

“Chinese and Western Aesthetics – Some Comparative Considerations”

Karl-Heinz Pohl,

Trier University, Germany

Aesthetics, as an epistemic discipline, is part and parcel of sciences and humanities which, though set up by Western academics, have now become systems with universal or global significance. The universalistic claim of the natural sciences and humanities means that, as a rule, one tries to find theories and principles that are universally valid and do not give much space to exceptions. It has to be considered, however, that the sciences and humanities are a European invention. And thus there is the inclination to define concepts and categories on the basis of the specific European tradition, according to European (also American) preferences.

Aesthetics is part of this Eurocentric academic endeavour. Hence, other than in natural sciences such as physics, where there can only be one global and common to all form, there are still significant differences in humanistic disciplines such as philosophy, literature or aesthetics as well as in the arts, for they are much more bound to social conditions and developments in the respective countries. Arts and aesthetics form particularly significant parts of a culture: Apart from language, the cultural framework of myths, images, allusions as well as references to literature, art, religion and philosophy, in short, the symbolic and aesthetic orientation (shared literary or artistic sensibilities) have, thus far, formed the basis of any cultural identity.

In modern times, aesthetics assumed a special place in China's grappling with Western thought: First, aesthetics constituted a realm relatively free of politics. For this reason, it attracted Chinese to explore freely and without political restraint occidental thought. Second, philosophy of art as part of aesthetics offered Chinese intellectuals the possibility of linking up with their own traditional ideas. This was important because – unlike the mainstream of Chinese traditional social and political thought, particularly Confucianism – the Chinese aesthetic tradition had not been discredited by the reception of Western ideas and the radical anti-traditionalism of the May Fourth period (1917-23). Quite the contrary, when the Chinese at the beginning of the 20th century began to define themselves in relationship to the West, they understood their own culture as an essentially aesthetic one.

Hence, in order to understand modern discussions in China about “Chineseness”, it would be necessary to know more about this important part of Chinese culture. In the following, the way of Chinese aesthetics shall be pursued through the traditional and the modern period. Against the backdrop of modern discussions of aesthetics in China, the main characteristics of traditional Chinese aesthetics, which were (and often still are) considered to be at the basis of a Chinese cultural identity, will be explored and compared with basic ideas in the Western tradition.

I. Traditional Chinese Aesthetics

Concerning Chinese aesthetics, one often hears the objection that China never had a discipline that could be compared to occidental philosophical aesthetics. Seen from a methodological point of view, such objections may carry a certain weight, but because of a similarity to art-philosophical aspects of Western aesthetics, the Chinese, in general, understood and still understand their own rich tradition of poetic rather than systematic reflections on the essence of literature and art as “aesthetics”. Hence, if we want to avoid getting further tangled up in the snares of euro-centrism, we would be well advised to accept this cross-cultural approximation in spite of its vagueness over a rigorous definition of terms.

“Traditional Chinese aesthetics” is a modern perspective on pre-modern Chinese art which includes not only poetry, calligraphy and painting (as the most prominent scholarly arts) but also architecture, pottery, bronzes, music, martial arts and so on.¹ Although it would be impossible to find common traits to all of these disciplines, the three above mentioned scholarly arts do share some common traits (particularly in the combination of poetry and painting, on the one hand, and painting and calligraphy, on the other); and these traits did have an impact on a cultural identity for Chinese.²

Let us first look briefly into the corpus of writings on aesthetics in China. Other than in the long European tradition, based on works by Plato and Aristotle, we don’t find systematic discussions on the concept of beauty. In most works there is, instead, a probing into the

¹ See Li Zehou’s overview on traditional Chinese aesthetics in his popular book *The Path of Beauty: A Study of Chinese Aesthetics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

² For a detailed discussion of Chinese aesthetics and literary theory see Karl-Heinz Pohl, *Ästhetik und Literaturtheorie in China – Von der Tradition bis zur Moderne*, Munich: Saur, 2006.

