

The Establishment and Development of Chinese Aesthetics as a Modern Study

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Abstract

The ultimate aim of this paper is to track how research in the field of aesthetics has recently come to greater prominence in China and to explore how aesthetics might establish itself as a significant field within the Chinese academic system. “Aesthetics” which has emerged as a branch of philosophy during modern times, has a definite purpose and range of study: “Cognition of the truth through human sensibility”. Aesthetics is fundamentally rooted in the structure of philosophical thought, and has a particularly intimate relationship with art, which is directly linked to sensible perception. Since modern Chinese studies on aesthetics have progressed rapidly during the process of modernization, it was probably inevitable that the acceptance of the field would produce considerable friction and compromise, particularly since it is a relatively new branch of inquiry in the Chinese intellectual tradition. In contemporary China, the study of aesthetics has become mired in conflict and lost much of its developmental direction. The unique growth process of the academic system, which is directly connected to modern Chinese history, has played a crucial role in the development of aesthetics as a field of inquiry in the Chinese intellectual tradition. Hence, this paper examines the identity of Chinese aesthetics and explores the basis on which it might be established as a rigorous science, suggesting a way forward for the development of so-called “Chinese Aesthetics” which would employ the method of critical review as the field further grows and matures.

Keywords: modern studies, sensuous cognition (*sinnlichkeit*), aesthetics, Chinese aesthetics

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**Special thanks go to my supervisor, Prof. Zhang Qiqun (Professor, Department of Philosophy, Peking University, China), for his patience, understanding, guidance, and encouragement.

1. Introduction

In East Asia, the academic standing of the field of study under the name “aesthetics” is quite ambiguous. Owing to this fact, aesthetics cannot merely be dismissed as a profound concern only for a small group of intellectuals, in no small part because it is also a very familiar term for ordinary people. There are a number of life-aesthetics surrounding us right at this moment. If one consults the dictionary in contemporary Korean, Japanese and Chinese, one will find that aesthetics shares elements of a common definition that might be roughly phrased in English as “a value that is put on nature or human thinking according to sensory or emotional effects,”¹ a definition which exists in common usage separately from whatever particular connotations the term might carry in a specific academic field. This common definition of aesthetics as an everyday term has amplified the academic standing of the field as well as the ambiguity surrounding the object of its research.

In this study a serious question is considered: “what is aesthetics as a subcategory of rigorous and systemic science?” We are primarily concerned here with giving an identity to aesthetics, therefore we will examine two contexts of particular importance: first, the modern academic system from which aesthetics has emerged; and second, the study of “Aesthetics” as a department within that modern academic system. This study will examine the early conversation in the Chinese academy regarding aesthetics as a field of study and will track the sometimes rocky process by which aesthetics has developed into an arena for rigorous academic inquiry in modern China.

In this paper, this developmental process is divided in four stages: the inflow of aesthetics as a modern field of study from abroad (1897-1912); the establishment of the study of aesthetics in the Chinese academic system (1912-1949); the first “Aesthetics popularity” (*meixuere* 美學熱) and the dark age (1949-1979); and finally, the second “Aesthetics popularity” (*meixuere* 美學熱) and period of expansion (1978-). In this paper our discussion will focus mainly on the first two stages (from 1897-1949), particularly since they provide the foundations for the subsequent stages of

*** This article was revised based on a paper presented in February 2015 at the international conference titled “Is Eastern Aesthetics Possible?” The conference was co-organized by the Institute of Confucian Philosophy and Culture, the College of Confucian Studies and Eastern Philosophy, and the BK21PLUS Group in the Department of Eastern Philosophy at Sungkyunkwan University.

1 The ordinary definition mentioned above is a comprehensive meaning resulting from the analysis of three different definitions in current use in Korea, China and Japan. For the specific contents refer to the following three links. Korean: <http://stdweb2.korean.go.kr/search/View.jsp> (search word: 미학); Chinese: <http://www.zdic.net/c/e/110/297446.htm> (search word: 美学); Japanese: <http://dictionary.goo.ne.jp/jn/183286/meaning/m0u/%E7%BE%8E%E5%AD%A6/> (search word: 美学).

development and have deeply shaped the contemporary Chinese sense of aesthetics. Finally, this study will also ultimately suggest some direction of for future improvement of the field.

2. Modern Studies

While aesthetics and human history may seem at times to have evolved together, the history of the field of aesthetics as it is commonly described is far less ancient than that of the human race.² Aesthetics' history is parallel in some ways with some other modern sciences, like psychology or psychoanalysis, which gradually grew independent from the field of philosophy as the modern academic system began to be established in Western universities. All current works of so-called knowledge, discipline and academic research mainly revolve around the academic system and the institution of the university. In other words, in order to establish a field of study which obtains formal approval, all of the procedures involved that field must submit to the norms and expectations of the modern academic system, and universities are the organizations which have been most instrumental in building and conducting this academic system. Thus, the study of aesthetics in the current academic system cannot be exactly parallel to the history of aesthetics itself; from the same point of view, even a study of philosophy, the field from which aesthetics itself originates, could only result in a department of philosophy in its current academic form through several steps of integration and separation.

If modern universities occupy the center of the contemporary intellectual landscape, what are their origins? Basically, it can be said that the form of most current academic institutions, including the modern university, were developed from classical universities, the leading educational institutions of the early European modern age. Classical universities³ were institutions which existed primarily to fulfill the desire of pure knowledge rather than to

2 Jean-Marie Schaeffer has written with great clarity about the birth of the study of aesthetics: "However, hardly anyone doubts that it was in the eighteenth century, in the wake of Leibnitz, Wolff, and their followers, that a genuinely philosophical aesthetics was born. . . . Aesthetics was knowledge gained through the senses, and especially with knowledge gained through the imagination (*phantasia*) and the fiction-making capacity (*facultas fingendi*)." Schaeffer, *Art of the Modern Age: Philosophy of Art from Kant to Heidegger*, 17.

