 1998, 309).

In this respect, Xu's engagement in the field of aesthetics, where he carried out research based on a comparative perspective of Chinese and Western aesthetics and phenomenology, reflected his general position regarding Western modernity, as outlined above.

### Xu Fuguan's Understanding of the Spirit of Chinese Art

Xu Fuguan's main motivation for writing *The Spirit of Chinese Art* 中國藝術精神 (*Zhongguo yishu jingshen*) in 1966 emerged from his response to the contemporary art arriving in Taiwan from the West. He criticized the unreflective and uncritical acquisition of Western modern and postmodern art and culture by young Taiwanese intellectuals and artists, and called for a deeper understanding and acknowledgement of their own cultural tradition. It is therefore understandable that this book contains a rather broad spectrum of Western philosophical categories, especially aesthetics and phenomenology through which Xu tried to point out that Chinese tradition, especially Zhuangzi's thought, already contained certain concepts (questions and even answers) that were occupying Western contemporary philosophy and art which were popular in Taiwan at the time (ibid.).

In this fundamental work, he argued that the aesthetic spirit of Chinese culture followed the thought of Confucius, which is manifested mostly in literature, and in Zhuangzi's philosophy, that is most vividly expressed in painting and poetry. The first half of the book deals with a comparison of Confucius' and Zhuangzi's aesthetics, and the latter's relation to Western aesthetics and phenomenology. An extensive chapter is dedicated to his presentation and thorough philological

analysis of the fundamental Chinese aesthetic concept of *qiyun shengdong* 氣韻生動. The last third of the book deals with the history of Chinese painting.

According to Xu, the axiology of Chinese aesthetics was already clearly defined in the first etymological dictionary from the first century (*Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字), where it is written that beauty and goodness are in fact synonyms (*mei yu shan tongyi* 美與善同意). The actuality of this innate relation is most clearly expressed in Confucius's thought. Confucius valued art highly for its contribution to human education and moral improvement. Xu Fuguan argued that Confucius paid great respect to art in general; his devotion to music in particular illustrated that virtue and art converged and reinforced each other (Lee 1998, 325). Confucius engagement in art through relaxation, moulding and contemplation of human emotions provides a deeper understanding of human nature in the context of self-cultivation (Li 2010, 77). It expresses the value of art in human life with respect to the unity of beauty and goodness which is directly connected to Confucian values. Confucius' "six arts" 六藝 *liuyi* were educational tools for self-cultivation, and as such held the function of moulding and balancing human emotions that enabled humans to discover, develop and realize their moral subjectivity as the highest realm of the human spirit, which represents the highest goal in Confucian philosophy.

However, Xu believed that the aesthetic spirit of Chinese tradition in the sense of the *art of life* is best seen in Zhuangzi's philosophy of a liberated and free human spirit, namely in the "free and easy wandering" (*xiaoyao you* 逍遙遊). He acknowledged Zhuangzi's thought as the best representative of the "Chinese aesthetic spirit", because of its unity between life and art (Ni 2002, 299).

According to Xu Fuguan, Zhuangzi's freedom of human spirit and emancipation from the secularity of human existence can be achieved in two ways. The first is to achieve the liberation of the human spirit and unity with *Dao* by the methods of *xinzhai* 心齋 (or "fasting of the human heart-mind") and *zuowang* 坐忘 (or "sitting in forgetfulness"). The second option which enables us to achieve such a liberation is, as we will see later, through artistic creativity.

In the *fasting of the human heart-mind* method, bodily and emotional desires and any kind of utilitarian purposes are dispelled, and one is able to integrate oneself with nature and discover (or grasp) its true essence. In *sitting in forgetfulness*, Zhuangzi transcended conceptual or analytical thinking, and the making of judgements and decisions that he saw as products of socialization and moral cultivation processes, overwhelmed by anxieties, worries, desires, life and death. In this way, he tried to open up a way to dissolve the boundaries between people and establish genuine interpersonal relations. Only on such basis could human beings become one with nature (or *Dao*) (Xu 1966, 66).



Xu draws attention to Zhuangzi's proposition of how to achieve a selfless (*wuji* 無己) state of mind, in which one is able to grasp the essence of human life, the universe (*Dao*) and all phenomena. In Zhuangzi's view, such a state could not be attained on the basis of cognitive knowledge, but rather on the basis of intuition or direct (pure) perception (ibid., 68). Only in this way could people master (*gongfu* 功夫) the methods of fasting of the heart-mind and sitting in forgetfulness.