essence of artistic (mostly literary) expression and creativity. Interestingly, this was often done through the medium of poetry; that is, we have poems about poetry (or literature), such as Lu Ji's 陸機 influential "Rhapsody on Literature" (*Wen fu* 文賦) or Sikong Tu's 司空圖 (837-908) "Twenty-four Modes of Poetry" (*Ershisi shipin* 二十四詩品). Also Liu Xie's 劉勰 (465-522 AD) monumental *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (*Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍), the most thorough treatise of all aspects of literature from the 6th cent. AD, is not just a discursive work on literature as, let's say, Aristotle's *Poetics*; it is, much rather, a work with a most artistic diction (of parallel prose) as well as structure (symmetry according to the *Yin-Yang* pattern). Later on, particularly beginning with the Song period (10th – 13th cent.), we become a critical literature in the form of impressionistic remarks and aphorisms, so-called "poetry talks" (*shihua* 詩話). Most influential for the last millennium was a "poetry talk" from the Song-period by Yan Yu 嚴羽 (1180-1235): *Canglang's Poetry Talks* (*Canglang shihua* 滄浪詩話).

Traditional Chinese poetics and art theory – as found discussed in the above mentioned works – give weight to two seemingly contradictory notions: to naturalness (*ziran* 自然) and regularity (*fa* 法). The stunning aesthetic effect of this unity of opposites can best be observed and studied in the so-called "regular poems" (*liushi* 律詩), flourishing in the golden age of Chinese poetry, the Tang dynasty (6th-10th cent. AD). These poems have to follow a strict set of rules concerning length and number of lines, tone patterns, parallelism and the like. And yet, reading the works of not only the greatest poets of that time, such as Du Fu 杜甫, Li Bai 李白 or Wang Wei 王維, one gets a feeling of absolute naturalness and ease, recalling Goethe's dictum, that "true mastery only reveals itself in restriction" (In der Beschränkung zeigt sich erst der Meister). True, this preponderance of regularity also has its linguistic roots: The structure of the Chinese written language – single characters pronounced with a single syllable – lends itself supremely to neatly regular arrangements, parallelisms and such, unknown in this form in Western languages. But there are also ideological reasons for this feature, such as a Confucian predilection for regularity, or rather regular rites (*li* 禮), in the interpersonal conduct. Naturalism, on the other hand, is the domain of Daoism. And when the Chinese literary and art theorists, all through the ages, elaborated on the notion that a work of art both follows and transcends rules (*fa*), they drew their inspiration for this mostly from Daoist stories. In the Song-dynasty, for example, Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037-1101), the most

influential scholar-literatus for the last 800 years of imperial China in terms of aesthetics, invoked Daoist images of natural creativity when he compared his writing to

a thousand-gallon spring that issues forth without choosing a site. [...] There is no knowing how it will take shape. But there is one thing I am sure of; it always goes where it should go and stops where it should stop.³

In later periods, after Buddhism had taken a strong hold in Chinese society, particularly for the scholar-literati class in the Daoist inspired Chan 禪 (Zen-) Buddhist school, Buddhist concepts became major reference points in aesthetics. This also applies for the concept of *fa*. In Buddhism, *fa* is the Chinese rendering of the Sanskrit *Dharma* which here refers to the teaching of the Buddha (or truth resp. ultimate reality). Thus it is not surprising that in the 15th and 16th century, when the discussion on rules and methods (*fa*) in poetry and painting reached its height, we have constant reference to its Buddhist usage, requiring that the “*Dharma* of poetry”, i.e. its “methods” or “rules” (*fa*), be matched by “enlightenment” (*wu* 悟), thus leading in writing to an “intuitive mastery”⁴, the main goal in Chan-Buddhism. Hence basic concepts of Chan-Buddhism serve in an allegorical way as explanations for the central questions of Chinese aesthetics: the unity of regularity and naturalness.

Here the question arises, what kind of rules the poets or artists were to follow. Even the most ardent followers of rules, the so-called archaists who, flourishing in the Ming dynasty, looked up to the great masters of the past, were eager to point out that following rules or models did not mean following the models of ancient poets but following nature, because it was the rule of nature which the ancient poets followed, in the words of one of its main representative, Li Mengyang 李夢陽 (1475-1529):

Words must have methods and rules before they can fit and harmonize with musical laws, just as circles and squares must fit with compasses and rulers, which were not invented by them but really created by Nature. Now, when we imitate the ancients, we are not imitating them but really imitating the natural laws of things.⁵

³ Susan Bush, *The Chinese Literati on Painting*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1971, p. 35.

⁴ Richard John Lynn, "Orthodoxy and Enlightenment: Wang Shih-chen's Theory of Poetry and Its Antecedents", *The Unfolding of Neo-Confucianism*, Wm Theodore DeBary (ed.), New York 1975, p. 219.

