Summary

THE SPACE OF IMAGINATION: TRADITIONAL CHINESE AESTHETICS AND ART

The Distinctive Nature of Chinese Aesthetic Theory

Chinese aesthetics is an uncommonly distinctive cultural phenomenon created by the spiritual values of a great civilization. China is where many fundamental ideas formed that determined the main features of Far Eastern aesthetics and art. When we compare the aesthetics of China with that of other great Eastern civilizations, we can distinguish some characteristic features. First of all, Chinese and Indian aesthetic theories are connected by a sustained continuity of ideas determined by equally rich unbroken traditions in the development of spiritual culture. On the other hand, unlike India, where normative aesthetic treatises on poetry and dramatic art are dominant, in China – because of the visual-associative apprehension of reality characteristic of a pictographic culture – aesthetic works on painting and calligraphy stand out. In Korea and Japan aesthetic thought, like the entire culture of these countries, is more sensitive to external influences, experiences more transformations, and more easily adopts innovations. In China, however, we can see the incomparably stronger influence of aesthetic and artistic traditions formed over centuries.

The role of tradition in the history of Chinese aesthetics and art is one of the most wonderful phenomena in the spiritual culture of mankind. The West has long since been dominated by a vulgar attitude that bluntly opposes the "dynamism" of European culture, with its constantly alternating periods of rise and decline, to the "stability" – near stagnation – of Chinese cultural traditions. If we look more closely at how Chinese civilization developed, battered by drastic, apocalyptic historical shocks and disastrous invasions by nomadic peoples, all of which completely interrupted – for a while, at least – the steady development of cultural, aesthetic, and artistic traditions, we can be convinced of the shallowness of these Eurocentric theories. Like dynamic periods of rising spiritual powers, times of stagnation are equally characteristic of the aesthetic and artistic traditions of both Western and Eastern cultures.

The cultural, aesthetic, and artistic strata, movements, themes, and leitmotifs that crystallized in China obeyed, as it were, a law of undulating change. Here, traditionalism, the search for something new, and the constant remining of the cultural lodes of the past always progressed together. The cultural tradition was open, plastic, and dynamic, strong enough to adapt to the needs of the day, and capable of integrating not only new forms, themes, and motifs but also entire socially important strata of spiritual culture. In this way, the cultural, aesthetic, and artistic tradition of the Chinese became, by absorbing new content in every period, ever richer and more multilayered. It was naturally self-regulating. For this reason, meaningful progress in Chinese aesthetics and art primarily demanded that the bearers of this culture achieve self-awareness in tradition, adapt this tradition, and guarantee its further continuity and transmission. The cult of traditionalism dominates Confucian aesthetics. Even those who follow Daoist and Chan aesthetic concepts and outwardly negate traditionalism unconsciously form traditions of their own based on other ideas and ideals.

The syncretic aesthetic worldview embodied in the canonical texts of the Archaic Period is closely connected to ancient Chinese strata of prephilosophical mythology, folklore, and ritual and artistic culture. When we acquaint ourselves with the oldest surviving texts, we can easily see that early ontological, cosmogonic, and organicist concepts are closely connected with aesthetic views. Here, the cosmos, nature, and man are understood as a single living organism filled with beauty and harmony.

Along with the terminology of related branches of learning, the beginnings of Chinese aesthetic categories were formed in old written records – the *Yijing*, *Shijing*, *Lunyu*, *Laozi*, and *Zhuangzi*. In the absence of clear-cut boundaries between philosophy, other branches of learning, and literature, these texts used a unified terminology that led to different levels of understanding pictogrammatic texts: 1) visual-metaphorical, 2) concrete-emotional, and 3) abstract-philosophical. The multilayered effect of character script greatly expanded the self-expression of thinkers and artists.

Unlike the Western tradition of philosophical aesthetics, where the development of terminology and basic concepts is promoted by ideas, in China this important function is usually performed by categories. These categories not only coalesce with the totality of certain pictogrammatic structures but also become the most important stimulus for Chinese aesthetic thinking. Here, new ideas are regarded as a revival of old ones expressed in the works of ancient sages of the "golden age." For this attitude to become entrenched, something characteristic of Confucianism helped greatly: the cult of traditionalism and canonized texts. This cult encourages the followers of every school to rely on ancient categories, which, once they have appeared in a new context, constantly acquire new nuances and significances that are often rather far removed from their primary meaning. Hence follow the polysemy and situativity characteristic of many basic Chinese aesthetic categories because, depending on the context, the same term acquires different meanings. In essence, this polysemy and situativity distinguish the world of Chinese aesthetic categories from that of India and Europe.

As Chinese civilization matured and formed its own aesthetic traditions, this feature of aesthetic terminology and how it is understood, closely connected with the principles of character script, essentially changed the relationship between the aesthetic tradition of China and those of other countries. After becoming one of the most important cradles of world culture, Chinese civilization gradually acquired confidence in its own powers and the ability to adapt to its own needs many of the ideas that penetrated from other countries and to give them a distinctively Chinese form. This fate could not be avoided even by such a fully developed metaphysical doctrine as Buddhism, which underwent the influence of Chinese philosophical traditions and quickly acquired Chinese features.

This syncretic and broad concept eventually distinguished between those kinds of art that are cultivated by the lower strata of society and are closely connected with practical human needs and those that satisfy the spiritual needs of the aristocracy. There was a differentiation between the crafts that were just beginning to develop and the art needed by "highborn people." Moreover, the concept of art split into two other levels. The first, or lower, one embraced those forms of creative activity that were connected with external adornment. These included what was very popular in ancient and medieval China: landscape architecture, the composition of artificial lakes and ponds, the art of eloquence, many rituals and ceremonies, i.e. everything foreign to the natural and, in one way or another, connected with the "artificial." Performing a hedonistic function, the art of adornment devoted most of its attention to satisfying human emotional needs. Oriented toward external aesthetics, it could not, according to the authors of the ancient texts, give people an understanding

of the nature of true beauty. It is no accident that, when the artistic forms of adornment are treated, only the results of creation are usually discussed – and not the creative process itself.

The second, or higher, form was that of "spiritual" art. Although it relied on external expression, it looked at it only as a means and not as the ultimate goal of creative activity. Hence followed the main feature of high art: the ability to masterfully express, through outward form, the essence of an inward spiritual vision. In Chinese aesthetics, the artist-creator of true spiritual art is regarded as a philosopher. This relationship between the true artist and the philosopher is primarily expressed through what is characteristic of both of them – the direct power of intuitive knowledge and the ability to penetrate through the veil of external phenomena to their true nature. A characteristic feature of Chinese culture has always been the inner connection between art and philosophy. In traditional Chinese culture, the artist was understood not only as a subtle painter, calligrapher, poet, and musician but also, primarily, as a thinker, a scholar, a universal personality of high intellect, one with a multifaceted education and with the power of intuitive knowledge, one who could use the achievements of the multilayered Chinese cultural tradition. This emphasis on the closeness between the artist and the philosopher explains why in Chinese aesthetics the artist is described as a sage and why, in discussions of the artist's intuitive power to know the essence of phenomena, literature often uses the concepts of master and sage alongside each other. Hidden in the canonical books of Chinese wisdom, this syncretic mythological and folkloristic worldview gives aesthetics, literature, and art an abstract way of modeling the world and a rich system of artistic images. The *Yijing* (Book of Changes) became the main source of ancient Chinese philosophical aesthetics, and the beginnings of art-historical aesthetics emerged in the folkloric and individual poetic texts collected in the *Shijing* (Classic of Poetry). The third important source of aesthetic thought came from reflections on the symbolical meaning of archaic rituals or on the ritual process itself. This tendency can be clearly seen in the *Liji* (Book of Rituals).

When discussing the highest aesthetic qualities of the universe, natural phenomena, things, and people, these canonical books use the category of *mei* (beauty). It is used in this sense in many of the other oldest texts of the first half of the 1st millennium B.C. According to dictionaries that appeared in China at the beginning of our era, *mei* originally meant 'sweet,' although this word was also used in the sense of 'beauty, excellence, goodness.' In the oldest texts of the Zhou Period (12th – 3rd century B.C.), the category of *mei* often acquires an ethical nuance and is used as a synonym of 'goodness' (*shan*).

