

Chinese Aesthetics and Kant

Karl-Heinz Pohl, Trier

Since the reception of Western aesthetics in China at the beginning of this century, the modern Chinese aesthetic discourse appears to be taking place purely in Western terms and categories. According to the main trend of Western aesthetics from Plato to Marx, the focus is on the category of beauty, hence the Chinese modern term *meixue* - 'beautology', if we would try to re-translate the term back into English. With the adoption of Marxism as the fundamental and all encompassing new Western ideology in China, this trend towards Western discourse, although of the 19th century, has only reached a further height. China, however, with its long and continuous civilization, can look back upon an equally long evolution of aesthetic thought and reflection, apparently with a different focus, that of inquiring predominantly into the nature of artistic creativity and the artistic qualities of a work of art.

When we examine the names for our discipline in English and Chinese, we find out that, ironically, both the Western and the Chinese names are misleading: From its Greek etymological roots, the Western term 'aesthetics' means 'theory of sensual/sensational - as opposed to mental - perception', in reality it stood (and still stands), however, for 'theory of beauty'. The Chinese term *meixue* might fit regarding the mainstream of Western 'aesthetics' as 'theory of beauty', but it does not when applied to traditional Chinese thought on art in which the category 'beauty' did not play a significant role. In early Confucian scriptures, the character *mei* (beautiful) was used almost synonymously with 'moral goodness' (*shan*) - such as in *meiren* (beautiful person) understood as *shanren* (good person) - 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*, chapter 2, succinctly states: "When everyone in the world knows the beautiful as beautiful, ugliness comes into being."¹ Particularly after the "Classical Prose" (*guwen*) movement, initiated by Han Yu (768-824) in

¹ 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.

the Tang Dynasty,² elegance or beauty (most often expressed in the many synonyms of *mei*, such as *hua*, *li*, *yan*, *zi*) in literature and art became close to the notion of vulgarity (*su*) and thus carried more negative rather than positive associations³.

In the following, we have to leave aside, though, such ironic twists of name giving, as the term *meixue* is established now also for traditional Chinese aesthetics, meaning roughly the theory or philosophy of art (*wenyi lilun*). The importance of aesthetics in China in this sense of the word is highlighted by the fact, that Professors Liu Gangji and Li Zehou, while listing a few basic characteristics of Chinese aesthetic thought in their classic and standard *History of Chinese Aesthetics (Zhongguo meixue shi)*, mark as the 6th and final characteristic, that for the Chinese, an "aesthetic consciousness is the highest consciousness to be attained in human life" (*yi shenmei jingjie wei rensheng de zui gao jingjie*). Seen from this point of view, it appears only natural that, confronted with Western thought, modern Chinese thinkers like Cai Yuanpei (1868-1940) proposed the idea that aesthetics should play in China the role which religion played in the West. Also, the 'aesthetic fever' (*meixue re*) that broke out in China during the eighties can be understood from this eminent role that aesthetics played in the history of Chinese ideas.

In the following, I shall first discuss a few central notions in the history of Chinese aesthetics, then compare them to very similar ideas which Kant discussed in his *Critique of Judgment*, and finally attempt to highlight the differences and draw some conclusions. My first part on Chinese aesthetics will fall into two sections, one on the nature of the work of art itself, and one on the nature of the artist.

*

Traditional Chinese poetics and art theory give weight to two seemingly contradictory notions: to naturalness (*ziran*) and regularity (*fa*). Central to this topic is the question of rule/method (*fa*) in poetry and art. As all literature and art has a relationship to philosophy and language, the discussion on the role of *fa*, beginning in the Song period (960-1279), but

² A movement that advocated the unadorned style of the Confucian classics, thereby - in the face of prevailing Daoist and Buddhist thought - also advocating a return to the Confucian ideas.