3 The very first universities "invented founders from the distant past. In Paris it was Charlemagne, in Oxford, the English king Alfred the Great." Among them, the earliest might be Bologna University; it is "around 1888 a foundation year of 1088 was invented in Bologna in order to be able to celebrate the jubilee of the oldest university in Europe." And in Bologna they concocted a foundation document according to which the emperor Theodosius II of the late classical period, who had played an important role in establishing Roman law, gave Bologna the right to teach jurisprudence." Rüegg, *A History of the University in Europe*, 4.

serve explicitly practical purposes, and the shift in focus to more practical aims has attributed to the influence of the European enlightenment, by which several medieval institutions forsook some of the more conservative propensities of Christianity and emerged as the early universities.⁴ The early universities considered unity to be their guiding principle; hence most were constituted with four schools in a comparatively simple shape, unlike subspecialized current universities. These four subcategory schools were the school of theology, medicine, law and politics. Philosophy operated in a separate college of liberal arts, a term which including logic, linguistics, rhetoric, mathematics, geometry, astronomy and music.⁵ Philosophy first began to take shape as an independent course of study in the mid-16th century, a time in which some subordinate fields in a college of liberal arts were attempting to be upgraded from a lower school into an advanced school.⁶ In this period, social science, education, and some independent research in natural science were all conducted together in the school of philosophy. In this period, advances in the natural sciences were threatening the position of absolute power that theology had hitherto enjoyed; furthermore, the spread of Enlightenment ideas throughout Europe had the effect of increasing faith in human rationality. Spurred in large part by these historical phenomena, by the 18th century, a new academic system had begun to form in which philosophy had achieved its academic independence, alongside the humanities as well as the natural and social sciences.

3. Aesthetics as a Modern Study

With philosophy only being established as a specific disciplinary field in conjunction with the European enlightenment, it has not been that long since aesthetics itself came to be accepted and studied as a discrete, independent subdivision of philosophy. The German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb

4 It is in the same way “Just as the vertically oriented Gothic cathedrals were replaced by renaissance and baroque churches with their emphases the horizontal perspective, so the aim of university study became not so much that of the scholar.” Rüegg, *A History of the University in Europe*, 8.

5 See Rashdall, *Zhongshiji de ouzhou daxue*, 14-57.

6 This is due to the collapse of church unity, which meant that universities and separate education institutes could be liberated from the Catholic control. Walter Rüegg writes that these institutions “did not survive, however, as the sole all-embracing institution of higher education. General education was entirely or partly displaced from the art faculties into residential colleges within the university, which in England continued to operate as an examining body for academic degrees, or outside the university in schools, gymnasiums, lyceums, which prepared students not only for university study.” Rüegg, *A History of the University in Europe*, 9; Regarding the dichotomy between lower school and advanced school, Kant also made a critical discussion, insisting there is no lower or advanced value in academic field. See Nicolovius, *The Conflict of the Faculties*.

Baumgarten (1714-1762) was the first to argue for the construction of an independent academic field which he termed “Ästhetica” in his 1735 essay *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus*. In that work, Baumgarten conducted an analysis of the domain of poetic life which centered on a depth analysis of human sensuous cognition. His attempt achieved wide recognition for its academic rigor and validity; consequently, the philosophers formed a consensus on it, this achievement stemmed from the strict logical training in the academic system of his time.⁷

Baumgarten used his achievement above as a stepping stone, elaborating his theory in a further work, *Ästhetica*, which he published in 1750. In this text he proposed the establishment of “Ästhetik” as a complex academic discipline, defined as “a study about sensuous cognition (*scientia cognitionis sensitivae*).”⁸ His choice of “Ästhetik” is a word derived from the Greek terms for sensory or perception. Ancient Greek philosophers had largely thought about human knowledge through two dichotomous categories: “cognition (*noesis*)” and “sense (*aisthesis*).” From the historical point of view, Baumgarten’s contribution was to use the logical method of the academic system of his time to recover the value of the domain of sensibility which was largely dismissed as something illogical or unscientific; in other words, Baumgarten sought to restore “something sensed (*aistheta*)” to its original position of significance, one which corresponds to “something thought (*noeta*)” and thus worthy of and susceptible to further philosophical scrutiny.

Not only that, Baumgarten also made an attempt to reintegrate the domain of art with philosophy which was operating together in the school of arts & letters. For instance, Baumgarten asserted in *Ästhetica* that philosophical reflection on poetry guides all the discussions on the issue of sense to proceed towards being a complete science.⁹ Not only that, he further argued that art, with poetry as one example, is a science that consummately expresses sensuous representation,¹⁰ that is to say from the aspect of the sensuous cognition which constructs a major component of human knowledge system. Because art is uniquely capable of being sensuously complete, he argued, art is in fact the most appropriate object for this process, more suitable than any other cognized object. This argument helps to explain the fundamental reason why aesthetics and art have maintained an extremely intimate relationship in the history of discipline’s development.

7 Niu Hongbao, *Meixue gailun*, 8.

8 At the same time, he also gives an academic identity to the study of aesthetics, he says: “The science of knowledge and of sensuous representation is Aesthetics considered as the logic of the faculty of inferior knowledge, a philosophy of the Graces and Muses, an inferior gnoseology, an art of beautiful thought, an art of the analogy of reason.” Baumgarten, *Texte zur Grundlegung der Ästhetik*, 16, 533.

