

Book Review: Li Zehou. *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition* Trans. Maija Bell Samei Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010

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Li Zehou's *Huaxia meixue* (华夏美学) (*The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*) was published in 1989, ten years after his *Pipan zhexue de pipan* (批判哲学的批判) (Critique of Critical Philosophy) (1979) on Kant's philosophy. The decade between these two books marked the "free thinking movement" in modern China and witnessed the translations of Western philosophical works such as Heidegger's *Being and Time* and Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. In Chinese scholarship, Li is noted for his pioneering works dealing with Kant's philosophy and Chinese traditional aesthetics. During the 1980s, the influence of Western existentialism was prevalent on Chinese campuses, where scholars and artists passionately sought a new understanding of humanity after the Cultural Revolution. It was during this period that there emerged the melancholic reflective movement including so-called scar literature, nostalgic paintings, and fictional architecture. The academic fresh air emanating from Western influence diverted the Chinese students' attention from Li's solitary journey for traditional aesthetics. Through the conflicts resulting from the technical world-view brought about by the Chinese modernization process, the significance of Li's reconstruction of aesthetic tradition is now being recognized. His books are, once again, among the most popular in Chinese book-

stores. His philosophy consistently intrigues its audience to contemplate what is fundamentally missing in contemporary China and what is most valuable within Chinese culture.

The chapters begin with the rites and music of the pre-Confucian age, then flow into Confucian humanism, the interaction between Daoist and Confucian thoughts, the southern theoretical line of Qu Yuan's deep emotion, and the metaphysical pursuits of the Buddhist Chan School, and they end with the theoretical trend in early modernity. Compared with other Chinese books that chronologically list individuals' aesthetic ideas, Li's book undertakes a philosophical investigation of fundamental issues in Chinese aesthetics, ones such as rites, humanity, freedom, emotion, contemplation, and desire. He concludes by regarding the aesthetic tradition as the ontology of Chinese philosophy, which latter he calls "anthropological ontology," to emphasize humankind itself as the noumenon of China's culture. Differing from Western transcendental subjectivity, ontological humankind retains rich emotion (*qing* 情) by living in a concrete historical process of an individual's life. Li's ontological aesthetics is well demonstrated by the title of his earlier book *Meide licheng* (美的历程) (*The Path of Beauty*) in 1981, which hints at his own life journey engaged in searching for aesthetics.

Li began this search with the term *mei* (美) (beautiful), which is etymologically related to delicious taste and totem dancers. The etymological meaning was interjected into Confucian rites and music, which pageantry cultivated an individual's emotion for the sake of a harmonic ordering of society. There continues to exist within the Confucian system an inherent conflict between the development of individual emotion and the restriction of collective ethics. The conflict has reinforced the aesthetic role of poetry and southern-style painting for expression of individual emotion. In contrast, Li emphasizes the Confucian tradition as the basis of Chinese aesthetics by arguing that the core concept of humaneness (*ren* 仁) in Confucian tradition should be aesthetically understood as compassionate humanism. Confucian ethics, although being closely related to state politics, is an aesthetic categorization about the beauty of humanity. Confucius' kindness was elevated by Mencius to the "strong beauty" of subjectivity, the vital force of ethics, which was further altered in the *Yizhuan* (易传) (Commentaries to the Book of Changes) into the consciousness of the harmony between heaven and earth.

It was through Daoism that the Confucian harmony between heaven and earth was truly developed into an aesthetic attitude that valued the ultimate joy of fusing with nature by means of withdrawing from society. The Daoist intuitive perception of nature, the transcendence of the human world, resulted in the popular eremitism among the literati and stimulated the birth of landscape aesthetics, centered on the concept of "free and easy wandering" (*xiaoyaoyou* 逍遥游). Li describes the Daoist aesthetic situation as a matter of "infinite beauty" which is beyond linguistic expression and is required to be carried out through an abnormal approach, such as regarding the odd-looking rocks in gardens. The aesthetic conflict within the Confucian tradition is thus resolved by the Daoist romantic strategy of living in nature where both emotional and natural beauty overlap. The Daoist aesthetic joy, as exemplified in skillful and divinely-inspired craftsmen, cultivates an ethical personality for Confucian society.

The mythological line of pre-Confucian aesthetics was best maintained in the southern culture with Qu Yuan's poetry as its representative. Li describes Qu's living towards death as the perfect integration of unrestricted romantic imagination and Confucian sincerity aimed at human truth. By selecting death, Qu unfolded his deep emotion for a truthful life, which Li equated with existentialist Being. In the literature and art of the Wei-Jin period (3rd-6th centuries), experience of deep emotion between life and death became ontologically aesthetic, and individual emotion was identified with a universal outlook towards the world. Beauty thus became a symbol of morality. The aesthetic development of this historical period is best presented by the concept of *yijing* (意境), which is translated in the book as "artistic conception," but it literally means "idea-projected environs" through which emotion and a beautiful scene are fused into "imaginary reality" via imagination.

Chan Buddhism integrates the Daoist love of nature and Qu Yuan's deep emotion into a subtle awakening of eternity, which can be encountered through sudden enlightenment in daily life. Li maintains that because Chan seeks timelessness through extraordinary means, the Chan approach must be poetical and philosophical. The aesthetic situation of Chan can be equated with the concept of "blandness" (*dandan*) in which Being presents itself in quietness. Li advances that it was through the metaphysics of Chan that aesthetics took over the role of religion in Chinese culture.

After the peak of rationality of Neo-Confucianism, the mind (i.e., human heart) rose as a central philosophical concept emphasizing a sensuous connection with the temporal world. In literature and paintings of the Ming and Qing dynasties (15th-18th centuries), individual desire and emotion were sought to satisfy specific aesthetic tastes. Artistic creation began to follow patterns abstracted from the past. Such mechanical patterns weakened the cosmic dimension of the aesthetic tradition and motivated the 19th-century theory of an "aesthetic realm" (*jingjie* 境界) influenced by Schopenhauer's pessimistic perception of "the world as will." In increasingly atheistic China the collapse of traditional aesthetics led to the national movement of aesthetic education, modeled on Kant's ethical theology.

Through the creative analysis of classic literature and poetry, Li builds up a theoretical framework of Chinese aesthetics that is based on the Confucian tradition but integrates the ideas of Daoism, Qu Yuan, and Chan Buddhism. His research emphasizes the historicity of Chinese aesthetics as the cultural "sedimentation" of idealist intellectuals' consistent longing for a beautiful life. Throughout the book, Li occasionally inserts some Western aesthetic theories for comparison with his argument. Although without carefully defining the comparability, his casual quotes of Western theories do not strengthen his claim for a historicity of Chinese aesthetics. Because his research on Kant's philosophy has been part of his life journey, one becomes convinced that his methodology of ontologically questing for Chinese aesthetics and defining it as the ontology of Chinese culture has indeed demonstrated the influence of Kant's critiques.

About the Author

Hui Zou is an associate professor of architectural history and theory at the School of Architecture, University of Florida. His research interests include architectural and garden histories, architectural philosophy, and comparative cultural studies in the art of building. His research searches for historical coincidences (*qiaohe* 巧合, literally, “crafty joint” in an architectural sense) and endeavors to reveal the horizon of their meanings.