Modernization of Beauty in China: From the "Great Debate on Aesthetics" to the "Aesthetic Fever" and Beyond[1]

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Abstract

The article explores the socio-political and historical development of the great debate on aesthetics and the aesthetic fever in China during the 20th century. It introduces the main figures of the aesthetic movement and their aesthetic theories. It introduces the period of appropriation of the aesthetic debates to Marxist ideology that prevailed in China after 1949 and lasted until the end of 1970s. The 1980s and 1990s represent a shift in the Chinese aesthetic debate which focused on the adoption of Western aesthetic concepts and paradigms in a more scientific way. The article tackles the problem of Chinese society on the verge of the millennium, and problematizes the consumerism of art and attitudes towards aesthetics in general.

Keywords: great debate on aesthetics in China, the aesthetic fever, the aesthetization of everyday life

Modernizacija lepote na Kitajskem: od »velike razprave o estetiki« do »estetske vročice« in naprej

Izvleček

Članek raziskuje družbeno-politični in zgodovinski razvoj velike razprave o estetiki in estetski vročici na Kitajskem v 20. stoletju. Predstavi glavne osebnosti estetskega gibanja in njihove estetske teorije. Obravnava obdobje prilagajanja estetskih razprav marksistični ideologiji, ki je na Kitajskem prevladovala po letu 1949 in trajala do konca sedemdesetih let. Osemdeseta in devetdeseta leta pomenijo premik v kitajski estetski razpravi, ki se je na znanstven način osredotočila na prevzemanje zahodnih estetskih konceptov in paradigem.

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Članek se loteva problema kitajske družbe na prelomu tisočletja ter problematizira potrošništvo umetnosti in odnos do estetike nasploh.

Ključne besede: velika razprava o estetiki na Kitajskem, estetska vročica, estetizacija vsakdanjega življenja

Introduction

The development of aesthetic theory in China at the beginning of the 20th century was characterized by the multifaceted adoption of Western ideas and thought, with aesthetics playing an extremely important role as an academic discipline. On the one hand, aesthetic theory was an academic field free from political encumbrances; on the other, the philosophy of art, as part of aesthetics, provided a platform for a recognition and reassessment of China's long and rich cultural heritage. It is therefore by no means coincidental that in the last two decades of the 20th century, which were marked by economic, cultural and to a certain level also political liberalization, led to numerous heated debates about Chinese aesthetics.

In the 1980s, these discourses blossomed under the fashionable label "aesthetic fever", which represented a kind of ideological liberation movement that could also be called an enlightenment or renaissance in China (Li and Cauvel 2006, 23).

In order to better understand the socio-political context in which aesthetics emerged as an academic discipline, we will therefore first briefly present the principal stages of development that led to the Chinese "aesthetic fever" and point out its later implications.

The Birth of Aesthetics as an Academic Discipline

Chinese aesthetics as an academic discipline started to form at the beginning of the 20th century. While Confucianism (and traditionalism in general)—together with all the conservative ideologies it brought along—was completely rejected and discredited as a result of the May Fourth Movement,[2] many Chinese

2 I am referring here to the long period that exceeds the narrow time frame of mere demonstrations, i.e. to the so-called "May Fourth New Cultural Movement" (*wu si xin wenhua yundong* 五四新文化運動) which was sparked by these protests and took place between 1919 and 1923. Although many scholars claim that it was carried out under the banner of "total Westernization" (Pohl 2009, 95), this view should be somehow relativized, since, at the time, this movement showed some tendencies to preserve certain traditional concepts and values, as well as to create syntheses between traditional Chinese and Western thought.

intellectuals still perceived their culture as an essentially aesthetic one. This position was of utmost importance, especially considering the entire anti-traditional atmosphere that prevailed in China during the process of exposure to Western ideas and appropriation of Western knowledge (Pohl 2015). Therefore, it is not surprising that aesthetics as the academic study of beauty[3] (*meixue* 美學) began to flourish at this time. Moreover, aesthetics represented the intellectual field in which scholars attempted to redefine the essence of Chinese culture and establish a new Chinese identity after the end of imperial China (Woei 1999).

