

## Being and Aesthetic: Poetic Wisdom as The Manifestation of A Culture's Power to Live

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### ABSTRACT

*The aesthetic feelings of Chinese people differentiate them from people of other countries who have grown up in different traditions. The poetic wisdom in aesthetic experience stirs people and cultivates their personalities within a certain historical situation, which can help them to cope with their specific and individual reality around, and the harmonizing experience of a creative interactive process between the subject and object ultimately helps to bring about the harmony between man and nature, and between man and society. This paper aims to expound Chinese poetic wisdom and its melting into people's daily life, in which their aesthetic experience serves as a plat form for the being of individuals and social harmony.*

**Keywords:** Poetic wisdom, being, aesthetic experience, harmony between man and nature

### INTRODUCTION

Sonja Servomaa (2006) once remarked: "The cyclic concept of time, which is predominant in Asian culture, is pressing us to see freshly back to traditional notions of *wisdom*, to *the unity of man and nature* and to the immortality of poetics with a view of rediscovering in them new light for today's humanity." [1] In the essay, it is discussed how classical Chinese and Japanese Aesthetic concepts of nature and the immortality of poetics can enhance wisdom with a new enlightened attitude to life and nature. Following Sonja Servomaa, we may feel tempted to extend his dictum to classical Chinese philosophy and aesthetics, which is particularly telling manifestation of Chinese culture. To emphasize the spiritual, aesthetic and emotional dimensions of Chinese aesthetics and philosophy is to call for quality of life on spiritual and living aspects founded in the whole universe, animate and inanimate. This paper will accentuate the two essential aspects: (1) Traditional Chinese culture embodies poetic wisdom and sense perception, which is endowed with a "practical-affectional" spirit; (2) following the "practical-affectional" spirit, The dominant trend of "the unity and harmony between nature and man" in traditional Chinese culture probes into life aesthetics and moral aesthetics, revealing the way of life that makes his or her own existence beautiful through "practical-affectional" activities.

In the international symposium on "Aesthetics and Culture: East and West", held in Beijing, China, in 2002, significant issues about Chinese aesthetics were presented, such as comparative aesthetics of East and West, and traditional Chinese aesthetics and its modern significance. Similar topics have been discussed in other recent international conference, e.g. in 2010, in the 18<sup>th</sup> international congress, Five Phases of Chinese Benti-Aesthetics and their contemporary significances were finely elaborated by Chung-ying Cheng. Actually, the highlighted research into Chinese aesthetic culture, aesthetics and arts includes not only the poetic wisdom of nature, cultural characteristics and basic forms of Chinese poetics, Taoist

thought, Interactions between western and Chinese aesthetics, Confucius and other aspects of Chinese aesthetics and culture, but also the various traditional Chinese arts like Chinese calligraphy, painting, brush work and other visual arts and cultural practice.

In the development of aesthetics for the past centuries, one serious problem is: Western aesthetics has been in the leading position, and for Eastern aesthetics, the ancient civilizations, long-standing traditions and rich aesthetic thought have been ignored, and thereafter, Eastern and Western wisdom hasn't struck a balance. With the speeding up of aesthetic globalization in the 21st century, the world aesthetics' trend with the East-West collaboration for a new aesthetics lets the sunshine in for the development of Chinese aesthetics. Nowadays, many scholars, home and broad have been aware: the collaboration between the East and the West and exploration of the oriental ancient aesthetics is a new feasible way for the prosperity of the world aesthetics. Especially, in traditional Chinese aesthetics, the poetic wisdom full of the most primitive and naïve wisdom in various art forms suggests a need to return to naturalness and harmony, which seeks the essence and spirit of being beautiful and good in our daily life.

### **POETIC WISDOM WITH THE “PRACTICAL-AFFECTIONAL” SPIRIT**

Traditional Chinese aesthetics emphasizes poetic wisdom and sense perception, regarding subtlety and ambiguity as beautiful realm. The characteristics of the poetic wisdom and perceptive experience are: aesthetic experience and substance are in the first place, which is presented as willful, impressive, impromptu; perception is highly valued rather than understanding, featured as intuitive, sense-perceptive and empirical in aesthetic thinking. This experience-centered, poetic wisdom-specified aesthetics tends to appreciate tacit understanding and hint-taking, with attempt to convey or perceive sort of “meaning beyond the flavor” and “the extremity beyond the rhythmic vitality”. It is implicit, leaving a lasting and pleasant impression or aftertaste, worthwhile tasting over and over again. “Implication” and “ambiguity” has been the aesthetic ideal of ancient Chinese art theories.