³ See for example Han Yu's verdict on Wang Xizhi's (321-379) calligraphy in his "Song of the Stone Drums": "Wang Xizhi's vulgar handwriting with its charming [*zimèi*] style ..." Cf. Li Zehou, *The Path of Beauty. A Study of Chinese Aesthetics*, Transl. Song Lizeng, Oxford 1994, p. 151.

particularly virulent in Ming (1368-1644) and Qing times(1644-1911), has both ideological and linguistic roots. In the sense of observance of man-made regulations and restrictions, the ideological root of *fa* goes back to the pre-Qin (7th - 3rd cent. B.C.) school of Legalism (*fajia*). In Confucian thinking, the notion of rule, however, is eminent as well, albeit in the context of observance of etiquette and rites (*lijiao*). For the ancient Chinese thinkers, *fa*, however, meant more than man-made laws, but stood for the cosmic order. In *Guanzi*, a text from pre-Qin times, which has both Confucian and Legalistic bends, it says:

That the four seasons do not change, that the stars do not alter in their course, that there is day and night, shadow and light with the shining of sun and moon, that is rule (*fa*).⁴

This notion is close to the Daoistic point of view, in which *fa*, likewise, stands for the law of nature, the order of the universe and nature itself - as it says in the *Daodejing* (25): "The Way models (*fa*) itself to that which is so on its own" (*Dao fa ziran*)⁵. Also in Buddhism, *fa* (*Dharma*) has this double connotation, both as the teaching of the Buddha or truth and as the ultimate reality. Thus it is not surprising that in Ming and Qing times, when the discussion on *fa* reached its height, we have constant reference to its Buddhist usage, requiring that *fa* be matched by 'enlightenment' (*wu*), that is 'intuitive mastery'⁶, the main goal in Chan-Buddhism, thus implying regularity and at the same time naturalness.

Regarding the linguistic roots to this double notion of naturalness and regularity in Chinese literature, we have, on the one hand, the structure of the Chinese written and spoken language - single characters pronounced with a single syllable - which lends itself supremely to regular arrangements such as parallelism (*dui'ou*), regulated poems (*lüshi*), parallel prose (*pianwen*) and the 'eight legged essay' (*baguwen*). On the other hand, there is the syntactical indeterminacy or ambiguity of classical Chinese syntax, which lends itself to openness and suggestiveness, rendering even philosophical discourse more poetical and suggestive rather than conceptual and rational.

Be that as it may, Chinese literary and art theorists have elaborated on the notion that a work of art both follows and transcends rules. Inspiration for this they drew mostly from

⁴ *Xinbian zhuzi jicheng* V, Taipei 1983, S. 254.

⁵ Lao-tzu, p. 77.

⁶ 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.

Daoist stories in the *Zhuangzi* (4th cent. B.C.)⁷. It the Song dynasty, for example, it was Su Shi (1037-1101) who 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"⁸. Others, such as Lü Benzhong (fl. 1119 A.D.), first spoke of 'living rules' (*huo fa*) as opposed to 'dead rules' (*si fa*)⁹. In the Ming period, archaists (*fugupai*), such as Li Mengyang (1475-1529), pointed out that following rules or models does not mean following the models of ancient poets but following nature, because it was nature which the ancient poets followed:

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.¹⁰

In the Qing period, it was Ye Xie (1627-1703) who further elaborated on the notion of 'living rules', giving us the image of the clouds on Mt. Tai, which form their beautiful and natural structure just because they do not follow dead rules but the unfathomable rules of nature.¹¹ In painting, it was the monk Shitao who pinpointed this idea with his notion of 'no-rule' (*wu fa*) being the 'ultimate rule' (*wu fa er fa, nai wei zhi fa*)¹².

Regarding the way to achieving this ultimate state of natural creativity, it was clear that constant practice (*gongfu*) according to masterful models was the only means. This emerges already from the story of Cook Ding in the *Zhuangzi* who had to practice cutting up oxen for a decade until he could wield his knife in a spiritual fashion¹³. Thus, constant practice and copying lead to an intuitive mastery over the artistic medium. We have similar stories

⁷ See, for example, the story of "Cook Ding" in Burton Watson (trans.), *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, New York 1968, p. 50f.

⁸ Susan Bush, *The Chinese Literati on Painting*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1971, p. 35.

⁹ 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, S. 392.

¹⁰ R.J. Lynn "Orthodoxy and Enlightenment", p. 232.

¹¹ 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.

¹² Lin Yutang, *The Chinese Theory of Art*, New York 1967, p. 140.