9 Baumgarten, *Meixue*, 134.

10 Baumgarten, *Meixue*, 134.

If Baumgarten's contribution in the history of aesthetics was to set out the field's broad field of inquiry and primary objects of research, aesthetics' academic system and specific content were mainly constructed by Kant (1724-1804) and Hegel (1770-1831). These two philosophers largely concurred with the arguments Baumgarten had made regarding the possibilities and legitimacy of sensuous cognition, and advanced the study of aesthetics principally through their mutual focus on the issue of how to unravel the contradictory relationship of "cognition (*noesis*)" and "sense (*aisthesis*)."¹¹ Although these two philosophers were concerned with the same issue, they took different routes in establishing their positions. Kant's discussion revolved mainly around the possibility of human sensuous cognition and the psychological function of subject¹¹, while Hegel's discussion of aesthetics was conducted largely through the result of human sensuous cognition and a consideration of the art which corresponds with it.¹²

To sum up, early aesthetics emerged as a subcategory in the department of philosophy and conducted research into the various forms and effects of sensuous cognition. Art, because of its perceived ability to present the "integrity of sensibility (*perfectio*)," became and has remained the most significant object for studies in the field of aesthetics.

4. The Acceptance and Settlement of Aesthetics in China (1897-1912)

In the period between the 17th and the early 20th century, through the process of so-called Modernization or globalization, the Western academic system became generalized in East Asia. According to the movement of these changes, China could not but have been highly influenced by Western civilization and their academic system, and the disciplinary fields of philosophy and aesthetics offer no exception. As with many other studies such as natural sciences, humanities, social sciences, and so forth, aesthetics began to be accepted in China as a part of the modern academic system which was built based on beliefs on human rationality in accordance with the spirit of the Western Enlightenment. A point to highlight is that aesthetics occupied a relatively minor position in the modern academic structure imported into China; for Chinese scholars of this era it was already too much to entirely

11 In *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant explains his concept of the "Transcendental Aesthetic," and criticizes Baumgarten's writing on aesthetics as an "abortive attempt . . . to bring the critical treatment of the beautiful under rational principles and so to raise its rules to the rank of a science" (A21n-B27n). However, in the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant shows a very similar understanding about the judgments of "beauty." Basically it can be said that for both of them, the judgments of "beauty" cannot be cognitive or logical. From this, it can be assumed that Kant critically accepted Baumgarten's aesthetics. See Gregor, "Baumgarten's 'Aesthetica,'" 257-358. The translation of the original text is also recited from the same paper.

12 See Yang Eunhuan, *Meixue yinlun*, 5.

accept a new academic system, and it would obviously have been unfeasible for aesthetics, a relatively recent and still somewhat minor branch of philosophy to have been directly and quickly adopted in the Chinese academic system. In part this is due to the nature of aesthetics, itself, since even though aesthetics can operate as an independent academic domain, fundamentally it germinated from the same root as philosophy and was developed together with it. In addition to this peculiarity, philosophy constitutes an enormous, accreted structure of knowledge that has developed along with human history long before it came under the control of academic institutions, that is to say that prior to its formation as a discipline in the modern university, philosophy had over a thousand years of its own prior history as a branch of human knowledge which included cosmology, world outlook, cultural habits, thinking patterns, etc. In the absence of deep integration and rich mutual interaction, it was in a certain sense inevitable that one would end up with only a cursory grasp of Western philosophy and aesthetics in the Chinese academic system, especially if one system were to oppressively push their system and concepts into the other. The historical approach to the study of art posed further issues: as previously mentioned, art occupies an important position as a research object in Western aesthetic theory, but theories about art in East Asia have developed in a quite different fashion from the rigorous and logical processes undertaken by Western aesthetics.

There were additional barriers to smooth entry, like the degree of abstruseness which belonged to the study of aesthetics itself as well as the very advanced academic system which surrounding it. Despite these hurdles, aesthetics was embraced into the Chinese knowledge structure, from which it occupied a unique academic field and began to make its influence felt in society, which allowed it to develop more rapidly and broadly than in any other country.¹³ To understand how aesthetics came to occupy its place in Chinese intellectual society, one must first understand the three primary channels by which Western civilization was imported into China in this period. The first channel was via direct connection to the Western countries themselves, the second route came was via Japan, and the last route was from the former Soviet Union. Since modernization in China was conducted through various routes with very different inclinations, hence, although the process had developed quickly, each stage of development was conducted according to differing political tendencies, which make themselves visible in the progression of philosophy and aesthetics as modernized, rigorous arenas of study in China.

In East Asia the earliest citation of the modern discipline of aesthetics was made by the Japanese philosopher and politician Nakae Chomin 中江兆民 (1847-1901).¹⁴ In translating the French aesthetician Eugène Véron's (1825-

13 Zhang Qiqun, "Zhongguo meixue yanjiu fei xueshuhua qingxiang de genyuan." 83-84.

14 "Nakae Chomin 中江兆民 (1847-1901) is an outstanding figure as a popularizer of the

1889) *L'Esthétique* (1882), Chomin rendered the term “aesthetics” as *bigaku* 美學. This term, newly coined by Chomin, was brought directly into Chinese by the modern philosopher Kang Youwei 康有为 (1858-1927) in his book *Riben shumuzhi* 日本書目志, which was edited and published in 1897.¹⁵ Kang Youwei’s work initiated the process of disseminating what was essentially a foreign concept of aesthetics, and did so largely under its Chinese name of *meixue* 美學.¹⁶ The person most responsible for the conception of aesthetics as a new academic domain within the Chinese academy rather than a mere translated concept word was, in fact, the influential Chinese scholar Wang Guowei 王國維 (1877-1927). Wang Guowei was the first to systemically introduce the study of aesthetics into Chinese intellectual life, doing so first with his translation of two Japanese works concerned largely with aesthetics: *The Education Textbook* (教育學教科書) written by Makiso GoIchiro 牧漱五一郎 and *General Remarks on Philosophy* (哲學概論) written by Kuwaki Umutsabasa 桑木嚴翼.¹⁷

