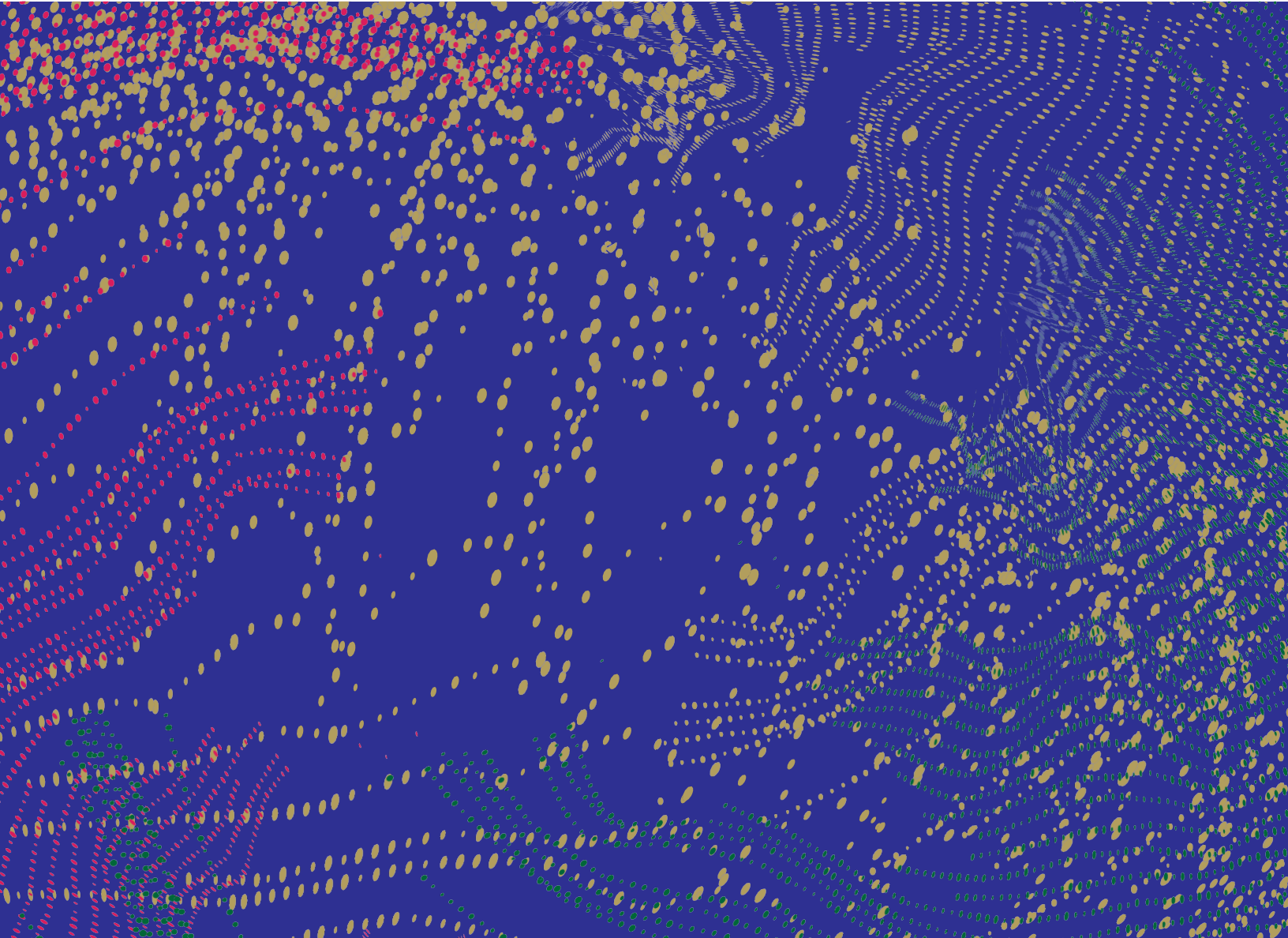


The World Humanities Report

Aesthetics and Literary Developments in China

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Aesthetics and Literary Developments in China

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The development of Chinese aesthetics and literary theory in the past thirty years is connected with the general situation of the two fields in the preceding period. The 1980s, immediately after the Cultural Revolution, witnessed a re-turning-to-normal trend in Chinese humanities, during which the so-called aesthetics craze stood out. The “aesthetics discussion,” which had originally appeared between 1956 and 1966, began anew in the 1980s, and literary theories of this period also returned to where they left off in 1966, when the Cultural Revolution started. Several textbooks were of enormous influence in the 1980s and occupied a dominant place in the liberal education at Chinese universities: *Meixuegailun* [Introduction to aesthetics] (1981), *Xifangmeixueshi* [The history of Western aesthetics] (1963, 1979), *Wenxue de jibenyanli* [Basic principles of literature] (1961, 1979), and *Wenxuegailun* [Introduction to literature] (1979). Some of them had been published before 1966, while some after 1979, and the plan was that the original versions of these books would be used as college textbooks throughout the country. Translations of international aesthetics and literary theories in the 1980s had considerable impact as well. Many previously translated works were reprinted or reissued, and many Chinese journals started to introduce Western literary theories, such as New Criticism, Russian formalism, structuralism, poststructuralism, and psychoanalysis, which, before 1980, were not known to the Chinese academia. However, even after they were introduced, these new theories did not appear in textbooks of the same period, and they were rarely used in literary criticism. Since 1990 Chinese aesthetics and literary studies have undergone significant change.

