



# Chinese Design

A myth? Wherefrom? Whereto?

by Robert Chung





**Chinese Design:**

**a Myth?**

**Wherefrom?**

**Whereto?**



**CHINESE DESIGN:  
A MYTH?  
WHEREFROM? WHERETO?**

**by**

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## Foreword

Chinese civilisation as we know it today has outlasted many ancient and significant civilisations including the Pharaonic Egypt, the Greek and Roman. And yet China today is still “a puzzle” to current Western civilisation, if not the rest of the world, and one aspect that has always puzzled me is the lack of documentation or knowledge of Chinese Design. This then has lead me to set the backdrop of this paper in the approach of design not so much on its purely technical connotation, but on its broadest cultural reference, design as directly influenced by philosophy, art and aesthetics.

In this respect Western Civilisation has a very dynamic and colourful history of Design as a direct result of the articulation and application of Aesthetics and it has been subjected to endless research, analysis, debates, and so much has been written about it. The resulting body of knowledge is quite impressive and very useful. However ancient, rich, dynamic and venerable the Ancient Chinese Culture is, it does not have words similar to “Design” and “Aesthetics” in its artistic vocabulary to give them connotations which are meaningful from a western cultural point of view.

Obviously, it does not mean that the Ancient or current Chinese Civilisations did not approach their artistic endeavour without some sort of Aesthetic appreciation and application. Chinese design is highly technical with a high level of empiricism and pragmatism, and the results of Chinese technical design achievements have been well documented. Their Civilisation is very rich in their great many “technical designs” or inventions that the whole world now takes for granted: Paper, Printing, Money, Gun Powder, the Compass, and so on. It is also worth noting that research, analysis and debates about Chinese culture are confined to specialists in the field and have a limited audience, and historically this has always been the case. Chinese research and appreciation of its own culture were confined to a closed circle of scholars within the reigning leaders of the time.

While pragmatism and empiricism have always been part of the Chinese approach to all their endeavours, especially as far as design is concerned, the underlying factor of a philosophical or spiritual approach has never been far away. In a very subtle way the Chinese “unspoken aims” in their achievements have another dimension that goes beyond the purely tangible human factors. This paper will explore those “hidden values” both from a Western point of view and a Chinese point

of view. This will lay the ground for a further exploration of the future paths that the Chinese design and aesthetics could be heading at.

What is fascinating about Chinese culture is the absolute belief in their “self-sufficiency”, that is, the strong will to isolate themselves from the rest of the world and the capacity and endeavour to carry out this isolation and the assuredness of purpose to execute it. And throughout their very long history, they have demonstrated time and again the great skill and intelligence to absorb any internal presence of external cultural influence (be it from their conquerors, foreign religions or trade partners) and to transform them into something undeniably Chinese: the *sinicisation* of all cultures that come into contact with Chinese civilisation.

During the past few decades China has been developing at a breakneck rate, absorbing Western technologies and “savoir-faire” without any significant element of sinicisation, apart from some occasional symbolic reference to Chinese icons. This paper will explore the possibility of this sinicisation in future design development in China. Historical references will be the starting point of this monograph, where Chinese Culture and Design and anything associated with design, in particular philosophy, art and aesthetics, will inevitably be compared with Western Culture in order to have a known frame reference to contextualise it.

The timing of this monograph is also appropriate in two ways. I have just spent a sabbatical leave in Beijing from my role as the Coordinator of Interior Design at the Raffles College of Design and Commerce in Sydney, and the proposed National Curriculum in Australia is to include the creative arts after 2011 in order to educate the whole person through the creative arts.

As a person with a background in both design and quantitative methods, as well as in education, I share with Lee (2009) the view that “it is only necessary to browse through science journals to see the extent to which scientific knowledge is everywhere mediated by forms of graphic representation. And even mathematics, which is the most abstract and symbolic of the sciences, is rich in forms of visual representation. Euclidean geometry is a form of ‘visual literacy’ that has been embedded in Western culture for more than 2000 years, and the development of linear perspective in the Renaissance is understood to have changed our vision of the universe. In every area of the arts and sciences we are users of charts, maps, diagrams, graphs, plans, scores, notational systems, story boards and pictures; and for all of these there are methodologies of practice and application that might be

usefully taught.” (cf. Atanassov *et al*, 2002). Indeed, as we shall see this is not peculiar to Western culture. As a further example, the 2010 Calendar published by the Department of Applied Mathematics of The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, is aptly entitled “The joy of Mathematics in arts, architecture and music”, all of which are elements of the text of this monograph.

R. Chung  
Beijing  
January 2010



## **Chapter 1: Chinese and Western Culture**

### **Chinese Culture**

“To understand the Chinese culture, one must understand the life and teachings of Confucius,” says curator Meher McArthur of Pacific Asia Museum in Pasadena. Confucianism is about the canons that delineate the nature of a life-worth-living. It emphasizes the importance of human relationships, those within the family, between friends, and those between governments and their citizens. Some key concepts of Confucius' teachings set out the desired ethical character of human beings and how that person relates to others. Confucianism had very powerful, widespread and long-lived influence in Chinese government service, public relationships and the artistic expression for over two millennia. In artistic expressions, key concepts of Confucius' teachings, such as filial piety, is depicted with scenes of children performing acts of respect toward their parents. Images of bamboo represent moral integrity, while fortuitous rulers are painted in a 17th century civil service exam. For a life to be worth-living Confucius canons must not be tampered with and should be timeless in its application. All this is carried out into the artistic field. So, the seemingly immutability of the Chinese artistic expression, is not culturally conducive to be compared to the history of the Western artistic development. Whilst there are remarkable changes in the historical development of the Western artistic expression both in terms of form and content, the Chinese artistic expression seems to be remarkable in the singularity of its formal expression if not entirely in its content.

The iconographic artistic representation of Chinese paintings appear to have undergone very little changes during its long history. However, this does not deny them a deeper and more sophisticated content, and this applies across all the other artistic expressions such as sculpture, pottery, architecture and others. James Cahill in his co-authored book gives an incisive insight into this view. He gives an accurate account about the almost placid reactions of western public when faced with their first serious encounters with Chinese paintings. Quoting from his book he remembered that, “... I can recall the experience of emerging from a great loan exhibition of European oil paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art to enter its Chinese painting galleries and being shocked at how small and flat and hard to penetrate the Chinese pictures suddenly appeared, even to someone like myself who knew them well.

The truth is that Chinese painting, though not a connoisseur's art, does not, on the whole, present its imagery with the same forcefulness and immediacy as European paintings typically do. In part, this is a matter of immersion: an unfamiliar art is always likely to be difficult to access at first. I have sometimes recalled, in thinking about this problem, the experience of taking a noted Chinese artist and connoisseur who had recently arrived in the United States through the European painting galleries of the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., from Italian primitives to Picasso, and hearing him complain that the paintings all looked more or less alike, besides not exhibiting much variety in their brushwork". And he continues to elaborate more on the uniformity of Chinese paintings, "...sensitising them to qualities that may not be apparent to casual viewers but that differentiate the paintings strongly, so that they no longer 'all look alike'."<sup>1</sup>

### **Western Culture**

The artistic expression of the classical Greek period could not be more different from the Gothic artistic expressions both in terms of form and content. The aesthetics, artistic, philosophical and design issues of the Classical Greek period are so different from those of the Gothic period or any other successive artistic periods such as the Baroque, Modernism and so on.



Qin Dynasty Paintings



Han Dynasty Paintings



Sui Dynasty Paintings

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<sup>1</sup> James Cahill et al, "Three Thousand Years of Chinese Paintings", p.5

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Tang Dynasty Painting



Ming Dynasty Painting



Qing Dynasty Painting



Tang Dynasty Painting



Ming Dynasty Painting



Qing Dynasty Painting



Plate 1-The Parthenon Temple Athens (BC 433)



Plate 2-Milan Gothic Cathedral (Temple) (AD 1386)



Plate 3-Tang Dynasty Pagoda (618-907 AD)



Plate 4-Qing Dynasty Pagoda (1644-1900 AD)

However, as the Chinese artistic expression is always related to the Dynasties in which they belong, a chronological time line of the Chinese Dynasties is very helpful in putting the Chinese artistic expression into perspective. A short and concise time line is shown below.