Consequently, the aesthetic categories and concepts tend to be random, poly-semantic and fuzzy and it's obvious that what Chinese aesthetics pursues is the realm of the unfathomable, wordless comprehension. Among the ancient Chinese philosophers, from Laozi's concepts such as “Dao”, “fullness” “nothingness”, “void”, “substance” and notions such as “eliminating the wisdom and understanding”, to Zhuangzi's conceptions such as “Heaven and earth have great beauty, but never speaking about it”, “sitting in forgetfulness”, “fasting of mind”, “transformation between the subject and object”, still to later times' “establishing images to express ideas”, “image beyond image, realm beyond realm”, “meanings beyond the flavor, and extremity beyond the rhythmic vitality”, “transcending the image, and gaining”, “learn from the nature and gain from the inner heart”, proposed by other philosophers and literati, all these categories and concepts reflect the characteristics of implicitness and reservation of Chinese aesthetics.

These poetic conceptions have great impact on the formation of traditional Chinese aesthetic theories. Philosophical, aesthetic and literary theories have been written in poetic styles such as in ballad and prose, parallel prose, poem, while poetic notes on poems and prose have become the critical style and theoretical patterns. Feng Youlan (1985) claimed: “Chinese philosophers are liable to use the thought-provoking and celebrated dictums and epigrams, and metaphorical exemplifications to express their ideas... Dictums and epigrams must be short and the metaphorical exemplifications must contain no relations to its topic.” “The languages of Chinese philosophy are highly implicit, rather than explicit. It is not explicit, because it doesn't signify the deductive concepts. The philosophers just tell what they see.

Right for this reason, what he says with few words is poly-semantic. Right for this, his words is suggestive, not necessary to be clear.”[2] The common features of these literary forms are: implicitness, diffusiveness, and conciseness, with emphasis on flavor, rhythm, and beauty. Words or phrases in these styles demonstrate the profound image of the very word, which often requires reflections over them again and again. As a result, Most of the distinctive literature theories are both literature theories and literature works in themselves, such as Lu Ji’ *The Verse of Literature Comments*, Liu Xie’s *Literary Mind and Carved Dragon*, Zhong Rong’s *The Categories of Poems*, Dufu’s *Comments on the Poems with Six Quatrains*, Yuan Haowen’s *Comments on the thirty poems*.

Owing to the poetic wisdom and its expressive language, the tradition of following the “practical-affectional” spirit has come into being. Following the “practical-affectional” spirit, Chinese aesthetics holds the first and foremost important thing for human beings is not to catch the specific way of knowing the external things through cognitive activities, but to make her or his own existence aesthetic and beautiful through practical activities and natural feelings. Under this guiding principle, poetic wisdom and its sense perception replenish and harmonize the essential elements in human existence like practice, sense, instinct, emotion and will with natural feelings like joy, love, liking or disliking, pleasure, anger and sorrow, in terms of which, one’s existence becomes authentic human existence, unifying reality, morality and aesthetic being.

### **HARMONY BETWEEN MAN NATURE AND THE TRADITION OF “POETRY EXPRESSES HUMAN ASPIRATION”**

In traditional Chinese culture, the “practical-affectional” spirit tends to unite human being and nature. If “aesthetics” in the West is mainly considered as the study of sensory or sensori-emotional values or “critical reflection on art, culture and nature”, it would be more specific “a philosophy of beautiful human life” in Chinese tradition, which can be traced back to the specific geographical and historical background.

Ancient China’s geographical environment is considered as the ideal condition for the primitive agriculture, “man working in the field and woman weaving at home”, “self-containing and self sufficiency” is the typical life form. In this society, people uphold the values of living in peace and contentment, and follow the regular life of “getting up and work at sunrise, rest at sunset, and enjoying themselves between heaven and earth”. All this shows us the image of harmonious living between man and nature. Due to the specific living surroundings of China’s interior agricultural society for thousands of years, the dominant trend of “the unity and harmony between nature and man” in traditional Chinese aesthetics is mainly conveyed to enlighten life and moral aesthetics. Chen Wangheng (1998) maintains “the unity and harmony of nature and man” presents as a kind of life style, “life” as the ontology and “happiness” as the highest pursuit, leading to aesthetic appreciation through the ways of “integration”, “interactive perception”, “spiritedness”, “life-orientation” and “pleasure-pursuit”, etc. [3] To grasp such intentions is helpful for us to really understand the features, such as “the upholding of harmony”, “purification of spirit”, “admiration of nature”, and “pursuit of the utmost lofty realm”, and to really understand the relationship between man and nature, man and society.