⁵ R.J. Lynn, "Orthodoxy and Enlightenment", p. 232.

The concept of unity of naturalness and regularity – in terms of following the rules of nature – was further elaborated on by juxtaposing the notion of “living rules” (*huo fa* 活法) against that of “dead rules” (*si fa* 死法)⁶. In the Qing period, the literary critic Ye Xie 葉燮 (1627-1703) expressed his idea of “living rules” in the following text about the image of the clouds on Mt. Tai. They form their beautiful and natural structure just because they do not follow dead rules but the unfathomable living rules of nature.⁷

Within Heaven and Earth the greatest forms of *wen* [pattern/literature] are the wind and clouds, rains and the thunder. Their mutations and transformations cannot be fathomed and have neither limit nor boundary: they are the highest manifestation of spirit (*shen* 神) in the universe and the perfection of *wen*. But let me speak of them from one particular point of view. The clouds of Mount Tai rise from the merest wisp, but before the morning is done, they cover the world. I once lived half a year at the foot of Mount Tai and grew familiar with the shapes and attitudes of these clouds. Sometimes, as I said, they rise out of the merest wisp and stream off flooding all the ends of the earth; sometimes all the peaks of the range seem to try to rise above them, but even the very summits disappear. Sometimes several months will pass in continuous shadow, but then the clouds will scatter in the short hour of a meal. Sometimes they are as black as lacquer; sometimes as white as snow. They may be as huge as the wings of the Peng bird, hanging over both horizons, or as wild as tangled tresses. Sometimes they sit suspended like lumps in the sky with no others following them; sometimes they are continuous and fine, coming one after another without interruption.

All at once black clouds will mount upward, and the natives of the region will read the signs by established rule: “It will rain,” they say. And it does not rain. Then again some clouds, lit by the sun, will come out, and their established rule tells them, “It’s going to be sunny.” And it rains. The attitudes assumed by the clouds can be counted in the tens of thousands; no two are the same. Neither are any two manners of clouds the same by whose colours we might forecast their future movements. Sometimes all the clouds will come back; sometimes they will

⁶ See also Richard John Lynn, “The Sudden and the Gradual in Chinese Poetry Criticism: An Examination of the Ch’an-Poetry Analogy”, *Sudden and Gradual*, Peter Gregory (ed.), Honolulu 1987, p. 392.

⁷ An untranslatable part of this inspiring passage is the ambiguity of the important Chinese term *wen* 文 meaning both beautiful/regular pattern/structure and literature.

go off for good, and never come back. Sometimes all come back; sometimes half will come back - no two situations are the same. This is the natural pattern of Heaven and Earth, its perfect work.

But let us suppose that the pattern of Heaven and Earth could be set according to a rule. When Mount Tai was going to dispatch its clouds, it would first gather the troops of clouds and hold a conference with them: "I'm about to send you clouds out to make the Great Pattern of Heaven and Earth. Now you over there - I want you to go first - and you follow him. I would like you to rise up; you next to him - you sink down. You should try shining in the light, and you might try making a rippling motion. You back there! - You should turn around as you go out and come back in; and I think it would be especially nice to have you sort of roll over in the sky. This one is to begin; this one is to close; and this one here is to follow up the rear wagging its tail."

If the clouds were dispatched like this and brought back home like this, there would be no vitality in any of them. And if the pattern of the universe were made in this manner, then the universe would feel burdened by having a Mount Tai, and Mount Tai would feel burdened by having clouds, and no clouds would ever be sent out.⁸

This vivid image, better than any theory, illustrates the Chinese traditional aesthetic ideal of a great work of poetry or art: that of a living, organic pattern, not dependent on rules derived from "orthodox" models or periods but following the rules of nature. Such works come alive, creating their own rules, in each new period with each new poet-artist who is stirred by the world and its affairs. In painting, it was the influential unorthodox monk-painter Shitao 石濤 (1641–1717) who pinpointed this idea with his famous notion of "no-rule" being the "ultimate rule" (*wu fa er fa, nai wei zhi fa* 無法之法，乃為至法)⁹.

Regarding the way to achieve this ultimate state of natural creativity, it was understood from the earliest time that constant practice (*gongfu* 功夫) according to masterful models was the only means leading to mastery and perfection. This emerges already from a famous story in the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 (4th - 3rd cent. BC) which is central to Chinese aesthetics. It pictures a cook

⁸ Stephen Owen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1992, p. 509. See also K.-H. Pohl, "Ye Xie's *Yuan shi* - A Poetic of the Early Qing", *T'oung Pao*, LXXVIII (1992), p. 1-32.

