Several Inspirations from Traditional Chinese Aesthetics

Ye Lang

Peking University, China

Contemporary social life and its art are urgently in want of a new aesthetic system, namely, an aesthetic system of modern formation.

However, the above-mentioned “modern aesthetics” is not absolutely equal to “modern Western aesthetics” as advocated by certain people. Modern’ is a global concept. “Modern aesthetics” should be a genuine international subject, standing at a height of 21st century, absorbing the whole quintessence of both Oriental and Western cultures. In spite of the fact that various schools of aesthetics are emerging with leaps and bounds in today’s West, we can hardly find any that can be named aesthetic systems of modern formation.

Up to now, the Western aesthetic system has been limited to the scope of the Western culture, and has not assimilated and imbied Chinese aesthetics, to say nothing of Oriental culture as a whole.

Therefore, constructing a modern aesthetic system does not mean introducing a ready-made aesthetic system from the West. We Chinese scholars should devote our efforts to carrying out research on, summarizing, and developing traditional Chinese aesthetics, and simultaneously introducing it to the other parts of the world, making it merge into the fine achievements of Western aesthetics and realizing a new theoretical creation. This is the way to create a genuine international subject with the characteristics of the era.

Since the 1980s, I have laid emphasis on categorizing and researching into traditional Chinese aesthetics. I have discovered that traditional Chinese aesthetics is imbued with modern meaning which coincides with some aspects of modern aesthetic thought in the West. Digging up the Chinese legacy and expounding it in a new way will inspire us to blaze a trail in the field of aesthetic theory, and thus enter a new realm.

I believe that traditional Chinese aesthetics has enlightened us in the following three fundamental aesthetic issues:

A. Beauty exists in the image. Aesthetic judgment constructs a world of imagery beyond the physical world;
B. The world of imagery lights the true world. That world refers to “nature,” as is frequently mentioned in Chinese aesthetics. It is not logical “truth,” but perceptive truth—a charming world filled with vigor and vitality;
C. Aesthetic judgment is a kind of spiritual activity beyond the senses.

1. Beauty consists in idea-image

What is Beauty? This is an old and ancient question that has been discussed from Plato up to today. In the 1950s to 1960s, there was a great debate on aesthetics in China. This question became the focus of the debate, and scholars were divided into several groups according to their answers to this question. Some of them maintained that beauty was objective, while others argued that beauty resided in the mind or in the relationship between the mind and the objective world.

What inspirations can we draw from traditional Chinese aesthetics in connection with this question?

Most of the ancient Chinese did not think that there existed a materialized and objectified “beauty” independent of human beings. “Beauty” cannot be disconnected with the aesthetic activities of mankind.
Liu Zongyuan (773-819), a poet and essayist of the Tang Dynasty, was among the first to put forth an important argument in this concern:

Beauty does not manifest itself, but is revealed by man. If Lan Ting (“Orchid Pavilion”) with and its clear river and slender bamboo had not been described by Wang Xizhi (303-361), it would have remained in deserted mountains without being known.

This means that, the natural scenes should be stimulated, awakened, and illuminated by human consciousness, or the aesthetic activities of mankind, which turns them from a mere substance into an idea-image (yixiang 意象, a united, meaningful, and sensuous world). In other words, objects or landscapes can exist in themselves, but the beauty of these lifeless things is one of the experience of human beings.

Liu Zongyuan’s argument reminds us of Jean-Paul Sartre’s remarks that it is the existence of human beings that makes the existence of everything on earth possible. He maintains that, if we throw the landscape aside, it will stay constantly in silence because of losing eyewitness. This is exactly the same as Liu’s idea.

Then, what is Beauty? Traditional Chinese aesthetics provides an answer: Beauty consists of idea-images. Aesthetic activities will produce a world of idea-images beyond the physical world. This world of idea-images is an aesthetic object, or beauty, as we said in its general meanings.

Now we come to the question: what is an idea-image? Traditional Chinese aesthetics gives a most general definition: it is the interfusion between feelings and scenes. Feelings and scenes cannot be understood as separated with each other, but as keeping a harmonious unification.

The world of idea-images is not a part of the physical world, but a world created by people. Ancient Chinese thinkers distinguished between “substance” and “appearance.” and took the former as belonging to the real world and the latter to the aesthetic world. Friedrich von Schiller once said, reality is the product of Nature, while appearance is the product of human beings. Chinese poet Tao Qian’s (365-427) chrysanthemum (as depicted in his verses) belongs to his own world, the same as Vincent van Gogh’s “Sunflowers” do. Both are worlds of idea-images, rather than the world of reality. If there had been no Tao or Van Gogh, there would have been no such worlds of idea-image.