China’s ancient universe view manifests the oneness of man and nature, and the oneness of the subject and the object, with emphasis on integration and harmony, revealed in the following philosophical views like “The Dao generates One; One generates Two; Two generates Three; Three generates All things. All things leave behind them the Obscurity (out

of which they have come), and go forward to embrace the Brightness (into which they have emerged), while they are harmonized by the Breath of Vacancy.” “The vital force between heaven and earth, combined to be oneness, divided into YinYang, evaluated by four seasons and listed as five elements”. Therefore, in the Chinese traditional values, the mainstream culture attaches importance to the collective orientation of the whole community, the harmony of the groups, and the safeguard of national interests. Confucians highly value “the true gentleman personalities”, the cultivation of which will follow the course of “rectifying their heart, nurturing their moral sentiment, regulating their families, ordering their states and illustrating their virtues throughout their kingdom”. On the opposite, Taoists suggest “take no actions yet leaving nothing undone” to realize the harmony of the whole universe. So it’s not difficult to understand that Chinese culture regards time as the recycling object, which is coordinating with the law of nature: “Spring comes after winter, autumn after summer, then again and again, recurring successively and regaining after it is lost”. Similarly, the law of human and human society follows the corresponding “Dao”, that is, one country’s prospect and decline and the individual’s richness and poorness will obey the following order: the poor and humble conduct diligence and thrifty, leading to their fortune and honor; the rich and honored conduct pride and luxury, leading to their lust and debauchery; lust and debauchery tend to make one become poor and humble again. This is the law of “the circulation of natural law” in the agricultural society of China for thousands of years. Consequently, in traditional Chinese culture, people often take man and nature, man and universe, man and society as a whole unity, inseparable, interactive affected, co-existing and inter-corresponding, which entails “the consistence of knowledge and action”, “the unifying of the feeling and the world”, “the coordination of Yin and Yang”, “being both opposite and complementary to each other”, “the doctrine of the mean”, etc.

“The union of the nature and human beings” is practiced in different ways by China’s two largest schools, Taoism and the Confucianism, which shows that they are open and inclusive. The Taoists’ aesthetic thought identifies the great union and harmony between man and nature by practicing the two tenets of “taking no action yet leaving nothing undone” and “the law of the Tao follows its being what it is”. In their view, the conception “beauty” is often esteemed as a naïve and harmonious unity of human being with nature. To be more exact, if human beings can follow “taking no action” or “following Tao’s being what it is”, as the paradigm of their existence, they will become beautiful as Heaven and Earth do. The two tenets have become the highest realm for the Daoism aesthetics, shown in the famous Taoist beliefs: “The universe and I come into being together; everything and I therein are One.”

“The highest excellence is like water, the excellence of water lies in its benefitting all things, without striving for a better place, to the contrary, tending to be at the lower place which everyone dislikes.” To them, beautiful or ugly, complete or defected, gains or loss, blessing or misfortune, all are the result of “the law of the Tao follows its being what it is”. These beliefs show that beauty lies in nature, or to be natural. Accordingly, for Taoists, the highest state of human life is the naïve unity between the beautiful and the true, namely, the naturalness.

Confucianism also advocates harmony between man and nature: “harmony stimulates the prospect, and rejecting the difference will not”. Compared to Daoism that is presented as taking no action, tranquility, and centering on nature, the Confucian aesthetics features positive actions, utilitarian and social orientation, to achieve individual’s moral cultivation and the social moral humanization in the official ideology. Confucian harmony takes a “subject-object dichotomy” as a precondition. Moral humanization towards individuals and the whole society follows the principles of “It is by *the Book of Songs* that man is inspired. It is by the Rules of Propriety that man is established. It is by Music that the accomplishment is

