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TRADICINĖS KINŲ FILOSOFINĖS IR MENOTYRINĖS ESTETIKOS SĄVEIKA

Interaction between Traditional Chinese Philosophical
and Art-Historical Aesthetics

SUMMARY

The focus of the article is the exposition of peculiarities and role of the two main trends of traditional Chinese aesthetic thought, philosophical and art-historical. It starts with a discussion of the main typological features of the most influential trends of philosophical aesthetics (Daoism, Confucianism, Chan). Later the attention is transferred to another art-critical aesthetic tradition (represented by Zong Bing, Xie He, Du Fu, Su Shi, Mi Fu, Guo Xi, Zhang Yanyuan, Shitao, Wang Kai etc.) that was born in the 4th century. It opposed philosophical aesthetics and was associated with development of different art forms in the country. This trend derived not from the abstract world of philosophical ideas but from the theoretical generalization of specific artistic practices. Particular attention is devoted not only to interaction between the ideas of these two most influential trends, but also to exposure of their role in the history Chinese aesthetic thought.

SANTRAUKA

Straipsnyje pagrindinis dėmesys sutelkiamas į dviejų pagrindinių tradicinės kinų estetinės minties tendencijų, *filosofinės* ir *menotyrinės*, savitumo ir vaidmens kinų kultūros istorijoje atskleidimą. Pradžioje glaustai aptariami įtakingiausių filosofinės estetikos krypčių (daoizmo, konfucianizmo, čan) savitumai ir pagrindiniai jų skiriamieji tipologiniai bruožai. Vėliau dėmesys perkeliamas į IV a. užgimusią filosofinei estetikai opojuojančią kitą įtakingą menotyrinę estetikos tradiciją (atstovaujamą Zong Bing, Xie He, Du Fu, Su Shi, Mi Fu, Guo Xi, Zhang Yanyuan, Shitao, Wang Kai ir t. t.), kurios idėjų plitimas siejamas su šalyje intensyvėjančia įvairių meno formų raida. Ši kryptis kyla ne iš abstrakčių filosofinių idėjų pasaulio, bet iš konkrečios meninės praktikos teorinio apibendrinimo. Itin daug dėmesio straipsnyje skiriama ne tik šių dviejų įtakingiausių krypčių idėjų sąveikai, bet ir jų vaidmens kinų estetinės minties istorijoje išryškiniui.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: kinų tradicinė estetika, daoizmas, čan, neokonfucianizmas, menotyrinė estetika, *fengliu*.

KEY WORDS: Chinese traditional aesthetics, Daoism, Chan, Neo-Confucianism, art-historical aesthetics, *fengliu*.

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 dis-

tinctiveness and value of their own traditions in aesthetics, art theory, and art.

Not by accident, the French Sinologist Florence Hu-Sterk proposes that instead of the familiar term *aesthetics* scholars should employ a different formulation, one that she sees as more precise: “Chinese reflections on the arts and the beautiful”¹ (Hu-Sterk, 2004, p. 11). We will see how conceptually justified this proposal is by plunging into an excursus comparing Chinese aesthetics with the aesthetic and artistic theories of other civilizations. Point by point, we will discuss various aspects of Chinese ideas about aesthetics, art, the artist, the hierarchy of the arts, the psychology of the creative process, the work of art, etc. Therefore, when employing the Western term *aesthetics* for an analysis of traditional Chinese aesthetics, we will do so only with certain qualifications. We will not forget the distinctive character of the tradition we are examining.

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.