Why was it that aesthetics, a relatively young field of study, flowed so easily into the Chinese intellectual system of this era? The most convincing reason might be the fact that the intellectuals of that era were highly motivated to accept the Japan’s advanced academic system, setting it up as role model for academic modernization in China. This phenomenon bears a close parallel relation with the case of *zhexue* 哲學, the Chinese translated word for the academic discipline of “philosophy,” which was also easily and naturally accepted and generalized in China. Furthermore, some internal factors that are implied in the Chinese character *mei* 美 can explain how aesthetics could successfully be generalized in China under the designation of *meixue*. Prior to participating in advanced discussions about aesthetics, East Asian citizens of that era already sharing a set of attitudes and ideas regarding *mei*; the fact that an already widely accepted Chinese character helped to play the role of intermediary probably greatly accelerated the acceptance of the concept of aesthetics itself throughout East Asia. In addition, the multi-layered and flexible implied meaning of *mei* itself, corresponded to great extent with what the study of aesthetics was pursuing. While the connection to *mei* may have helped the study of aesthetics to gain rapid acceptance, it is hard to deny the fact that *mei*’s semantic flexibility has probably contributed to various negative effects; the variety of multiple

French philosophy of the Enlightenment, a high-class journalist and a writer with utopian socialist tendencies” For more information about Nakae Chomin and the Japanese modernization process, see Takayanagi Shunichi, *Nakae Chomin no kenkyu*.

15 See Lü Cheng, “Meixue yanjiu de duixiang,” 2. Li Zehou 李澤厚 also agrees that Kang Youwei borrowed the word from Chomin (see Li Zehou, *Huaxia meixue & meixue sijiang*, 239). Huang Kingshou 黃興濤 insists, however, that the translated word was, in fact, invented in China and provides an argument to that effect in “‘Meixue’ yici ji xifang meixue zai zhongguo de zuizao chuanbo,” vol. 1.

16 See Zhang Fa, *Meixue de zhongguo huayu*, 17.

17 See Zhang Qiqun, “Zhongguo meixue yanjiu fei xueshuhua qingxiang de genyuan,” 79.

possible meanings for the term has meant that the study of aesthetics has sometimes been misinterpreted as an ambiguous study without academic strictness, or as an abstract field in which it is difficult to know precisely what people are discussing. The contemporary Chinese philosopher Zhang Rulun 張汝倫 has argued, regarding this very issue:

“Originally the study of aesthetics was a philosophy that aims for ‘beauty’ as ‘integrity’. However, people in China often use it as an ambiguous concept, forgetting the philosophical attributes of aesthetics; hence aesthetics in China has faced an academic identity crisis. Moreover, they have developed the study of aesthetics without a well-defined and deep cognizance of its philosophical attributes, whereupon it ended up in the phenomenon confounding aesthetics with ‘science of art (*Kunstwissenschaft*)’ or ‘science of literature (*Literaturwissenschaft*)’.”¹⁸

The crucial idea that aesthetics is a philosophy, basically corresponds to Wang Guowei’s understanding of relationship between aesthetics and philosophy. Wang Guowei believed that “the ultimate goal of aesthetics and philosophy is to attain ‘truth,’”¹⁹ therefore he also believed in its philosophical, spiritual and educational importance, and this conviction became the source of impetus that let him to vigorously disseminate ideas regarding aesthetics. In so doing, he introduced some crucial terms, like *meigan* 美感, “*shenmei* 審美,” “*meiyu* 美育,” etc., which he had acquired through his translation of Japanese texts on aesthetics, bringing into China an academic foundation upon which would be built the actual faculty of aesthetics in early Chinese universities. Furthermore, in 1906, Wang Guowei presented his concrete beliefs regarding the spiritual and educational effects of aesthetics at “Zuoding jingxueke daxue wenxueke daxue zhangchengshu hou 奏定經學科大學文學科大學章程書後”²⁰ emphasizing that in addition to history courses, each department in the college of liberal arts should be structured to include courses in aesthetics. At the same time, he also criticized contemporary intellectuals as being immersed in matters of merely short-term value, singling out Yan Fu 嚴復 (1853-1921) for only doing scientific research, and Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873-1929) who were simply translating some political books.²¹

The issue of primary concern to Wang Guowei during the process of establishing an aesthetics department as an independent faculty subdivision was how to implant a particular course of study developed in the Western academic system within their own indigenous structure of thought. His theory regarding “*meiyu* 美育” and “*jingjie* 境界” reflects his critical opinion on the answer to this question, and has had a decisive effect on the

18 Zhang Rulun, “Xiandai zhongguo meixue de ziwo lijie ji qi lilun kunjing,” 56.

19 Wang Guowei, *Jingan wenji*, 119.

20 Wang Guowei, *Wang Guowei wenji*, 29.

21 See Wang Guowei, *Wang Guowei wenji*, 114-115.

development of most subsequent aesthetic theory in China. For instance, in his book *Renjian cihua* 人間詞話, Wang Guowei made an attempt to interpret Western aesthetic theories based on Chinese thinking through the concept of *jingjie* 境界 which he repurposed from extant Chinese philosophical texts. He wrote:

“The concept of ‘*jing* 境’ is very different from other concept simply named ‘*jing* 景’. States of human feeling including happiness, anger, love and delight all are the internal ‘*Jingjie* 境界’ in human minds. Through this, people can express the thing so-called ‘*jingwu* 景物’ or the genuine emotion outwardly, and we verbalize this phenomenon as ‘something to have *jingjie* 境界’. If they cannot express those feelings outwardly, then it can be said that they don’t have any ‘*jingjie* 境界’.”²²

Wang Guowei thought solely through the concept of *jingjie*, Chinese classic texts become capable of crossing cultural borders and go beyond modernity; Chinese poems expand their historical contexts and enter the stage of life; the study of Confucian classics (*jingxue* 經學) and Chinese poetry (*shixue* 詩學) can communicate; the ambiguity that traditional Chinese poetic turn of expression has can ultimately be overcome.²³ This highly valued concept of *jingjie* directly influenced Zong Baihua 宗白华 (1897-1986), a third generation Chinese aesthetician. Through his detailed writing it ultimately became a category of aesthetics which today has taken a leading position in contemporary Chinese discussion with in the field.