Moreover, the combination of the concepts *mei* and *shan* in the compound *meishan* was then used to describe the "inner beauty" of ceremonies and the ritual process. We would immediately like to draw attention to a specific aspect of this description, one that is closely connected with the characteristic search of Chinese aesthetics for the inner, mysterious nature of beauty. Although the beauty of ritual ceremonies is expressed through outward forms, in the ancient texts in which we encounter the synthetic concept of *meishan* we clearly see an appeal to "inner" aesthetic qualities.

The Chinese Concept of Aestheticism

Chinese aesthetics, which has laid the foundations for the other great traditions of the Far East, stands out in the history of aesthetic thought not only because of its continuity but also

because of its especial subtlety and a multitude of distinctive features that separate it from the great aesthetic traditions that have developed in other regions of the world. The refinement of the mature Chinese aesthetic and artistic tradition can be explained by the inclusion in its creation of a comprehensively educated highborn aristocracy, high-ranking officials, thinkers, scholars, artists, and writers who have relied for millennia on rich traditions of philosophy and artistic practice, the ideal of the noble-minded wise man, and the distinctive ideology of their own "artistic path."

Typical of Western scholars is an unconscious desire to impose on the study of the aesthetic and artistic theories of other civilizations, thus, too, that of the Chinese, their own intellectual schemata, their own theoretical and methodological principles. However, the Western concept of aesthetics can be applied only with certain qualifications to traditional Chinese aesthetics, which is based on different attitudes toward the relationship between man and the natural world around him, aestheticism, art, the hierarchy of the arts, the artist, the goals of his creative work, the creative process, the most important factors that influence it, etc. For this reason, as we acquaint ourselves with traditional Chinese aesthetics, artistic theory, and art, we must not forget the distinctiveness of the aesthetic phenomenon we are studying.

In a close comparative analysis of the characteristics of aesthetic thought, its manifestations in nature, and its traditions in art, we are immediately struck by the fundamental differences in how it developed in China, India, and the West. These differences primarily emerge in basic theoretical attitudes, in categories and areas of interest, in accents on specific problems and on their distinctive interpretation. Moreover, in each of these traditions different movements have developed – schools with their own distinctive views of the fundamental problems of philosophical and art-historical aesthetics. These differences are also obvious in the basic theoretical attitudes of the most influential movements in Chinese aesthetics (Confucianism, Daoism, Chan). For example, in texts by Confucian artists and followers of Confucianism there emerges, more clearly than in other movements, an attraction to rational thinking, to the logical arrangement of ideas, to more clearly defined categories, while Daoist and Chan thinking often amazes us with its paradoxes and the indefiniteness typical of its categories, the dependence of meaning on a specific context and situation.

When we look back at the long path trodden by Chinese aesthetic thought, we cannot categorically state that traditional Chinese culture has a "science of beauty" in the Western sense of this discipline. First of all, the compound term *meixue*, which consists of the words *mei* (beauty) and *xue* (science) and is widespread in today's Chinese humanities, is a neologism that was coined only in the early 20th century. It has become established through the translation of Western aesthetic texts and a search for Chinese equivalents of the concept aesthetics. In China, this search for symmetrical terminological equivalents is shaped by the various factors involved in the encounter between the development of learning and Western civilization: it is primarily a way to help one better understand the distinctive nature of the ancient Mediterranean world and Western aesthetic and artistic traditions. Moreover, it follows from a quest for cultural dialogue, from the desire to have a rewarding discussion with representatives of the Western aesthetic and artistic tradition in the domain of their theoretical concepts and ideas. And finally, a reception of the ideas and theoretical and methodological principles of Western aesthetics helps the Chinese themselves better understand the distinctiveness and value of their own traditions in aesthetics, art theory, and art.

The Typological Features of Philosophical and Art– Historical Aesthetics

As in many other regions of the world, there are two basic currents in the development of Chinese aesthetic thought: first, a philosophical one and, later, an art-historical one, both of which reflect theoretically on the aesthetic patterns that emerge in various art forms and on the artist's attitude toward the world around him, nature, and the various subtleties involved in creating and employing the means of artistic expression. In the field of philosophical aesthetics, the deepest mark on the history of Chinese aesthetic thought was left by Daoism, Confucianism, Chan, and less significantly legalism, whose proponents formulated the fundamental principles of these movements for understanding the aesthetic world. We encounter the rudiments of these principles during the 6th – 3rd century B. C., when ancient Chinese attitudes crystallized toward aesthetic phenomena and various forms of artistic activity. The earliest stage in the development of aesthetic thought was dominated by Confucian and Daoist thinkers. Without stretching the truth too much, we can interpret the later development of philosophical aesthetics as a constantly expanding commentary on the texts of Daoism (*Laozi*, *Zhuangzi*) and, less often, Confucianism (The Analects, or *Lunyu*). Eventually, alongside these two basic movements in philosophical aesthetics, there also unfolded the aesthetic ideas of Neo-Daoism, Chan, and Neo-Confucianism. As all these movements interacted among themselves, they formed a specific world of situational and contextual categories in philosophical aesthetics and a field of basic problems.

Dominant for many centuries in the milieu of the imperial palace, Confucianism was an important factor in the development of early traditional culture and aesthetic thought. The ideas about morality and the regulation of life that characterize the Confucian aesthetic tradition were primarily directed toward a cult of traditionalism and ethical attitudes that provided the basis for examining the fundamental problems of aesthetics and artistic creation. Hence follows the call to Confucian adepts to rely on the age-old laws of order, justice, and morality that lead to harmony in social relations and things and define the artist's relationship to nature and society.

Confucian aesthetics spread not only in the milieu of the imperial palace, among members of the academies for calligraphy and painting established in the capitals, but also in provincial cultural centers influenced by state administrative institutions. In their treatment of artistic problems, Confucians focused on the social functions of art and on what they distinguished as its three main ones: the illustrative, the magical, and the moral. The most important of these, the moral one, emphasizes the power of art to develop the socially significant qualities of a noble-minded and harmonious personality: virtue, a noble spirit, a sense of duty, and the cultivation of wisdom and spiritual equilibrium. According to the followers of Confucianism, a sense of harmony, truth, beauty, refinement, subtlety, and the other supreme aesthetic values can be attained not by common people, but only by noble-minded individuals who are guided by noble deeds and ethical principles of life.

Ancient Chinese culture already experienced the tremendous influence of the classical philosophical opponent of Confucianism – Daoism, whose founders, Laozi and Zhuangzi, dissociated themselves from social conventions and distrusted the power of words. Daoism, which exalts creative freedom, attracted those creative personalities who were of an artistic nature and had consciously avoided the milieu of the imperial palace with its rigidly defined rituals. Under the growing influence of Neo-Confucianism, however, these ideas exalting seclusion, solitude, and spontaneity later also influenced the imperial academies of calligraphy and painting, whose members were obligated to follow the provisions of Confucian aesthetics.

The point of departure for Daoist aesthetics is the exaltation of the mysterious *Dao* (way, essence), which cannot be expressed in words. The universal Daoist teaching of the Way of the Dao with its many different connotations and with all of its basic attributes (the interaction between yin and yang, harmony, beauty, naturalness, simplicity, etc.) is the fundamental leitmotif of Daoist aesthetics and pervades various aspects of its aesthetic theory and artistic practice. After adopting some elements of a mythical worldview, the adherents of philosophical Daoism plunge into an exploration of the relationship between man and nature. For them, harmony is primarily connected with the fullness of human existence, feelings of joy, and the natural unfolding of creative powers in the haven of external nature. Hence follows the special attention that Daoist thinkers give to the concepts of wholeness and fullness because they believe that in the world around man individual people and things exist only in a more universal system of harmony between all things and relationships. Thus, the system "earth – man – heaven" with all its component parts exists in accordance with the unified principles of the *Dao*, and the relationship between the individual and the whole is described in terms of balance, purposefulness, wholeness, the unity of opposites, and other concepts that acquire an aesthetic shading and are akin to harmony.