reached.” It reveals the tradition of “expressing aspiration and ideal with poems” of Confucianism. “*The Book of Songs* inspires readers” emphasizes the significance of poems that can stimulate one’s motivation to be good; by studying poems, he can also learn to observe the rise and fall of the human society and the gains and losses of individuals and the nation. All of the norms are supposed to guide him to better serve their country in future. Then “the strict compliance with the Rules of Propriety” tends to constrain one in order to obey the social norms, to help him to be a person who can cultivate himself when he is poor, and to be an influential figure to help lot of others and maintain social stability and order when he is in fortune. With “music” to nurture his nature, he can reach a real gentleman’s characters. Eventually, the finish of true gentleman’s personality not only helps him to become the persons leading social morals and instructing the subjects of the country people, but also to become guardians of national security. Mencius ((n.d., trans., 2011)) once said: “the true gentleman will prefer not to fight; but if he does fight, he must overcome.” “If poor, they attended to their own virtue in solitude; if advanced to dignity, they made the whole kingdom virtuous as well.” In the point view of Mencius, the man of virtue will possibly become a never-defeating soldier for the security of the country. “The Odes can be for inspiration, for observation, for uniting people, as well as for expressing complaints. In the home, they teach you about how to serve your father, and in public life they teach you about how to serve your emperor.” The norms advocated by *The Analects* demonstrate that the ultimate objective of the aesthetic cultivation of individuals points to the political utility.

Besides, Confucian aesthetics stresses on the union of the truth, the goodness and the beauty, leading to “benevolence” aesthetics. The so-called truth does not signify the understanding of the objective laws, but emphasizes human emotions in “good genuineness” status; the so-called goodness tends to mean “kind-heartedness” of “benevolence”; “beauty” is considered to be the highest ideal, to achieve the union of all the three in a harmonious emotional way. The unification of the truth, the goodness and the beauty for “a beautiful man” means that only when one’s words, actions and appearance are filled with benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, can he finish the cultivation of goodness.

## DISCUSSION

In traditional Chinese aesthetic culture, a lot of things were attempted, including, primarily, the characterizations of the relationships between poetic culture and life form of human existence. Along the way, an enduring question in the aesthetic culture concerns how poetic wisdom manifests a culture’s will or power to live. The existence of such a tradition goes back to the ancient times, in which the judgments and comments made by Confucius on the poems of the *Book of Songs* in many passages contained in *The Analects* lead to the concerns of traditional Chinese aesthetic thought. The *Book of Songs*, the earliest collections of poems in China, was written by authors arranging from kings, princes and aristocrats to common folk people from Zhou Dynasty to the medium Spring and Autumn times (from the tenth to the sixth century B.C.). In the authoritative recurrence and exegesis, these comments and judgments were immensely influential in the tradition of Chinese culture. On the one hand, the expressions of poetic language became popular; on the other hand, the larger concerns of Confucian thought embodied in *The Analects* remain to the modern era.

As for the tradition of poetic culture, the common features of poetic expressions are: implicit, diffusive, metaphorical, associative, rhythmical and concise with emphasis on flavor, rhythm, expressive force and beauty; the philosophy is based on the “practical-affectational” spirit. Such language expressions exhibit the aesthetic strengths of being associative, flexible,

balanced, climatical and interpenetrating of poetry and painting. Take the Chao Zhi's *The Quatrain of Seven Steps* for example:

People burn beanstalks to boil beans;

The beans in the pot cry out.

Born as they are of the selfsame root;

Why should they torment each other so much?

The Chinese version of this poem consists of four lines with five characters per line. This can be the typical example to explain the features of the poetic culture, which includes the poetic language expressions and the “practical-affectional” spirit. Allegedly, this poem is famous literati's masterpiece in the state of Wei in the Three Kingdoms period. Superficially, the poem articulates the situation in which the beanstalks were burned to boil the beans in the pot. In fact, it addresses more profound implications, which shows the depressed incitement of feelings: This poem is the analogy of the fight and destruction between siblings with the father and the mother; further, it reflects the cruelty of feudal rule groups' internal struggle. Actually, this poem has been quoted and recited in lots of situations to mean many other things by people.

Obviously, these poetic expressions demonstrate the “vagueness” of Chinese conceptual expressions in poems. Such “vagueness” leads to a dilemma: the quest for precise definition of terms or vocabularies has been neglected, which brings about the barrier for mutual communication and isolates itself in its incapability to identify and understand, especially between the Eastern and Western traditions. As a result, only “resonance” has been regarded a value while the preciseness of terms and conceptions has been ignored.

Following the poetic wisdom with the tradition of “poetry expresses human aspiration”, the “practical-affectional” spirit also leads to the relative lack of cognitive-rational spirit. Consequently, this Chinese aesthetic culture suffers from the absence from the apprehension of nature of human beings and aesthetic activities and the explanation of the essence and the functions of beauty and arts.