However, the effort (*gongfu* 功夫) of becoming one with *Dao* is—according to Xu Fuguan—the laborious creative effort of a great artist. The main goal of this effort is not artistic production, but, much more importantly, the realization of an artistic genius. While Zhuangzi finds the unceasing unification with *Dao* in an accomplished artistic life, the artist himself or herself reveals this unity within his their artwork (Bresciani 2001, 345). Nevertheless, Zhuangzi's artistic life refers to the perfection of human life, not to the concrete artistic perfection that manifests itself in works of art.

Xu also reveals that, in fact, Zhuangzi seems to surpass the established values of the beauty, perfection, and happiness of this superficial life in order to reach up and grasp the great beauty of the universe and great happiness beyond sensory enjoyment to acquire the creative ability of the cosmic force of transformation (Xu 2002, 123), which makes the human spirit free and liberated.

Zhuangzi's *sitting in forgetfulness* is similar to Laozi's "non-knowledge" (*wuzhi* 無知) and "non-desire" (*wuyu* 無欲). It does not radically or absolutely negate desires, but just prevents them from controlling people's personalities, and hence the course of their lives. Such *forgetfulness* (of knowledge) is thus a method of eliminating axiological and conceptual knowledge, and what remains is "pure perception or consciousness" (*chun zhibue* 純知覺). Xu argued that this kind of pure perception (or consciousness) is the "aesthetic observation" (*meidi guanzhao* 美地觀照) (Xu 1966, 73).

In his view, this "aesthetic observation" is a non-analytical comprehension of things (*phenomena*) through intuition or "direct perception" (*zhibiguan de huodong* 直觀的活動). Such an approach is completely different from more pragmatic ones, which always aim to seek knowledge. It simply relies on the perception that occurs through the spontaneous activity of the sense organs, which occurs, for instance, through seeing and hearing.<sup>8</sup>

8 As Zhuangzi wrote: "Do not listen with your ears, but with your heart-mind. Do not listen with your heart-mind, but with your *qi* (vital potential). The hearing stops at ears, the heart-mind stops at symbol. *Qi* (the vital potential) is empty, and therefore able to receive things, and the accumulated emptiness is *dao*. Emptiness is the fasting of the mind."  
无聽之以耳而聽之以心，无聽之以心而聽之以氣。聽止於耳，心止於符。氣也者，虛而待物者也。唯道集虛。虛者，心齋也。(Zhuangzi s.d. *Nei pian*, *Renjian shi*: 2)

Xu Fuguan tried to compare the notion of *fasting of the heart-mind* and *sitting in forgetfulness* with certain aspects of Husserl's phenomenology. In this context, he highlighted Husserl's method of *bracketing*, or *epoché*, where we put in brackets our so-called natural attitude or our usual way of seeing reality, in order to focus on our experience of it. In this way we become able to explore our consciousness. Xu argued, according to Husserl, our consciousness is always intentional in the sense that it is actional (always doing something) and referential (it is always referring to something). In Xu's opinion, such intentionality, actionality and referentiality cannot be regarded as experiences of our consciousness, but should rather be seen as forms of transcendence. Xu Fuguan suggests (1966, 74) that in this sense Husserl's approaches can be compared to the methods proposed by Zhuangzi. Through Zhuangzi, Xu also tried to explain the essence of intuition, and to clarify how perception can provide us with insights into things. In this regard, he reveals another alleged similarity between the two philosophers, noting that for Husserl intuition means realizing the essential nature of consciousness, which represents the phenomenological approach that leads "*back to the things in themselves*" (ibid.).

Here, we could mention that Li Zehou also compared Zhuangzi's elimination of the mind and senses in the process of perception to Husserl's notion of pure consciousness. However, Li clearly stated that the difference between their respective approaches is that Husserl's pure consciousness is epistemological, while Zhuangzi's *zuowang* is an aesthetic notion (Li 2010, 81).