Influence from the West

A Craze for Translating Western Works

After 1949, Chinese aestheticians and literary theorists emphasized the translation and introduction of classical Western works. In the field of aesthetics, the Commercial Press, the first modern publishing organization in China, published translated versions of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1961) and DeWitt H. Parker's *The Principles of Aesthetics* (1965). The People's Literature Publishing House published many translated classical works from the Western literary tradition, such as G. W. F. Hegel's *Aesthetics* (1958), Boileau's *L'Art poétique* (1959), Plato's *Selected Dialogues on Arts* (1963), Aristotle's *Poetics* (1962), Horace's *Ars Poetica* (1962), and Hippolyte Taine's *The Philosophy of Art* (1963). Between 1961 and 1966, the People's Literature Publishing House also initiated an academic series titled Modern Literary Theories, which introduced many books on nineteenth- and twentieth-century aesthetics and literary theories, though many of such books were originally written by scholars from Russia and the Soviet Union. Wu Lifu, a Shanghai-based scholar who studied at the University of London, edited the two-volume *Xifangwenlunxuan* [Selection of Western literary theories] (1963). A successful textbook, these two volumes collected representative Western literary theories from ancient Greece to the nineteenth century.

In the 1980s, twentieth-century Western aesthetics and literary theories attracted more and more attention in the Chinese academy, and a trend of translating Western works emerged. The contemporary national policy of reform and opening up motivated the translation and introduction of these Western books, and they opened new horizons for the intelligentsia. Li Zehou, a renowned philosopher, served as the chief editor of the influential Aesthetics Translation series, which published some fifty titles, including Rudolf Arnheim's *Art and Visual Perception* and Susanne Langer's *Feeling and Form*. The Toward the Future series, which published more than one hundred titles, was another set of books that had widespread impact in mainland China. In addition, the Modern Western Philosophy series published dozens of books.

In the area of literary theory, the same thing happened. Wang Chunyuan and Qian Zhongwen, two scholars from the Institute of Literature at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), edited over ten books under the International Modern Literary Theories Translation Series. This series included a translated version of René Wellek and Austin Warren's *Theory of Literature*.

Another group of scholars at the Institute of Foreign Literature at the CASS supervised the publication of the Contemporary Foreign Literary Theories series and the 20th-century Western Literary Theories series. The scholarly translation continued throughout the 1990s.

After China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001, globalization had a profound impact on the study of aesthetics, literature, and arts. The topics and subjects selected for translation changed as Chinese translators preferred new works by contemporary Western scholars. A number of important series appeared in this period. The Research on Modernity series, edited by Zhou Xian and Xu Jun, contains many important books that could fall under the subject of aesthetics, such as Terry Eagleton's *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, and Wolfgang Iser's *Unsere postmoderne Moderne* [Our postmodern modern]. Other series that introduced the contemporary international theory to China include Translations of Contemporary Academic Prism (edited by Zhang Yibing), Intellectual Library (coedited by Wang Fengzhen and J. Hillis Miller), the Weiming Translation Library of Peking University Press, and Western Academic Thought in the 20th Century published by Renmin University Press.

The collaboration between Zhou Xian and myself resulted in the series Translations of the New Century Aesthetics, which published more than a dozen works by active philosophers in the West, such as Richard Shusterman's *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, Noël Carroll's *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays*, and Kendall Walton's *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts*. Peng Feng of Peking University initiated the Aesthetics and Art series, which also introduced to China many titles recently published in the West. Shen Yubing served as the editor in chief of a series that introduced numerous research monographs in art history. Some Chinese publishers focused on the introduction of new books that fall under specific areas of philosophy: analytic aesthetics, new pragmatism, phenomenology, existentialism, the Frankfurt School, and environmental aesthetics, among others. With Zhang Yunpeng, I co-organized the publication of a series titled Translation of Aesthetics in the New Era. The first group of titles included *The Revival of Aesthetics* (coedited by Aleš Erjavec and Gao Jianping), Wolfgang Iser's *Aesthetics beyond Aesthetics*, and Curtis Carter's *Border-Crossings: Aesthetics into the Arts*.

The influence of international aesthetics on Chinese academia is of course not only manifested in the above-mentioned translation series, but also in

Chinese scholarship. With the introduction of the ideas of such scholars as Roger Fry, Clive Bell, Susanne Langer, Rudolf Arnheim, Sigmund Freud, and Carl Jung in the 1980s, Chinese scholars started to incorporate them into their work. The introduction of the Frankfurt School and cultural studies in the 1990s collided with a narrow conception of aesthetics in China, and eventually they broadened Chinese aesthetics research. In the meantime, research on phenomenological aesthetics, analytic aesthetics, and neopragmatic aesthetics continued to move forward with the expansion of academic exchange between China and the West.

Academic Exchange between China and Other Countries

International conferences have increasingly been held in China. In the area of aesthetics, an international conference organized by the Chinese Society for Aesthetics and Shenzhen University took place in Shenzhen in November 1995. Over ninety scholars of aesthetics and art educators attended the conference, from mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Sweden, Germany, Finland, Japan, and beyond. In a sense, this conference was a continuation of introducing and exploring foreign theories of aesthetics—and a reflection of the change in conditions for scholarly exchanges in China.