Besides his theory of *jingjie*, Wang Guowei also tried to combine Western aesthetics with historical Chinese through comparison with ideas regarding *meiyu* present in Confucianism. In 1903, he wrote *Kongzi zhi meiyu zhuyi* 孔子之美育主義 (Confucian’s principle of aesthetic education), arguing that there are similarities between Schiller’s (1759-1805) theories of “aesthetic education” and the Confucian point of view that “art reflects the ultimate spiritual state.”²⁴ This idea became the main vehicle for the development of *meiyu* in Chinese aesthetics, and provided a strong example of the way that prior Chinese thinking could be established as part of a systemic and academic study of aesthetics in a modern intellectual context.

Wang Guowei claimed that through the entire history of Western aesthetics, from Aristotle (384–322 BCE) to Schiller, *meiyu* has practically helped moral education. In making this argument, he pays considerable attention to Kant’s conception of “moral judgment” and “play (*spiel*).” From this he posited a correlation between ethics and art, and suggested his

22 Wang Guowei, *Renjian cihua*, 12.

23 Zhang Qiqun, *Beijing daxue zhexue xuekeshi*, 320.

24 See Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man: In a Series of Letters*. See also following comments from Grossmann: “Schiller’s letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man aim at a remaking of civilization by virtue of the liberating force of the aesthetic function: it is envisaged as containing the possibility of a new reality principle” (Grossmann, “Schiller’s Aesthetic Education,” 31-41).

own proposition, namely that “Literature is the work of play (*spiel*).”²⁵ This makes a connection between Chinese literature and ethics, while simultaneously enabling his Schiller’s ideas about the role of “aesthetic education” in support of his argument regarding *meiyu*.

Wang Guowei also contemplated Confucian thought in light of his understanding of the ethical notions which Western aesthetics had developed, and tried to find points of commonality between them. For instance, he suggested that the Confucian concept of “*an er xing zhi* 安而行之 (conducting morality and feel comfortable)” closely resembles Schiller’s idea about “willingly respecting moral law,”²⁶ which itself was predicated on Kant’s theories regarding moral sensibility.²⁷ He also sought to combine the aesthetic theory present in German metaphysics with *shijiao* 詩教, the traditional Chinese theory of poetry education.²⁸

Wang Guowei concludes the piece by suggesting:

If the propositions I have presented through the two discussions are truth, then *meiyu*, on one hand, is something which, on the one hand, develops human sensibility so that they reach the stage of entire beauty. Also on the other, it is the mean that lets people advance their *de* 德 (morals) and *zhi* 智 (wisdom).²⁹

He would later proceed from this assertion, however, to place more weight on the practical value of *meiyu*, i.e., the invisible practical value of useless things (*wuyong zhi yong* 無用之用), which differs considerably from the intentions of his early theorization of *meiyu*.

5. The Establishment and Development of Aesthetics as an Academic Discipline (1912-1949)

If Wang Guowei was responsible for presenting *meiyu*’s value within a theory of aesthetics and emphasizing its significance then Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 (1868-1940) should be described as the first to actually put these theories into practice by actually establishing aesthetics in universities as an independent academic discipline. In the assessment of the modern Chinese philosopher Feng Youlan 馮友蘭 (1895-1990): “Speaking of the achievements on bringing Western thought into China, if the most important scholar in importing British

25 Wang Guowei, *Jingan wenji*, 167.

26 Wang Guowei, *Wanguowei xueshu jingdianji*, 12.

27 Kant’s relatively complete idea about the respect for moral law is discussed in “The Incentive of Pure Practical Reason,” the third chapter of the *Critique of Practical Reason*.

28 Zhu Zhirong 朱志榮 has described this attempt as “the conversion of Schiller’s theory of ‘the aesthetic kingdom’ into the concept of ‘the moral world (道德人間)’ in Confucianism.” Zhu, Zhirong, *Zhongguo meixue yanjiu*, 85.

29 Wang Guowei, *Wang Guowei meixue lunwen xuan*, 3.

empiricism was Yan Fu, then the key figures in importing European rationalism into China were Wang Guowei and Cai Yuanpei.”³⁰

In his development of Chinese aesthetic theory Cai Yuanpei put particular emphasis on Baumgarten and Kant. Specially, his writing on Kant's three Critiques (i.e. the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the *Critique of Practical Reason* and the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*)³¹ is still regarded highly enough to be useful in the field of aesthetics,³² and is particularly notable for its comprehensiveness and accuracy, particularly in comparison to Wang Guowei's work on Kant, which has been criticized for making a number of misinterpretations. Cai Yuanpei also introduced a number of specific categories and details of Western aesthetics, e.g. aesthetic theories centered on Hegel's idealism (from *the logic of conceptuality*), psychologism, Neo-Kantianism, Experimentalism, and other specific schools of thought that had not previously received much attention in China.