Xu Fuguan's interpretation of the concept of *qiyun shengdong* is also extremely important, since it reveals his thorough and very precise philological approach in presenting this fundamental aesthetic concept. Xu's analysis deals with individual concepts within *qiyun shengdong*, namely the *qi* and *yun*, *qiyun* and *shengdong*, and shows their conceptual development over time (see Sernelj 2017). He showed its multidimensional and multi-layered contents and meanings, and also elaborated upon the complex problems concerning the translation of this concept into other languages (see ibid.). As we have seen in Fang Dongmei's aesthetics, he translated it as vigorous dynamics of vitality or vivid vitality. But due to the lack of any similar concepts in English and other Western languages, Xu Fuguan strongly advised against such renderings. For him, *qiyun* is primarily understood as the fusion of the spirit of the artist with the spirit of the external world. He revealed that such a fusion is based on the ancient Chinese concept of *Tian ren heyi* 天人合一 ("unity of man and nature"). This process is not about the presentation of the external world, but rather represents the inner experience of the fusion of the individual with the world (nature, cosmos), which happens through the dynamics of *qi*. *Yun* plays a key role in this procedure, because it creates and enables a balance between

elements of the external cosmos on the one side, and those of the internal individual world on the other.

## A Comparison of Xu's and Fang's Approaches to Chinese Aesthetics

In the Modern Confucian process of reviving and re-examining Chinese thought and culture, Fang Dongmei was probably the first philosopher who was profoundly engaged in the illumination of Chinese aesthetics and art.

However, according to Sun Qi (2006, 5), most of the Modern Confucians have been dealing with questions regarding the Spirit of Chinese art. In his view, studies of Chinese aesthetics were by no means limited to Fang Dongmei. In this context, he explicitly names Tang Junyi and Xu Fuguan, but also some other scholars. He even emphasizes that the first person who really raised and demonstrated Chinese aesthetics as a concept was Tang Junyi. However, on the other hand, we cannot forget that Tang was one of the three closest disciples of Fang Dongmei. Hence, it is quite possible that Tang adopted and developed Fang's conception of this very term. But we must also take into consideration that Xu Fuguan and Tang Junyi likewise collaborated very closely, and therefore it is also very likely that Xu was indirectly influenced by Fang Dongmei's conception of Chinese aesthetics through Tang Junyi. In this regard, Sun Qi (2013, 40) draws our attention to the fact that Tang had already elaborated upon the concept of the spirit of Chinese art in the 1940s, whereas Xu Fuguan further and more thoroughly debated it in his book *The Spirit of Chinese Art*, which was first published more than 20 years later, in 1966.

There are some similarities between the two approaches. The basic resemblance is reflected in the fact that both emphasize the importance of the relation between art and human life. They both use a comparative perspective of China and the West, and both see the important role of Daoism in Chinese art. However, the main difference between Fang and Xu lies in their respective approaches to the study of Chinese aesthetics.

In Fang Dongmei's philosophical system, art is an important and necessary step on the way towards human perfection. It belongs to the highest philosophical ideals, and from the very beginning is based upon metaphysical presuppositions.

Xu Fuguan, on the other hand, has posited the Chinese experience of beauty into the framework of the human experience of life. Even though it arises from the momentous experience of life, and although it seeks to transcend material limits and reach infinity, it never leaves real life. As a part of Chinese philosophy, such

an idea of beauty never points to metaphysical ontology, as is the case in Western philosophy (Liang 2013, 135).

In his philosophy of life and human nature, which has been briefly delineated in earlier sections of this paper, Fang especially admired the Confucian ideal personality. However, it is obvious that Fang Dongmei regards Daoism as the philosophical basis of all Chinese art theory. As a result, Fang Dongmei merged Confucianism and Daoism in his aesthetics, and even endowed Daoist ideas with the Confucian ideal of moral perfection (*ibid.*). Fang Dongmei was aware of Zhuangzi's transcendence, but in his philosophical vision he directs this to theological redemption (*ibid.*): "Once I talk about Daoism, I often enter another brand-new world, such as the magical dreamland" (Fang in *ibid.*).

Indeed, in his specific exposition of Chinese aesthetics, Fang Dongmei thoroughly understood the important impact of Daoism on Chinese art: "When discussing Chinese metaphysics, when discussing the "world" or "universe", we must continue to transcend it ... in Daoism, it becomes the world of art" (Fang in *ibid.*).

Hence, Fang's elaboration of Chinese art and aesthetics is a part of his philosophy of life with its metaphysical foundation. Xu Fuguan, on the other hand, completely discarded the metaphysical dimension of Chinese thought in general, and thus his comprehension of Chinese art and aesthetics is based on more concrete methods, namely historical, cultural and philological ones.