Dynasties	Time Line	Characteristics
<b>Chinese Dynasties</b>		
<b>Xia</b> -Pre Xia -Early Xia -Xia	2500-2200BC 2200-1900BC 1989-1523BC	Chi Chia ping pottery Yang Shao I pottery Yang Shao II pottery, Pan Shan pottery
<b>Shang</b> -Early Shang (Yin)	1523-1028BC	Ma-Chang Pottery
<b>Zhou</b> -Western Zhou -Eastern Zhou -Spring & Autumn -Warring State	1027-256BC 770-256BC 770-481BC 481-221BC	Centre in Shenxi Centre in Henan Period of Spring and Autumn Annals Period of Warring States
<b>Imperial era Dynasties</b>		
<b>Qin</b>	221-207BC	North China unified and racially alien kingdoms of South China subjugated
<b>Han</b> - Early Han (Qien Han) - Wang Mang - Later Han (Hou Han) - Three Kingdoms Han of Sichuan Xu Han Wei North China Wu	206BC-220AD 206BC-08AD 09 -22 25 -220 221 -263 221 - 263 220 -265 221-280	Reign extending over all of China Capital Chang-an, or Xi-an-fu Usurpation Capital Luo-yang China split into 3 parts South China, capital Nanjing
<b>Jin</b> (Ssu-ma family)	265-420	Reigning over China until 316. Losing North China to the Tartars in 316; China fell back

- Western Jin	280-316	on South China. Capital Luo-yang. Holding sway over all China.
- Eastern Jin	317-420	Capital Nanjing. Pushed back by the Tartar invasion to South China.
<b>South and North</b>		
- Nan-Bei –Chao	317-589	Division between the North and South, the North being occupied by the Tartars, the South having become the refuge of the Chinese.
Eastern Jin	317-420	National Empire. Five Imperial dynasties succeed one another in the South with Capital Nanjing.
Song (Liu-Song)	420-479	The Liu-Song family dynasty.
Chi and Liang	502-556	The Chi family (479-501) and the Liang family (501-556) dynasties.
Chen	557-589	Chen family dynasty
- Tartar Dynasties	316-581	A great number of Tartar dynasties occupied China in the North.
Chao (Huns)	316-352	Several hordes of Hiung-nu (Huns) occupied North China. Several hordes of Hsien-pei (proto-Mongols) occupied North China.
Mu-jung (Mongols)	349-407	Tartar King becomes Emperor of China.
Fu Chien	357-385	The Tahghach (in Chinese To-pa) of Turkish race, Kings of Wei, successively annexed the other Tartar kingdoms of North China, unifying and reign over all Northern China within a short time:
Northern Wei	398-534	Northeast China around Honan;
Eastern Wei	534-550	Northwest China around Shensi;
Western Wei	534-581	Northeast China around Honan;
Pei-Chi	550-577	Northwest China around Shensi.
Pei-Chou	557-581	
<b>Sui</b>	589-618	From 581 in the North, from 589 in the whole of China, the Sui Dynasty unified it by annexing the Southern Empire of Nanjing. The capital was Chang-an (His-an-fu).
<b>Tang</b>	618-907	Reigning over all of China with capital Chang-on (His-an-fu).
- The Five Dynasties	907-959	The period of the Five Dynasties (Wu-tai) in the North only with capital Kai-feng. It was an era of political upheaval in China beginning in the Tang Dynasty and ending in the Song Dynasty. During this period, five dynasties quickly succeeded one another in the north, and more than 12 independent states were established, mainly in the south.
Hou-Liang	907-923	
Hou-Tang	923-936	
Hou-Jin	936-946	
Hou-Han	947-950	
Hou-Zhou	951-959	
- Ten Kingdoms		
Wu	907-937	Its capital was Guangling or Jiangdu (modern Yangzhou in Jiangsu Province). It was replaced by Nantang (Southern Tang) in 1937.

Min	909-945	<p>It existed in a mountainous region of modern Day Fujian province and had a history of quasi-independent rule. Its capital was Fuzhou. It was founded by Wang Shenzhi. The capital of the Chu Kingdom was Changsha (Tan Prefecture). Present-day Hunan and Northeastern Guangxi were under the control of the kingdom. Wang Jian was named military governor of western Sichuan by the Tang court in 891. As the Tang Dynasty weakened and eventually fell in 907, Wang was able to expand his holdings into eastern Sichuan and took the title of emperor as the Tang fell in 907.</p> <p>It was located in present-day Sichuan with its capital in Chengdu.</p> <p>Jingnan was the smallest of the longer-lived southern kingdoms. Its capital was Jiangling, and in addition to the capital, it held two neighboring districts on the Yangste River southwest of present-day Wuhan. Then Nan-Tang, capital Nanjing. In Chekiang (Hangzhou). GuangZhou (formerly Hing Wong Fu). The Northern Han was a small kingdom located in Shanxi with its capital located at Taiyuan. Shanxi had been a traditional base of power since the fading days of the Tang Dynasty in the late ninth century and early tenth century.</p>
Chu	907-960	
Former Chu	907-925	
Later Chu	934-965	
Jingnan	907-924	
Nan-Tang	902-975	
Wu-Yue	907-978	
Nan-Han	907-965	
Bei Han	951–979	
<b>Song</b> - Northern Song - Southern Song	960-1276 960-1127 1127-1279	<p>Pei-Song, the capital is Kai-Feng reigning practically over all of China which they have unified Nan-Song, reduced by the Tartar invasion (the Jin) to South China, capital being HangZhou.</p>
<b>Liao</b> - Khitan	936-1122	<p>In the far North, in Beijing, the Khitan (chitat), in Chinese Liao, of the Mongol race.</p>
<b>XiXia</b>	1001-1227	<p>Tangut of Tibetan race, capital Ning-xia.</p>
<b>Jin</b> (Jurchen)	1127-1234	<p>In all North China (except Kansu), the Jurchen of Tongus (Manchu) race capitals Beijing (1122), then Kai-feng (1214).</p>
<b>The Mongols</b> - Yuan	1276-1368 1276-1368	<p>Descending from Genghis Khan, masters of all China.</p> <p>The ascension of the Yuan Dynasty can be dated from 1260, when is founder Kublai grandson of Genghis Khan, mounted on the Mongol throne in conquered Northern China; or from 1276 when Kublai in Hangchow captured the last officially consecrated Song</p>

		emperor; or from 1279-1280 when Kublai put to death the last Song pretenders in the Cantonese region. The Yuan capital is Beijing
<b>Ming</b>	1368-1644	Reigned over the whole of China; capital Nanjing from 1356, then Beijing from 1409. One of the greatest eras of orderly government and social stability in human history, was the last dynasty in China ruled by ethnic Hans.
<b>Qing (Manchu)</b>	1644-1912	Masters of all of China; capital Beijing. The dynasty was founded by the Manchu clan Aixinjueluo in what is today Northeast China (Manchuria). During its reign, the Qing Dynasty became highly integrated with Chinese Culture. However, its military power weakened during the 1800's.
<b>Chinese Republic</b>	1912-	Sun Zhong Shan first president of republic, followed by Jiang Jie Shi, Mao Ze Dong.

Table 1: This table was developed from many sources on the Internet, with the core from Rene Grousset's Book, *Chinese Art & Culture*, 1959, The Orion Press, New York.

## **Chapter 2: Western View of Chinese Culture**

### **Western Culture's View of China**

The first real efforts of Western civilisation to have a genuine understanding of China and its civilisation date back to the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, when European explorers were sent by their monarchs to find the sources of precious spices from the East. Even though Marco Polo, together with his father Niccolò and his uncle Maffeo, was one of the first Westerners to travel the Silk Road to China (which he called Cathay after the Khitan), and to visit Kublai Khan, a grandson of Genghis Khan and the founder of the Yuan Dynasty (refer to Table 1). While Marco Polo's travels did much to put China on the map, so to speak, he and his companions only knew of the Northern part of China, the Mongols Empire of the Yuan dynasty, and not the Han Chinese in the rest of this vast country.

The successive accounts of the European explorers are very interesting as far as the cultural aspects are concerned. Though the main aims of the exploration were a combination of both the opening of new trade ventures and the establishment of missionary footholds in China, they must be put into a wider context. It must not be forgotten that these activities took place during the most challenging, exciting, and amazing era of cultural, artistic, philosophical, religious, scientific and technical development Europe has ever seen: the period of the Renaissance and Baroque Europe. The comments of these explorers and missionaries should be seen in this light and context.

### **Spain and Portuguese Exploration of China**

When Spain and Portugal were exploring the East during the mid and late 1500s, there was some very interesting information coming from the reports of their explorers. China was referred to as the "Mightie Kingdome"<sup>2</sup>, and in their reports, the authors marvelled at the way China's regions were governed, some even referred to them as being more efficiently governed than the various countries of Europe, and when this is taken into context of opinions of Europeans during their glorious Renaissance and Baroque periods, it gives us some idea to what extent China's social structure was developed then. The explorers admired their flourishing agriculture, their advanced farming techniques, hence their almost "envious" feeling about the abundance of food in China. As far as Chinese technology was concerned the Europeans were struck by the extent of their development, backed by

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<sup>2</sup> Donald Flach, "Asia, in the Making of Europe – The Century of Discovery" p. 751

mining industries with, "... mines, of all kinds of metals, including iron, copper, lead, tin, mercury, silver and gold"<sup>3</sup>.