In the process of adopting Western concepts, skills and knowledge, Chinese intellectuals were not only the passive and unreflective recipients, but also critically engaged with their own cultural tradition in the new socio-political context. In doing so, they were initially strongly influenced by the Western intellectual tradition (especially German idealism and Marxist materialism), but at the same time they were also influenced by numerous elements of traditional Chinese culture. While aesthetics as a "theoretical discipline" was imported from the West, many modern and contemporary academics attempted to create a synthesis with certain Western concepts on the one hand, and some key concepts founded in the course of Chinese aesthetic history on the other.

The assimilation of Western ideas led to the formation of various intellectual currents within Chinese aesthetics. They were determined on the basis of different views on whether beauty is subjective, objective, or both, or how to develop Chinese aesthetics as a discipline. In defining Chinese aesthetics, they either sought a synthesis with Western aesthetics or tried to find its unprecedented uniqueness. In discussing these problems, Chinese aestheticians referred to 18th- and 19th-century German philosophy as well as to the Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist philosophical traditions. The pioneers of this early phase of the establishment of aesthetics in China were Wang Guowei 王國維 and Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培.

Wang Guowei's (1877–1927) concept of *jingjie* as an aesthetic state and aesthetic idea is a typical attempt to synthesize the Chinese tradition with Western ideas.

3 The term was introduced in China by Chinese students studying in Japan. Before World War II, Japan represented a mirror image of Europe to the Chinese. Many modern Chinese words are derived from the Japanese (and thus, actually European) system, such as philosophy, aesthetics, literature, art, etc. (Gao 2006a, 107). Li Zehou believes that the translation of aesthetics as *meixue* 美學 (lit.: the study of beauty) is not appropriate and accurate, since the Western term *aesthetics* derives from the Greek term referring to perception. Li Zehou thus suggests that *shenmeixue* 審美學 would be a far better and more suitable translation of the meaning, because it actually refers to the study of the process of recognizing and perceiving beauty (Li and Cauvel 2006, 19).

Wang interpreted this Chinese Buddhist concept of *jingjie* through Kant's "aesthetic idea" creating a new and very significant concept within a new and unique Chinese aesthetics.[4] The encounter with Western thought and new and incredibly interesting ideas led, *inter alia*, to the search for comparable concepts within the Chinese cultural tradition. Cai Yuanpei (1868–1940), the dean of Beijing University during the May Fourth Movement, was the first to outline the idea of a cultural and aesthetic self-understanding of the Chinese. When studying in Germany, he became acquainted with Western philosophy, especially Kant. He recognized Westerners as a people who were decisively influenced by religion, and claimed that aesthetics, as a combination of rituals, art, beauty and ethics in China, was a practical "spiritual" equivalent to religion in the West (Pohl 2007, 425). In this context, he emphasized the importance of aesthetic education of Chinese youth. Such education was supposed to replace religious education as conducted in the West (ibid., 91). In the Chinese tradition, aesthetic experience was always considered the highest state of the human heart-mind (*xin*), which enabled people to experience a higher level of life or the transcendental, with comparable effects and meaning to the experience and function of religion in the West.

At this time, there were two intellectual currents concerning the development of Chinese aesthetics. The first maintained that, since aesthetics as a discipline has Western roots, it would be unnecessary to develop a special discipline called "Chinese aesthetics", just as it would be superfluous to establish "Chinese mathematics" or "Chinese logic". The second current held that it would be useful and necessary to re-examine Chinese literature and art (as well as literary and art theory), with an appropriate methodology because of its long tradition. This kind of theoretical investigation and research would then lead to the establishment of a new academic discipline, namely Chinese aesthetics, which could thus provide a good and valuable explanatory tool for the development of traditional Chinese thought (Gao 2006a, 28).

Gao Jianping 高建平[5] specifically singled out Zhu Guangqian 朱光潛, Zong Baihua 宗白華, Cai Yi 蔡儀 and Li Zehou 李澤厚 as the most influential academics in the field of aesthetics of that time. According to Gao, Zhu Guangqian was a typical representative of the so-called "Western aesthetics in China". He

4 *Jingjie* 境界 is one of the most fundamental and very complex concepts in Chinese aesthetics. It refers to perfect aesthetic fusion of the artistic idea (or feeling) with a concrete (external) scene. It later gained a general aesthetic meaning that signified the aesthetic idea as well as the most sublime state of human consciousness (Pohl 2015, 91). *Yijian* 意見, however, has a similar meaning.