Daoist philosophy characteristically exalts an ideology of the aesthetic life and of "the way of art" as "the way of the wise." This exaltation is supplemented with its own distinctive symbolism, which is connected with the primordial forms of nature: a wheel with a man's light footprint and a square with a woman's dark one. Here, spirit is opposed to matter, the ideal – to the natural, beauty – to ugliness, good – to evil, the sky – to the earth, light – to darkness, mountains – to waters, the right – to the left, the top – to the bottom, the center – to the periphery, the active – to the passive, organized structure – to amorphous, etc. A dialectical perception of all the processes of nature, life, and artistic creation pervades Daoist aesthetics and becomes one of its properties.

The third philosophical movement to greatly influence Chinese aesthetic thought is Chan Buddhism (Chan), which came from India but was distinctively transformed by Chinese intellectual traditions. This movement in philosophical aesthetics developed from Mahāyāna Buddhism and the ideas of the sixth Chan patriarch, Huineng, and Mazu Daoyi. From Chan monasteries, it spread among philosophers, the creative intelligentsia, and artists and acquired tremendous influence during the Tang Period. Chan thinkers developed ideas derived from a mythic worldview and akin to those of the Daoists – ideas about the primordial unity of the universe and nature and about the harmony in all that exists.

Chan thinkers doubted the power of the word, which Confucians glorified; they believed that words cannot convey the Absolute, the true mysterious nature of phenomena and art. They connected knowledge of the Absolute and of the unity of all manifestations of perfect natural harmony and true art with the enlightenment of consciousness that comes through meditation and with the path of intuitive knowledge. For this reason, words are understood here as merely secondary, auxiliary instruments of true knowledge, for they can neither describe nor through the language of images authentically convey knowledge of the intuitively grasped unity of the universe and nature and of the primordial harmony of all that exists.

Thus, according to the followers of Chan philosophy, neither words nor visual images can authentically convey the underlying nature of the things and phenomena in the world around us. They can convey only an intimation of the truth because the real truth lies hidden beyond the limits of conceptual logical thinking and an emotional perception of the world. Hence follows the special

attraction of Chan thinkers – and later also of the followers of Japanese Zen aesthetics and art, the tradition that developed from this movement – to paradoxical, metaphorical, associative thinking, aesthetic suggestion, and ineffability, which overcome the contradictions that arise on the way to intuitive knowledge of the truth.

As followers of Zhuangzi, Huineng, and Mazu Daoyi, the proponents of Chan aesthetics exalted the avoidance of social ties, mercantile cares, and the contradictions of rational and emotional knowledge; they sought spiritual freedom, fullness of being, and the enlightenment of consciousness in commitment to artistic creation and the ideology of the way of art. They believed that the constantly changing world of enchanting mountains, forests, rivers, and lakes that provide man with a sanctuary is, in the grandeur of its harmony, superior to one that has been artificially created. By poeticizing the harmony and beauty of nature, Chan aesthetics reflects the longing of ascetically inclined Chinese intellectuals and artists for a simple life in the bosom of nature and a contemplative, meditational relationship with the reality around them.

Even in the simplest natural phenomena, Chan thinkers discern their unusual aspects, and they call upon the artist to speak forth, through a seemingly minor, insignificant detail, about great, important matters connected with the nature of existence. For this reason, they turn established aesthetic attitudes upside – down, as it were, and highlight the other side, unseen by others, of the diversity of natural phenomena, the creative process, and works of art. Here, we see in operation the distinctive antilogic typical of the paradoxical nature of Chan thinking. This paradoxicality in perceiving reality, in thinking, and in creating art gives special depth to works by followers of Chan aesthetics.

Alongside our briefly discussed philosophical line of aesthetic thought drawn from the works of Confucius, Laozi, Zhuangzi, Huineng, and other thinkers, for millennia China has also had and developed a parallel art-historical aesthetic tradition (Cai Yong, Lu Ji, Wang Xizhi, Zong Bing, Wang Wei [415–453], Xie He, Du Fu, Wáng Wéi [701–761], Jing Hao, Su Shi, Mi Fu, Guo Xi, Zhang Yanyuan, Dong Qichang, Shitao, Wang Kai, etc.). This latter tradition is derived not from the world of abstract philosophical ideas, but from a theoretical summation of specific artistic practice. The spread of art-historical aesthetic ideas is connected with the intensifying development of various art forms. During the early centuries of our era, as Neo-Daoism fused with Chan, influential movements in calligraphy, poetry, and painting emerged, and they promoted the development of new syncretic theories in art-historical aesthetics. For centuries, artists inclined toward theoretical reflection have produced a huge torrent of art-historical treatises and other literature dealing with artistic problems.

The early period of art- historical aesthetics emerged around the 4th century, when the tradition arose among Chinese intellectuals, littérateurs, and artists to record their thoughts, observations, insights, and emotional experiences connected with various art forms, especially the subtleties and theoretical principles of poetry, calligraphy, painting, and music. Eventually, a huge corpus formed – of notes, fragmentary thoughts, and unified theoretical treatises that devote a great deal of attention to various problems in aesthetics and the theory of art. The first appearance of art-historical aesthetics occurred during the Jin Dynasty in the Neo-Daoist *Fengliu* Movement, in the theoretical views and work of Tao Yuanming, Gu Kaizhi, and Wang Xizhi.

While living in solitude for two decades and doing the simplest labor as a farmer, the leading ideologue of this movement, Tao Yuanming, devoted himself to the realization of his creative goals.

Thus, he may be regarded as the ideological founder of the "way of art," which exalts living in seclusion, and as an example of an authentic creator who has inspired many great masters of Chinese and Japanese art to realize the principles of this way in practice.

In the Neo-Daoist and Chan aesthetic traditions, artists give special attention to various elements of psychotraining and meditational practice. By associatively linking the means of expression of three art forms, calligraphy, painting, and poetry, they open up broad possibilities for a metaphorical understanding of reality. In Chan aesthetics, the spontaneous creation of poetry, calligraphy, and paintings is understood as an effective means of helping artists and apprehenders unfold and expand their conscious powers and plunge into the other, deeper nature of things and phenomena lying hidden beneath a layer of outward appearances. Thus, the authentic artist is seen as a creator who is on the way of constant becoming, of negating his achievements and perfecting himself. For this reason, Chan aesthetics devotes special attention to the artist's inner world, to introspection, the contemplation of nature, the achievement of spiritual perfection, and the authentic expression of mood, which in works by artists of this tradition is conveyed more subtly than in Western art. To this end, instead of a realistic reflection of the world, there is a reliance on the inexhaustible possibilities for artistic expression provided by symbolical, allegorical, and metaphorical thinking, aesthetic suggestion, and a spontaneously arising torrent of associations.

Aesthetic treatises even connect ideals that seem completely antithetical: the Confucian aspiration to high moral standards, intellectual improvement, and clarity along with a tendency toward conformism and regulation is intertwined with the Daoist exaltation of naturalness and spontaneous flights of creative freedom. Moreover, what characterizes Daoist and Chan aesthetic treatises – the artist's seclusion from the outer world and flight to the refuge of nature – is combined here with the opportunities provided by a multifaceted Confucian education, the worshipful love of nature, and respect for the great theoretical and artistic achievements of the past. And finally, the Confucian emphasis on social activity and individuality is successfully neutralized on the plane of aesthetic ideas by Daoist seclusion, longing for harmony, and the exaltation of introspection, silence, and aesthetic suggestion characteristic of Chan aesthetics. Here, striving for clarity coalesces, paradoxically, with symbolism and a longing for an allegorical and metaphorical understanding of reality.