### **Arts and Crafts**

China's town planning, architecture, arts and crafts as a whole, at least to the extent that were known then by the Europeans, came in for a fair share of attention. One European observer concluded that, "in this kingdom in all places, there be men excellent in architecture."<sup>4</sup> He also admired the fine porcelain and ceramic coming from sophisticated ceramic and porcelain industries. He commented about the skills of the craftsmen, the artist painters and admired about the wonders of their products from metals, wood, and other craftsmen materials specific to China, such as the use of bamboo in their crafts for every day uses and its artistic expression in paintings.

### **Customs, Social Practices, and Learning**

One aspect of the Chinese Culture that intrigued the imagination of all European observers then was the food tradition of the Chinese. The variety was countless, and "by European standards the Chinese are great eaters"<sup>5</sup>. One word that describes Chinese food is "exotic", due to its unusual ingredients and the way they are cooked. Even today, this is the case and after more than 450 years, Europeans, or people with similar cultural roots still marvel at the variety and diversity of Chinese food.

"In June 1054 Chinese stargazers spotted a novel bright spot in the sky which, not surprisingly, they took for a guest star (kho hsing), the Chinese name for comets. The fact that it did not infringe on Aldebaran inspired in them the view that the rule of the emperor would be beneficial"<sup>6</sup>. In the words of the Emperor's Chief Calendrical Computer: "The guest star does not infringe upon Aldebaran; this shows that a Plentiful One is Lord, and that the country has a Great Worthy"<sup>7</sup>

Nothing impressed the Europeans more than the celebrations observed by the Chinese at their Lunar New Year, especially the feast days with their decorations, processions and theatrical entertainments. Writing about the Chinese Theatre for those who could understand it, the long performances of the Ming theatre are termed a delight,

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, pp. 767-768

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, pp. 769-771

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 772

<sup>6</sup> Jaki, 2000, p.58

<sup>7</sup> Needham, 1959, p.427

and for those who could not understand it was “wearied”. The costumes were very colourful and the changes during a performance were quite frequent, they listed most of the Chinese instruments used in the theatre performances. “They play many instruments together... consorted in four voices which make a very good consonancy.”<sup>8</sup>

Special mentions were made about the Chinese women; their complexions, their gentleness, their foot-binding and especially about their subjugation to men. Much attention was devoted to the phenomenon of poverty in China, and also a sort of Chinese social security system of State charity that maintained almshouses and hospitals, which was non-existing as a state function in Europe at that time.

The complexities of the Chinese language quickly engaged the attention of sixteenth century Europe, though unfortunately no real effort was made to understand it, and its knowledge was quite superficial. One observer wrote that, “there are many tongues, in sort that one man cannot understand another by speech and yet they all understand each other in writing”<sup>9</sup>. Paulus Jovius, the Italian historian made reference to the fact that printing may have originated from China and had travelled from there to Europe.

Regarding science and technology of 1500s China, Mendoza the Spanish explorer mentioned:

1. “Of musicke and songs, and who were the inventors thereof
2. Of the mathematicall sciences, and of arithmeticke, and rules how to use the same
3. Of the effects that the children doo make in their mothers wombs, and how they are every moneth sustained, and of the good and bad times of their birth
4. Of architecture, and all manner of buildings, with which the bredth and length that every edifice ought to have for his proportion
5. Of the properties of good and bad ground, and tokens how to know them, and what seede they will beare every yeare
6. Of astrologie naturall, and judiciare, and rules to learne the same, and to cast figures to make coniectures
7. Of chiromancia and phisiognomia, and other signes and tokens, and what every one doth signifie
8. Manie herbals, or books of herbes, for phisitions, shewing how they should be applied to heale infirmitie”<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 773

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 776

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, pp.778-779

About Chinese education, observers seemed to agree on the importance that Chinese students put into understanding the system of preparation required to be part of the Imperial officials, and the examinations based on it. It was crucial and important for Chinese students to pass those examinations if they were to aspire to be part of the Imperial entourage and bureaucracy, which were the goals of every educated Chinese. The examinations were conducted in the written format. This is the modern equivalent of the first Bachelor degree. Also it was disturbing for the Europeans to learn that public education during the Ming Dynasty was subsidised by the State and “was more freely open to all qualified persons than it was elsewhere in the sixteenth century”<sup>11</sup>.

### **Military Weakness, Trade and the Tribute System**

Europeans of the time thought that the Chinese Military expertise was not as good as that of the Europeans, “The people of China are, in general, neither brave nor skilful, nor have they any natural inclination for warlike affairs; if they maintain themselves it is by the multitude of the people, the strength of the walls and towns, and the provision of ammunition”<sup>12</sup>. The Chinese engagements with the Europeans were “tolerated” rather than being a real exchange of culture and knowledge. The Europeans were very tempted to subdue the Chinese militarily (due to the perception of their military weakness), and to force them to conduct international diplomatic relations with other nations.

However, quoting from Donald Flach, “...much that distinguished the Chinese system of international relations was constantly being reported to sixteenth century Europe. In theory the only Chinese who clearly had the right to go abroad were envoys sent by the emperor to confirm legitimacy of a vassal prince. As seen, tribute missions might come to China on in terms prescribed by Beijing. Under no circumstances could foreigners be permitted to stay in China indefinitely. The Celestial Empire could thus be insulated from barbarian penetration; at the same time the emperor’s universal sovereignty would be periodically acknowledged, outside contacts maintained, and a limited commerce permitted. The Chinese system for regulating international affairs was based on the assumptions of China’s unqualified cultural supremacy; and it directly contrasted with the international system developing in sixteenth century Europe which assumed the theoretical equality of all sovereign nations”<sup>13</sup>. The Chinese people’s “natural” tendency to consider

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, pp.780-790

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p.786

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, pp.787-788

themselves “self-sufficient” has not changed since then, even though dynasties succeeded one another and have been so different from one another in culture and scope, this culture of isolation has not changed. We shall return to that subject later on.

### **The Jesuits’ views of sixteenth century China**

The Jesuit writing in the sixteenth century confirmed what was previously written about China. The Jesuits tried with great efforts to end China’s isolation policies by implementing strategic plans for the assimilation of Chinese culture rather than by converting the Chinese into behaving and thinking like Europeans<sup>14</sup>. Their policy was implemented with two main goals in view; first, they will have to understand the Chinese culture with all its complexities and then express their messages through the establishment of that direct means of communication.

From 1558 to 1600, the Jesuit Matteo Ricci contentiously compiled accurate information concerning China, and his writings became the sources for all extensive and reliable information about China. Through his writings, some of the misconceived ideas of China were removed and Chinese culture became more accessible to Europeans, even though the romantic “mystical” view of China was still prevalent. During that process of assimilation, an interesting phenomenon took place; the first steps towards the “sinicisation” were initiated. In the process of understanding the Chinese culture, Ricci and his companions became so absorbed with it that they were gradually being drawn into being part of it “without consciously” realising it!

Chinese language became their first concern, noting that Chinese characters are clearly not representations of sounds but are simply pictures and ciphers designed to jog the memory. They were somewhat puzzled as to how these pictorial characters could be used as verbs, conjunctions, articles and other part of non-substantive parts of speech. This “puzzle” can be clarified if we consider that the Chinese language is intrinsically conceptual because those pictorial representations are ideas which when strung together into a meaningful sequence create a “concept”, whereas the Indo-European languages are descriptive in nature. One of the Jesuits remarked that, “since the characters signify ‘things’, the Chinese have no need to assemble the parts with another (in any specific order)<sup>15</sup>, and therefore they may well write from the toppe to the bottom”<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Spigelman

<sup>15</sup> The author notes

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p.807

Another intriguing factor about the Chinese language was how to write European names when there were no existing Chinese characters for them. However, they did find out that the ingenuity of the Chinese language, being conceptual in nature, could find a means to accommodate the writings of all different European names. As an example, the word “Aesthetics” has no equivalent in Chinese culture, but it does not mean that “Aesthetics” as a concept does not exist in the Chinese culture, except it is known as a different word. And it can be accommodated within the Chinese language structure, so to speak.

The Jesuits elaborated more on the Chinese system of education than the earlier observers. The Jesuits recorded that the Chinese who were not fitted for learning were trained to be merchants or to study the practical part of sciences. However, those who wanted to have a career in letters worked upwards through a series of three degrees:

- “*xiu-cai*”, “budding genius” or Bachelor,
- “*ju-ren*”, “promoted scholar” or Master,
- “*jin-shi*”, “entered scholar” or Doctor.