In 2002 the Chinese Society for Aesthetics, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and Beijing International Studies University co-organized a large conference in Beijing, which attracted more than one hundred participants from seventeen countries, including the United Kingdom, the United States, Germany, Italy, Japan, Korea, India, Greece, Turkey, Slovenia, and Australia. After the conference, its proceedings were published in a Chinese-English bilingual edition under the title *Aesthetics and Culture: East and West*.¹

In 2006, due to the cooperation between the International Association for Aesthetics (IAA) and the Chinese Society for Aesthetics, a conference on “Aesthetics in Diversified Cultures” was held in Sichuan in southwest China. The president and vice president of the IAA and the leaders from the aesthetics organizations of various countries attended the conference. Papers for this conference were collected in the eleventh volume of *International Yearbook of Aesthetics*.

¹ Gao Jianping and Wang Keping, eds., *Aesthetics and Culture: East and West* (Hefei: Anhui Education Press, 2006).

In 2010 the 18th International Congress of Aesthetics was co-organized by Peking University in Beijing and the IAA and held at the university. As the largest international conference in aesthetics, it attracted some four hundred international scholars and more than four hundred scholars from China. After this conference, China integrated successfully into the world aesthetics community. Two volumes of conference proceedings were published, one with the Chinese papers and the other with the English.²

During the past thirty years Chinese scholars have had much greater opportunity to participate in international conferences. Since the 1990s, China, Japan, and Korea have taken turns to host an Oriental Aesthetics Forum annually, and it has played an important role in promoting scholarly exchanges among the three countries. In addition, many other conferences in the areas of literary theory and comparative literature have been held in China.

The IAA formally came into existence in 1988 at the 11th International Congress of Aesthetics in Nottingham, England. However, the history of international association in aesthetics goes back many years. It began with the First International Congress of Aesthetics organized by Max Dessoir in Berlin in 1913. Originally, the association was called the International Committee of Aesthetics, which was a rather closed international group that consisted of members from the Europe, North America, and Japan. It was not until the 1980s that the association started its reorganization and democratization. In 1998, during the 14th International Congress of Aesthetics that was held in the Slovenian capital Ljubljana, the Chinese Society for Aesthetics was approved by the executive committee of the IAA and officially became a member. Although only a few Chinese scholars came to that conference, it marked a beginning for Chinese aesthetics reaching out to the outside world. The aims of the IAA, according to the association's constitution, are "to give institutional recognition, world-wide, to aesthetics as a field of humanistic knowledge, to encourage and promote inquiry in aesthetics, and to disseminate its findings."³ Since its internationalization in the 1980s the IAA has elected twelve presidents: Harold Osborne (1984–88), Göran Hermeren (1988–92), Arnold Berleant (1995–98), Aleš Erjavec (1998–2001), Ken-ichi Sasaki (2001–4), Heinz Paezold (2004–7), Jos de Mul (2007–10), Curtis L. Carter (2010–13), Gao Jianping (2013–16), Jale Erzen

² Gao Jianping and Peng Feng, eds., *Diversities in Aesthetics: Selected Papers of the 18th Congress of International Aesthetics* (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2013).

³ "Constitution of the International Association for Aesthetics," IAA, accessed May 15, 2021, <https://iaaesthetics.org/about-the-iaa/constitution>.

(2016–19), Miodrag Šuvaković (2019–22), and Rodrigo Duarte (2022–). In this century, the International Congress of Aesthetics has been held in Tokyo, Japan (2001), Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (2004), Ankara, Turkey (2007), Beijing, China (2010), Kraków, Poland (2013), Seoul, Korea (2016), Belgrade, Serbia (2019), and Belo Horizonte, Brazil (2023), and more and more Chinese scholars are participating in these conferences.

The Western Influence on Chinese Textbooks

In the early 1980s teaching materials in the liberal arts in Chinese universities still showed Soviet influence. In the area of literary theory, Chinese scholars edited several textbooks, such as Ye Yiqun's *Basic Principles of Literature* and Cai Yi's *Introduction to Literature*. Although intended to pursue a certain degree of theoretical independence, due to the limited availability of other sources, the guiding theories in these books were taken from the Soviet Union. The translation and introduction of Western literary theories, such as French structuralism, and the New Criticism, directly affected the content of teaching materials in Chinese humanities. In the 1990s these new theories were properly integrated into many textbooks, such as *A Textbook of Literary Theory* (edited by Tong Qingbing; 2000) and *Principles of Literary Criticism* (edited by Wang Xianpei and Hu Yamin; 1999). In the twenty-first century, many more new textbooks emerged, reflecting Chinese scholars' efforts to assimilate Western literary theories.

The Emergence of Historical Books on Western Aesthetics and Literary Theories

Zhu Guangqian, one of the founders of the study of aesthetics in twentieth-century China, published his important *History of Western Aesthetics* in 1963, which led the way for more Chinese scholars to published work on this topic. In the 1960s Ru Xin published *Xifangmeixueshiluncong* [A Symposium on the history of Western aesthetics] and followed up in the 1980s with a sequel, *Xifangmeixueshi luncong xubian* [A sequel to a symposium on the history of Western aesthetics]. In 1980 Jiang Kongyang published *Deguo gudian meixue* [Classical German aesthetics], an early monographic study on a specific area of Western aesthetics.

The 1990s witnessed the emergence of more historical studies on Western aesthetics such as *Currents of Twentieth-Century Western Aesthetics* (coauthored

by Mao Chongjie, Zhang Dexing, and Ma Chi) and four volumes of *History of Western Aesthetics* (edited by Ru Xin). Besides these multivolume works, many single-volume studies on Western aesthetics were written by Chinese aestheticians, such as Zhang Fa, Niu Hongbao, Ling Jiyao, Zhang Qiqun, and Zhou Xian, each reflecting its author's own take on the subject.