However, if we focus simply on the internal structure and the logic of his theories, we find that he merely presented a fragmentary introduction to Western aesthetic thought. Moreover, he did not conduct much exploration of the relationship between aesthetics and Chinese traditional thought, at least not in the ways that Wang Guowei had done. Nevertheless, the reason why Cai Yuanpei is highly appreciated in the history of Chinese aesthetics is that he modeled the features of Chinese aesthetics by practice and not by systemic argumentation. His understanding of *meiyu* is representative this point. He insisted that “Education should be centered on ethics, and should be upheld by two wings, science and art studies”³³ under the slogan of “Substituting aesthetic education for religion (以美育代宗教).”³⁴ In his view, prior to the modern era, religion disciplined the human spirit, and the codes of conduct that religion was suggesting could be condensed into few concepts: *zhi* 知 (knowledge), *qing* 情 (emotion), *yi* 意 (justice). However, with the arrival of the modern era, these genuine roles of religion slowly declined,

30 Feng Youlan, *Zhongguo xiandai zhhexueshi*, 64.

31 “The *Critique of Judgment* is the culmination of Kant's contribution to our understanding of freedom—the human meaning of which is being-with-other-as-with-own. Central to that complex achievement and to the overarching role assigned by Kant to the aesthetic dimension (beauty, feeling, judgment, and art) is his revolutionary new way of seeing beauty and art as the expression of aesthetic ideas—a definition of them which carries him beyond formalism to illuminate also the modern and romantic search for freedom. This move also brings Kant to the threshold of religious ethics as man's ultimate freedom, his being-with-the-infinitely-transcendent-as-with-own, is, in art and beauty, disclosed for imagination and made available for the life of feeling in this world” (Hofstadter, “Kant's Aesthetic Revolution,” 171).

32 See Zhang Qiqun, *Beijing daxue zhhexue xuekeshi*, 327.

33 Cai Yuanpei, *Cai Yuanpei meixue wenxuan*, 5.

34 Regarding the topic of “aesthetics substitute religion (美育代宗教),” Cai Yuanpei also wrote specific theories in his following publications: *Meixue gainian* 美學觀念; *Huafa jiaoyuhui zhi yiqu* 華法教育會之意趣; *Meiyu gainian* 美育觀念; and *Huagong xuesiao jiangyi* 化工學校講義.

although, Cai Yuanpei believed that the *meiyu* role of religion is still alive. Cai Yuanpei thought that *meiyu* possibly substitutes the position of religion and successfully exert actual influence on the human spirit. That because moral acts are actually not determined by any knowledge or rational activities, but by the manifestation of feelings.

However, if one takes a critical view of Cai Yuanpei's argument about the relationship between moral acts and emotional factors, it seems obvious that the precondition of his theory is rather inclined to his own Chinese Confucianist thought, rather than a Kantian aesthetics which at the beginning superficially he imposed upon the field of Chinese aesthetics. He essentially selected from the spiritual realm of Confucian the method he had used for the disciplining of his own mind and advanced it as the most desirable model for carrying out *meiyu*. Therefore, he said "Confucian's spiritual life fits into the category composed with *zhi* 智 (wisdom), *ren* 仁 (benevolence) and *yong* 勇 (bravery), furthermore, he built up his moral character through music and not through religious superstitions. From this, people today can completely find a role model."³⁵ Contradistinctively, the "the power of reflective judgment"³⁶ in Kant's aesthetics theory is first a mechanism designed for connecting human understanding (*verstand*) and human rationally (*vernunft*); second, is subdivided into "the Aesthetic Power of Judgment" and "the Teleological Power of Judgment"; and third, especially in the case of "the Aesthetic Power of Judgment," is entirely disinterested. Therefore, the structure of *zhi* 知 (knowledge), *qing* 情 (emotion) and *yi* 意 (justice) than Cai Yuanpei advanced is far from Kantian aesthetic theories regarding beauty, feeling, judgment, and art. Furthermore, eventually he put more attention on the pragmatics of the theory and aggressively pushed it into governing the behavior of individuals.

The academic limitations of Cai Yuanpei's aesthetic theories were addressed by Deng Yizhe 鄧以蜚 (1892-1973), who systemically compiled fragments of Western aesthetics that had been introduced by Cai Yuanpei, and in the process formed his own aesthetic theories. In his book *Shi yu lishi* 詩與歷史 (Poems and History), he divided human mental activity into three sections: impression (*yinxiang* 印象), art (*yishu* 藝術) and knowledge (*zhishi* 知識). He argued that when people are facing the world, they form "intuitive emblems." This initial stage he called the stage of impression, and claimed that it was followed by a second stage in which people express their "intuitive emblems" outwardly in their own unique way, and that these idiosyncratic outward expressions are what we call "art." Finally, he felt

35 Cai Yuanpei, *Cai Yuanpei meixue wenxuan*, 431.

36 The notion of reflective judgment is introduced by Kant in response to a problem concerning the empirical heterogeneity of natural phenomena. In the light of this problem, reflective judgment appears to consist primarily in the capacity for engaging in systematic natural sciences. But Kant also takes reflective judgment to be exercised in judgments of taste. Ginsborg, "Reflective Judgment and Taste," 63. See also footnote 45 of this essay.

that there existed a third stage, in which people dexterously produce knowledge out of or from the art which was produced in the previous stage. This whole process of human mental activity in his theory shows that Deng Yizhe was trying to combine the Kantian notions of “free beauty (*Pulchritudo Vaga*)” and “dependent beauty (*pulchritudo adhaerens*)”³⁷ through the creative tasks of an artist. Due to his understanding of cognition and the process of artistic creation, he was against any position which might perceive artistic creation as a simple imitation of nature; he says “what so-called art is a human spiritual object and it is not something that belongs to nature.”³⁸ Obviously, this point of view about art corresponds very well with Hegel’s notion that art is a sort of a spiritual production of human beings. Deng Yizhe’s early theory of literary aesthetics was also produced under the marked influence of Hegel, as when he argued in his book *Yishujia de nanguan* 藝術家的難關 (The Difficulties of Artists) that a piece of art is an expression of the ideal stage beyond the stage of nature.³⁹