One observer noted that the system of degrees that existed in China then, had no counterpart in the European Universities at the time; so too with the Imperial written examination that also served as a competition for the highest offices in the Imperial bureaucracy. The Chinese government had a very well balanced structure with very innovative governance skills that impressed the Jesuits a lot. Though the Jesuits were conversant with moral philosophy, medicine, war, and astronomy, government was recognised as the “chief arte” of the Chinese<sup>17</sup>.

As far as religions and philosophy were concerned, the Jesuits observers showed much greater acquaintance with Chinese Buddhism, Taoism and classical Confucian tradition. They described in great detail how the Chinese practice their two main religions and evaluate their values against Christianity. And how Confucian teaching permeates all the strata of Chinese society in its value system, its justice, its imperial governance, its bureaucratic system, its ethics and its influence in setting artistic criteria.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 813

## Chapter 3: Traditional Chinese Culture

### Traditional Chinese Artistic Culture

Under the Tang Emperors, China became an international powerhouse; it defined its golden era in all its artistic expressions. Here was a period which honoured learning and welcomed the entry of new thinking in art, culture, economics and religion within its borders and also welcomed innovations from without. Its artistry in metal crafts has not been improved since, and it had bold glazing in its ceramic forms. However, all the external influences were sinicised, and the resulting artistic developments became an inspiration for almost all later artistic development.

The tomb figures from the Tang Dynasty burials offer abundant evidence of the pervasive presence of persons from all races and lands who came to China to trade, to serve the prosperous, to share in their prosperity, and to entertain or join the skilled craftsmen or superb artists of the period. An Arab merchant who visited China between 830 and 851 reported: “ The Chinese have gold, silver, brocades and silk, all in good quantity.... They imported into China ivory, incense, copper ingots, tortoise shells and rhinoceros horn, of which they make belt ornaments.... They have clay of an excellent quality of which they make porcelain bowls as fine as glass [as clear as glass drinking cups;] the sparkle of water can be seen through it, although it is pottery.”<sup>18</sup>



Plate 5-Tang Dynasty tomb figure    Plate 6-Tang Dynasty figurines    Plate 7-Tang clay animals

The economic and cultural progress in the earlier part of the Tang dynasty established a climate in which both arts and crafts flourished. The distinction between art and craftsmanship was strictly drawn. The arts, as accepted by the scholars of those days, embraced only painting and calligraphy. All else was considered to be the work of men who were not artists but artisans. Many regard the Tang religious figures as the zenith of all

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<sup>18</sup> Hugh Scott, “the Golden Age of Chinese Art”, p.15

Chinese sculptures. The realism and dynamic ferocity of stone animals is beyond compare save those of its predecessors, the Six Dynasties.

Artistry in the use of gold and silver alone, or with articles of bronze, had been handsomely exemplified in the cleverly patterned inlay work of the Zhou and Han Dynasties. As has been noted, many foreigners, skilled in the working of metals, appear to have made their way to the Tang cities, bringing with them stylistic inspirations from the Sassanians, Romans, Greeks, Turks, Hindus, Moslems and other cultures<sup>19</sup>. It is interesting to note that all the influences were eventually sinicised.



Plate 8-Tang Dynasty pottery



Plate 9-Tang Dynasty religious figures



Plate 10-Tang Dynasty stone sculpture

### **The Italian Renaissance in China**

A very good example of the sinicisation of foreign influence in Chinese culture is the story of Giuseppe Castiglione as an artist in the Qing Dynasty. The period of Emperor Qianlong was the most prosperous of the Qing Dynasty in Chinese history, and the culture of art also came to its peak. Giuseppe Castiglione was born in Milan in 1668, and as an artist, received systematic and standard training in the technique of the Renaissance and Baroque painting. He was a missionary and he set out to convert the Chinese into Christianity, and he wanted to utilise his artistic talent to achieve his goals. However, he wanted to teach the Chinese artist the classical technique of the Renaissance and Baroque painting, especially that of Leonardo Da Vinci. He never achieved that; instead, on the contrary, he was converted into using the Chinese technique in his painting. He became a favourite artist of the Qing Emperor, Kangxi. However, the natural inclination of Castiglione to use the three dimensional perspective techniques in his Chinese painting still lingered on. In his later developments, even those three dimensional perspective techniques disappeared and he became a genuine Chinese artist with a Chinese name, Lang Shining.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 20



Plate 11



Plate 12



Plate 13

The gradual sinicisation of Giuseppe Castiglione's artistic expression: Plate 11 illustrates the Renaissance technique of painting, the vase shown in its 3-D volume with the Chiaroscuro and light reflexion techniques. In Plate 12 there are fewer perspective techniques (which are absent in Chinese paintings), with even more Chinese painting techniques, even though some of the Renaissance and Baroque "atmospheric perspective" still lingers on. Plate 13 is a Chinese painting painted by Lang Shining (Castiglione's adopted Chinese name). Plate 14 illustrates Giuseppe Castiglione's classical Chinese paintings of the Qing Emperor Kangxi and his wife the Empress.

### **China in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Since the concerted efforts by Western civilisation (as exemplified by the Europeans) in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to try to understand Chinese culture, the current state of affairs has not changed that dramatically. Even though the structure of Chinese society has changed radically since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century from an Imperial rule to a Democratic



Plate 14

Republic, subsequently from a Democratic Republic to a Revolutionary Communist Republic in 1949, and transformed again in 1978 by Deng XiaoPing after he developed the conceptual policies of “Socialism with Chinese characteristics”.

Deng XiaoPing is generally credited with advancing China into becoming one of the fastest growing economies in the world and for vastly raising the standard of living of its people. He was a characteristically Chinese pragmatist who used the western economic free market theories to his advantages and benefits. He, as much as his illustrious predecessors in Chinese history, “sinicised” free market theories by adopting the market policies of economic reform. Today in just less than 30 years, China has been transformed from abject poverty during the disastrous Cultural Revolution (from 1966 to 1976) to become the 3<sup>rd</sup> biggest economy of the world after the USA and Japan.

During the past 30 years China’s main cities have been transformed into ones not very much different from other world-class cities around the world. Shanghai, Beijing, Ghuanzhou, Nanjing can compete with any Western cities such as New York, London, and Paris in terms of quality of design in both the areas of town-planning and architecture.

However, one remarkable thing in this rapid transformation of the Chinese main cities (and other ones too) is the similarities with other Western Cities. There is nothing intrinsically Chinese in either the design or the process of transformation of those cities. This is a clear reminder of the transformation of Shanghai and Beijing during the European colonial occupation of China in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This is a recurring comment from many of my China-born Chinese friends, especially during the celebration of the Olympic Games opening ceremony. This is quite puzzling considering how culturally rich is the history of Chinese civilisation. Does it mean that China has abdicated all its vast and incredible deep cultural values in art, design and invention to embrace totally the western culture? Is there anything that can be recuperated from their past advanced technical and artistic tradition?

Apart from some “cosmetic” iconic signs of Chinese Culture, the Dragons, the “Feng Shui”, red and yellow colours, and the kite being splashed on some designs as being Chinese, there should be a typically Chinese “savoir-faire” in the approach to design or to any other artistic endeavour. One recent example is the staging of the Opening ceremony of the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. It was an incredible spectacle with all the most sophisticated Western computer technologies on display and with all modern western management techniques to stage efficiently the ceremonies. Apart from the “cosmetic use” of typical Chinese traditional musical instruments (drums, erhu, etc), the traditional Chinese

costumes, and the traditional acrobatic skills of the Chinese, was there anything that would suggest that there was an intrinsically Chinese approach to the design and staging of the event? Or was it just an oriental version of a classical Hollywood Cecil B de Mille production with a hi-tech twist?



The current city-skyline of modern Chinese cities transformed into other western cities

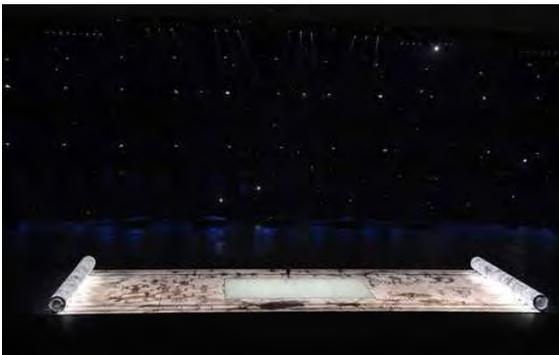


Plate 15 – Hi-tech Holograph of Chinese scrolls



Plate 16 – Traditional Chinese costumes



Plate 17 – The artistic and acrobatic skills



Plate 18 – Chinese Icons and costumes

### **Chinese Aesthetics in Art and Design**

As initially mentioned, the western concept of 'aesthetics' and 'design', as we know and understand them, has no counterparts in the Chinese Language. This does not mean that the Chinese did not have any aesthetic consideration in their approach to art in general, and that they did not know what design is. They did have terms that would be equivalent to those, but expressed in a different manner.