Also in this period, some important Western historical works on aesthetics were translated into Chinese, such as Bernard Bosanquet's *A History of Aesthetic* (1998), Benedetto Croce's *Aesthetic: As Science of Expression and General Linguistic* (1984), Katharine Everett Gilbert and Helmut Kuhn's *A History of Aesthetics* (1989), Earl of Listowel's *A Critical History of Modern Aesthetics* (1980), and Monroe Beardsley's *Aesthetics: From Classical Greece to the Present* (2018). The translation of these masterpieces expanded the breadth and vision of Chinese researchers.

Following Wu Lifu's *A Selection of Western Literary Theories* (1963), Gao Jianping and Ding Guoqi compiled six volumes of *Classics of Literary Theory* (2014), the fifth and sixth volumes of which selected key Western literary theories of the twentieth century. Gao Jianping also edited three books on contemporary Western aesthetics: *Xifang wenlun jingdian jingdu* [Readers of the Western theory of literature] (2022), *Xifang meixue jingdian jingdu* [Readers of the Western aesthetics] (2021), and *Xifang Marxism meixue jingdian jingdu* [Readers of the Western Marxist aesthetics] (2022).

Premodern Chinese Aesthetics and Literary Theory

The Studies of Chinese Literary Criticism

In the early twentieth century, three historical books on Chinese literary criticism with the same title—*Zhongguo wenxue piping shi* [A history of Chinese literary criticism]—were published by Luo Genze, Zhu Dongrun, and Guo Shaoyu, respectively. Since the 1990s, numerous studies of the history of Chinese literary theories have been published as well, of which the important titles include: Zhang Shaokang's *A Course in the History of Chinese Literary Theory and Criticism* (1999), Wang Yunxi and Gu Yisheng's *A New History of Chinese Literary Criticism* (2007), and Li Zhuangying and Li Chunqing's *A Course in Traditional Chinese Literary Theory* (2005). In addition to these books, several multivolume studies have also been published, most notable being *A Comprehensive History of Chinese Literary Criticism* (edited by Wang Yunxi and Gu Yisheng, 7 volumes; 1996).

The History of Chinese Aesthetics

In the 1980s the publication of two books established an important precedent for the study of the history of Chinese aesthetics: Li Zehou and Liu Gangji's *History of Chinese Aesthetics* (2 volumes, published in 1984 and 1987 respectively) and Ye Lang's *Outline of the History of Chinese Aesthetics* (1985). Immediately after the publication of these two books, Ming Ze published three volumes of *A History of Chinese Aesthetic Ideas* (1987). In the 1990s many scholars presented their own monographs on Chinese aesthetics, such as Zhou Laixiang's *Main Trends of Chinese Aesthetics* (1992) and Chen Wangheng's *A History of Classical Aesthetics in China* (1998).

Li Zehou's *Mei de li cheng* [*The Path of Beauty*] is one of the most influential books in the study of Chinese aesthetics.⁴ A noted philosopher and aesthetician, Li Zehou draws on examples of various Chinese arts, such as sculpture, painting, calligraphy, and poetry, and builds a cogent and engaging narrative of the changing aesthetic taste of China's successive dynasties. His style of writing attracted many followers. At the turn of the century, two multivolume works gathered extensive historical materials to narrate the development of Chinese aesthetic tastes: *History of Chinese Aesthetic Trends* (edited by Xu Ming; 2000) and *History of Chinese Aesthetic Culture* (edited by Chen Yan; 2000). These two books focused on broader issues in Chinese aesthetic phenomena, and, as a result, they attracted broad attention from contemporary researchers.

In addition to the above books, five sets of books—all under the general category of Chinese artistic and aesthetic tradition—need to be mentioned. Three of them were edited by Ye Lang and Zhu Liangzhi, aestheticians from Peking University: *Chinese Aesthetics Library* (19 volumes; 2003), *A Comprehensive History of Chinese Aesthetics* (8 volumes; 2014), and *A Comprehensive History of Chinese Art Criticism*. The other two titles are: *A Comprehensive History of Chinese Aesthetic Education* (9 volumes; 2017) and *A General History of Chinese Aesthetic Consciousness* (8 volumes; 2017). Massive scholarly undertakings like these demonstrate the remarkably high productivity of the Chinese aesthetics community when compared to other countries.

⁴ Li Zehou, *The Path of Beauty: A Study of Chinese Aesthetics*, trans. Gong Lizeng (Beijing: Morning Glory Publishers, 1988).

Modern Implications

Since the 1990s, there has been heated debate in the Chinese academy about whether traditional literary theory can achieve “modern transformation.” This debate coincides with a fresh wave of research on classical Chinese literary criticism and aesthetics. Not content with doing historical research, some scholars started to reflect on the implications of such research for contemporary Chinese humanities and how traditional Chinese literary and aesthetic thought could be adapted for modern society. Some have held that through a “transition” we can build a modern system of literary theory and aesthetics. Others contended that the contemporary context is radically different from that of the ancient, and as a result, the classical literary and aesthetic ideas are not compatible with the modern discourse and the realities of modern life.

With the intensification of the debate, a few aesthetics scholars argued that the introduction of Western literary theory and aesthetics resulted in a kind of “aphasia” on the part of Chinese academia. To fight this disease, they held that we need to return to our traditional resources. A majority of Chinese scholars who believe that the introduction of Western theories played an active role in building a modern system of Chinese aesthetics and literary theories have criticized this point of view. Eventually, what prevailed in the debate was a pragmatic position that holds that in building a modern system of Chinese aesthetics and literary theory, we need to take Chinese realities into consideration and in the meantime to draw on resources from the West and premodern China.