Furthermore, he attempted to combine Western aesthetics and Chinese art by performing an analysis of the relationship between the three main components of the most advanced artistic stage in Chinese thought, i.e. Chinese poetry, art and history. However, despite his intentions, he was unable to build his analysis up as a form of rigorous, logical philosophy. Nor was he successful in deriving many novel conclusions, ending up merely performing a comparative analysis of Chinese and Western art. His attempts did however create the intellectual momentum which altered the focus of a second generation of Chinese aesthetic theorists who were less concerned with communication between Western and Eastern aesthetic theories and more interested in producing aesthetic interpretations of Chinese traditional and cultural characteristics. Regarding about the issue aforementioned, he paid more attention to the concept of *yijing* 意境 and many theories about it, tried to find it’s aesthetic value. While the concept of *yijing* 意境 had been previously discussed by a few early Chinese aestheticians, Deng Yizhe used this concept in an novel, academically rigorous way to make a clear explanation of ways in which processes of

37 Kant’s distinction of two beauties, free beauty and depend beauty, is conducted in §16 of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. In his introduction to the work, Paul Guyer writes that “Kant introduces a distinction between ‘free’ and ‘adherent’ beauty: the former is beauty that is found in an object without any concept of its purpose at all, while the latter is a form of beauty that is perceived when the form of an object is felt to cohere freely with its intended purpose, as in a work of architecture, or even its moral end, as in the case of beauty.” Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, xxix-xxx. These two varieties of beauty are also intimately related with his concept of taste, as Philip Mallaband has explained: “A judgment of free beauty is a singular (pure) judgment of taste, and a judgment of dependent beauty is a complex judgment made up from a pure judgment of taste and a judgment of goodness of kind.” Mallaband, “Understanding Kant’s Distinction between Free and Dependent Beauty,” 66.

38 Deng Yizhe, *Deng Yizhe quanji*, 43.

39 See Deng Yizhe, *Deng Yizhe quanji*, 393-398.

aesthetic creation and aesthetic appreciation unfolded themselves in Chinese paintings and poems; in the end, this analysis was significant because it demonstrated that it was possible to study aesthetic theory academically.

If Deng Yizhe demonstrated the possibility of an academically rigorous aesthetics, it was Zhu Guangqian 朱光潛 (1897-1986) who best extended these efforts, elaborating aesthetic studies into a comparatively complete and systematic form. Perhaps more importantly, Zhu popularized aesthetics and did a great deal to establish it as a field of generalized study in China. As one of the best known aestheticians in China, Zhu has been constantly conducting academic research in the field from the second period (1912-1949) to the fourth period (1978-).⁴⁰ Chinese society has obviously undergone a number of social and political changes during his period of activity, and his aesthetic theories, unsurprisingly, show different features depending on when they were developed. Regardless of the changing political tendencies of Zhu's theories, much of his work has exerted influence on the Chinese academy. Additionally, no matter the period in which he has been writing, his basic academic position surrounding the proposition of "object-image (*wuxiang* 物象)"⁴¹ has never changed. Not only he has emphasized this proposition from the time of his earliest writing on aesthetics, this has remained the central idea during every phase of his thought.

According to his expression, the object-image (*wuxiang*)" has special features as follows:

"Beauty" is not only a thing existing in the object (*wu* 物), nor is it a thing only existing in the mind (*xin* 心). "Beauty" exists in the relationship between object and mind. However, this kind of relationship is not the kind where something like objects provide stimulus and the mind receives that stimulus, as Kant and ordinary people believe. That (beauty) is something where mind expresses the "sentiment (*qingqu* 情趣)" through the means of object-image (*wuxiang* 物象). There does not exist anything which freely and easily turns into "beauty" since its creation. Every kind of "beauty" must undergo a process of creation in the human mind.⁴²

Here, Zhu Guangqian clearly defines "beauty" as something that "mind (*xin* 心)" expresses out of "sentiment (*qingqu* 情趣)" through the means of object-image (*wuxiang* 物象), and further clarifies that beauty itself belongs to neither object (*wu* 物) nor mind alone. Considering the academic trends in Western countries at this time and Zhu's own personal experiences

40 See the second paragraph of this essay's introduction for more detail on these period classifications.

41 Zhu Guangqian made more specific discussion about the core concept of object-image (*wuxiang* 物象) in the short chapter of "Zai women duiyu yi ke gusong de san zhong taidu" 在我们对于一棵古松的三种态度 (Our three kinds of attitude to treat an old pine tree). See Zhu, *Zhu Guangqian quanji*, 8-11.

42 Zhu Guangqian, *Zhu Guangqian quanji*, 346-347.

studying in Europe, it is quite reasonable to assume that this argument amalgamates several aesthetics theories, including intuitionism, the theory of psychological distance, and the theory of common sense.

Unfortunately, with the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, intellectuals in mainland China, including Zhu Guangqian, had to adapt themselves to the new political conditions and ideology. On result of this political adjustment was that aesthetic thought, which had already reached a considerably in-depth level through the development of the first two stages of aesthetics studies in China, effectively came to a pause for decades. In the case of Zhu Guangqian, he responded to this new political climate by modifying the whole structure of his aesthetic thinking into a shape that aligned more closely with Soviet aesthetics, incorporating more ideologically approved psychological tendencies into his "The theory of unification of objective and subjective" (*zhukeguan tongyi shuo* 主客觀統一說). Despite these alterations, Zhu still cleaved to his basic ideas about the object-image. On the whole, however, during this third stage of development, the academic circle of Chinese aestheticians came under the control of political power, making the era worse than a merely academically barren period, since not only did aesthetic thought in China stop advancing, its fundamental academic form was distorted, turning it into a pragmatic study discussing purpose and practicability, rather than investigations of "beauty" itself.