5 Gao Jianping (1955–) is one of the leading Chinese aestheticians of the 21st century, along with Li Zehou (1930–) and Wang Keping (1955–).

translated numerous classics of Western aesthetics (Plato, Croce, Vico, Hegel, etc.) into Chinese and introduced the scientific method of combining Western thought and Chinese substance (or material). Zong Baihua was the first to translate Kant's *Critique of Judgment* into Chinese. He researched the arts in great detail, studied the theory of painting and uncovered a great difference between the Chinese and Western spirit of art, and thus between the two kinds of aesthetics. He claimed that Western painting originated from architecture and therefore contained many scientific implications, while Chinese painting originated from calligraphy and contained similar aesthetic elements to those found in music and dance. For Zong, Western aesthetics is based on spatial-temporal consciousness, and on the dichotomy between subjective and objective, while Chinese aesthetics implies understanding of the world through the identification with nature (ibid., 26). According to Gao Jianping, Zong Baihua sought to complement the model of Western theories through the originality of unique details from Chinese art (ibid.).

The Great Debate on Aesthetics Based on Marxist Ideology

However, the polemic on the development of Chinese aesthetics is considered to be the first phase of the whole discourse on aesthetics, since the main concern in the aesthetic debate in the mid-20th century was establishment of Marxist aesthetics in China as part of the spread of Marxist ideology[6] after 1949. Among all the so-called "open debates" on various problems, where the political elite of Chinese Communist Party actually decided which discussants were right and which were wrong (with the latter punished accordingly), the aesthetic debate was actually the only exception within these debates that was truly open, thanks to the intrinsic connexion between art and society on the one hand, and to the established Marxist ideology on the other.

In the famous Yan'an Forum *On Literature and Art* in May 1942, Mao Zedong made the clear demand that the role of art is to serve the people and socialism in the spirit of class struggle and the needs of the revolution (Li and Cauvel 2006, 32). With the onset of the Cultural Revolution, aesthetics suffered a decline, but the results of the debate came to the fore again during the "aesthetic fever" soon after Mao's death. The 1950s and 1960s were thus marked by a major discussion

6 According to Amighini and Jia (2019, 271), the Sinicized Marxist theory emphasizes Marx's philosophy of history rather than any version of Marxist egalitarian political philosophy; this is doubtless not a coincidence and this also seems to be a main reason because of which it can be called ideology.

on aesthetics between Zhu Guangqian, Cai Yi and Li Zehou,[7] whose political background was the Chinese Communist Party's striving for a national ideological re-education of intellectuals, in which idealism was to be replaced by dialectical materialism in order to strengthen the spread of Marxist ideology in China (Rošker 2017, 3).

While Zhu Guangqian and Zong Baihua belonged to the first phase of the development of Chinese aesthetics, which at the beginning of the 20th century was characterized by a multifaceted engagement with Western thought, Cai Yi and Li Zehou represented the second phase, which took place in the second half of the century and in which leftist ideas came to the fore.

In the first years after the founding of the People's Republic of China, Chinese aestheticians were under a strong influence of Soviet theories and ideologies. They attempted to establish a Marxist aesthetics by applying a materialist epistemology and emphasizing that beauty is objective and "typical". At the same time, as leftist intellectuals they also strove for artistic intervention in the realm of social reality (Gao 2006a, 109). Although this theory of art did not completely oppose emotions or feelings, and although it argued that every "type" of art must be typical, that is, defined by specific and unique qualities in addition to its aesthetic element, both Cai and Li essentially advocated the transcendence of individuality and feelings in the realm of art. As leftist intellectuals, they also strove for artistic intervention in the realm of social reality (ibid.).