Chinese Aesthetic Concepts

The principle that “making the ancient serve the present, and making foreign things serve China” has different meanings in different periods. Initially, it meant that revolutionary contents should be infused into traditional and Western art forms. But how does the modern system of Chinese aesthetics and literary theory assimilate and combine traditional and foreign ideas? This is still a challenge for the Chinese academic community. In response to this challenge, some Chinese scholars chose a practical approach: to focus on the key concepts and categories in Chinese aesthetics and literary texts.

Since the 1990s, many books on Chinese aesthetic concepts have been published. Three of them were quite long and influential: Cheng Fuwang’s *Dictionary of Chinese Aesthetic Categories* (1995), Wang Zhenfu’s *History of Chinese Aesthetic Terms* (2009), and a book series titled *Classical Chinese Aesthetic Terms* (2001–9). In addition to these, numerous monographs have been

published on such key aesthetic concepts as *yijing* [idea-scape], *yixiang* [idea-image], *qiyun* [spirit resonance], and *fenggu* [vigor of style].

The history of Chinese aesthetics is successive, and as a result, many terms that were prevalent during the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368–1911) can be traced to the Wei and Jin dynasties (220–420), even to the pre-Qin period (before 221 BCE). Thus, studying the history of key terms proves to be a useful approach in Chinese aesthetics research and an alternative to those efforts to build grand systems. Beyond the study of key aesthetic terms, some scholars compare Chinese and Western concepts, which is more challenging, and their efforts also play a positive role in the development of Chinese aesthetics research.

Research Organizations

National Scholarly Societies and Associations

In recent decades many national scholarly societies have been founded, and they have played a pivotal role in the organization of academic activities. The most important among them are:

- The Chinese Society for Aesthetics. This society was founded in 1980, and the secretariat of the society is set up at the Institute of Philosophy, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. The Society contains more than 1,000 members and holds a yearly conference. The society has six divisions: the Commission for Aesthetic Culture, the Commission for the History of Chinese Aesthetics, the Commission for Foreign Aesthetics, the Commission for Aesthetics of Arts, the Commission for Technological Aesthetics, and the Commission for Young Aestheticians. In the past forty years, the society has played an important role in the development of aesthetics in China.
- Chinese Association for Theory of Literature and Art. Founded in 1979, this association is set up at East China Normal University.
- Association for Marxist and Leninist Art and Literary Criticism. Founded in 1978, this association also has its secretariat set up at East China Normal University.
- Chinese Comparative Literature Association. This association was founded in 1985. Its secretariat was originally set up at the Institute of Literature, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and currently at the

Institute of Comparative Literature, Department of Chinese Language and Literature, Peking University.

- China Association of Sino-Foreign Literary and Arts Theories. This association was founded in 1994. The association has many divisions, such as the narratology, the literary semiotics, Bakhtin research, and the new media literature.

During the past forty years, these societies and associations have made substantial contributions to the study of Chinese aesthetics and literary theories.

Academic Research Institutions

Two research units at CASS have played an important part in promoting the research of aesthetics and literary theories since the 1980s. The first one is the Aesthetics Research Office that is affiliated with the Institute of Philosophy, and the second is the Literary Research Office affiliated with the Institute of Literature. Since the 1990s, the Ministry of Education in China has entrusted a few universities to establish specialized research units, such as the Center for Aesthetics and Art Education, located at Peking University, the Center for Literary Theory and Aesthetics at Shandong University, and the Center for Literary and Art Theory at Beijing Normal University. These three centers are directly subordinate to the Ministry of Education, and many universities have established advanced research institutes that place great emphasis on the study of aesthetics and literary theories.

Scholarly Journals and Publications

In the early 1980s, two journals exerted great influence on the study of aesthetics: *Meixue* [Aesthetics], edited by Li Zehou, and *Meixueluncong* [Aesthetics forum], edited by Cai Yi, but they were discontinued in the late 1980s. The influential journal *Waiguo meixue* [International aesthetics] began in 1985, then stopped publication after five years before resuming in 2005. Several features in this journal have had a strong impact, such as its regular columns on Selected Translations of Western Aesthetics Classics and Frontiers of Contemporary Aesthetics, through which the work of contemporary scholars of aesthetics, such as Joseph Margolis, Richard Shusterman, Aleš Erjavec, Arnold Berleant, and Curtis Carter, has been introduced to Chinese readers. *Waiguo meixue* also

publishes articles that introduce aesthetics ideas from India, Japan, France, and Russia.

Makesi zhuyi meixue yanjiu [Research on Marxist aesthetics] was cofounded in 1996 by Liu Gangji and Wang Jie and has been a major platform for publishing work on Marxist aesthetics in China. Its editorial office has organized an international forum on Marxist aesthetics since 2011 in a variety of international cities. Permanent features of the journal include Classical Marxist Theories, Overseas Marxism and Aesthetics, Marxist Aesthetics Research from Diverse Perspectives, Marxism and Cultural Studies, Research on the History of Chinese Marxist Aesthetics, International Marxist Aesthetics, Anthropology of Aesthetics, Media Aesthetics, and Book Reviews.

Dongfang congkan [The journal of multicultural studies of the Orient] was founded in 1992 and has published seventy-nine issues. Its regular features include Eastern Culture and Literary Studies, Oriental Poetics, Oriental Aesthetics, Oriental Forum, and Oriental Documents. The journal also offers occasional columns on comparative research, new explanations of classics, and research on culture and media.