⁹ Lin Yutang, *The Chinese Theory of Art*, New York 1967, p. 140.

who, transcending mere method, was able to wield his knife in an unfathomable, spiritual fashion because he had entered the *Dao*. However, as he also confesses, he had to practice cutting up oxen for a decade until he could reach this level of spirit-like mastery¹⁰. Hence, constant practice and copying led to an intuitive mastery over the artistic medium. Thus, the first ideal of traditional Chinese aesthetics is to achieve a degree of artistic perfection in the work of art which, when imbued with a “vital resonance” (*qiyun* 氣韻), makes it seem like a work of nature, and yet conveys a sense of spiritual mastery.

A second important notion in Chinese aesthetics is that of openness and suggestiveness. This also has a linguistic root: the syntactical indeterminacy or ambiguity of classical Chinese syntax, lending itself to openness and suggestiveness. In terms of aesthetics, the idea of suggestiveness found a lasting coinage in the dictum of the Tang poet and critic Sikong Tu 司空圖 (837-908) that poetry should convey “images beyond images”, and “scenes beyond scenes” (*xiang wai zhi xiang; jing wai zhi jing* 象外之象; 景外之景)¹¹. In terms of a philosophical background, we have here again Daoist roots, i.e., the notion that words cannot completely transmit ideas, let alone convey the ultimate truth or *Dao* 道.¹² In a way, this emphasis on suggestiveness – compounded by the syntactical indeterminacy or ambiguity of classical Chinese prose - lead to the predominance of poetic diction in Chinese writings of all kinds, rendering even philosophical discourse more poetical and suggestive rather than conceptual and rational. Also painting, which aimed at a depiction of “inner reality” (*zhen* 真) beyond “form” (*xing* 形), was supposed to have this suggestive, allusive, and finally poetic quality¹³ (with titles of paintings often being lines of poetry), leading to the well known feature of Chinese painting that the empty space (*xu* 虛) is more important, i.e., suggestively telling, than the painted substance (*shi* 實).

Let us now turn to the creator of art, to the poet and artist. In Chinese thought, we have the notion of “vital force” (*qi* 氣) which serves as the main category with which to discuss the

¹⁰ See Burton Watson (trans.), *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, New York 1968, p. 50f.

¹¹ Owen, p. 357. Maureen A. Robertson, “... To Convey what is Precious’: Ssu-k’ung T’u’s Poetics and the *Erh-shih-ssu shih-p’in*”, David Buxbaum and Frederick W. Mote (eds.), *Transition and Permanence. A Festschrift in Honor of Dr. Hsiao Kung-ch’üan*, Haon Kong 1972, p. 327ff. See also K.-H. Pohl, “Bilder jenseits der Bilder - Ein Streifzug durch die chinesische Ästhetik”, *China. Dimensionen der Geschichte*, Peter M. Kuhfus (ed.), Tübingen 1990, p. 232f.

¹² See the beginning of Laozi’s *Daodejing*: “The *Dao* that can be spoken of is not the eternal *Dao*.” (See note 28 further below.)

¹³ Lin Yutang, p. 63f.

creative power of a poet or artist. At first, “vital force” was taken to be an innate quality which could not be acquired. Over the centuries, the notion of the “vital force” of a person changed, however, ranging from an innate capacity to something which can be cultivated and acquired. Thus the rather dazzling notion of *qi* stands for both an innate talent as well as an acquired power of expression, being the first requirement of a poet-artist.

A second important requirement is the artist’s imaginative capacity. This indispensable faculty of a poet, called “spiritual thinking” (*shen si* 神思)¹⁴, was thought of bringing about a fusion of the artist’s mind with the outside world¹⁵. There is a well known image used by Su Shi describing this faculty most impressively in the capacity of his friend, the bamboo painter Wen Tong 文同, of having the “complete bamboo in his mind” before painting (*xiong zhong cheng zhu* 胸中成竹), or rather of actually becoming bamboo when painting bamboo.¹⁶