Eventually, under the Tang and Song dynasties, China formed one of the most powerful art-historical aesthetic traditions in the world; its proponents (Li Cheng, Fan Kuan, Su Shi, Mi Fu, Dong Qichang, Shitao, Wang Kai, etc.) connected their aesthetic ideas with theoretical reflection on their own creative practice and that of their predecessors and contemporaries. Dominant, alongside texts of a more general nature, are specialized, more narrowly focused art-historical treatises devoted to calligraphy, painting, and poetry. These treatises proceed from theoretical reflection on artistic practice, and they reveal the distinctive world of Chinese aesthetic categories.

The Distinctive Nature of Treatises on the Fine Arts

Chinese treatises dealing with problems in aesthetics and the theory of art differ markedly from those of Classical Antiquity, the West, and India. They are more concise, and their style is predominantly metaphorical. Here, we almost never encounter what is typical of the West – abstract metaphysical discussions of beauty, grandeur, and the tragic – because these treatises are dominated not by

speculative reflections, but by classificatory, ethical, and didactic questions or ones connected with the creative process and the artist's emotional experiences. Hence follows the attention of these treatises to the histories of specific schools and to the twists and turns in artists' creative biographies – all of which leads to reflections about reality and representation, the seen and the unseen, beauty and ugliness, speaking forth and keeping silent, perfection and incompetence, refinement and simplicity, artificiality and naturalness, purposefulness and spontaneity, volubility and leaving things unsaid, overburdening and aesthetic suggestion, outward and underlying nature, and other problems.

Throughout Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Modern Period, China has created a multitude of diverse treatises dealing with the problems of aesthetics and the theory of art. In catalogues of treatises on calligraphy, painting, and poetry we encounter thousands of titles. Apart from philosophical and art-historical treatises, much important information about Chinese aesthetics can also be drawn from a variety of other genres: problems in aesthetics and the theory of art are discussed in anthologies, digests, compendiums, the chronicles of dynasties and their commentaries, historiographical writings, religious, historical, and poetic texts, records about the "noteworthy" and the "strange" (to which the Chinese devoted special attention), diaries, travel notes, letters, various observations, and other texts.

Among the many art-historical treatises, the most important ones for the development of Chinese aesthetic thought are on the art forms most closely connected with written characters: calligraphy, painting, and poetry. Of the fine arts, calligraphy was the first to acquire high social status and a privileged place in the artistic hierarchy. For this reason, painting was greatly influenced by the aesthetic principles of calligraphy, which had developed earlier. Treatises on painting deal with various genres (portraits, flowers, birds, bamboo, etc.), but the ones on landscapes undoubtedly stand out for their profound and multifaceted treatment of theoretical problems.

These treatises focus not on an analysis of specific works of art or their aesthetic qualities, but primarily on various systems of classification and sometimes on the artist himself, his relationship with nature, and those diverse emotional relationships that are established between the apprehender and the images depicted in an artist's works, the depth of a specific idea, composition, style, and the means of artistic expression. For this reason, in Chinese as in Indian and Japanese aesthetic treatises, unlike Western ones since Classical Antiquity, greater attention is devoted to the problems of the psychology of art. They describe in detail the inner experiences of the artist contemplating the beauty of nature.

When classified according to various criteria, the history of theoretical treatises on aesthetics and the fine arts can be divided into different stages, each of which has its own characteristics. Because calligraphy long occupied the highest place in the Chinese artistic hierarchy, its aesthetic principles are what influenced treatises on other art forms (only during the Song Period did competition for influence arise from landscape painting, which in the Chinese aesthetic tradition became a symbol, directed toward knowledge of emptiness and infinite space, of the all-encompassing universe).

On the basis of chronology and specific typological features, in the history of Chinese treatises on the fine arts (calligraphy, painting) we can distinguish, with qualifications, four main stages since the rise of philosophical aesthetics in ancient times. During the early stage (2nd – early 7th century), the relationship between man and nature was at the center of theoretical interest, and the fundamental aesthetic principles of calligraphy and painting crystallized. The second stage (618–1368) covers the period of the Tang and the Five Dynasties up to the end of the Yuan Dynasty. In the Song and

Yuan treatises of this period, the aesthetic principles of calligraphy and landscape painting, which had risen in the artistic hierarchy, acquired their classical form and symbolical meaning. At the beginning of this period, during the Song epoch, didactic and instructional treatises predominated, while they were later replaced by introverted interpretations of landscape aesthetics marked by Chan influence and closely connected with classificatory descriptions of subjective creative processes, spiritual states, and the most typical features of works of art. The third period (1368 – early 19th century) is connected with a decline in the creative powers of theoretical thought and with the growth of eclecticism and, finally, of modernization and interaction with Western aesthetic traditions. In the fourth stage (early 19th century – today), there is already an intensive spread of various eclectic tendencies along with the growing influence of Western aesthetic and artistic traditions.

Harmony – the Fundamental Category in Chinese Aesthetics

The distinctive features of Chinese aesthetic thought and its system of categories are influenced by the ideographic system of writing. In contrast to the aesthetics with which we are familiar, that of the West since ancient times, here we see different situational and contextual categories that are directly connected with the associativeness of ideographic writing and whose content and diverse shades of meaning it is almost impossible to convey adequately in European languages. Moreover, in China we do not encounter a dualistic division into a *material* world and a *spiritual* one because, from an intellectual viewpoint, all spiritual entities are inseparable from their material, tangible, physical, sensory nature. And finally, under the influence of an organicist worldview Chinese ontology regards man, the cosmos around him, and the natural world *holistically*, as a single system in which the *ideal* (spiritual) and the *real* (material) principles are *inseparable from each other and in a constant process of metamorphosis*. Hence follows what is characteristic of the Chinese perception of the aesthetic world and of many Chinese aesthetic categories – the processuality that is reflected in the concept of space and time as well as in such fundamental categories as harmony, beauty, the Dao, *qi*, the flow of energy, breath, wind, rhythm, line, etc.

These situational and contextual categories attest through their semantic meanings to the openness of Chinese thinkers to the processes of the universe and nature, to their attention to these processes, and to their attempt to authentically convey in their works the most diverse aspects of their contact with the manifestations and elements of the natural world. Analogues of other categories important for Western aesthetics – for example, grandeur, gracefulness, tragedy, etc. – either generally do not emerge in the treatises of the Chinese or are on the periphery of their conceptual vocabulary.

According to Florence Hu-Sterk's categorical but essentially just observation, the quest for the underlying nature of Chinese aestheticism "could be summarized in a single word: harmony"[1] (Hu-Sterk, 2004, p. 23). Indeed, when we delve into Chinese aesthetic treatises, it immediately becomes clear that *we encounter the concept beauty (mei) far less often than harmony*. In Chinese philosophical texts, as in the early ones of the ancient Greeks, there is a greater discussion of harmony in its various aspects – cosmogonic, social, ethical, and aesthetic. For this reason, in the early Chinese aesthetics that was connected with reflection on cosmogonic problems, *the functions of the main aesthetic category were eventually taken over by harmony (he), which had acquired the*

1 „pourrait se résumer en un seul mot: l'harmonie"

status of a universal category, while other aesthetic concepts were regarded as semantically narrower modifications of aestheticism.

In our brief discussion of what distinguishes Chinese aesthetics, we mentioned that the main and universal category that most profoundly expresses the nature of aestheticism in this tradition is harmony *(he).* The sources of this category can be found in archaic cosmological concepts of primordial chaos and the harmony of the heavenly spheres. Universal harmony in the cosmos and in natural processes dominated the mythic worldview of the Chinese and was inevitably reflected in their attitudes toward nature, phenomena, things, and all forms of human existence, creative work, and art. As mythic consciousness broke down, early philosophical theories connected the concept of *harmony* with the purposefulness of natural and cosmic processes, beauty, truth, and the destruction of opposites. Hence followed the conviction that the ideal state of the world is *harmony*, which like beauty is regarded as an objectively existing matter independent of the human will. The chief task of the sage and the artist is not only to achieve inner harmony but also to make it the highest goal of his spiritual aspirations.