Besides the above-mentioned, there are three other widely read journals: *Meixue yu Yishu Pinlun* [Aesthetics and art criticism], edited by Zhu Liyuan; *Yishu Lilun yu Yishushi Yanjiu* [Journal of art theory and art history], edited by Zhou Xian; and *Zhongguo Meixue Yanjiu* [Chinese aesthetics research], edited by Zhu Zhirong.

Current Research

Current research on aesthetics and literary theories in China is varied and complex, which can be best understood through the following six perspectives.

Overcoming the China-West Dichotomy

In ancient China there were no such subjects as aesthetics and literary theories. The concept of aesthetics was imported into China around 1900, and within a few decades the discipline of Chinese aesthetics was established. Thus, in Chinese academia, “aesthetics in China” transformed into “Chinese aesthetics.” At the beginning, scholars of Chinese aesthetics tended to emphasize the translation of Western aesthetics, and in their research, they adopted a Western theoretical framework while examining Chinese artistic traditions. Stimulated by the Western aesthetics, some scholars were committed to the study of Chinese

aesthetics as a counterweight to the Western tradition. However, the view that the West is coterminous with “modern” has long prevailed in Chinese, and today many Chinese scholars endeavor to modify the subject of aesthetics so as to make it modern *and* Chinese.

The discipline of literary theory developed in the same way. Chinese literary research was first under the influence of the Soviet Union and then the West. Researchers of literary theories normally do not involve textual analysis, and in recent years some literary theorists in China have proposed that the development of theories should be integrated with actual literary works and rely on analysis of them.

Chinese Attempts to Formulate Basic Aesthetic Theories

In the 1980s the so-called practical aesthetics prevailed among Chinese aestheticians. First proposed by Li Zehou in his *Meixue si jiang* [Four essays on aesthetics], practical aesthetics was much debated, and in the 1990s such schools as new practical aesthetics and post-practical aesthetics emerged in China.

In contemporary Chinese aesthetics, schools that have exerted influence also include environmental aesthetics, eco-aesthetics, and *sheng-sheng* aesthetics.⁵ Scholars in the schools of environmental aesthetics and eco-aesthetics aim to present a new explanation of natural beauty. In recent years, scholars who held eco-aesthetics in high regard have been promoting the concept of *sheng-sheng* aesthetics through integrating the ideas in *The Books of Changes*, an ancient Chinese divination text and philosophical classic, with those of New Confucian philosophers in Hong Kong and Taiwan. *Sheng-sheng* aesthetics posits that an endless, ever-generating strength permeates nature, society, and the arts, and beauty arises from this dynamic process.

Besides the above-mentioned schools, four other groups of aesthetic theories have been advanced in Chinese academia and gained a following among contemporary scholars. The first group includes life aesthetics, living aesthetics, and aesthetics for human life. These three theories have distinct origins in different countries, but they merged in China. Life aesthetics was formed under the influence of the philosophical movement *Lebensphilosophie* [philosophy of life]. Inspired the writings of philosophers like Henri Bergson, Wilhelm Dilthey, and Georg Simmel, Chinese scholars adopted a new perspective.

⁵ The reduplication *sheng-sheng* is a Chinese term from *The Book of Changes*, meaning “perceptual growth and change.”

Likewise, the writings of John Dewey, Wolfgang Iser, and Mike Featherstone directly influenced research on everyday aesthetics and living aesthetics in China. As Chinese scholars have different attitudes toward everyday aesthetics, debates often take place in academic journals. The concept of aesthetics for human life originates in traditional Chinese aesthetics, and it is more like an attitude toward life, complementing existing aesthetic theories.

The second group consists of empirical aesthetics and somaesthetics. In contemporary Chinese academia, somaesthetics is currently in vogue, attracting many researchers. This concept has its origin in the existential philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and took off in China after the translation into Chinese of Richard Shusterman's *Pragmatist Aesthetics* in 2002. The starting point of Shusterman's theory is Dewey's pragmatist aesthetics, especially Dewey's account of experience. When explaining the concept of experience, Dewey proposed that an experience involves both "undergoing" and "doing"; it is a two-way action that combines feeling and operation. Shusterman stressed that when we discuss the physical body, we should use the term "somaesthetics" rather than "body aesthetics" because the word "body" may refer to a dead body, whereas aesthetics involves the living human body, the sensations of the active human body. Aesthetics cannot be separated from the human beings who have an experience. Some Chinese scholars took the term "somaesthetics" so literally that they only focused on the concept of body in their research. New interpretations of somaesthetics emerged, and along with them have come misreadings.

The third group includes cognitive aesthetics, psycho-physiological aesthetics, and neuroaesthetics. Modern Chinese aesthetics has an enduring psychological tradition, which can be traced at least back to Zhu Guangqian's *Wenyi xinlixue* [The psychology of art and literature] (1936). In that book, Zhu discussed psychological concepts, such as intuition, distance, and empathy, illustrating his discussions with numerous examples from both Chinese and Western artistic traditions. His book exerted great influence before 1949, and during the "aesthetics craze" of the 1980s, psychological ideas—Rudolf Arnheim's Gestalt psychology, the method of psychoanalysis from Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, and Jean Piaget's genetic epistemology—once again entered the realm of aesthetics and had a big impact on Chinese academia. But, generally speaking, the majority of Chinese psychological aesthetics research is imported from the other countries, and original research in the area is rare. In recent years, some scholars have taken an interest in neuroaesthetics, but the lack of experimental equipment, cooperation among various fields of science (such as

neurophysiology and pathology), and, most important, a scientific methodology has hampered their research.