¹³ See note 7 above.

about the calligrapher Wang Xizhi using up a whole pool of water for washing the ink out of his pen until he could reach his spirit-like mastery of calligraphy, making it seem like a work of art modelled after the work of nature. This is thus the first ideal of traditional Chinese aesthetics: achieving a degree of artistic perfection in the work of art which made it seem like a work of nature, and yet conveying a sense of spiritual mastery.

A second important notion in Chinese aesthetics is that of openness and suggestiveness as proposed by Sikong Tu (837-908) in his ideas of 'meaning beyond flavour' (*wei wai zhi zhi*) 'images beyond images', and 'scenes beyond scenes' (*xiang wai zhi xiang, jing wai zhi jing*)¹⁴. Here again we have Daoist roots to this notion, such as the saying in the "Great Commentary" (*Xici zhuan*, I.12) to the *Classic of Changes* (*Yijing*), that words cannot completely convey ideas (*yan bu jin yi*)¹⁵, the beginning of the *Daodejing* ("The *Dao* that can be spoken of is not the eternal *Dao*."), or the parable in the *Zhuangzi* comparing ideas to words like fishes to fish-traps (once the fish is caught, the trap can be forgotten; once the meaning is grasped, words are not needed anymore)¹⁶. In a strictly literary sense, Sikong Tu's ideas are prefigured in the notion of 'association' (*xing*), the suggestive poetic evocation on the basis of a concrete image of nature, as one of the basic principles of poetry in the "Great Preface to the *Book of Songs*" (*Shi da xu*)¹⁷. In a way, this emphasis on suggestiveness lead to the predominance of poetic diction in Chinese writings of all kinds. Also painting, which aimed at a depiction of 'inner reality' (*zhen*) beyond 'form' (*xing*), was supposed to have this suggestive, allusive, and finally poetic quality¹⁸.

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*) which serves as the main category with which to discuss the creative power of a poet or artist. This begins with Cao Pi's dictum: "In literature, the most

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ "Writing does not exhaust words, and words do not exhaust ideas." R. J. Lynn, (transl.) *The Classic of Changes. A New Translation of the I Ching as Interpreted by Wang Bi*, New York 1994, p. 67.

¹⁶ Watson, p. 302.

¹⁷ James J.Y. Liu, *Chinese Theories of Literature*, Chicago 1975, p. 109f.

¹⁸ Lin Yutang, p. 63f.

important thing is vital force" (*wen yi qi wei zhu*)¹⁹. He takes 'vital force' to be an innate quality which cannot be acquired. As Guo Shaoyu has shown, the notion of the 'vital force' of a person has changed over the centuries, ranging from an innate capacity to something which can be cultivated and acquired. When Ye Xie talks in his "The Origins of Poetry" (*Yuan shi*) about the 'personal factors' (*zai wo zhe*) of a poet, he mentions four qualities: judgment (*shi*), talent (*cai*), courage (*dan*), and force (*li*)²⁰. Ye Xie's analysis of the psychology of a writer, i.e. his four qualities, comes pretty close to what the traditional and rather illusive notion of *qi* stands for: both an innate as well as an acquired power of expression, being the first requirement of a poet-artist.

The second most important requirement is the artist's imaginative capacity. This indispensable faculty of a poet has been most eloquently evoked in Lu Ji's (261-303) "Prose-Poem on Literature" (*Wenfu*), in which he depicts the spirit of the poet roaming the limits of the universe²¹, as well as in the chapter on "Spiritual Thinking" (*shen si*) in Liu Xie's *Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (*Wenxin diaolong*)²². This capacity can bring about the above mentioned fusion of the artist's mind with the outside world (*shen yu wu you*)²³. Su Shi and his brother Su Che most impressively described this faculty in the bamboo painter's Wen Tong having the 'complete bamboo in his mind' (*xiong zhong cheng zhu*) or rather of actually becoming bamboo when painting bamboo.²⁴

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*) and idea/feeling (*yi/qing*), and fusion of self with world or subject with object. They can be singled out as the most important ideas in Chinese aesthetical thought.

*

¹⁹ James Liu, p. 10-12, 70-72. Owen, p. 65.

²⁰ Owen, p. 512.

²¹ Owen, P. 87.

²² Owen, p. 201.

²³ Owen, p. 202.

²⁴ Lin Yutang, p. 92f., Bush, p. 38f.