Moreover, aesthetic texts of the Classical Period show that the concept of harmony is closely connected with two other concepts, beauty (*mei*) and goodness (*shan*), which are used in the narrower context of ideas. Today, because of the universal application of the concept of harmony, it is difficult to say with any precision whether it first became established in cosmology, natural philosophy, social relations, ethics, aesthetics, or some other field, for it can be found everywhere.

When Confucians deal with the problems of harmony, they first look at them in their social aspect, but the followers of Daoism spread their discussion of these problems over various fields of life, learning, and reflection on the relationship between man and nature. Since the rise of Neo-Daoist aesthetics, when the *Fengliu* (Storm and Stream) Movement emerged and the beginnings of landscape painting aesthetics formed, *the leitmotifs of the artist's harmony with the natural world around him and of his seclusion in mountains to contemplate the harmony and beauty of nature* have been established in the Chinese aesthetic and artistic tradition. Ideas about the quest for this primordial harmony in nature reached their apogee during the Tang, Song, and Yuan periods, primarily in the work of followers of the *Wenrenhua* (intellectual) and Chan tradition that arose during the 11th – 14th century.

In the aesthetic texts of this period, the concept of harmony is connected with a structure in the artist's spirit that promotes a concentration of creative powers and inner concord in thought and feeling. The special role of harmony also emerges when dealing with the nature of aestheticism, the aesthetic qualities of works of art, the criteria for artistry, and other problems. This category additionally plays an important role in the theory of composition, which requires that each component in a work of art must find, in accordance with the principle of balance or its violation, a defined place in a unified compositional system. Moreover, the category of harmony is employed in describing the artist's fruitful spiritual state during the creative process, when the mysterious nature of all existing phenomena and beauty is revealed.

When harmony became the universal point of reference and the supreme value in aesthetic life and artistic creation, it also acquired the status of a basic category that cements together the system of concepts in traditional Chinese aesthetics. It is the nurturing source of important aesthetic categories such as, for example, beauty, refinement, naturalness, spontaneity, simplicity, purity, plainness, etc., and as such it pervades the attitudes of Chinese thinkers and artists toward aesthetic ideals, works of art, their aesthetic value, inner structure, etc.

The Relativity of the Concept of Beauty

Alongside harmony, in the treatment of different aspects of aestheticism and the creative process, what is perhaps closest to the fundamental category of *beauty*, which has been dominant for many centuries in Western aesthetics, is the Chinese category *mei*, which means beauty in general. Since remote antiquity, this concept has been used to describe women, nature, things, precious metals, etc. as well as inner personal qualities like virtue, noble-mindedness, honesty, sincerity, elegance, etc.

In its oldest manifestations, the concept *beauty* is connected with the qualities of delicious food, i.e. with the concepts *delicious* and *tasty*, which migrated from the field of cuisine to aesthetics, and etymologically *mei* is directly derived from the archaic concept of a "delicious fattened sheep." This fact attests, as *François Jullien observes*, that "[r]eading and eating, as conceived in Chinese thought, are linked by something more than just analogy" (Jullien, 2004/1991, p. 103). Moreover, a comparative analysis of the most diverse connotations of *mei* also reveals the closeness of this concept to the category of goodness (*shan*). Thus, in the early stage of Chinese culture and aesthetic thought (when the first philosophical theories were being developed), the aesthetic and ethical principles were still closely related to each other, and beauty was inseparable from goodness.

For the Chinese, moreover, abstractly understood beauty is not in general a special value that requires special attention because in the everyday world around man and in nature, they believe, we constantly encounter complex relationships between beauty and ugliness – relationships in which these categories, understood by Westerners as polar opposites, permeate each other and in each specific instance interact differently.

In comparison to the Western aesthetic tradition, the Chinese typically have a more dialectical view of the relationship between the categories of beauty and ugliness. In the work attributed to the founder of Daoism, Laozi, beauty is interpreted only as the dialectical opposite of ugliness and not as something alien to it. Laozi emphasizes the relative nature of these categories and their inner connection. Sometimes, beauty is regarded as something external, unstable, and occasionally, its importance for Daoist and Chan aesthetics in general is denied. In his development of Laozi's relativistic ideas about aesthetics, Zhuangzi demonstrates that it is impossible to draw a boundary between beauty and ugliness because there are not and cannot be objective criteria for beauty. Hence follows the relativistic conviction that the diverse forms of beauty are boundless and that beauty has so many different aspects that it is impossible to evaluate all of them objectively.

Another fundamental text of philosophical Daoism, *Huainanzi*, speaks of the ability to discern another, inward beauty beneath the charming veil of outward qualities. This work also puts forth an important idea for the further development of Chinese aesthetics, that of *beauty as a kind of standard for imitation*, and for the first time it speaks about beauty as a way of expressing *perfection*. This idea is evident both in early treatises on philosophical aesthetics and in later art-historical ones that seek to define the attitudes of the true artist toward knowledge of the nature of inner beauty. These thoughts are also expressed by the Tang aesthetician and one of the great masters of landscape painting Jing Hao: "One should not take outward beauty for reality; he who does not understand this mystery, will not obtain the truth, even though his pictures may contain likeness" (Sirén, 2005, pp. 234–35). Not only in Daoism but also in the other main schools of aesthetics does there emerge a principled divide between *inward* and *outward* beauty.

In treating the Chinese concept of beauty, we may distinguish three essentially different levels of understanding. The first is that of the specific objects that we encounter in everyday life; the second is higher – that of all the diversity of life in the totality of all the colors of life, while the third is connected with a cosmic sense that transcends individual experience and encompasses everything, a cosmic sense of the fullness of beauty and existence. This last, highest level has many features in common with religious feelings because it is directed toward the world of absolute values and an understanding of beauty as the great harmony of existence. In many Chinese aesthetic treatises, it is precisely this knowledge that is proclaimed the main goal of a true artist's creative aspirations.

The Daoists were the first in the history of Chinese aesthetics *to develop the idea of the ineffability of supreme beauty, to speak about background aesthetics, about formless forms, invisible colors, supreme inaudible music and poetry*. Supreme beauty, perfection, and harmony can be adequately known, Daoist and Chan theoreticians believed, only by avoiding criteria of outward evaluation and plunging into the underlying nature of phenomena.

Hence follow several conclusions that are necessary in order to understand the Chinese concept of beauty. First, this concept values *not outward but inward beauty, which lies beneath the surface, hidden and not always visible*. Second, it recognizes *the relative and subjective nature of customary assessments of beauty*. And finally, in order to know the profoundest nature of beauty, aesthetic treatises call on us *to avoid normative attitudes and conventional criteria of assessment*.

The Metamorphoses of the Concept of Art

The oldest concept of art to be developed in Chinese culture differs little from the syncretic one that appeared in the ancient civilizations of the Indians, the Greeks, and the Romans and in which aesthetic aspects are combined with various other, primarily utilitarian ones. Since the most ancient times, this concept has been named and written with different characters and has stood out for its broad semantic field. Shu *is connected with technique, craftsmanship, means, and science, and* yi – *with ability, talent, mastery, etc. The Classic of Music* (*Yuejing*)[2] attributes to it mastery, proficiency, subtlety, refinement, beauty, virtuosity, and other similar qualities connected with a sense of harmony.

During the Zhou Period (12th – 3rd century B.C.), it was used to describe the results of the creative activity of a potter, sculptor, architect, painter, carpenter, jeweler, philosopher, or anyone else whose work involved *craftsmanship* and *proficiency*. The theoretical views of the Chinese toward art formed during the transition from mythical consciousness to a philosophical worldview, in texts of the Classical Period. These views unfolded in many diverse fields of learning that were developing – in philosophy, cosmology, history, literature, music, and art theory, in texts in which the crystallization of this concept was a long and contradictory process filled with metamorphoses. The concept of art encountered in these treatises is semantically similar to those of ancient Greek *τέχνη* and Roman *ars*. It encompasses crafts, learning, and art in the narrow contemporary sense. At that time, everything was considered art that was connected with knowledge and the ability to express oneself perfectly in any sphere of creative activity.