The fourth group of aesthetic theory is evolutionary aesthetics. Chinese scholars have invoked anthropological and evolutionary aesthetic ideas—such as the arguments of Wolfgang Iser's animal aesthetics, and Charles Darwin's and John Dewey's viewpoints on the origin of beauty, but in general China is weak in this area. Philosophy since German rationalism has tended to presuppose a discontinuity between animals and human beings, but evolutionary aesthetics draws upon Darwin and Dewey, who found an evolutionary continuity between the animals and human beings.

Intercultural Communication

Since 1900, Chinese scholars have been engaged in the importation of international literary and aesthetic theories. Examining these theories from the perspective of communication history has attracted many contemporary Chinese researchers. Many Western theories undergo changes upon reception in China, as seen notably in Zhu Guangqian's reception of Benedetto Croce, Theodor Lipps, Edward Bullough, and John Ruskin, and in Li Zehou's modification of the Clive Bell, Carl Jung, Jean Piaget, and Susanne Langer. Changes arise both from misreading and from deliberate remolding. This same phenomenon occurs in European countries, but in China it is all the more obvious. The main reason behind this phenomenon is that China and the West differ widely in languages, history, and culture. As a research topic, the variations that occurred in the course of cross-cultural communication also reflect the cultural differences between different countries. Many aesthetic theories originally from the West have shown variations or generated new meanings after being imported to China, notably everyday aesthetics, aesthetic ideology, life aesthetics, and somaesthetics.

Another phenomenon is that many theories arrived in China decades after they were prevalent in the West. For example, existentialist aesthetics, which prevailed between the 1940s and 1950s in Europe, became fashionable in China between the 1980s and 1990s. In Europe analytic aesthetics emerged and developed during the 1950s and 1960s, but in China it gained popularity only after 1990. The gap suggests that social conditions determine when theories are taken up. Some scholars have traced the trajectories of these theories, and their research has been quite fruitful.

The Impact of Cultural Studies

Chinese aesthetics in the 1980s displayed a tendency toward “new enlightenment.” Influenced by Kant’s aesthetics, Chinese scholars were fond of concepts like “aesthetic disinterestedness” and “the autonomy of art.” In the 1990s the atmosphere in Chinese academia changed, partly due to the importation of some new methodologies from the West, such as the Frankfurt School, the social cultural criticism that was prevalent in 1960s France, and British cultural studies. Previously, what had influenced Chinese literary research were those theories like New Criticism, formalism, and structuralism, but in the 1990s they were replaced by “anti-mainstream” aesthetic and literary thought.

Chinese society underwent a profound transformation in the 1990s, a period when China’s market economy gained momentum. The market economy led to the rapid development of China’s popular culture, which served as a counterbalance to traditional elite culture. At the beginning, popular culture in mainland China was under the influence of Hong Kong and Taiwan. The general relaxed atmosphere of Hong Kong’s returning to China, as well as the improved relationship between Taiwan and mainland China, helped bring the popular cultures from Hong Kong and Taiwan to the Chinese people. Pop singers like Taiwan’s Teresa Teng and Hong Kong’s Andy Lau were extremely popular among the young generation. Martial arts [*wuxia*] novels, especially those from Hong Kong’s Jin Yong, were all the rage in mainland China. Films from Hong Kong and Taiwan, regardless of their genre, have captivated a large audience in mainland China.

Cultural studies emerged in China against this background. Of course, Chinese cultural studies found its theoretical roots in the West, but in China it followed a different trajectory. In the West, what initially attracted the theorists were avant-garde artistic practices that challenged tradition. Modern aesthetic and literary theories were constructed around these anti-traditional practices. By contrast, in 1980s China literary realism and the Kantian notion of aesthetic disinterestedness prevailed. Avant-garde arts did spring up in the 1980s in China, especially in the area of fine arts, but there were few theoretical responses. Rather, what initially attracted the attentions of Chinese cultural researchers was popular culture. It was not until a generation later, in the 2010s, that Chinese scholars exhibited an interest in the Western avant-garde and in the analytic aesthetics that aimed to explain the avant-garde arts.

As to the scope of literary and art research, some Chinese cultural scholars held that it should be enlarged to contain the many varied aspects of society or

culture. For another group of scholars, however, the reconstruction of the subject of literary theory could benefit from the idea of cultural poetics. They proposed that the study of literary theory should of course include various cultural forms, but its main object should remain the same—that is, literary texts, elite art and literature, and realist works. They disapproved of the idea that literary research should expand to include things that are not directly related to literature. That is to say, literary research should have the actual literary text at its center while also taking into consideration the culture that gives rise to the literary work.

The theory of cultural poetics merged with the ideology of the aesthetic, a theory proposed by the British literary theorist Terry Eagleton. In his 1990 book *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Eagleton argued that the emphasis on the aesthetic values of works of literature and art constitutes an ideology of the middle class, which should be seen as both a historical fact and a circumstance that needs to be subverted. Chinese advocates of cultural poetics have tried to modify this theory—moving from “the ideology of the superstructure” to a special kind of “aesthetic ideology”—to remold the identity of the arts in China.