We shall not be treating those issues as a semantic exercise, but we shall try to understand what are the processes that the Chinese undergo to assign beauty, a feeling of well-being, and positive emotional experience in their approach to artistic endeavour and its overflow into design. And similarly we shall try to understand what is the concept that the Chinese use to describe design (as understood in the west) as their process of creativity in the production of objects with specific utilitarian and functional qualities, which at the same time have artistic values.

## **Chapter 4: Western and Chinese Aesthetics**

### **Comparative studies of Western and Chinese Aesthetics**

Can the investigative culture step out of its own value system to appraise another culture? Because of Western military, economic and scientific and technical hegemony during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, we tend to compare Chinese Culture with our western Culture. And it is taken for granted that when investigating Chinese culture from a western standpoint, similarities with the west are the first criteria to base our judgement on Chinese culture - with the resulting investigation being entirely biased towards the west. (And vice versa from a Chinese point of view.)

However, here we are trying to investigate the Chinese sense of Aesthetics as the Chinese understand the term in some way and use it. This paper is investigating the overwhelming factors that have influenced the Chinese to literally and figuratively “reject” their patrimony of artistic, cultural, scientific and technical achievements in favour of the western ones.

I find that situation almost humiliating when I consider the extent to which the Chinese are either culturally “conceding” that they will have to bear the burden of the western hegemony for quite some time to come, or hoping that the tide will turn and they will be in a position to start making use of their historically proven skills in the process of sinicisation. Yet, based on recent cultural and technical developments in China, I cannot see this happening soon.

This then begs the question of whether in these modern times the momentum created by the west is so overwhelming that there is going to be for the first time that in the history of Chinese Civilisation that the Chinese will be subjected to a process of Westernisation to such a extent that the Chinese Civilisation will be transformed for ever? Is globalisation a synonym of new western colonialism?

We shall have to study as individual proposition these two civilisations, gauged their weaknesses, and eventually analyse whether the Chinese will be able to sinicise the west or vice versa. Or could there be a “fusion” happening as have been observed in the Food Culture? And I would immediately add that it is not my intention here to turn this into a discussion about competing cultures of the east and the west.

It is not about the superiority of one culture over another, but it is about what is more conducive to one’s attitude and approach to cultural issues and what is more appropriate to one’s conditions and circumstances in the art of living one’s way of life that will include,

culture, tradition, intrinsic aesthetics values and expression in the artistic world. I would loathe living in a world where everything is standardised to such an extent that it would be almost unbearably boring to be part of it. The challenge of Western thought has been the single most important influence on Chinese thoughts since the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Despite millennia of Chinese cultural dominance, it was clear that western culture has acquired the type of knowledge that has enabled it to erase and surpass Chinese dominance, and has provided them with such dangerously powerful technologically, militarily and economically means that would “tempt” the west towards a “cultural dictatorship”. However, I would like to clarify what is at stake here is not about whether one culture is better and is going to get the upper hand, but it is about the research into the possibility of finding a Chinese way of facing the 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges. Not because China has some pride to defend, but because it difficult and a great challenge to China to dig deep into its vast cultural, scientific, technical and design history, using them as a solid foundation to build its modern society.

### **The choice of topics of study**

The approach to such a topic can be problematic and difficult, and in his Book “*Contemporary Chinese Aesthetics*”, the author Gene Blocker, argues that, “... Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries Chinese intellectuals debated what their response should be, one group urging a complete rejection of Western forms of thought, a second a complete rejection of traditional Chinese forms of thought in favour of a wholesale embrace of Western thoughts, and a third arguing for some sort of mixture of the two – basically Western thought for science and technology and Chinese traditional thought for social values. In the course of these debates this third alternative gradually gained the upper hand, but debates continue in China to this day as to precisely how to achieve this ‘mixed mode’ – for example, today how to develop a Western market economy without introducing too many Western freedoms and individual rights”<sup>20</sup>

About the study of Aesthetics, he writes that, “This is precisely the kind of thing which has happened in the area of aesthetics. For a least a hundred years Chinese aestheticians have been debating how to mix Western and Chinese theories of art and beauty- as can be seen from the range of articles in this book, some writers use Western

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<sup>20</sup> Gene Blocker “Contemporary Chinese Aesthetics” pp. 8-9. A very good example is the introduction of “Google” in the Chinese Culture, and the various means adopted by the Chinese authority to “control” its “freedom of expression”.

methodologies and techniques to re-examine traditional Chinese aesthetics; others are more interested in Western aesthetics and simply want to join in these ongoing debates; while still others adopt a comparative approach, exploring similarities and differences between Western and Chinese attitudes towards art and beauty. By emphasizing differences, Chinese aestheticians follow Liang Shuming in using philosophy to differentiate cultures - that is, by looking at the aesthetic theories of these two cultures we can better understand differences between Chinese and Western attitudes, values, and temperaments. Those two stress similarities look for ways of facilitating communication between Chinese and Western intellectuals. Despite large differences in tradition and language and conceptual orientation, Chinese and Western aestheticians have often confronted similar issues, though this has not previously been widely recognized. By now calling attention to these areas of similar interest, it may be possible to bring the two traditions into some common meeting point-a new international philosophy or aesthetics in which Chinese and Western writers are brought to bear on the same issues, topics and problems.”<sup>21</sup>

And finally he argues strongly that a pure ethnic cultural form is limited in scope, “Nor is it true that only the ‘pure’ ethnic, cultural forms of thought are the richest, most interesting, or most profound. On the contrary, it is often the case that the most exciting, innovative, flourishing thought occurs precisely as a result of the stimulation of intensive cross-fertilisation of ideas and mutual borrowing”.<sup>22</sup>

For a broader view of the issues we will attempt to describe briefly what currently we understand about the Western and Chinese Aesthetics.

### **Western Aesthetics**

As mentioned above, Western civilisation has a very rich tradition in the culture of Aesthetics, starting with ancient Greek civilisation through to the Middle-ages, the Renaissance and Baroque, the Rationalists approach, Kant articulation and finally the Modern/Avant-Garde.

Greek Aesthetics was based on the notion that an object is called beautiful, because it serves a purpose with a rational end, either gratifying human senses or helping in building self-assurance and security. There is an absolute beauty (the idea), and love produces aspiration towards this idea. This beauty in objects is expressed with concepts such as

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid p. 9

<sup>22</sup> Ibid p. 12

proportion, harmony and unity among its parts. On the more practical side, beauty is expressed in action, in order, in symmetry and in definiteness. Another rational approach is where objects are deemed ugly in so far as they are unacted by reason, hence formless. A single object not divisible into parts is termed beautiful when it is simple in its unity.

The initial German approach to Aesthetics was based on a theory of knowledge by the German philosopher Baumgarten. He sought to clarify the scientific or "logical" knowledge of understanding to the confused knowledge of the senses, to which he gave the name "aesthetic". It is clearly an intellectualist approach in aesthetics, reducing taste to an intellectual act and ignoring the element of feeling. With this approach he declared that nature is the highest embodiment of beauty.

To Emmanuel Kant, Aesthetics was a "Judgment of Taste" in which he explored the conditions of the validity of feeling that mediates among subjects, cognition and desire (volition). He denied the objectivity of beauty, even though he conceded certain formal objectivity to beauty when it is defined in terms of its harmony with the cognitive faculties involved in an aesthetic judgment (imagination and understanding); a harmony the consciousness of which underlies our aesthetic pleasure. Since all objects that are fitted to please humanity are defined as beautiful, then it follows that; beauty is universally subjective. In dealing with values such as moral good, ideals of modesty, frankness, courage and the primary colours that he assigned to beauty, Kant is suggesting that he is not as rigid as it seems with his doctrine of pure subjectivity. Similarly to Baumgarten, when dealing with beauty, Kant is thinking of nature, ranking this as a source of aesthetic pleasure high above art. However, his main contribution to aesthetics consists in the preliminary critical determination of its aim and its fundamental problems. Subjects associated with Aesthetics are culturally defined in their psychological contexts, and the ultimate expression of Aesthetics is found in the distinctive features of art. It would help clarifying these aspects in order to delve deeper in the understanding of western practical application of Aesthetics.