The etymology of this concept bears witness that in China the sources of art are closely connected with crafts and other forms of work, from which it gradually evolved. In the course of

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history, however, the content of this concept changed; as the refined culture of the Chinese imperial palace developed, the concept of art acquired new connotations because aristocrats and intellectuals believed that only those artistic fields connected with spiritual activity have aesthetic value. This new attitude toward art emerged under the Han Dynasty, when the spread of written culture and growth in the number of educated people serving it ever more firmly connected the concept of *yi* with the world of books. At that time, the world of art split into the so-called liberal arts (*yi*) and technical arts (*shu*).

Even though poetry, literature, and the monumental painting of frescos already existed in ancient times, before the Han Period there were only six basic liberal arts: etiquette (rituals), music, archery, the control of a horse-drawn vehicle, calligraphy, and the art of calculation (arithmetic). The technical arts included divination (augury), medicine, astronomy, and geomancy.

For their part, some of the so-called liberal arts, despite their intellectual nature, are performed with the hands; this fact connects them with old traditions of craftsmanship. For this reason, in traditional Chinese culture the boundary between craft and art, between the liberal and technical arts performed with the hands, is not rigidly fixed. This boundary remained relative until the rise of the refined artistic culture of Chinese aristocrats and intellectuals. For a long time, it prevented calligraphy, poetry, and painting from joining the ranks of the "privileged" arts.

Eventually, this syncretic and broad concept distinguished between the art forms cultivated by the lower strata of society and the ones closely connected with the aristocracy – between those that met people's *practical* needs and the ones that satisfied the *spiritual* needs of the upper strata. Thus, a fundamental distinction emerged in the concept of art – between practical work akin to crafts and the more refined, spiritual, creative activities typical of the nobility. For this reason, the primordial syncretic concept of art gradually split into two hierarchically different levels. The first, *lower* one encompasses those creative activities that are connected with external embellishments. In China, these are the popular garden architecture, the composition of artificial lakes and ponds, the art of eloquence, and many rituals and ceremonies, i.e. everything foreign to the natural world and in one way or another connected with artifice. By performing its social functions, this hierarchically lower art of *embellishment* satisfies people's most elementary practical and emotional needs. By concentrating on *external* matters, it cannot, according to the authors of classical texts, reveal to people the true nature of beauty and harmony. For this reason, when treatises discuss the art of *embellishment*, they *speak only about the results of creativity and not about the nature of the art itself*. The second, higher, *spiritual* art also involves embellishments, but it regards them only as an auxiliary means and not as the ultimate goal of creative activity. Hence follows the main feature of the *higher* art: the ability to masterfully express through external form the deepest nature of an inner spiritual vision.

The further transformation of the concept of art is connected with the rise of the three great arts (poetry, calligraphy, painting) and the development by the intellectual school of theories devoted to them and grounding the concept of elite art. In the Chinese cultural tradition, the cultivation of all three of these arts is mandatory for a comprehensively educated, civilized man (*wenren*) who has mastered the principles of the *wenhua* written tradition. While the aesthetics of the intellectual school was flourishing, treatises of the 14th century crystallized a new concept of art (*yi*) that was dissociated from technical aspects and connected exclusively with educated people of high humane culture. The hierarchically lower sphere of *technical arts* remained beyond its range.

Thus, with the spread of the refined artistic culture of Chinese aristocrats and intellectuals with a comprehensive cultural education, the concept of art (*yi*) became markedly narrower, but its meaning was not at all the same as in the West, where an important connection with technology remained for a long time.

On the other hand, traditional Chinese culture valued highly the craftsmanlike mastery of the technical subtleties of artistic expression in one's chosen field, and without this mastery it was impossible to become not only a great master in a specific artistic field but even, when Chinese culture was flourishing during the Tang, Song, and Yuan dynasties, a high-ranking official. This view was reflected in the complex, multilevel system of state examinations in art taken by officials in order to receive appointments. Here, an important component was an artistic understanding of the world and the high aesthetic culture that followed from it. When preparing for state examinations, Chinese officials, who were often intellectuals, calligraphers, painters, poets, etc., assimilated not only the subtleties of their chosen artistic field but also the essentials of classical *wen* humane culture and of many other arts. For this reason, traditional *wen* culture was permeated with aesthetic principles because strong artistic accents were at its heart.

Thus, art is undoubtedly one of the most important forms of spiritual culture cultivated in Chinese civilization, and it has for millennia cemented together the cultural tradition in this part of the world. Faithfulness to tradition and the unfolding of its creative powers in various art forms can be clearly seen in the history of calligraphy, painting, poetry, music, theater, and many other Chinese arts. Here, not only is art one of the forms through which *wen* culture spread, but it is also an extremely important integral part of this culture, and to a great extent it determined the distinctive character of the Chinese aesthetic and artistic tradition.

The distinctiveness of Chinese art system

In Chinese art system, the principles of determining the role and hierarchy of forms of art are different to those of Western and other civilizations. Views towards the significance of particular art forms and their role in society's life change during different historic times of cultural development. These views are affected by conquests, contacts with other cultural traditions, development of artistic consciousness, social ideals, the evolution of forms of art. For example, the art of sculpture in China is a secondary form of art, as opposed to Egyptian, Assyrian and Greek cultures where this form of art is held as being of utmost importance in the hierarchy of arts. In China, the suggestiveness and educational power of music has helped situating this form of art at the highest point of ancient art ranking system. According to Confucius and his followers, music is the basis of world harmony, while a ritual is a source of order within the world. Giving priority to music is intrinsic to Confucian aesthetic tradition. Neo-Daoist aesthetics, prevalent in the Early Middle Ages, proclaim a synthetic view of art system and argues for the importance of calligraphy.

Various forms of art – graphic arts (calligraphy, fine art, graphic arts, sculpture, engraving), poetry, music, drama, architecture, handicrafts – develop in different rhythms of rise and fall, specific to every single one of them. Music has been given immense meaning in various cosmogonist and mythical systems. In the oldest books of the canon for antiquity period – 'The book of music' *(Yuejing),* 'Record of Ritual' (*Liji)* and 'Classic of History' (*Shujing),* music is enthroned in Xunzi's

hierarchy of arts as the highest art that expresses and reflects the harmony of the universe. Traces of this tradition are seen in *Lunyu,* a work attributed to Confucius, in which we see twenty appeals to music. The view on music as the generator of all arts, connecting instrumental music with dance, poetry and song is derived from archaic mythical ontology and cosmological Chinese theories and is developed in Confucian aesthetics. Here, music, alongside poetry, is perceived as a subtle art of exceptional emotional effect, cultivated by individuals of great intelligence. Playing with silken strings of *qi,* a beloved instrument among aristocrats and intellectuals, was considered an inseparable attribute of a cultured personality with excellent mastery of *wen* principles. Due to its strings, this instrument was called the instrument of silk, contrasting it with instruments made from bamboo that were classed as wind instruments.

In other texts of antiquity, such as *Shijing* and *Chunqiu,* alongside the elevation of music in art hierarchy we see the praise of poetry as the highest form of art. This leitmotif also sometimes resounds in the discussed work of Confucius. Thus, in the early epoch of Chinese cultural development, before the rise of the 'three great arts' (calligraphy, poetry and fine art), it was music and poetry that were the top contenders.

Eventually, with the development of Chinese character script culture, graphic arts were starting to compete with poetry and art and gain significant social status. The importance of graphic arts stems from the visual nature of Chinese characters and the peculiarities of their evolution. The Chinese art system joins calligraphy, fine art, graphic and sculpture. Engraving appears in the 9th century, but due to various historical and sociocultural factors it does not spread as far as in the culture of Japanese cities and does not garner such response in the West as Japanese *ukiyo-e* carvings.

When exploring the principles of hierarchy in the later art system we first need to talk about the exceptional rise of 'three great arts' – poetry, calligraphy and fine art. After the decline of Han Empire, these arts, dependent on the stroke of a paintbrush, were competing with music in the sphere of social prestige.