6. Final Remarks

From the time that Wang Guowei brought some core concepts and theories of aesthetics from Japan into Chinese intellectual life in 1902, the modern study of aesthetics in mainland China has largely advanced through four stages of development. There have been numerous recent achievements in China in the field of aesthetics, however it can be said that these great achievements resulted largely from the exertions and contemplations of those early Chinese aestheticians that this paper has examined; all of whom did their work in the first and second stages of aesthetics development as a field in China. The establishment of the Republic of China (Zhonghuaminguo 中華民國) as the first republic in Asia was accompanied by the modernization of the Chinese academic system, and it was in this larger context that those early aestheticians' efforts brought about an invaluable result: The study of aesthetics began to have systemic form, while independent departments of aesthetics were established as an academic branch of the schools in many Chinese universities.

The academic achievements of the early aestheticians that this paper has examined can be appraised in the following ways: 1. From the point of view of their philosophical tendencies, it can be said that it was a priority

for them to introduce Western aesthetics to China, with particular attention given to the theories of Kant and Hegel; 2. Facing the methodological and structural gap between Eastern and Western approaches to scholarship, they struggled to free themselves from the academic limitations imposed by their traditional knowledge system. This struggle took several forms, some of which were deeply significant for subsequent research; for example, they made the very first attempts to combine Western and Eastern thought, identifying some important shared concepts which increased the possibilities for future dialogue between the two traditions. They also applied this new academic method and system to recover the aesthetic value embedded within some of their own traditional theories of art. In addition, some early Chinese aestheticians put more emphasis on their own *meiyu* thought, and led a movement to replace religion with their *meiyu* thought, before *meiyu* settled into its current role as a single research branch of Chinese aesthetics. These foundational achievements of the early Chinese aestheticians undergird the whole structure of Chinese aesthetics, even as it exists today. Thus the importance of these early aesthetic theories cannot be overlooked.

However, when the People's Republic of China was established in mainland China in 1949, the third generation of Chinese aestheticians set aside the great achievements of their predecessors and walked into a dark age during which time most aesthetic theories in China regressed or were severely distorted. In 1978, the Chinese Cultural Revolution (Wenhua dageming 文化大革命) finally came to an end, and was replaced with the movement to "reform and open to the outside world" (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放). As a part of this larger social and political flow of ideas, the academic field of aesthetics which had been frozen for decades began to thaw, entering into its fourth stage of development. Although the political repression seemed to be finished, Chinese aestheticians in this period failed to carry on the aesthetic thinking which had been developed in depth by the first and the second generations of aestheticians, and indiscriminately accepted foreign culture and art theories in great quantities. As a consequence they lost their academic identity and produced a number of divisions in the research domain of aesthetics, as well as confusion regarding the field's object of study and methodology. For instance, the research domain of aesthetics in China began to branch out into further areas including the study of art, art psychotherapy, art criticism, and so forth, becoming so diffuse that they lost sight of the fundamental purpose of the study of aesthetics. They were further hampered by their undue reliance on the methodology cited in Western philosophy, which reliance resulted in their conducting superficial substitutions from two very different streams of thought without sufficient critical introspection, eventually bringing the field into a chaotic state.

In this current academic condition, the discussions that the early Chinese aestheticians had during the first two stages of aesthetics' academic

development should be reevaluated. Because they were the prime movers who directly faced the most fundamental problems of aesthetics and tried to thoughtfully integrate two independently developed streams of aesthetics thought, their in-depth studies of aesthetics could provide a foundation to help contemporary scholars in the field of Chinese aesthetic face the existing academic crisis in the field and reenter the genuine academic field of aesthetics. In any event, it will only be when academic inquiry is undertaken on this basis that the study of aesthetics in China can advance as authentically “aesthetic” and the proposal of a set of aesthetic values shared mutually across Eastern and Western thought become possible.

■ Submitted: 2015.12.14 / Reviewed: 2015.12.16-2016.01.15 / Confirmed for publication: 2016.01.20

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作為中國近代獨立學科之美學的成立與發展 (1897-1949)

徐希定

中文摘要

本文旨在對作為中國近代獨立學科之美學的成立與發展進行批判性攷察，闡明當代中國美學學科研究對象的特殊性，並試圖從根本上揭示其癥結之所在。“美學”是近代以後，作為哲學的一個分支學科而出現的新學科，具有“以感性認識為研究對象”這一極為明確的特點。就其根本而言，美學實質上仍是將哲學思維作為其根基的。與此同時，由於藝術具有與感性直接相關的特殊性，故而美學研究與藝術之間也存有極為密切的聯係。然而，本論所探討的所謂“中國的美學”，在其學科成立與發展過程中，迺至於在其研究對象與範疇上，都與西方的“美學”(aesthetics)大相徑庭。西方的“美學”是沿襲西方哲學傳統，在社會、學科的近代化過程中逐步發展而來的，以感性認識為研究對象的學科。而中國語境下的“美學”學科，則是在中國近代化過程中從西方藉鑒引進而來的。中國的“美學”所關注的問題本身實質上與西方傳統的“美學”學科有著全然不同的根源。從而，在西方的美學學科進入到中國傳統思維模式與思想體系的過程之中，便出現了諸多摩擦、交鋒與碰撞。其結果迺是，逐漸形成了當下所謂“中國式美學”之獨特的研究形態，而這一研究形態實質上並不符合西方固有的“美學”學科本身，從而致使中國的美學學科陷入了某種程度上的迷茫與困頓。基於如此的處境，本論文將在對中國美學學科的成立與發展進行批判性攷察的基礎上，來探討中國的美學學科如何達到“學術認同性”(academic identity)這一問題。從而揭示出中國的美學學科成為嚴格意義上獨立學科的可能性，並試圖探尋中國美學的發展出路與前景。

關鍵詞：近現代學科，感性學，中國美學，美學