In summary, the above mentioned features – “living” rules, suggestiveness, creative power, and imaginative capacity - have led to notions such as unity of rule and no-rule, unity of concreteness and openness, fusion of scene (*jing* 景) and idea/feeling (*yi/qing* 意 / 情), and fusion of self with world or subject with object. Two more ideas need to be mentioned, though: First, the tendency to balance out complementary or opposite elements according to the well known and ubiquitous *Yin-Yang* 陰陽 pattern, that is uniting strong *and* weak, hard *and* soft, male *and* female etc. elements in a duality and not in contentious dualism. This balance is, for example, at the very heart of Chinese aesthetics: the unity of naturalness and regularity. It can also be observed in Chinese landscape painting, uniting mountains (the *yang*-element) with water (the *yin*-element) – hence its Chinese name as “mountain and water painting” (*shan-shui hua* 山水畫). Second, the importance of the calligraphic brushstroke: The black-white contrast of the calligraphic line with its dynamic movement was considered to have more aesthetic appeal than colours, which were not only considered rather static but also carried somewhat of a vulgar (*su* 俗) connotation. These notions can be singled out as the most important ideas in Chinese aesthetical thought.

¹⁴ See Liu Xie’s *Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (*Wenxin diaolong*), Owen, p. 201.

¹⁵ Owen, p. 202.

¹⁶ Lin Yutang, p. 92f., Bush, p. 38f.

II. Comparisons:

What are the similarities and differences between Chinese and Western aesthetics? In spite of the different styles of discourse we can find certain correspondences: Where the Chinese theorists emphasize adherence to rule, i.e. imitation of models, but ultimately transcending them in the concept of “living rule” or “enlightenment” (i.e., intuitive mastery), we have in Western thought the concept of *mimesis* as the imitation of nature in art. Aristotle, however, already propounded, just like Li Mengyang, one of the Chinese authors above, mentioned that *mimesis*, as artistic creation, is not the imitation of finished things in nature but imitation of the original creativity of nature. This thought is further elaborated in Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*¹⁷. The second part of this book (“Analysis of the Sublime”, paragraphs 45-49) is particularly rich in ideas which invite a comparison with the above sketched characteristics of Chinese aesthetics. § 45 in the *Critique of Judgement* begins with the following notion:

In a product of beautiful art, we must become conscious that it is art and not nature; but yet the purposiveness in its form must seem to be as free from all constraint of arbitrary rules as if it were a product of mere nature.

Thus, a work of art, though it “presupposes rules” (§ 46), must appear as being “free from all constraints of arbitrary rules”, so that in the end “it shows no trace of the rule having been before the eyes of the artist and having fettered his mental power” (§45). A work of art, according to Kant, is thus made according to the “rule of nature”.

Now the question arises, how does the rule of nature enter into the world of men, i.e. into the work of art? Nature needs a medium, which Kant calls “genius”; in Kant’s words: “Genius is the talent (or natural gift) which gives the rule to art. Since talent, as the innate productive faculty of the artist, belongs itself to nature, we may express the matter thus: Genius is the innate mental disposition (*Ingenium*) through which nature gives rule to art.” (§ 46)

For Kant, however, there are also so-called “scholastic” aspects in art which require adherence to rules. It is only the power of genius to transcend them, or, as it were, creating works which are and at the same time are not made according to rule, thus becoming models for the inspiration of others.

¹⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, transl., with an Introduction, by John H. Bernard, New York/London: Hafner Press, 1951.

Kant's "genius" finds its analogy in the Chinese concept of "vital force" (*qi*) as a disposition which transmits the vital power of nature into the mental and thus artistic realm. Su Shi's description of his creative force, his "thousand-gallon spring that issues forth without choosing a site", creating writing which is "like drifting clouds and flowing water, things which cannot be constrained by definite patterns and which go where they ought to go and stop where they ought to stop"¹⁸, very much fits this idea of genius through which nature gives rules to art. The work of art thus created, does not show any signs of conscious artistry and cannot be taught to others, notions that are found both in Western and Chinese aesthetic thought.¹⁹

In § 49, finally, while inquiring into the crucial property constituting beautiful art, Kant calls this property "spirit" (*Geist*). In an aesthetical meaning, Kant understands "spirit" to be "the animating principle of the mind", "what puts the mental powers purposively into swing". More concretely, the main faculty of the "spirit" is its ability of presenting "aesthetic ideas". Kant also understands aesthetic ideas – in contrast to rational ideas which are bound to concepts – to be "representations of the imagination". As such, they occasion "much thought, without, however, any definite thought, i.e. any concept, being capable of being adequate to it." This is to say that such thought cannot adequately be put in conceptual language; consequently, the faculty of creating aesthetic ideas manifests itself "in its entire strength" in the "art of the poet", because these aesthetic ideas – binding spirit with language – cannot be completely compassed and made intelligible by language.