2. The world of idea-image illuminates the real world

As mentioned above, the world of idea-images is created by human beings. It is not a physical world, but transcends the substantiality of the physical objects. Then, is Beauty (the world of idea-images) separated from Truth?

Chinese aesthetics gives a negative answer to this question. In accordance with traditional Chinese aestheticians, our world is not only a physical one, but one full of lives as well. In this world, man lives harmoniously with nature, and so it is a world in which man identifies themselves with the Heaven. Our world is not the only one that is true.

The Book of Changes, China’s oldest classic, pays a great attention to the living phenomena of man and the natural world, and considers an internal unification of the living process of man and nature. It begins with the living activities of human beings, and observes all natural appearances from this standpoint. The Eight Trigrams of The Book of Changes represented eight things in nature, and all of them are closely connected with the life of man. In the “Appended Remarks” of this book, the “changes” were interpreted as “production and reproduction,” a successive producing of the process of life. Nature is understood as a process of continuously producing, with full senses of life, from which a world of significance and interest generates. This is a realm of great “Music” of nature.

In Chinese aesthetics, therefore, Man and Nature are not separated, but harmoniously connected with each other. On Music says: “Great Music keeps in harmony with the Heaven and Earth.” This harmony is in the realm of “Music.” Just as Wang Fuzhi (1619-1692) maintained, Music is the harmony between Man and Nature. This Great Music is the ontological state of Man and Nature. The truth is Nature, which is not the natural world as we usually say, but the manifestation of Nature itself. It is living and “identifying Man and Nature.”

Dong You (active around 1120), a painter in the Song Dynasty, made an important statement in response to the question of what is shengyi, or the sense of life?

The Heaven and Earth transforms things by means of a single vital force, which functions silently and unwittingly, but appropriate to every occasion, and thus becomes natural. (Dong You, Guang Chuan Hua Ba)

Zhu Ziqing (1898-1948) explains this paragraph by saying that, the *shengyi*, or sense of life, is the truth and nature, which is “transformed by means of a single vital force.”

To synthesize the various points mentioned above, we can conclude with the following formula:

\[ \text{Truth} = \text{Nature} = \text{Production} = \text{Transformation by a single vital force} = \text{Identification of Heaven and Man} = \text{Music} \]

That Chinese aesthetics argues the idea-image world “manifesting the truth,” therefore, refers to this identification of Heaven and Man (the harmonious state between man and nature), or the returning to the natural realm of Music. Jing Hao (active around 920) wanted to “collect wonderful elements and create truth,” and Sikong Tu (837-908) intended to “create nature skillfully”—both mean to achieve nature and truth by means of creation.

Just as modern aesthetician Zong Baihua (1897-1986) pointed out, at a metaphysic level, the Chinese philosophic system is a system of living, which will experience the interests, significance, and value of the world. He also argued that, the Chinese system emphasizes *xiang* or image, and “image is producing, generating and illuminating everything like the sun!” Zong actually told us that, idea-images are the product of man, and it is precisely these idea-images that illuminate a sensuous world that is full of vital energy.

### 3. Aesthetic consciousness is a super-rational spiritual activity of man

Aestheticians now generally agree that aesthetics is to study aesthetic activities, which are the spiritual activities of mankind.

Many people in the past took part in aesthetic activities as a way to be recognized. The end of recognition is to know the truth, which here means the subjective knowledge in accord with the objective reality, that is, to grasp the nature and law of the objective things, and advance from the perceptual knowledge to the rational one, while the rational knowledge requires thinking in abstract concepts.

We meet a problem here that aesthetic activities cannot be separated from sensuous images, but thinking requires abstract concepts that are disengaged from images. It is a contradiction that, on the one hand, if aesthetic activities cannot get onto the level of rational recognition, they will not be able to know the truth; on the other hand, if they eventually arrive at the level of rational recognition, they have to break away from the sensuous images, and will no longer be aesthetic.

In order to solve this problem, some people developed a concept called “thinking in images,” or “imaged thinking.” “Thinking in images,” as the compound shows, means to think through images. But, as long as one is to think, one has to use abstract concepts that are divorced from sensuous images. Consequently, “thinking in images” is absurd and contrary to reason.

This tells us that aesthetic activities are not recognition but experience. Cognitive activities try to find out the nature and law of objective things, and it can only know “what it is.” In this case, the subject cannot be in a communicative state with the world, and thus experience “how it is” (“how to exist”) and how to live. If one communicates with the world only through thinking, one can only reach the “truth” in logical sense, and thus stays merely at various levels of abstraction and one-sidedness.