The New Media’s Impact

The media have been an important influence on the study of aesthetics and literary theories. The founding of such disciplines as aesthetics and literary theory in China can be traced to the society’s modern transformation, to the rise of modern universities, and to the emergence of modern printing in China. The popularity of movable-type printing brought about a boom in the publication of books and journals, which radically changed the cultural life in Chinese society. However, it was not until recent years, with the emergence of the new media, that Chinese academia developed an awareness of the media’s impacts on literary and artistic creation.

In China, an important part of research on new media is the introduction and translation of international media theories. A fine example is the translation of the works of Marshall McLuhan. In this regard, He Daokuan from Shenzhen University has done a lot of work, including the translation of McLuhan’s *Understanding Media*. Huang Mingfen from Xiamen University also made great efforts in the construction of new media theories. Generally speaking, new interpretations of McLuhan’s ideas, such as “the media is the message,” fostered a media awareness among Chinese scholars.

In the past twenty years, a notable phenomenon in China is the rise of the so-called internet literature. Chinese network literature started with a group of Chinese writers and students who lived in the United States in the 1990s. China did not gain access to the internet until 1994, and it started with the top universities and research institutes based in Beijing. The emergence of online literature has three preconditions: the use of computer, the invention of Chinese character input method, and widespread internet availability. When all three came together in China, the internet developed rapidly. The earliest internet literature typically was the online reproduction of literary works that had been previously published in print, with the aim of expanding readership. Internet literature, in contrast, is literature written specifically for and on the internet. As a result, the boundary of internet literature gradually became clear. It was proposed that “online literature” and “literature online” were two distinct notions. Those works that were first published on traditional paper media and then uploaded online were clearly defined as literature online, and online literature originated on blogs or literary websites. Two notable works of online literature are Anni Baobei’s *Zaijianwei’an* [*Goodbye Vivian*] (2000) and Murong Xuecun’s *Chengdu, jinye qing jiang wo yiwang* [*Leave Me Alone: A Novel of Chengdu*] (2002).

The emergence of an independent status for online publication marked a new phase of China’s internet literature. In October 2003, China’s largest literature website, Qidian, introduced fees for its online content. Even though online authors with a large subscription base earn only around 2,000 yuan (\$300) per month, this change was of great significance. Just a few years later, Zhang Wei (better known by his pen name Tang Jia San Shao), China’s top-earning online novelist, earned millions of yuan for his novel *Mad God*, which had been serialized on Qidian. After a decade of development, internet literature has become a growth area. According to the 37th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China, at the end of December 2015, there were 297 million online literature subscribers and 259 million mobile-phone subscribers, and the revenue from online literature was 7 billion yuan (around \$1.1 billion). Today in China, the number of print novels is a hundred times smaller than that of online novels. Print media still maintain a high status and are valued by the government and academia, but it is clear that internet literature has become an unstoppable force in the literary world.

When online literature was restricted to a youth subculture, it did not receive much attention from literary scholars. Likewise, aesthetics scholars

thought that online literature was rubbish and not worth reading. What prompted them to finally study online literature was its growth and broad popularity among young people. Today, internet literature has become the mainstream, and in the process of becoming mainstream, it is changing. In its infancy, internet literature was regarded as a form supplemental to print literature, but after internet literature become mainstream, literary critics and aestheticians have in recent years increasingly explored its distinctive aesthetic properties.

The Relation between Text and Image

The relation between images and words is an ancient topic in aesthetics and literary theories. Traditional theories in both Europe and China center on the words. Words and various kind of humanistic subjects that are based on words, such as poetry, history, and philosophy, constitute the cornerstone of modern civilizations. Traditional education relies on the words and texts. Although not a few civilizations have been under the threat of images, the outcome of such struggles is always the same: the words eventually get the upper hand. In Chinese terminology, the common term *dushu* has a variety of meanings—“reading a book,” “studying,” and “attending school”—which suggests that “book reading” is synonymous with receiving education. Images are either an attachment or a disturbance to education, subordinate to words. However, in the past few decades, images have played more and more important role in education and in our daily lives. Ubiquitous images—video and television, advertisements, and photographs—all testify to the fact that we occupy a world of images.

As a result, a “pictorial turn” has emerged in the Chinese academy. Such a turn started with the spread of a translated version of the article “That Meets the Eye...” by Slovenian philosopher Aleš Erjavec (2000), a former president of the International Association for Aesthetics. After that, a selection of Erjavec’s papers was translated into Chinese and published under the title *Toward the Image* in 2003. In 2006, W. J. T. Mitchell’s *Picture Theory* was translated into Chinese and published by the Peking University Press. These translations encouraged a wave of research on the relationship between image and text in Chinese academia. Some Chinese scholars who were originally engaged in cultural studies shifted their attention to the relations between image and word. Another group of literary theorists returned to Chinese tradition to study the history of relationships between images and Chinese literature.

This pictorial turn since the beginning of the twenty-first century suggests that visual images are replacing words and becoming an important source of knowledge. The prevalence of images is changing our way of life, our means of education, and how we present academic works. The tension between the words and images has attracted many Chinese scholars of aesthetics and literary theorists, and their research has challenged traditional ideas about aesthetics, literature, the classification of arts, the boundary of art, and so forth. For some scholars, this constitutes the beginning of a new aesthetics.

Conclusion

During the past thirty years the fields of aesthetics and literary theory in China have yielded fruitful results in almost all areas of the two fields through direct dialogues with the international academic community, assimilation of the latest theories from other countries, and a comprehensive study of traditional Chinese texts. With thirty years of effort on the part of Chinese scholars, the two humanities disciplines of aesthetics and literary theory have been firmly established in China.

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