As a philosophical understanding of the world developed, the influence of mythic imagination was limited and marginalized primarily by rationalistic Confucianism, which historicized myths by turning supernatural mythological beings into people. Confucianism, which had acquired the official status of a state ideology, exerted a tremendous influence on the milieu of the imperial palace, on the highborn aristocracy, the intellectual elite, and literary and book people. Its followers mainly focused on social relationships, the political principles needed for the existence of a harmonious state, duties, and the problems of an ethical and aesthetic education – problems that were solved by relying on the opportunities provided by poetry, music, calligraphy, and painting. Poems, Confucius says, “will enrich your imagination, enhance your power of observation, help you communicate with people and master the art of expressing grief” (*Analects, XVII:9; Lin Wusun, p. 148*). The leitmotifs of Confucian aesthetics took firm root in the Chinese tradition of aesthetic thought, and in the course of millennia they were reborn in various forms. “Virtuous men occupy themselves with music, calligraphy and painting,” the Confucian adept

Jing Hao writes; “they do not indulge in inordinate lusts” (Sirén, 2005, p. 40).

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. "Should a man as gifted as the Duke of Zhou be arrogant and niggardly," Confucius states, "then his other qualities are not worth looking at" (Getting to Know Confucius: A New Translation of The Analects. 2010. *Analects*, VIII:11; Lin Wusun, p. 77).

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. "A *Dào* that can be defined," Laozi asserts in his text, "is not the eternal *Dào*" (Laozi, Chapter 1, 1991, p. 7; *dào kě dao**, *fēi cháng dào*. – "A word play with two meanings of *dào*." See <http://www.tao-te-king.org>). 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 Way cannot be heard," Zhuangzi states; "heard, it is not the Way. The Way cannot be seen; seen, it is not the Way. The Way cannot be described; described, it is not the Way." (Watson, 2013, p. 184) 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, moun-

tains – 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. Hence follows this statement made by Mazu Daoyi, the influential forerunner of the Linji (Japanese Rinzai) School: “The entire Earth is one consciousness; the entire Universe is the footprint of one truth” (Mazu Daoyi, 1997, p. 73).

Chan philosophy paradoxically combines Buddhist ideas about perfection and the transformation of consciousness with Daoist ones about the Way. “If your consciousness does not change,” Mazu Daoyi states, “you will drown in an intoxicating ocean of dizziness” (Mazu Daoyi, 1997, p. 86). He qualifies this statement with another thought that “it is not possible to become perfect on the Way because in perfection there are nei-

ther gains nor losses. But if you do not become perfect on the Way, you will become like ordinary people.” (Mazu Daoyi, 1997, p. 74)

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. “The flower of *samādhi* [spiritual concentration],” Mazu Daoyi’s teacher emphasizes to him, “is formless” (Cheng Chien Bhikshu, p. 60).

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, meditative relationship with the reality around them. In Chan aesthetics, according to Thomas P. Kasulis, awareness best reflects the meditative and nonverbal nature of things and lays bare what they really are (Kasulis, 1981, p. 73).

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 perceiv-

ing 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, Wang Wei [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.

CONCLUSION

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. “As someone once said,” Nicole Vandier-Nicolas writes, “a poem is an invisible painting, and a painting is a visible poem”² (Vandier-Nicolas, 1982, p. 97). 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.

In studies by Western authors about the history of Chinese aesthetic thought, an artificial opposition is often posited between the aesthetic ideas of Confucianism and those of Daoism and closely related Chan. In reality, as is illustrated by many art-historical treatises on Neo-Daoism, Chan, and Neo-Confucianism, they intertwine into unified organisms. “[I]f you look at them from the point of view of their sameness,” Zhuangzi has Confucius state, “then the ten thousand things all are one” (Watson, 2013, p. 34). Indeed, *the union of opposites is one of the most striking features of mature Chinese aesthetic thought*. When we look more closely at aesthetic treatises on landscape painting during the Tang, Song, and Yuan periods, we will see that they often harmoniously combine Con-

fucian rationalism, clarity, and moderation with the intuitionism, mysticism, vagueness, and mystery typical of treatises by followers of Daoism and Chan.

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 seclu-

sion, 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.

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Endnotes

¹ « la réflexion des chinois sur les arts et le beau »

² « Comme l'a dit un homme d'autrefois, un poème

est une peinture invisible, et une peinture un poème visible. »