If we want to understand reasons behind these changes, we must explore how Chinese characters affects the Chinese aesthetic consciousness. The sequence of Chinese character structures is much more than a simple thought expression, because at the same time it becomes a form of meaningful control of the visual world, space and flow of time. The mysterious world of Chinese characters opens up a rich spiritual system in which rhythmic elements of all 'three great arts' (and music) are organically connected. The supple and harsh lines of Chinese characters emit energy in different directions, directly express person's mood, temperament, sense of harmony and spiritual elevation.

As opposed to European linear reading of letters, Chinese character script, without any kind of conceptual information, joins archetypical pictographic elements of perceiving world as a unified visual. The specificity of calligraphic script opens up wide possibilities for developing synthetic visual-associative thought. This is why the visual that enthrals the artist was able to find adequate forms of expression in the fabric of abstract Chinese character systems, in an emotional poem, written in Chinese characters, and in a work of fine art, that preserves the elements of calligraphic paintbrush movement. Even the materials used by a calligrapher, poet and painter (ink, paintbrush, paper, silk scroll) are the same. So, the developing art of calligraphy combines within itself not only the rudiments of fine art and poetry, but also the vertical construction of visual structures, the technical principles of using the paintbrush. The names of main forms, lines, spatial structures are the same as well. This organic kinship between calligraphy, fine art and poetry determines the

synthetic characteristic of medieval aesthetics. Chinese theorists and artists, discussing one of these art forms, usually subconsciously talk about the other two as well. This synthetic is characteristic to many of the most renowned Chinese artists (Gu Kaizhi, Wáng Wéi (701–761), Du Fu, Su Shih, Mi Fu, Shi Tao), that are embodiments of not only calligraphers, but also poets, painters, art theorists and, sometimes, musicians.

The intimate interaction between these forms of art manifests itself in other forms as well. In Chinese landscape painting, the empty space next to the landscape is usually filled with appropriate poetic text. Besides the emotional poetic impact it performs the function of a perfectly incorporated calligraphic structure. As known, the Chinese have always appreciated the abstract beauty of Chinese characters and the harmony of its components. The role, function and meaning of a calligraphic text, incorporated in a painting, are constantly changing during various development stages of Chinese landscape painting. Sometimes this text, together with the accompanying poetic paraphrase is of extreme importance as it strengthens the relationship between the portrayed images and poetic structures. It even creates a specific psychological tension which helps apprehend the deep meanings within the artwork. It is also not uncommon for a calligraphic text to carry a simpler meaning or to simply serve for decorative purposes.

It is worth noting, that both the painting and the calligraphic text, the latter complementing the first's spiritual purport, are here understood in a unified system of aesthetic categories and are evaluated from the same point of view. In a calligraphically written poetic paraphrase or a poem we see the organic intertwining and amalgamation of principles of fine art, calligraphy and poetry into one synthetic organism that stimulates the emergence of a complex visuals and associations that help the spectator naturally penetrate the depths of Chinese aesthetic phenomenon.

Because of the synthetism, characteristic to early Medieval Chinese aesthetics, calligraphy is usually considered the highest art, sometimes even true and only origin of painting. The intimate relationship between fine art and calligraphy is secured by 4th century calligrapher Wang Xizhi, who legitimates new principles of writing Chinese characters in a continuous line. This method is characterized by the expressiveness and integrity of the script because of the continuous, almost never broken movement of the paintbrush on paper or silk scroll. The paintbrush is rarely lifted from the surface thus creating consistent and plastic transition from one character to another. This strategy was a sharp change of direction in development of calligraphy and drew it closer to painting. Chinese character structures, losing their arid schematic appearance, eventually continue transforming to live images, helping the art of calligraphy approach the emotional aesthetic effect that fine art is capable of.

Ink painting rises into the art hierarchy later than calligraphy and reaches its apogee only in 10th -13th centuries when the genre of landscape painting and creators of these artworks gained respect and high social status in Emperor's Palace. Landscape painting, alongside calligraphy and poetry, became the most important part of art processes in the golden age of flourishing Song dynasty. This is connected not only with the rise of one of the grandest traditions in global art, but also the rise of a number of famous landscape painters and emergence of important aesthetic fine art treatises in which the most important philosophical art development tendencies are deeply analysed. The beginning of 18th century marked the rupture in the development of powerful landscape painting tradition. It was replaced by various eclectic schools in which the metaphysic conception of fine art is pushed out by daily fine art genres that lack the sophisticated taste and the purity of style, characteristic to elite culture.

Similar signs of decline were also visible in previously extremely popular and highly regarded art of poetry. After the rule Tang and Song – golden epochs for the art of poetry - during the later Ming and Qing dynasty periods, with the growing attention to modes of everyday life, the art of fiction grew as well. In Yuan epoch we witness the rise of various forms of drama and opera theatre.

When discussing the Chinese art system, it is worth at least briefly noting the unique Chinese ceramics tradition which notable for its abundance of styles, the precision and perfection of forms and technologies, not seen anywhere else in the history of art. Another tradition that deserves mentioning is that of Chinese gardens, traditions of which were developed into the heights of subtle art in Japanese culture.

Separate from the discussed forms of art is sculpture, which had its gold age during various periods and wood carvings, associated with folk art tradition. Wood carvings usually served as paintings as the authors were depicting various scenes from the lives of mythical heroes or everyday people. With their themes, content, the pursuit of unified style and artistic qualities they compare to aesthetic conception of works of drama.

The Artist as Analogue of the Thinker

In traditional Chinese culture, the artist and the art theoretician were usually one and the same person. As a unique individual, he was formed by *wen* culture and valued its achievements; in his creative activity, he relied on his own talent, on the opportunities provided by a multifaceted education, on the power of accumulated artistic tradition, and on its assimilation and further fruitful development. The growth of the artist's social status was directly connected with the spread of calligraphy, which formed the core of *wen* culture, was cultivated by the elite, and had risen to the pinnacle of the artistic hierarchy under the Han Empire. At the very beginning of the Tang Dynasty, however, there was marked growth in the social stratum of intellectual scribes and artists, and this growth in their influence was directly connected with the emphasis on artistic disciplines in the changing system of state examinations for high-ranking officials and the spread of calligraphy, poetry, and music in the palaces of the emperors and aristocrats.

In traditional Chinese culture, the formation of the artist's image was influenced by many factors, but primarily by the different schools of Confucian, Daoist, and Chan Buddhist thought, which through interaction supplemented one another. During different periods of historical development, the totality of basic qualities attributed to the artist changed, but many fundamental attitudes remained stable.

In the formation of the artist, several basic aspects were emphasized: primarily, the nurturance of rigorous self-discipline and psychotraining, of a moral personality that from its youth looks responsibly at its chosen profession and its well-rounded education. Hence followed special attention to seeking contact with the energy of external nature, immersing oneself in earlier traditions of art, copying the works of the great masters of the past, and assimilating professional skills, ideas, style, rules developed over the centuries, canons, various technical subtleties, and the means of artistic expression – without any of which it is impossible for a true master of a specific art form to emerge. Also characteristic of the concept of an authentic artist are deep self-reflection, clearly expressed leitmotifs of introspection, and emphasis on a highly personal view of art and one's own creative work.

Unlike the Romantic, Nonclassical, and Modernist aesthetic traditions in the West, the cult of the genius and the exaltation of his willfulness are foreign to Confucian aesthetics. Dominant here is an attitude directed against subjectivity: the artist aspires to find himself in tradition, to suppress his own ego, and to plunge with an open heart into written culture. For this reason, the image of the artist formed by Confucian aesthetics is primarily connected with civilization, knowledge of the Confucian tradition of written culture, personal training, and constant self-improvement that follows from dissatisfaction with results achieved so far. This attitude is encouraged by following Confucius' precept: "Great tasks will not be accomplished if you covet small gains" (*Analects*, XIII:17; Lin Wusun, p. 118).