These notions very much correspond with the mainstream of Chinese aesthetics. What Lu Ji and Liu Xie call *shen* (spirit) or *shen si* (spiritual thinking, i.e. imagination) appears to be the same faculty that Kant calls "spirit" (*Geist*): the power of creating "aesthetic ideas", "representations of the imagination". In their ineffable quality, beyond the possibility of being expressed in conceptual language, they correspond to the quality of poetry which is to be found "beyond language" (*yan wai* 言外). This has been, since the *Book of Songs* (*Shijing* 詩經), a constant theme in classical Chinese poetic theory; it found lasting expression in Sikong Tu's mentioned metaphors as well as in Yan Yu's *Canglang's Remarks on Poetry* (*Canglang shihua*). Later theorists, such as Wang Fuzhi 王夫之 (1619-1692), have called this quality the

¹⁸ See note 3.

¹⁹ See, for example, the parable of the wheelwright in *Zhuangzi* who cannot teach the spiritual mastery of his craft to his son. Watson, p. 152.

merging of “thought” (*yi* 意) with “setting” (*jing* 境) or “feeling” (*qing* 情) with “landscape” (*jing* 景)²⁰. Today, this idea is expressed with the word *yijing* 意境 (roughly “artistic idea”)²¹. Hence it would not be far fetched to see a direct correspondence between this popular but illusive Chinese term to Kant’s “aesthetic idea”.

So much for some of the similarities. What about the differences? Since Kant, there has been a strong emphasis on originality in Western aesthetics. Regarding the qualities of the genius, for example, Kant summarizes (§ 46): (1) “Originality must be its first property.” (2) “Its products must be models, i.e. *exemplary*, and they consequently ought not to spring from imitation, but must serve as a standard or rule of judgement for others.” (3) “It gives the rules just as nature does.” This means, that the work of art shows no indication of how it is brought about, and there is also no possibility to communicate to others devices or precepts “that will enable them to produce similar products.”

This notion of originality does not find much correspondence in Chinese thought²². For Western art, however, particularly for the period of romanticism and thereafter, i.e. the modern period, this emphasis has had far reaching consequences, becoming the dominant characteristic of a work of art. In contrast, Chinese aesthetics places more emphasis on mastery or perfection (*gong* 工), both through orientation on past models and natural creativity. The two respective features of Western and Chinese aesthetics - originality and perfection - do not only mark the strong-points but also stand for the weaknesses of Western and Chinese art: In the West, the emphasis on originality has led to the conceptualization of art, to the loss of its truly artistic features. In China, on the other hand, the insistence on perfection has led to too much orientation on past models and therefore stagnation.

Let us finally compare not the content, the ideas, but the form of discourse on art in the West and in China. The Western way, with Kant’s or Hegel’s writing being typical for the Western approach in general, is highly analytical, at the same time very systematic, creating a complex system of thought. This, no doubt, is its strength, but, considering its sometimes wound and

²⁰ Owen, p. 472-478.

²¹ Used by Wang Guowei (1877-1927) in his influential work *Remarks on Lyriks in the World of Men (Renjian cihua)*. See further below.

²² With the exception, perhaps, of the writers of the so called Gongan school, a movement towards greater self-expression in literature at the end of the Ming Dynasty, led by the writer Yuan Hongdao (1568-1610) and his two brothers; see James Y. Liu, *Chinese Theories of Literature*, Chicago 1975, p. 79ff.

indigestible language, is also its weakness. The Chinese discourse, on the contrary, is unsystematic, suggestive, indeed poetic. The description above of the clouds on Mt. Tai exemplifies this metaphorical rather than conceptual approach to aesthetic questions. Seen from the Western perspective with its tradition of defining its terms, the poetic ambiguity of the Chinese approach appears to be a weakness. Put in the categories used above, we could say, the Western systematic discourse is “with rules” (*you fa* 有法), whereas the ambiguous, suggestive Chinese discourse is “without rule” (*wu fa* 無法). Considering, however, that the topic of this discourse is art - poetry, painting or calligraphy - and that it is expressed by poets and artists (not philosophers!), “without rule” might as well be understood in Shitao’s terms as the “ultimate rule” (*zhi fa* 至法), that is, as the adequate type of discourse for the topic of art. In comparison to this, the Western scientific and analytical approach appears detrimental to art, killing its spirit with its discursive style. Possibly also for this reason, aesthetics in the West appears to have become a subject with a purely academic interest. It does not seem to be a vital, intellectually inspiring tradition anymore. Today, the general reading public does not care about aesthetics at all; an “aesthetic fever”, as occurred in China during the eighties, would be unthinkable in the West.