Let us now turn to Kant's *Critique of Judgement*²⁵. 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. Before we begin, however, we have to keep in mind, that Kant's last one of the three great critiques is a work of philosophy and not of literature or art criticism. Backing up his two former critiques on the problems of cognition and practice, Kant is interested in the *a priori* principles which lay at the basis of aesthetical judgment, of taste and feeling. For this reason, the parts inviting a comparison to the above mentioned traits of Chinese aesthetics do not constitute the focus of his reasoning, but somehow pop up as side arguments. On top of this, Kant's style of endlessly long and wounded sentences is notoriously dense and hard to digest - if not, as J. H. Bernhard, his English translator, calls it - "repulsive", letting one wonder how it will read in a Chinese translation.

§ 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) As to the qualities of this genius, Kant summarizes: (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

²⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, transl., with an Introduction, by John H. Bernard, New York/London 1951.

precepts "that will enable them to produce similar products." (4) The term genius applies only to objects of beautiful art (not mechanical art or sciences).

In § 47, Kant sets off his notion of the genius against a so-called "spirit of imitation" (*Nachahmungsgeist*) to which it is "entirely opposed". The "spirit of imitation" is required for learning, but, as art is not like science, by applying rules "we cannot learn to write spirited poetry". And yet, through the medium of the genius, nature conveys rules to the work of art. How can a student of art learn from them? The rules come down to us through those works of beautiful art which serve as models, because they contain the "ideas" or "mental powers" of the genius. These models are "not to be copied, but to be imitated". Kant admits, much to his modern readers' comfort, "how this is possible is hard to explain". And yet he tries to explain this difficulty by distinguishing between mechanical and beautiful art, "the first being a mere art of industry and learning and the second of genius"; interestingly, "there is no beautiful art in which there is not a mechanical element". These mechanical elements "can be comprehended by rules and followed accordingly". Regarding this aspect of beautiful art, there are then "definite rules from which we cannot dispense ourselves", and it is only "shallow heads" who "believe that they cannot better show themselves to be full-blown geniuses than by throwing off the constraint of all rules". Hence models and rules, to a certain extent, are requisite. This is what he calls the "scholastic" aspect (*Schulgerechtes*) which forms an "essential condition" to art.

§ 49, finally, elaborates on the "faculties of the mind (*Gemüt*) that constitute genius" which are for him "imagination and understanding". Inquiring into the crucial property constituting beautiful art, he calls this property "spirit" (*Geist*). In this aesthetical sense, Kant understands "spirit" to be "the animating principle of the mind", "what puts the mental powers purposively into swing". The main faculty of the "spirit" is its ability of presenting "aesthetic ideas". Kant 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.

The mental faculty of the genius (his spirit), finally, allows him to harmonize between the intuitive and cognitive powers, between imagination and understanding, creating aesthetic ideas which "quicken the cognitive powers and therefore also indirectly cognition". The

talent, called "spirit", is "to express the ineffable element in the state of mind implied by a certain representation and to make it universally communicable - [...] this requires a faculty of seizing the quickly passing play of imagination and of unifying it in a concept [...] that can be communicated without any constraint of rules".

*

It will suffice to stop here in reviewing Kant's ideas for a short comparison with Chinese aesthetics. In spite of the different style 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, that *mimesis*, as artistic creation, is not the imitation of finished things in nature but imitation of the original creativity of nature (*physis*). This thought is further elaborated by Kant as art being the product of genius through which "nature gives rules to the work of art". But, as we saw, there are also for Kant "mechanical" or "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.

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"²⁶, very much fits Kant's 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. Here Kant's idea directly corresponds to the parable of the wheelwright in *Zhuangzi* who, likewise, cannot teach the spiritual mastery of his craft to his son²⁷. What also comes to mind is Yan Yu's (12th-13th cent.) requirement of the perfect poem which, so his

²⁶ See note 8.

²⁷ Watson, p. 152.

famous image of the "antelope that hangs by its horns, leaving no tracks to be followed"²⁸, does not reveal any traces of conscious craft. Su Shi has put this quality in a famous verse: "Poetry and painting are based on the same rule, / Like the work of nature clear and fresh" (*Shi tu ben yi lü, tian gong yu qing xin*)²⁹.