Although both scholars saw the connection of morality and art in Confucian thought, but the pure aesthetic experience of life and the universe in Daoist ideas, Fang included both dimensions in his understanding of Chinese art without separating the impact of both in his comprehensive aesthetic system. In contrast to such supposition, Xu Fuguan posited Daoist (in particular Zhuangzi's) aesthetics in a contrastive dialogue with modern Western philosophy, especially with phenomenology. In this respect, his main goal was to reveal the relevance of Zhuangzi's conception of the liberated human spirit as the highest aesthetic ideal that was at the forefront of modern art at that time.

As already noted, Fang Dongmei was trained in Western and Chinese philosophy, whereas Xu was not a philosopher, but rather an expert in the Chinese history of ideas. When comparing traditional Chinese and modern Western discourses, he was therefore often somewhat partial and tended towards essentialist generalizations. This becomes especially clear in his exploration of Western thought, in which he ignored and excluded the very fundamental basis of Western philosophical tradition, which has its roots in ontology or metaphysics.

What Xu tried to highlight was that the very concept of pure consciousness and pure aesthetic experience that was at the centre of modern Western phenomenology already existed in Zhuangzi's aesthetic thought. In this way, he aimed to provide the younger generations of Taiwanese artists and intellectuals, who were seeking for a way to liberate the human spirit and tried to adopt modern Western methods of such liberation, with the possibility of finding similar ideas in their own, i.e. Chinese, philosophical tradition, and to embrace this idea as arising from their own cultural heritage.

Here I agree with Sun Qi (2006, 9) and Liang Yuan (2013, 136) that in this regard Xu was very successful in explaining the spirit of Chinese art, because when illuminating the basic concepts of Chinese aesthetics, he used a contemporary language. The same holds true for his amplifications of his own encounters with Western aesthetic theories and phenomenology through which he tried to re-introduce and re-interpret Zhuangzi's aesthetics in a novel way.

In my view, however, the main problem of Xu's revival of Confucian and Daoist thought lies precisely in the elimination of their metaphysical (or ontological) dimensions. Xu's rejection of this inseparable facet, which allowed him to maintain his position of the so-called exclusively pragmatic Chinese worldview, leads to certain oversimplifications in his evaluations of the two most important Chinese philosophical schools. As we have seen from Fang's and Xu's interpretation of Daoist (or Zhuangzi's) philosophy, it is more than clear that it is metaphysical, since in general it deals with a wide range of questions connected to profound questions of existence and to the fundamental nature of reality, to the relation of mind and body, cause and effect, time and space, potentialities or possibilities and actualities, ethics, art, etc. It seems that Xu's understanding of metaphysics is quite problematic, since he probably understood it as something related solely to some kind of spiritual or religious dimension.<sup>9</sup> Fang, on the other hand, emphasized the transcendence and transformative power of Chinese art and aesthetic in a very coherent and poetic manner. Although Fang appreciates the unity of morality and art in Confucian aesthetics and emphasizes the metaphysical transcendence of Daoist aesthetics, he nevertheless includes both dimensions in his comprehensive theory of Chinese aesthetics.

I would hence argue that his approach is philosophical and poetic, while Xu Fuguan's is philological and historical.

9 Since Xu did not understand any European languages and was thus forced to read all works of Western philosophy through their Chinese and Japanese translations, such an opinion might also be a result of the Chinese (and Japanese) word for metaphysics, *xing er shang xue* 形而上學, which literally means "that, which is above the forms".

## Conclusion

Fang Dongmei's and Xu Fuguan's different approaches towards Chinese art and aesthetics can most vividly be observed in the very narrative structures they use when discussing the topic. Xu proceeds from presenting Confucius' and Zhuangzi's aesthetic thought, and in turn compares the latter with Western aesthetics. In the next step, this comparison is followed by the philological analysis of the concept *qiyun shengdong*, on the basis of which Xu focuses on landscape painting with a partial excursion into Chinese poetry. His approach is very systematic, and in his exploration of Chinese art and aesthetics he uses strictly historical and philological methods.

In contrast to such approaches, Fang's philosophical and poetic narrative fuses together all integral parts of Chinese art and aesthetics in order to bring forward the poetic nature of Chinese philosophy and art. Therefore, I would speculate that Fang's narrative is intentionally poetic in order to help the reader become immersed aesthetically into the world of Chinese art. However, Xu Fuguan's systematic approach provides the reader with a precise and thorough explanation of specific terms integral to Chinese aesthetics, which is indispensable, since it offers a different, and in his own way, an even deeper insight into the poetic nature of Chinese art and aesthetics in general.

In my view, both approaches are therefore complementary and, as such, extremely valuable for a more profound and comprehensive understanding of Chinese art and aesthetics.

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