With the appearance of a treatise by Xie He in the 5th century, the Chinese aesthetic tradition began classifying artists into three basic categories – *highest*, *middle*, and *lowest* – and nine finer gradations; with minor alterations this practice persisted in many later aesthetic texts. For example, in a treatise by the 9th – century historian Zhu Jingxuan, *Record of Famous Painters of the Tang Dynasty* (*Tangchao Minghua Lu*), we encounter three basic categories for artists of different talent (with each category further divided into three more detailed gradations – highest, middle, and lowest): 1) divine (*shen*), filled with spiritual flights and the magical power to affect apprehenders, 2) excellent (*miao*), and 3) skilled, experienced (*neng*), or in other words competent. To this trinomial system of classification, the author of this treatise adds a fourth category for artists of the very highest level – those who are not constrained by customary limitations and who defy customary criteria of aesthetic assessment. These artists, who are *unfettered and have freed themselves from all limitations and dogmas*, were eventually given the highest place in the hierarchy of different artistic types, and for many followers of Daoist and Chan aesthetics they became the standard for the authentic artist.

In the late 9th – century, another conceptual Chinese aesthetician, Jing Hao, who devoted special attention to the problems of artistic creation and its subject, classified artists into four qualitatively different categories: the divine, the excellent, the strange or unusual, and the craftsmanlike (Jing Hao, 1965, p. 75). The first, according to him, obtain the forms they desire without any special efforts by relying on the transformations of nature. The second, who stand out for their refinement, elegance, and subtlety, penetrate with their thoughts into the inexhaustible diversity of heavenly and earthly forms. For this reason, in their works they convey things in such a way that these things reflect the painter's character, feelings, education, and creative principles and rules. The type of the strange artist scatters himself with inordinate details that so differ from the true nature of the things depicted that the content of his works becomes one-sided. Although traces of brushwork remain in the works of such an artist, thought is lacking. And finally, from combinations of little fragments the craftsmanlike type of artist creates a petty, cheapened beauty that only outwardly reflects great creative principles (Jing Hao, 1965, p. 75).

Among the Chinese, the dominant image of the true artist and master in his field formed primarily under the influence of Daoist and, later, Chan aesthetic ideals that emphasized seclusion from social activity, solitude, silence, and inner concentration. As is shown by widespread historiographical treatises that devote much attention to the biographies of artists, the path of development for many great Chinese artists has almost always been uneven because artistic skills and the professional mastery that flows from them develop in waves. Sometimes they unfold consistently, sometimes with surprising rapidity, but eventually, as vital energy (*qi*) declines in the course of a life, the influence of the energetic factors that drive creative talent is extinguished. For this reason, in the

Chinese aesthetic tradition the concept of the true artist is often connected with the accumulation of energy, with its responsible conservation, nurturance, and development, and with the avoidance of negative external influences as well as an unwillingness to squander one's creative (i.e. energetic) potential, instead expending these powers consistently and with abandon in creative flights in the immediate milieu of nature and one's closest friends.

Treatises usually portray the true artist as a recluse who has secluded himself from the external forms of life, self-importance, and the advantages provided by a career and who has consciously chosen the advantages provided by harmonious fusion with the energies of nature. Solitude, seclusion, withdrawal or flight from inauthentic forms of social life, from social conventions, wandering in the boundless universe, taking refuge in nature in a remote abode – all these things were understood as an inseparable part of the authentic personality, thinker, and artist.

Hence follows what is found in many treatises and celebrated in verse: another leitmotif that is important for the image of the authentic artist, that of withdrawal to remote mountains, the refuge of nature, and of wandering in the boundless world of the spirit. Indeed, after rejecting the advantages provided by tranquil palace life, artists who professed the aesthetic principles of Daoism and Chan often discerned the meaning of life in creative work and seclusion in remote natural places from the hubbub of social life. When someone has chosen the way of art, his life is permeated with striving to express his inner personality and emphasis on the individual principle in his works. Here, authentic art is connected with wisdom, solitude, contemplation of the beauty and harmony of nature, silence, and concentration. For this reason, Bai Rui speaks of the "music of silence," and Zong Bing – of the experience of silence in the creative process. During moments of enlightened consciousness, when painters fuse with the mysterious energies of nature, they convey in their landscapes the subtlest emotional experiences, endless space, and the poetry of the ineffable.

In the Chinese aesthetic tradition, the authentic artist, who has chosen the way of art, is compared to a reclusive sage, to an eccentric living in a mysterious natural or mountain refuge. For this reason, in aesthetic treatises the concept of the artist converges with those of the sage and philosopher, who do not stop along the way in their quest for truth. What connects them is knowledge of the inner nature of things and phenomena and the pursuit of wisdom and the underlying truth hidden beneath the deceptive veil of appearances. For example, the painter, calligrapher, and poet of the intellectual tradition Su Shi was convinced that the deepest nature of phenomena is always hidden more deeply than the eye can see or the ear can hear. For this reason, he calls upon artists to go beyond the outward layer of appearance and plunge into the underlying nature of phenomena.

Hence follows the leitmotif, constantly encountered in the Chinese aesthetic tradition, of comparing the authentic artist to the sage. The inner connection between art and philosophy is a unique feature of the Chinese cultural and aesthetic tradition. Here, the creator of true spiritual art is indeed considered a philosopher. He is understood not only as a subtle painter, calligrapher, poet, and musician but also primarily as a thinker, scholar, and universal personality – as someone of high intellect, comprehensively educated, possessing intuitive knowledge, and able to employ the achievements of the multilayered Chinese cultural tradition. The relationship between the artist and the philosopher emerges in their shared powers of direct intuitive knowledge and in their ability to penetrate through the outer veil of phenomena to their underlying nature. This emphasis on the closeness between the artist and the philosopher explains why traditional Chinese aesthetics describes the artist as a sage and why treatises, when discussing the artist, often employ the concepts of *master* and *sage*.

Having discussed the main categories of traditional aesthetics, the system of arts, the artist, the creative process, and the main stages of development in aesthetic thought and art, we may state, first of all, that traditional Chinese aesthetics and art markedly differ in their theoretical positions, fundamental worldview, ideas, and artistic criteria from the corresponding traditions of the Indians, the Arab Muslims, Classical Antiquity, the West, and even the Japanese, who developed under the strong influence of Chinese culture. In comparison to the Japanese, Chinese art is less given to expressive decorativeness and an emphasis on the charm of diverse everyday phenomena, but when it flowered, in works created under the Song and Yuan dynasties, it undoubtedly exhibited greater meditational concentration and depth.

Second, traditional Chinese aesthetics and art were influenced by the ideographic system of characters in which the Chinese language is written. Hence follows the main archetype that systematically organizes the Chinese aesthetic and artistic tradition of fine art – the *character*. Its essence consists of visual symbols, enriched with energy (*qi*) meaning, that are an important factor influencing the Chinese tradition of fine art and the components of the system of arts.

Third, China has had two basic movements in the development of its aesthetic thought: one *philosophical* and the other *art-historical*. Proponents of the first explain fundamental aesthetic problems "from above" by relying on the abstract principles of Confucian, Daoist, and Chan philosophy, while supporters of the second movement work "from below," i.e. by starting with artistic practice to conceptualize its patterns. It must be acknowledged that the Chinese aesthetic tradition, unlike the Classical one of the West, does not accord "beauty" the "special" or "supreme" role of organizing basic aesthetic categories into a system. This *central* function is performed by "harmony," which brings together under its roof the other important categories of Chinese aesthetics.

And finally, Chinese artistic culture stands out for the centuries – old continuity of its ideas, art forms, and creative principles. The hub of this artistic culture is the comprehensively educated artist – scholar with his relationship to tradition and the natural world around him. Because of various external and internal factors, Chinese culture has historically altered the hierarchy of its arts and markedly expanded their interaction and their technical means of expression. During their early stage of development, Chinese aesthetics and fine art were greatly influenced by the principles that had already crystallized in music, poetry, and especially calligraphy. However, the greatest achievements of the Chinese are primarily connected with their unique aesthetics of landscape painting and what was created under its influence with a wonderful harmony of composition, color, and form – the phenomenon that reached its pinnacle in the landscapes of the great masters of the Song and Yuan periods. In these works, this genre soared to spiritual heights not reached by any other painting tradition in the world.

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