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 'beyond language' (*yan wai*) which has, since the *Book of Songs* (*Shijing*) been a constant in classical Chinese poetic theory and which found lasting expression in Sikong Tu's mentioned metaphors as well as in Yan Yu's *Canglang's Remarks on Poetry* (*Canglang shihua*)³⁰. Later theorists, such as Wang Fuzhi (1619-1692), have called this quality the merging of 'thought' (*yi*) with 'setting' (*jing*) or feeling (*qing*) with landscape (*jing*)³¹. Hence it would not be far fetched to see a direct correspondence between the popular but illusive Chinese term *yijing* (roughly 'artistic idea')³² to Kant's "aesthetic idea".

So much for the similarities. What about the differences? Regarding the beautiful art of genius, Kant emphasizes the aspect of originality. This does not find much correspondence in Chinese thought (with the exception, perhaps, of the writers of the so called Gong'an school³³). For Western art, however, particularly for the romantic and post-romantic, i.e. 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 perfection (*gong*), 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

²⁸ In his important work "Canglang's Remarks on Poetry", Owen, p. 406.

²⁹ Bush, p. 26.

³⁰ See note 28.

³¹ Owen, p. 472-478.

³² Used by Wang Guowei (1877-1927) in his influential work *Remarks on Lyriks in the World of Men* (*Renjian cihua*).

³³ 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 Liu, p. 79ff.

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 (Kant) and in China. Kant's approach, so 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 "repulsive" style, its wounded and indigestible language, is also its weakness. The Chinese discourse, on the contrary, is unsystematic, suggestive, indeed poetic. 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 at the beginning of this paper, we could say, the Western systematic discourse is 'with rules' (*you fa*), whereas the ambiguous, suggestive Chinese discourse is 'without rule' (*wu fa*). 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*), 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 "repulsive" 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.

For this reason the question arises, if the Chinese - in terms of aesthetics - might not be better off pursuing their own long and illustrious tradition of artistic or poetically suggestive discourse on art rather than following tediously the Western approach. Sure enough, particularly in a phase of cultural re-orientation, China needs the opening up, the critical discussion of Western theory and the inter-cultural dialogue with the West. But what if modern Chinese aesthetics, although adopting the Western terminology and categories, does not partake in the Western discussion on aesthetics? What if the West, as it seems, does not take note of modern Chinese aesthetics, at all? The West has, at least to a certain extent and mainly through the effort of Sinologists, taken note of traditional Chinese aesthetics, because this forms a distinctive tradition of thought, of artists and poets talking about their art with much fascinating reference to Daoist, Buddhist, or Confucian philosophy, which a Western audience might find stimulating and inviting for an inter-cultural dialogue. But it seems to me that the West is still waiting for a modern Chinese aesthetics with a culturally

distinct Chinese flavour, i.e. a modern Chinese aesthetics which is able not just to adopt but also to challenge Western theoretical positions (including that of Marxism).

But possibly this is only wishful thinking by someone who views with nostalgic feelings great traditions disappearing in the modern world. If we look at the state of art today, it is a long cry from the ideals held by Kant or the traditional Chinese thinkers on art. Thanks to the emphasis on originality, we have a situation today in which anything can go or rather sell as art, if only it is new. The rules or "scholastic" elements that also Kant still required, have completely been dispensed with. In Kant's terms, today's art predominantly would count as art of "shallow heads". On top of it, in the field of aesthetics, at least in the West, nobody talks anymore concerning a work of art in the category of 'beauty', that is, as a harmonious work conveying a sense of unity. Instead we have the aesthetics of the ugly, the dissonant, the vulgar, and more. Seen from this perspective, I would propose to modern Chinese aestheticians, at least if they entertain the ambition of partaking in the modern Western academic discourse on aesthetics, to choose another name for their discipline. As pointed out already at the beginning, the term *meixue* does not fit for the classical Chinese tradition, since the category of 'beauty' hardly played a role there. It might fit for the Western discourse till the end of the 19th century. Considering, however, as we are moving into the 21th century, the above mentioned trend in modern Western art and aesthetics (mind you again, the Western term 'aesthetics' means 'sensual perception', not beauty), a discussion in Chinese on the 'beautology' (*meixue*) of the ugly would sound like a contradiction in terms.