Certainly, from another perspective, the characteristic of poetry and philosophical prose—a high degree of openness or ambiguity as the poetic, rich aesthetic quality—should be considered as a source of poetic richness rather than a shortcoming or disadvantages, for this kind of style can really present or convey the total experience of the poets in its immediacy beyond the logical analysis of events. It is the same for the writer or speaker.

To be sure, the significance of those emotional elements in human existence conveyed should be highlighted. That is, human existence itself needs to become aesthetic and artistic, which may or should be endowed with the metaphorical significance in the aesthetic activities and arts. Comparatively speaking, based on the unique poetic wisdom with “practical-affectional” spirit in the traditions of harmony between man and nature or of inner harmony of human beings itself performed in “Poetry expressed human aspiration”, traditional Chinese aesthetic culture has own advantages and strengths. The insight regained from this poetic wisdom and its implications is to make aesthetics become the philosophy of “better life” in theory and make human existence become aesthetic and artistic in practice.

## CONCLUSION

In its tradition of aesthetic thought, Chinese culture tries to interpret the relation between its poetic civilization and other concerns: demonstrate the role that its poetic wisdom plays in that culture that has resonance in other areas of intellectual and social life. Such a tradition is, admittedly, not one that follows the cognitive-reasoning spirit with a tendency to combine the

subjective and objective in cognitive activities, but one that merges the poetic wisdom with “practical-affectional spirit.

Actually, traditional Chinese aesthetic culture does intend to convey the message that the role and the value of the poetic wisdom and the preferred social being in social activities and inner heart are not self-evident. The explanation and justification of what the poetic wisdom performs requires great endeavor. Despite never being a direct way, they do offer an oblique and essential insight into what people concern, desire, enjoy, perceive or intend to appreciate. For example, to describe the subjective states of mind, terms such as senses (gan) and taste (wei) are posed; to describe the objective states of mind, terms such as notion-image (xiang) and scenes (jing) are put forward; to describe the harmonious interaction between the subject-mind and the object-nature, terms such as spiritliness (shen), wonderfulness (miao) and talent (neng) are proposed. Definitely, when the literati wanted to convey what cannot be articulated with concepts furnished by reason, they expressed them in the poetic way with symbols. The poetic expressions suggest inexhaustible depth not communicable in any other way.

The moralization of nature, analogizing the things of nature with moralities in both schools of Confucianism and Daoism, is a profound philosophical thinking, conveyed in the tradition of “practical-affectional” philosophy and “Poetry expresses human aspiration”. This way of thinking has great impact on Chinese aesthetic attitude to contemplate with emotions. The harmony between heaven and human is a philosophical realm as well as an aesthetic realm. Human and Nature constitute a harmonious wholeness. Nature provides human with a colorful perceptual world. Humans enjoys themselves aesthetically in nature which also fosters the virtues of human and becomes a shelter for the spirit of human to settle. It is the result of history of specific race and culture, but it contains some common traits of humanity. There should be little denying that the holistic mentality in Chinese traditional aesthetics is beneficial for curing the split of human nature, the biological mentality for rebuilding the harmony between human beings and the nature, and the most worthwhile place, namely the most significant value to the modern times, is that it affords us the poetic place to live in spiritually. Consequently, it signifies a certain direction for us to build the cross-cultural communication.

The potential value of traditional Chinese aesthetics will let sunshine in “life form”. The notion of “the harmony between man and nature” and the cultural tradition of “the poetic wisdom” stress “harmony as beauty” and more genuine human nature, which will be of great significance to show how individuals, individuals and the society, man and nature live together in modern society; “mind fasting”, “Oblivion in sitting”, “eliminating the wisdom and thoughts” etc., the measures of perceiving “Dao” may help contemporary human beings to overcome their upset sentiments, whose irrational actions may give rise to various destructive traumas to the human world; the conceptions such as “Tao follows what it is being”, “The universe and I came into being together; everything and I therein are One”, “Dao endows him his nature and God gives him his form. He should not allow likes and dislikes to injure him” may help the world triumph over social crisis and environmental crisis caused by racial discriminations, political strife, endless exploration toward nature based on anthropocentrism; the Confucian concepts such as “benevolence”, “righteousness”, “rituality”, “wisdom”, “music”, “the true gentleman personality”, may contribute to establish the social grace of modern society...

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