Another important issue in this debate was whether beauty is subjective or objective, or in other words, whether it is the result of an idealistic or materialistic worldview. Zhu Guangqian argued that beauty is a combination of the subjective and objective, Cai Yi claimed that beauty is objective, while Li Zehou insisted that it is social, objective, and intuitive (Woei 1999, 50). As a materialist philosopher, Li believed that beauty must be objective because it is socially preformed

7 Li Zehou began to develop his aesthetic thought in the 1950s; at that time, he was strongly influenced by Marx's Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844, in which Marx developed the theory of alienation. Li became acquainted with Marx during his regular studies of philosophy at Beijing University. Soon after graduation, he started to participate in academic discussions regarding various interpretations of certain Marxist notions. In this respect, he gained a lot of attention in intellectual circles as early as 1956 (when he was 26 years old) with the publication of his first mature theoretical essay, entitled "On the Aesthetic Feeling, Beauty, and Art (*Lun meigan, mei he yishu* 论美感，美和艺术)". Later on, he further developed his own interpretations (Rošker 2019, 206). In addition to Marx, Li Zehou also sought great inspiration in Kant's philosophy. He endeavoured to reconstruct Kant's epistemology through Marx's ideas about social life and practice, namely, the material production activities, such as the making and using of tools. On this basis, he also examined the various concepts of human nature found in both original Confucianism and early Marx (Pohl 1999, XIV).

and as such must be independent of the psychology of the individual. In this aspect, he referred to Marx's theory that nothing in the external world possesses beauty *per se*, and that it is only through the objectification of the human being that it becomes "socialized" and thus acquires beauty. This, he argued, is a collective rather than an individual psychological process (ibid., 62). In this regard, Li claimed that idealist aestheticians reduced beauty to the individual's subjective sense of beauty and regarded it as the result of certain pre-empirical, subjective "psychological functions", which they believed were common to all human beings. In this respect, idealists denied the objective existence of beauty, which should be seen as the result of social and historical conditions (ibid., 60).

After relations between China and the Soviet Union cooled down in 1956, Chinese aestheticians attempted to establish their own aesthetic system. Unfortunately, this attempt was interrupted again, this time by the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution", which lasted from 1966 to 1976 (Gao 2006b, 109).

However, the debate had another important focus. It had laid the theoretical foundations that emphasized the theoretical concepts of art and refuted the conceptualization of its so-called "sloganization" (i.e., ideological propaganda). On the one hand, there was a strong attempt in the field of art and literature to bring art into social reality; on the other hand, the aesthetic world emphasized the notion of pure art. Against this background, it is certainly no coincidence that China was swept by the wave of "aesthetic fever" shortly after the death of Mao Zedong. At this point a period of constant, increasingly turbulent, controversial debate began in the world of academic, artistic and literary discourse.

The Aesthetic Fever (*Meixue re* 美学热)

The so-called aesthetic fever became extremely popular throughout the country and caused a huge wave of translations of various western authors of aesthetics, which indicated that aesthetics has become a leading discipline in the humanities in China. Schools and universities started teaching aesthetics, and books on the subject became bestsellers. The return of aesthetic thought was the result of exhaustion and boredom of previous omnipresent ideological constraints and revolutionary asceticism. People wanted to explore new ways of expressing their own individuality, and in this regard they also dealt with the question of what beauty is (Zhou 2005, 105).

All the aforementioned ideas led to a wider debate about aesthetics, which also included politics and culture, and resulted in what was called cultural fever (*wenhua*

re 文化热). In the 1990s, a new standpoint emerged among some Chinese literary theorists, emphasizing that Western influences on the study of Chinese literature and art in the 20th century were very problematic, and that the existing Chinese literary and art theories were not fit for purpose. They argued that Chinese literature has its own tradition and that there are special systems and categories in Chinese literary criticism that were not taken into account by their predecessors. There were also many academics who idealized the West and wanted to apply Western concepts of literary theory to Chinese art and literature. In contrast, some literary theorists argued that it was essential to thoroughly study ancient Chinese works on art and literature and, and on such basis establish and develop new aesthetic theories, based on comparative study of Chinese and Western aesthetic theory. Most Chinese aestheticians then adopted this position and began to explore certain traditional Chinese concepts such as *qi* 氣 ("vitality, creativity") and *qiyun* 氣韻 ("rhythm of *qi*"), comparing them with concepts from Western aesthetics.

The period of aesthetic and cultural fever is considered as a very complex and important "movement" in Chinese modern aesthetics, which had a remarkable influence on contemporary Chinese aesthetics, as well as to the formation of more autochthonous theories.