### **Distinctive Features of Art**

Properties regarded as the constitutive features of western art are:

1. An art work consists of a certain finite number of basic elements bound by relations. Spots of colour or light, solid bodies, sounds, motion and inscriptions are examples of such elements.
2. The system of elements and relations mentioned under (1) makes up a whole: any change in the elements or relations changes its identity.
3. The kinds of basic elements and relations are determined by the domain of art to which an artwork properly belongs.
4. The choice of basic elements and relations depends on decisions of the individual artist. This choice is subject to the restrictions set down under (3).
5. As a rule, not only an artwork as a whole but also some of its parts fulfil certain semantic functions: expressing, representing, symbolizing, etc.
6. In choosing the basic elements and the relations combining them, the artist takes into consideration their various substantial aspects; he invests the work with semantic functions, sometimes even with a plot; he considers the artistic rules and values acknowledged in a given period and milieu; he accepts philosophical, religious and other assumptions; he makes use of the scientific knowledge available at the time.
7. If a certain aspect of the creative process is controlled by his subconsciousness or is a certain spontaneous activity, the artist takes into consideration the substantial aspects mentioned under (6) in the sense that he reflects post factum upon the finished whole or fragments thereof, reconstructs the principles of selecting the elements and relations between them, and then consciously accepts them.
8. Both the art work as a whole and its fragments or aspects carry aesthetic values. These are founded upon those properties of the work described under points 1 to 7; their creation is also conditioned by the artist's craftsmanship, by his skill and good work.
9. A system of elements that meets the conditions 1 to 8 is the basis of the formal-expressive structure of a work<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> Tadeusz Pawlowski, *Aesthetic Values*, pp. 101-102

### Traditional Chinese Aesthetics and Art, “The Aesthetic Experience”

Traditional Chinese aesthetics, influenced strongly by Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism, manifests a distinctive and complex view of nature. The basic assumption is that the world of phenomena manifests the *Dao*, the Way of nature, which is not a separate reality but rather the patterned processes of the natural world. The human ideal is to understand the *Dao* and act in harmony with it.

This view of nature can appropriately be called “organic” for various reasons. First, all of reality is included: heaven, earth, and humans (the “Triad”) are all fully part of nature. Second, nature is self-creative. Rather than a separate creator who made the world in the past, nature by itself displays ongoing creation. *Zaohua*, the “Creative,” acts in spontaneous and unpredictable ways but is always skilful in creating the beauty and harmony of the natural world. Third, all things – including rocks and water -- have vitality, called in Chinese *qi*, literally the “breath” of life. Fourth, each phenomenon has an individual nature, and this consists not of some essence but of a distinctive power (*de*), spirit (*shen*), and pattern of growth. And finally, all phenomena are organically interrelated. The world is one continuous field of *qi*, with each phenomenon not a separate thing but rather a temporary form within it, like a whirlpool in a stream.

As the “spiritual aspects” of Chinese art is ever present, art is the evocation of the spirit of phenomena, rather than a depiction of surface reality. Painters, for instance, are supposed to capture the specific *qi* or “*spirit resonance*” of things. If the artist does it, then the painting itself will exhibit *qi* and be *instance* of *Zaohua*. The artist participates in nature’s creativity.

In order to accomplish this, the artist or poet must go through meditative practices that consist fundamentally of two things:

- removing the delusion of a separate self and the desires it produces, and
- concentrating upon the subject until there is a direct communion with it. That communion is described metaphorically, for instance, as “entering into” the rock or tree, or as allowing the phenomenon to enter into the artist, resulting in the “complete bamboo in the breast.” Such communing with nature is possible because we are within nature’s field of *qi* and thus ontologically continuous as with all other things.

Thus a major aesthetic concern was the relationship between self and nature, *inner and outer*. The Chinese saw nature as an ongoing dynamic of stimulus and response among all things, and humans were included in this. Emotions arise in reaction to circumstances, and

from the earliest statement of poetics, poetry was seen as a voicing of that response. It was assumed that there was a strong correlation between “scene” (*jing*) and “emotional response” (*qing*), and the great poet achieved a unity of the two.

Because humans are a part of nature, human culture is not seen as something separate from nature or unnatural. The term for both literature and culture is *wen*. Originally the term meant the pattern a phenomenon makes, for example, the particular sound a pine makes in the wind, the colours of a tiger, the shapes of a cloud. Human culture -- literature and art in particular -- is the *wen* of humans. The words written by a poet are essentially no different from the tracks a bird makes in sand. Culture is, thus, natural, but that naturalness is realized only if the person acts as nature does, with spontaneity according to one’s true inner nature rather than based on the desires of the ego-self.

This view gives humans a paradoxical status within nature. We are the only phenomena that fail to exhibit naturalness. However, humans also are given an exalted status within nature, for if an artist creates in a natural way, then the “mind of nature” is revealed and the transformations of nature are brought to “completion.” Thus we have a responsibility to act in a natural way. If we act on the basis of our personal desires or if we delude ourselves into thinking we are separate from nature, then nature’s transformations cannot reach fulfilment and disharmony results.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> David Landis Barnhill, EAST ASIAN AESTHETICS AND NATURE

## Chapter 5: The Sinicisation of Western Aesthetics

### Chinese Aesthetics in the Modern age

However, Marxist aesthetics and some fringe Western aesthetics have heavily influenced Chinese discussions of art and beauty, including art criticism as well as aesthetics, in the last hundred years or so. The traditional approach to aesthetics as mentioned above was found wanting during the period when China became a totally socialist country with a Marxist political system. This in turn has influenced heavily what Chinese scholars have been saying about traditional ancient Chinese writing and thought on art and natural beauty.

However, it seems to me that there was an attempt (directly or indirectly) to Sinicise the Western Socialist aesthetics during the years just after the Chinese revolution that brought Mao TzeDong to power. Eva Kit Wah Man paper's, "*A critical Reflection on a Suggested Return to Aesthetic Experience in Socialist China*", gives a very good account of the influence of Marxism in Modern Chinese aesthetics and the serious attempt then to adapt it to suit the Chinese culture. This started as the exploration of a new Modern Chinese Aesthetics with a highly socialist bias that resulted into the Aesthetics of "*GangXing*" which in turn replaced the traditional Chinese "Aesthetic Experience" (as described above). The *GangXing* Aesthetics were developed in a book entitled "*Modern Aesthetics System*" and it was as Eva Kit Wah Man puts it, "...part of a long-term research effort to construct a new form of aesthetics in China that would manifest the following four constructing principles:

- acting as a dialogue of traditional and contemporary aesthetics,
- acting as the merger of Oriental and Western aesthetics,
- integrating aesthetics with related studies, and
- enhancing the advancement of both theoretical and applied aesthetics (MAS, 2).<sup>25</sup>

### The *GangXing* experience in modern China's aesthetics

An exploration of the *GangXing* will throw some insight on the current and extent of its influence during the highly politicised China as a Communist regime. Eva Kit Wah Man describes the *GangXing* in this way, "The process of aesthetic *GangXing* has three stages: aesthetic preparation, aesthetic response, and aesthetic extension (MAS, 171-202).

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<sup>25</sup> Eva Kit Wah Man, A critical reflection on a suggested return to aesthetic experience in socialist China

The *aesthetic preparation* stage includes aesthetic attention and expectation. The result of this stage is an orientation system or a psychological attitude towards the object.

With *aesthetic attention*, the interest and attitude of the subject is attracted by the mode, the style, and the content of the object, which brings in anticipation of an immediate aesthetic experience. It should be noted that in this initial stage, the subject is disinterested.

The *aesthetic response* includes aesthetic perception, imagination, and insight. Aesthetic perception is regarded as the ground of aesthetic response in which the perceived data has formed a gestalt of the schema or integrated image, which also constitutes its preparation as an aesthetic object. It should be noted that the perceiving subject is not passive, for one conducts the selection of data according to one's inclination and aesthetic feelings. The response is read as the result of both the physical properties of the object and the attitudes of the subject. The former may be the materials, volume, colours, sounds, speeds, toughness or luster of the object which form what is called an 'energy entity' to be appropriated by the perceiving subject."<sup>26</sup>

Eva Kit Wah Man develops further her understanding of the *GangXing* process: "*Aesthetic imagination* that follows aesthetic perception is claimed to be more free. While the form of perceptual image is usually formed according to the physical properties of the object, imagination acts on it, reorganizes and reformulates it in arbitrary and creative ways corresponding to the attitudes of the subject. As a result, an aesthetic image is formed, which is the art itself" (MAS, 188).

*Aesthetic insight* is achieved during the process of aesthetic perception and imagination. In the stage of perception, there are limitations to insight due to its relation to the physical structure of the object. Since in aesthetic imagination subjective factors are more influential, and there is a reading of the nature of the object that allows for a greater freedom, which seeks to penetrate the object, merge with it and in this way creates the objects and comes to know it. This notion of aesthetic insight draws upon traditional Chinese aesthetics for its inspiration.

The final stage of aesthetic *GanXing* is *aesthetic extension*, described as an "aesthetic aftertaste" in which the subject is more relaxed, and reflects upon and enjoys the aesthetic images thus formed (MAS, 201).

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 48

### **The Nature of Aesthetic *GanXing***

*Modern Aesthetics System* conducts a qualitative analysis and defines the five natures of aesthetic *GanXing* as disinterestedness, intuitiveness, creativity, transcendence and pleasantness (MAS, 202-38).