Wang Fuzhi made a distinction between *biliang* (比量) and *xianliang* (现量). The former means to put one thing side by side with another thing and thus make a comparison between them, while the latter means directly to reveal the truth. *Biliang* is the result of logical thinking, which is the truth in logical sense. *Xianliang* is the result of intuition that is super-logical, which shows the original nature of a thing (or the world), and is thus the existential “truth.” The world of idea-images is precisely this *xiangliang*. Just like Zong Baihua said, “xiang” means to appreciate and taste the significance of the world directly by means of “intuiting or direct feeling.” He also said, “xiang” is autonomous, gestalt, non-depending, and thus super-relative, and it is a complete unity.

Aestheticians generally emphasized the disinterested quality of aesthetic activities in the past, while they paid little attention to (at least not explicitly put forth) its super-rational (super-logical) quality. But ancient Chinese thinkers, such as the followers of Zhuangzi and Chan Buddhists, saw a long time ago that the true image or the ontological world was covered by the utilitarian and logical way of thinking. This ontological world is a world of identifying of the Heaven and Man, and a realm of the Great Music or general harmony. In this world, truth,
goodness, and beauty are unified, in which the truth is not logical and the good is not utilitarian, but both are existential. It is in this sense that the super-utilitarian and super-rational quality of the aesthetic activities displayed.

Recently, some scholars start to notice the super-rational quality of aesthetic activities. One of these scholars is Zhang Shiyin, who pointed out: in the past we usually said that man is a rational being, now we should add to that by saying that, man is also a super-rational being. As a rational being, man recognizes the world by means of concepts and universals on the precondition of the dichotomy between the subjective and the objective. Nevertheless, man always seeks into the supreme whole and unity, which man in a state of dichotomy cannot realize. The unity of Heaven and Man can only be experienced by human beings in the state of the identification of Heaven and Man, and this experience can only be super-rational rather than rational.

The philosophical rationalism in the West cannot provide a good explanation of aesthetic activities. Just as Zong Baihua wrote in his critique of Hegel: “Hegel changes the Reason’ to be in fluxion, in development, and in vigor, but still tries to control and trap life with logics. There is no sense of Music in his system.”

The sense of beauty and that of religion share the super-rational character. From Albert Einstein to Frank Yang (Chen Ning Yang), many great scientists pointed out that when they reached the highest level in their research they will have a sense of beauty and religion. In a lecture entitled “beauty and physics,” Frank Yang argues that physicists could get the senses of beauty and holiness, the awe of first prying into the secrets of the cosmos from Newton’s laws of motion, Maxwell’s equations, Einstein’s theory of relativity, Dirac’s quantum theory of electron motion, and Heisenberg’s “uncertainty principle.” Here Frank Yang raises the issue of communication between sense of beauty and the sense of religion.

There are different levels of the senses of beauty. The first is the sense of beauty towards a certain concrete object, which occurs in everyday life; the second and higher than before is the feeling of the whole life, which we call the sense of life and history; the third and highest is what Frank Yang calls “the senses of beauty and holiness, the awe of first prying into the secrets of the cosmos.” It is on the third level that the sense of beauty and sense of religion share many similar points. Both of them transcend the limited meanings of individuals as limited beings, and by means of contemplating the Absolute, Infinite and “Supreme Beauty”, the individual life shares the meanings of eternity. For a religionist, it is to “identify himself with God,” while for an appreciator of the beauty, it is to “entertain the Great Harmony” (饮之太和), which is the vibration of soul and the state of ecstasy.

Frank Yang also raises the question of the relationship between the rational and the super-rational. The formulas put forth by scientists such as Einstein mentioned above are the result of the highest rational activities of mankind, while the sense of beauty and religion are super-rational. This brings about a question: whether or not is it possible for people to progress from the rational domain to the super-rational domain? This is a question deserving careful research. Ancient Chinese philosopher Wang Fuzhi provided an inspiring suggestion. By discussing “getting knowledge” (致知), he argued that when human thinking reaches its highest point, “tracing the reason to its origin, and reaching the Great Reason of all the things in the world,” then it will come to a wonderful realm of “merging the subject with the object in one and the same place” and “penetrating to everywhere and passing down ever since.” What Wang Fuzhi says seems to be that when the rationality of human beings reaches its highest point, it can get into a super-rational realm, in which absolute beauty can be contemplated, and in which Man can “identify with Nature,” and “entertain the Great Harmony.”