The Significance and Implications of Aesthetic Fever in the 1980s and 1990s

In the search for the most appropriate strategies for China's successful entry into the third millennium, we cannot overlook the political or ideological role that aesthetics has played. On the one hand, as a latent rebellion against the society of the prevailing pragmatism and as a manifested pursuit of beauty, or as a kind of emotional emancipation; and on the other, as a discourse that has always been closely linked to politics in China, with the possibility of reinterpreting or upgrading Marxist theories.[8] However, we should not forget the fact that Chinese aesthetics and literary theory focused primarily on rationality and the social dimension until the beginning of the 1980s. As already mentioned, the aesthetic fever gained an exceptional dimension in Chinese society at that time, spreading like a kind of theoretical epidemic; already in the early 1980s, the bookshelves were full of

8 The further development and upgrading of Marxists theories was perhaps most visible in the field of Marxist dialectics, for many Chinese scholars aimed to complement or synthesize it with the basic tenets of traditional Chinese correlative dialectical models that were based on the principle of complementary and rooted in the so-called *tongbian* dialectics (see for instance Heubel 2019; Rockmore 2019; Tian 2019).

translations of Western authors who wrote about aesthetics. The entire decade were therefore defined by the systematic translation and presentation of Western formalistic literary theories. Thus, during this period, all the most important works of the Russian formalists, Anglo-American New Criticism, Chicago School, archetypical criticism and structuralist poetics were translated into Chinese.

Undoubtedly, the 1942 work of Wellek and Warren, *Theory of Literature*, in which the authors clearly distinguished between "intrinsic" and "extrinsic" literary studies that form the basis of formalistic literary theory, had a major influence on the development of contemporary Chinese literary theories. Particularly popular became related ideas about the "intrinsic laws" of literature and its aesthetic laws, discussed by Jakobson in his discourses of "literariness" (Zhou 2005, 105).

These debates were at the core of intellectual attention until 1981, when a translation of Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* from 1844 was published. This document was also given great attention, and many theorists saw it as the basis of modern Marxist aesthetics. As for the autochthonous discourse on Chinese aesthetics, Li Zehou attracted immense interest and respect in academic circles during this period, not only in China, but also abroad. Following the experience of ten years of chaos and catastrophes caused by radical left politics, the Chinese Communist Party slowly turned away from ideas such as the class struggle and began to introduce the slogan "finding the truth in facts" (*shishi qiushi* 实事求是). Li Zehou's idea of "practice" in the field of aesthetics contributed to the new research atmosphere. In addition, Li Zehou's coinages for his other concepts, such as "sedimentation" (*jidian* 積澱) and "subjectality" (*zhuguanxing* 主觀性), the fusion of the social with an individual in the historical process, enriched the aesthetic debate of that time. Li Zehou is considered to be the greatest personality in the field of aesthetics during those years. On the one hand, he presented new concepts such as subjectivity and practice, derived from the fusion of Kant's and Marx's ideas, and on the other, he produced innovative interpretations of Chinese aesthetic and art traditions (see *mei de licheng* 美的历程).

Related theories were also represented in the same period by a number of less known and less influential but equally interesting theorists, such as the aforementioned art historian Zhu Guangqian or the philosopher Hu Jun 胡軍, who advocated a sinicized version of the Western concept of "aestheticization of everyday life". This aestheticization was perceived primarily as an emancipation and the everyday space of freedom, a space in which professional politics, with its dictates of pragmatic functionality, cannot interfere. This emancipation carried within itself a revolt against the world of a strict political hierarchy and the unconditional authority of individual political positions within that hierarchy.

The "subjective" negation of politics, which was the essence of the aesthetic fever of the 1980s, was constantly imbued with a charge of civil society politics. Thus the seemingly ivory tower of aesthetics was erected right in the realm politics; but this was not a policy of hierarchical relations of power and unquestionable authority, but a policy in the original sense, that is, a policy of people as *a priori* political beings (*zoon politicum*). The aesthetic fever that prevailed in China in the 1980s therefore stemmed precisely from the tendency to realize this kind of "subjective" political freedom. And yet the reality of the conditions of the rapidly changing Chinese society and its economic "liberalization" downplayed all such ideals, sadly drowned out in a flood of new, commercialized aesthetics that it is characteristic of all capitalist societies. Thus, it soon became clear that theories of aesthetic fever no longer fit the conditions of the rapidly changing Chinese social reality.