Traditional Chinese aesthetics, thus, constitutes an entirely different world of art in comparison to the Western tradition (although there are certainly overlapping elements). It is no wonder, then, that these characteristics were understood by the Chinese themselves as the most sublime features of Chinese culture. These features served, well into the modern period, as fundamental elements of a Chinese cultural identity. Hence, in their monumental (though not completed) *History of Chinese Aesthetics* (*Zhongguo meixue shi* 中國美學史), Li Zehou 李澤后 and Liu Gangji 劉綱紀 marked as the last and most important characteristic of traditional Chinese aesthetics the idea that an “aesthetic consciousness” (*shenmei jingjie* 審美境界) was regarded as the “highest and noblest consciousness to be attained in life”.²³

III. Aesthetics in modern China – Encounters with Western Thought

Let us also look briefly into the history of Chinese aesthetics in the modern period. The encounter with Western thought, on the one hand, brought the Chinese a wealth of

²³ Li Zehou and Liu Gangji, *Zhongguo meixueshi* (History of Chinese Aesthetics), I, Beijing: Xinhua, 1984, p. 33f.

fascinatingly new ideas; it allowed them, on the other, to look for familiar concepts which could be aligned with their own tradition, and here aesthetics assumed a paramount position. The president of the Peking University during the May Fourth period, Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 (1868-1940), was one of the first to formulate the idea of a cultural-aesthetic self-understanding of the Chinese. Through his studies in Germany he was familiar with occidental philosophy, particularly with Kant. He regarded Westerners to be largely shaped by religion, whereas for China he held aesthetics (a combination of ritual, art and ethics) to be the functional “spiritual” equivalent to religion in the West. For this reason he demanded for modern China “aesthetic education in the place of religion”.²⁴ As it was popular among culturally conservative intellectuals at this time²⁵ to posit a Chinese “spiritual” against a Western “materialistic” culture, the affirmation of “spiritual” aspects in Chinese aesthetics added to this understanding of Chinese culture.

A famous scholar, Wang Guowei 王國維 (1877-1927), represents the early encounter of Chinese with European ideas. He coined basic aesthetic concepts for the 20th century such as *jingjie* 境界 (“aesthetic state or consciousness”) or *yijing* 意境 (“aesthetic idea”)²⁶ to denote a perfect aesthetic fusion of artistic idea (or feeling) with a concrete scene. Wang first used the term *jingjie* only with regards to poetry and without any theoretical explanation; but this term (as the above quote by Li Zehou and Liu Gangji illustrates) soon gained a general aesthetic meaning, signifying both an aesthetic idea as well as a most sublime state of mind. Wang Guowei derived his concepts from Chinese tradition (using Buddhist vocabulary), but they are also imbued with meaning that he found in Kant and Schopenhauer (Kant’s “aesthetic idea”); hence, they represent early intercultural exchanges of thought between China and the West.

²⁴ Liu Gangji, “Verbreitung und Einfluss der deutschen Ästhetik in China”, K.-H. Pohl (ed.), *Trierer Beiträge. Aus Forschung und Lehre an der Universität Trier*, July 1996 (Sonderheft 10), pp. 8-13.

²⁵ Particularly influential was Liang Shuming and his book *Dong xi wenhua ji qi zhexue* (Eastern and Western Cultures and Their Philosophies), published in 1922.

²⁶ Adele Rickett, *Wang Kuo-wei's Jen-chien Tz'u-hua hua – A Study in Chinese Literary Criticism*, Hongkong: Hong Kong University Press, 1977, p. 23ff, and Hermann Kogelschatz, *Wang Kuo-wei und Schopenhauer: Eine philosophische Begegnung – Wandlung des Selbstverständnisses der chinesischen Literatur unter dem Einfluß der klassischen deutschen Ästhetik*, Wiesbaden: Steiner 1986, p. 245ff.