*Disinterestedness* is said to be the nature of the aesthetic attitude when the subject is attracted by the aesthetic values of the object and succeeds in holding an appropriate psychic distance with it, enabling the subject to be free from practical considerations.

*Intuitiveness* is the outcome of the subject's contemplating the sensuous form of the object and formulating an aesthetic image via imagination. This is a process of intuition in which the fullness and richness of the object is grasped and created in a way.

*Creativity* is the aesthetic activity of the subject's imagination, which has gone beyond the discovery process of the object and works on the schema perceived. At this stage, the subject "invents" an image. They emphasize the confinement presented by the physical form of the object in relation to the freedom of imagination.

*Transcendence*, again, refers to the creativity of aesthetic imagination, which enables the subject to transcend the physical conditions of the object.

*Pleasantness* is the freedom and resonance gained from the corresponding structure formed during aesthetic perception and the creative responses in the process of imagination. The authors here use descriptive terminologies usually applied to the realm of metaphysical joy in traditional Chinese aesthetics. <sup>27</sup>

### **The outcome of the Modern Aesthetics System (MAS)**

The firm intention of the *GanXing* as Eva Kit Wah Man puts it, is to avoid western mistakes of dealing with the problem of whether beauty is in the subject or in the object. The authors of MAS thought this was the wrong inquiry. They seek to replace the old dualistic model with a new integrated experience. They draw from other Western thoughts or aesthetics to seek an intentional structure in which subject and object are integrated, and suggested that the resulting aesthetic structure resembles that of the classical Chinese aesthetics (MAS, 565).

To ensure that the theory is all encompassing, they insist that basically it is still Marxist. Eva Kit Wah Man describes how they went about achieving that, "It is the attempt to hold such disparate theories together which becomes problematic. They insist on having it both ways: on the one hand they insist upon a full integration of subject and object, while

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, pp 49-50

on the other they hold to a separation of subject and object in order to ensure the objective, material status of the object so as to avoid being accused of falling prey to Western idealism (MAS, 541). This tension appears from time to time when they adopt a philosopher's notion and criticize it soon after."<sup>28</sup>

How novel was that approach? Eva Kit Wah Man answers, "One question we might ask at this point is: How new is this notion of aesthetic *GangXing*? In order to respond to this question it will be helpful to review certain trajectories of Chinese Marxist aesthetics, particularly as they have argued over the problem of subject-object relation in modern Chinese history of aesthetics."<sup>29</sup>

### The Four Schools of Aesthetics

The main proponents that addressed this problem come from the so-called **4-Schools**, a group of people working on this theory, and they are:

1. Gao Ertai
2. Cai Yi
3. Zhu Guangqian
4. Li Zehou

Eva Kit Wah Man succinctly outlines each one of them and their respective theories and describes them as:

1. "Gao Erti's **Theory of Absolute Objectivity**, he contends that objective beauty does not exist, he says that, "beauty, as long as it is felt, exists". He accounts for the aesthetic sense purely on the basis of subjective feelings and standards.
2. Cai Yi's **Theory of Absolute Objectivity**, he unlike Gao Erti, develops a position which was considered to be exemplary as far as the party-line point of view is concerned. Here beauty is taken to be inherent and intrinsic to objects themselves and is therefore absolutely objective.
3. Zhu Guangqian's **Theory of Subjective-Objective Integration**, he, as one of the most prominent and controversial figures, contends that we can deal with objects on two levels: objects as things-in-themselves at the primary level, or objects at the secondary level, which in terms of their beauty and form are reflected through human consciousness under subjective "prisms" such as ideology and taste. The secondary level is influenced by human subjectivity and activity. Thus the object is

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p.51

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p.51

no longer a natural object or a thing-in-itself but rather has become a social object. Nonetheless, the product of beauty (or the form of the object) still rests on the object's own objective qualities. (Please refer to Maritain's comment on this aspect)

4. Li Zehou **Theory of Social Objectivity**, he reduces the nature of beauty to its origin. As the most influential scholar in contemporary Chinese aesthetics, he expounds on Marx's ideas on labour and states that human knowledge and practice are able to correspond to the internal structure of natural objects. He names the act the "humanisation of nature" and believes that what we strive for is our freedom from contradictions. When such freedom is expressed in perceivable form through artistic practice, artistic beauty becomes the natural consequence or manifestation of the free interaction between the artist's activities and the nature of the object."<sup>30</sup>

In his attempts to integrate early Marxist and later Marxist positions with his own interpretation of subject-object relationship, Li Zehou positioned himself as one of the strongest voices in mainstream contemporary China.

### **Evaluation of the *GangXing***

Eva Kit Wah Man then went on to evaluate the subject/object relationship in the Aesthetics *GangXing*. She starts by comparing the four Schools, leading her to a critical examination of the subject/object relation in the aesthetics *GangXing*, and quoting from her, "The first problem with aesthetic "*GanXing*" as already noted is its attempt to combine and position itself among diverse and conflicting philosophical positions. The attempt swings among Marxism, classical Chinese philosophies, and Western theories of empathy, phenomenology, and psychology. Such a diverse and confusing heritage produces several ambiguities and contradictions."<sup>31</sup> And while claiming that their MAS is Marxist based, at the same time they are trying to incorporate European experimental philosophies and theories of empathy.

### **The inevitable transcendental aspects of Chinese Aesthetics**

In summing up her paper, Eva Kit Wah Man, says that, with a serious attempt to situate Chinese Aesthetics in the modern world, Chinese scholars have explored the western counterpart to initiate this search. Even though in the process, more problems were raised

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, pp.51-52

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p.53

rather than it can solve, but optimistically they consider all these as “natural work in progress”.

Eva Kit Wah Wan notes that there is a growing underlining concern by the scholars for the transcendental aesthetics experience of the subject. She remarked that, “In the writings of these scholars we can see a growing concern for the transcendental aesthetics experience of the subject, but one that also must respect social materialism. It is believed that the transcendental subject has a strong autonomy in its faculty of imagination, which can transcend the physical confinement of the object but that the object and its physical properties are always ground of activity. While these young Chinese scholars have not ignored the impact of social context, the social dimension is discussed in the chapters of aesthetics sociology and culture but not in the section of aesthetic *GangXing*. These sections stress the freedom and development of the aesthetics subject and admit that is what art is about”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, pp.54-55

## Chapter 6: Metaphysical Issues

### Metaphysics in Chinese aesthetics

As Eva Kit Wah Man succinctly observed, the authors of the *Modern Aesthetics Systems* had some trouble achieving their expressed purpose of merging Oriental and Western aesthetics together in their new aesthetics. She continues by saying that there is no doubt that the authors have appropriated much from the classical traditional Chinese aesthetics in developing the *GangXing*. She concludes that, “ It is clear that traditional Chinese aesthetics advocates a metaphysical ground for aesthetic experience. Taoist aesthetics aims at expressions of the realm of the Tao and Confucian aesthetics and is derived from the experience of the moral subject that corresponds to the metaphysical ground of morality. The problem is that, given this metaphysical ground, how is the merger of classical Chinese aesthetics and Marxism possible? We see no further explication provided in this recent aesthetic text in China”<sup>33</sup>

To me it is obvious that there can never be a merger, because of the simple fact that, fundamentally Marxism is atheist and materialist in nature and in its approach in practically all of its philosophies and culture. While traditional Chinese Culture is permeated with spiritual and metaphysical approaches. Whereas it would also be more interesting to know about other Western cultures that have metaphysical connotation to their approaches to aesthetics so that we may be more informed with a broader perspective on the subject. The philosopher and Thomist theologian Jacques Maritain made some very insightful observation regarding this matter not so much in the Marxist context but Western culture in general.

### Oriental art and western art

While Eva Kit Wah Man has illustrated the “failed” or incomplete attempt of integrating a Western culture into the Chinese one (even though with every good intention and in a largely favourable climate such as a heavily centralised system as a Socialist regime), it would be interesting to have the views of Jacques Maritain who has very illuminated views on both cultures, especially about the Chinese and Western approaches to Aesthetics. He is one that had done a lot of work in the field of philosophy in bridging the gap between the Chinese and western Aesthetics and Art. The understanding of the essence of Oriental

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p.54

(read Chinese) art form from a western philosopher is quite revealing. He differentiates them thus: "In a general way it can be said - and it is strongly emphasized by oriental writers - that the art of the Orient is the direct opposite of Western individualism. The oriental artist would be ashamed of thinking of his ego and intending to manifest his own subjectivity in his work. His first duty is to forget himself. He looks at Things; he meditates on the mystery of their visible appearance and on the mystery of their secret life force, he reveals both in his work, either for the pleasure of man and the ornament of human life, or for the sacred rites of prayer and worship. But because Oriental (read Chinese) art is essentially religious or religious-minded, this art is in communion with Things not for the sake of Things but for the sake of some other - invisible and adorable - reality whose signs Things are, and which, through Things, art reveals together with Things. In actual fact religion, not art has lifted art to that level of life which is the very life of art, basically needed for its own truth and greatness, and which is the life of symbols. Oriental art is only intent on Things; but, like every genuine art, it loathes realism.