The Third Millennium and the New Culture of the Consumer Society

At the end of the 1980s, the role of aesthetics in China has been greatly transformed; aesthetics as an academic discipline relatively quickly (and for most intellectuals, unexpectedly) lost its revolutionary and emancipatory function. Already in the mid-1990s, it represented only a marginal academic discipline that dealt with abstract theoretical problems on the outskirts of social reality.

> Aesthetics nowadays no longer have any revolutionary and emancipatory functions. The enlightenment and humanistic significance it once had has been transformed. Since the expansion of capital included our everyday factors in the processes of the market, the way of our aesthetic experience radically changed. If you can easily buy any artistic object, activity, or even experience on the market, as if they were goods, then how can aesthetic values arouse utopian impulses? When the executive director of the advertisement company explicitly declares that "beauty can of course be ordered", how can we speak of aesthetic activities in the same way as in the past? (Zhou 2005, 110–11)

As elsewhere in the world, also in China, where the general sale and megalomaniac marketing of aesthetics has necessarily led to its devaluation. The former leading, emancipatory voice of aesthetics died, and the aesthetics of freedom sadly became silent: The "subjectivity of aesthetics", which Li Zehou, Zhu Guangqian and other theoreticians were advocating for, could not really face the large-scale turn of aesthetics as a factor in the commercialization of everyday

life. The aesthetics of emancipation could never solve the acute contradiction between its primary tendency for liberalization of subjectivity on one hand, and the aesthetization of everyday life in terms of commodity culture on the other. Its theoretical framework was never able to encompass this completely new aesthetic phenomenon, one that includes the complete negation of humanity in which human sensitivity is reduced to the mediator of economic functions (Haug 1971, 17), and in which aesthetics as such is only a part of the "cosmetics of everyday life" (Welsh 1997, 3). The notion of consumer society mainly refers to post-industrial societies in which consumerism has become one of the central motives of social life and production. In a consumer society, aesthetics and culture, including aesthetic and cultural production, are closely linked to economic values or economism. While in traditional societies the fundamental purpose of production is linked to the basic needs of members of society and their satisfaction, production itself in consumer societies far outweighs the principle of existence or survival.

When dealing with the question of whether today's Chinese society is already a completely consumer one we must be rather cautious, because the nature of China's transitional society encompasses specific historical, regional and other social elements that limit the possibility of establishing a single definitive definition that could relate to all aspects of society. Differences between rural and urban regions (centre and periphery), and imbalances in political, economic and cultural aspects, lead to the conclusion that China should be treated only as a society with extremely diverse connotations. If we consider it from the aspect of certain characteristics that are at the forefront in the developed regions and major cities, we can also refer to it as a society that has already entered the post-industrial and capitalist stage, especially if we take into account the vitality of its development and its economic boom, which was most clearly demonstrated in the last years of the 20th century after economic liberalization took hold.

> Regardless of whether we admit it or not, a successful consumer society is spreading in China. Producers and consumers of cultural symbols are so deeply involved in it, that they are subordinate to it, or they try to resist it and regain its power through confrontation. The consumer society's attack on literature is so unprecedented that no matter to which historical concepts we cling to, we must admit the profound changes that modern culture has suffered. (Chen 2005, 118)

The Aesthetization of Everyday Life and its Expression in Culture

The consumer society introduced a number of new lifestyles in China. The lives of modern, especially urban Chinese people are intertwined with new aesthetic interests and values. While in traditional and industrial societies aesthetic activities have been separated from production and everyday life, the everyday experiences of individuals in the consumer society of urban China are most closely related to the elements of art and its aesthetic characteristics. The feelings of modern people living in a consumer society are exposed to constant stimulation and are therefore more sensitive and colourful; aesthetic requirements have replaced only material needs, and all this is reflected in the external environment as well as in the inner worlds of individuals. The aesthetic interpretation of everyday life and the transfer of reality into an aesthetized illusion are two extremely important cultural mechanisms:

> Today, the everyday, political, historical, economic and other reality already includes the hyper realistic dimension of the simulation, so that we are now fully living in the "aesthetic" hallucination of reality. (Chen 2005, 127)

Since the 1990s, literary and visual art as well as the art of music have been confronted with the problems of commercialization, excessive simulation and universalization, which pose a challenge to traditional understanding of culture and aesthetics. This situation cannot be avoided, which is why we hope that contemporary artists will be able to confront these challenges in a constructive way. The challenges of a new, global culture also offer the possibility to reshape concepts and conceptual paradigms that were not present in traditional Chinese culture, such as individualism, free will, self-determination and active participation. In any given period, the function of a particular culture and its impact on social reality are closely related to the conceptual elements existing in this culture.

The sudden development of modern China has completely changed the image of all of its major cities: the huge flows of internal migration of the population, the megalomaniac number of new ring roads, motorways and four-way avenues, the demolition of traditional houses and the construction of new, ever-higher glass skyscrapers, all this confronts us with previously unimaginable visual contrasts in China. The unstoppable development of urbanization that modern Chinese are exposed to, and the rapidly changing rhythms of everyday life, are also reflected in the new culture and its aesthetic creations. This does not apply only to the Westernized popular culture, but also to a large-scale billboards present everywhere, which create new criteria of popular aesthetics adapted to the contemporary society. The imaginary division between life and art has also been erased in contemporary Chinese society: art has become life itself, just as commercial capitalist

activities are regarded as a kind of artistic imagination (Chen 2005, 128). Contemporary Chinese art (both visual and literary) is mostly created for the masses, to whom it sells well. This art is quickly popularized and also quickly forgotten, since its primary goal is to facilitate the survival of individuals within the rapidly changing contemporary world, marked by the consumer culture. Similar dilemmas and problems of expressing and conveying the contradictions of modern society are also reflected in other spheres of artistic or aesthetic creation in contemporary Chinese culture.

> It comes from the past and lasts until now; and would have the possibility of expanding further—it can eternally exist in the struggle of resistance and absorption of aesthetic hegemony of the consumer society. (ibid., 136)

Moreover, Chinese art is confronted with the ubiquitous influence of electronic and digital media on a daily basis, but it also contains a culture of past periods and a memory of them. In this sense, it is firmly anchored in the consciousness of society and its individuals, so it must be understood as one of the central, still existing milestones of history.

Conclusion

As we have seen, aesthetic debates in China during the 20th century provided an important platform for dialogue with Western discourses on the one hand, and recognition of the profound value and significance of the Chinese cultural and philosophical tradition on the other. However, although the development of aesthetics as an academic discipline was initially intertwined with the appropriation of Western knowledge which was later more or less reduced to sinicized Marxist ideology, its foundations are deeply rooted in the unique Chinese aesthetic tradition. In light of the global development of capitalist consumerism in the 21st century, art and aesthetics (like many other cultural aspects of societies, such as education and the value of knowledge as such) are constantly confronted with new (and not necessarily meaningful) challenges. To what extent the market will define or even destroy the aesthetic and artistic influence on the value and meaning of our lives remains an open question, not only in China, but globally.

Indeed, in recent decades we can observe a revival of traditional Chinese art and aesthetics in Chinese academic circles. In their restoration, however, many Chinese intellectuals one-dimensionally and uncritically emphasize the allegedly unparalleled brilliance of Chinese art and aesthetics. Such attempts are problematic,

in my view, because they are constructed upon the basis of inverted or reverse Orientalism and from Sinocentric perspectives. On the other hand, they can nevertheless also be seen as reactions to the to some extent still prevailing, overconfident dominance of Eurocentric discourses that exclude the importance and value of the ideational traditions developed by Other, non-Western cultures.

But nonetheless, the recognition of the profound, but subtle realms of Chinese aesthetics in general is of great importance for the eventual establishment of an intercultural aesthetics that could contribute greatly to the recognition of a true "unity in diversity", and hence transcend the static singularity of cultures. This is all the more important in light of our present human condition, which desperately needs new, fresh and inspiring views upon our perception of life and being.

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