In his article, “The Spreading and Influence of German Aesthetics in China”,²⁷ Liu Gangji showed that modern Chinese aesthetics has been largely formed by dealing with the German tradition of aesthetics. Because of the enormous problems of translation, this tradition of aesthetics – from German idealism to Marx and Heidegger - was received in China with a phase shift of about 100 to 150 years. Due to this background, it is not surprising that the discourse of Chinese aesthetics of the 20th century was largely shaped by the categories and questions of German philosophy of the 18th and 19th century. The rather rigid reception of Marxism only reinforced this tendency. This fixation also explains the Chinese translation of the Western term “aesthetics” – “study of beauty” or “beautology”, if we want to re-translate the Chinese term *meixue* 美學 back into English. This translation is for China somewhat misleading, if not unfortunate, as the category of the “beautiful” – neither in the form of natural nor as artistic beauty – played a significant role in traditional China. In early Confucian scriptures, the character *mei* 美 (beautiful) was used almost synonymously with “moral goodness” (*shan* 善) without further differentiation or emphasis on a category of beauty. Apart from this connotation, Confucian discourse on literature and art seems to have slighted formal beauty, deeming it, as outward ornament, less valuable than the substantial ethical or moral content. For Daoist writers, the recognition of beauty only led to the notion of ugliness, as *Laozi* 老子, chapter 2, succinctly states: “When everyone in the world knows the beautiful as beautiful, ugliness comes into being.”²⁸ In Chinese literary theory and art philosophy “beauty”, thus, used to carry more a negative, if not a vulgar (*su* 俗) connotation. More important in terms of aesthetic “categories” were attributes such as “harmonious/balanced” (*he* 和), or “natural/spontaneous” (*ziran* 自然). As already mentioned, a work of art should not imitate reality or nature, but should convey a sense of natural creativity; apart from this, it should have a poetic or self-transcending suggestive effect on the viewer or reader.

The modern Chinese aestheticians frantic search for beauty in their own tradition thus appears in many ways like a voyage into the wrong direction which however, as is not unusual with such voyages, also let them discover unknown and interesting territory, such as a few parallels between Chinese and Western aesthetics, some of which having been mentioned before. Also

²⁷ See note 23.

²⁸ Lao-tzu: *Te-tao Ching. A New translation Based on the recently Discovered Ma-wang-tui Texts*, transl. Robert G. Henricks, New York 1989, p. 54.

worth noting is the creative appropriation of Marxist aesthetics in China, an accomplishment which could be stimulating in Marx' own cultural hemisphere, if anyone would only take note of it. What would be needed is simply to get a dialogue started on these issues.

IV. Final Remarks:

Around the world we now have Western priorities everywhere we look, also in arts and aesthetics. According to these standards, art has to be conceptionally innovative, it has to serve a liberating function or should, at least, be politically critical – not to mention the “achievements” brought about by Dadaism and such. In contrast to these tendencies we have a – largely extinct – Chinese tradition with different priorities. There, a work of art, first of all, should possess suggestive poetic qualities – an enriching capacity beyond the actual work (painting or poetry). Also, an artist ought to have “perfect intuitive control of the artistic medium” through long and arduous practice (as in Chinese calligraphy), only then will he be able to create great works of art with a “spiritual” impact. The majority of Chinese artists – in and out of China – follow the Western trend, consciously or unconsciously.²⁹ But Western style modernity is only the continuation of a long *local* cultural tradition; and just as Western modernity is unthinkable without a constant re-engagement with its own long history and tradition so, too, is there a possibility that China, on her way into global modernity, might also become more aware of her cultural tradition as an object of active engagement. Because of the increasing Western interest, the rediscovery of her tradition might even serve as a means for further cultural and artistic exchange. There is already an over hundred year long history of stimulation of Western artists by East Asian art (from Art Nouveau in the 19th century up to Mark Tobey and others in the 20th). The encounter of cultures has not just begun in the last decade, it has only gained a new dimension in the age of globalization. It has to be seen how artists will arrange themselves in their moves between different cultures and traditions (as well as in their gaining multiple identities). And thus only time will tell to which hybrid forms of art – and of aesthetics – this will lead to: if there will be great works of art resulting from this fusion, and whether or not the rich Chinese artistic and aesthetic tradition will still play a significant part in this encounter.

²⁹ The predominance of installations over paintings also illustrates this tendency.