Now there are two specific features which must be pointed out, and which help us to realize why Things and the pure objectivity of Things, not man and human subjectivity, hold sway over Oriental art".<sup>34</sup>

He continues to elaborate on the self-effacing thinking process of Oriental (read Chinese) art. "On the other hand art, for Oriental thought, does not stop at the work done. Better to say, a work of art is not simply an object fashioned by the artist and existing on its own. The work is brought to completion, the work *exists*, only when it is seen-as a meeting place where two minds (the artist's and the beholder's) joins one another: it veritably exists only as a vehicle of actual ideal communication. As a result, not only is the Oriental artist entirely intent on Things, but on Things such as to be made communicable to the minds of others. And this (together with the related ascendancy of traditional disciplines) is a further obligation for him to depart from himself and make self-forgetfulness his primordial virtue."<sup>35</sup>

Commenting directly on Chinese art, and in that he concurs with Eva Kit Wah Man by outlining the "hidden" spiritual values that underline Chinese Art; "Chinese art also is entirely intent on Things: but in a way typically different from the Indian way. It is not captured by Things; rather it does capture them, in the light of a sort of animist trans-naturalism. This art is a contemplative effort to discover in Things and bring out from Things their own engaged soul and inner principle of dynamic harmony, their 'spirit', conceived as

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<sup>34</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, pp.10-11

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, pp.11-12

a kind of invisible ghost which comes down to them from the spirit of the universe and gives them their typical form of life and movement.

Here we have no dash for the Absolute, the supreme, and unique Self. We have a cosmic faith, a sacred veneration for Tao, the primal source, and for heaven, in which the spirits of all that is visibly shaped pre-exist, and from which they come down into Things to hide in them and shape and move them from within. And Things exist, be it in a fleeting manner - these native, deep-seated Chinese feeling has possibly been invaded, but has never been effaced by Buddhist irrealism; Things are not a dream, they have their own reality. Then Things themselves (since they are real participations in being) can be spiritualised - in other words the spirit they conceal can be discovered and set free by our contemplative grasping. And senses, through which Things are reached, can be purified too. Such a process describes the primary intent of Chinese art. What does the first of the famous six canons of Xie He<sup>36</sup> prescribe? - To have life-motion manifest the unique spiritual resonance that the artist catches in Things, inspired as he is by his communion with the spirit of the cosmos. The second canon is no less significant. If the brush strokes which render bone structure have primacy among all means of execution, to the point of making painting, so to speak, a branch of calligraphy, it is because the very vigour and alertness of these touches (together with the quality of the ink tones) express the movement of life perceived in things and its structural harmony (and they are, at the same time, a token of the value of the artist's inspiration)".<sup>37</sup>

And observing the same underlining spiritual approach of Greek Art, Maritain comments, "Contrary to what we have noticed apropos of Chinese art, not only Greek art but the Greek artist himself sought after beauty, and in the most conscious and purposeful manner. This was a great event in the spiritual history of mankind: a liberation of the transcendent value of beauty, which is a participation in divine attributes, and, at the same time, an invaluable step (though naturally pregnant with those "beautiful dangers" that Plato cherished) in the progress of the human spirit in self-awareness. By the same stroke, Greek art perceived the privilege of man in the objective realm of beauty; it realized that the

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<sup>36</sup> In the Southern Dynasty (317-402), the art critic Xie He (500-535) established the "Six Canons" of painting. In their proper order, they are: animation through spiritual resonance (the painter must create vitality in the painting); strong brushwork; fidelity to the object (depiction of form must be natural and accurate); correct colour (use of colour must suit the subject matter); proper composition; and skill in copying earlier masters' works (copying was, and still is considered a way of understanding and absorbing the creative genius of past masters). More than any other set of rules or principles, it is these that Six Canons best capture the essence of Chinese painting.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, pp. 14-15

human body is the most beautiful object in nature: a revelation, which was too much for it. Greek art bent in adoration before the human figure. Thus it was in the long run doubly vanquished: by nature and by the figure, by aesthetic submission to the external thing-in-itself and by idolatrous worshiping of the human body.”<sup>38</sup>

### **Maritain’s Views on Art**

Maybe Maritain has a point, when he argues that the only factor that has a common thread that runs through both the Western and Chinese art is their underlying spiritual values – even though expressed differently. Here is an interesting comment (by Deal Hudson) on Maritain’s rejection of the modern notion of aesthetics, which was concerned simply with arguments over perception and taste. "Is this beautiful? - Is it beautiful to you? - Why? - It's not beautiful to me." Worthy of mention is St Thomas Aquinas’ definition of art as “id quod visum placet”, (Bourke, 1960), often mistranslated as “that which being seen pleases” rather than “that which being perceived pleases” (cf. Maritain, 1944).

Instead, Maritain wanted to return to what the ancients and scholastics meant when they used the word 'art' - art as a virtue, a habitus of the practical intellect. This is a virtue that some people have, and some do not - the disposition to create objects of beauty. Maritain rejects the notion that the artist, in creating beauty, creates something disconnected from either God or metaphysical being. The beauty created by the artist directly participates in the Divine. Beauty saves the artist from suffering a strict division between his speculative intellect and his practical intellect and between the moral order governed by prudence in the practical intellect and the order of making governed by art.”<sup>39</sup>

### **Chinese spiritual Values in aesthetics**

Both Eva Kit Wah Man and Maritain have argued strongly about the “hidden” spiritual values that underline the aesthetics values of Chinese Art. The former hinting at an inevitability of a metaphysical approach to aesthetics of even under the most materialistic environment, the latter demonstrating its intrinsic metaphysical aspects. This now clearly suggests where the current and future exploration of modern Chinese aesthetics research and debates would lie. And as we are dealing with the direct relationship between the values of aesthetics on Design, I would propose that any avenues that have some

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p.20

<sup>39</sup> Deal Hudson, Maritain on Art and Morality p.2

possibilities of providing that link should be worthwhile exploring. That is, exploring all the possibilities of putting forward some strong arguments for that purpose in design research.

If we can demonstrate historically those aspects of aesthetics that Eva Kit Wah Man and Maritain write about, then we will have a strong foundation to build our arguments. I think there are great possibilities in that respect from the Ming Dong Gu's essay entitled *"Aesthetic Suggestiveness In Chinese Thought: A symphony of Metaphysics and Aesthetics"*<sup>40</sup>. Ming Dong Gu suggests that an articulation of Aesthetic Suggestiveness can lead to the metaphysical aspect of Chinese Aesthetics. In his opening statement for the essay, he clearly indicates that aesthetic suggestiveness has a strong Design bias when he states that, "Aesthetic suggestiveness is a major theoretical category in Chinese art-verbal, visual, and auditory. As Fung Yu-lan, the renowned historian of Chinese philosophy, puts it, '*suggestiveness, not articulateness, is the ideal of all Chinese art, whether it be poetry, painting, or anything else.*' Fung also points out: '*such is the ideal of Chinese art, and this ideal is reflected in the way in which Chinese philosophers have expressed themselves*'".<sup>41</sup> He adds that, "Aesthetic suggestiveness is certainly a category to be found in discussions of the arts, but in many ways one may almost say that it grew out of philosophical discourses and treatises and had its philosophical foundation firmly established in Chinese thought".<sup>42</sup> To distinguish between philosophy and literature approaches, Ming Dong Gu explains that, "Perhaps a reasonable view would be that philosophical discourse and literary thought initially grew in symbiosis, and then the latter borrowed a great deal from the former in the development of Chinese aesthetics. Within the broader context of Chinese tradition, the Chinese concept of suggestiveness is a product of the interpenetration of and exchanges between philosophical and artistic discourses. It is a symphony performed by metaphysics and aesthetics in harmonious accord"<sup>43</sup>. By this introduction to his arguments he establishes solidly the metaphysical aspects of Chinese Aesthetics into a broad historical panorama.

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<sup>40</sup> Philosophy East and West; Oct 2003; 53,4; Academic Research Library p. 490

<sup>41</sup> Ibid p.490

<sup>42</sup> Ibid p.490

<sup>43</sup> Ibid p.490

### **Suggestiveness, Aesthetics and Metaphysics**

In order to put into context the concept of Suggestiveness in the Aesthetics argument, Ming Dong Gu explains it thus, “In everyday discourse, suggestiveness in Chinese is called *anshi* (suggestion). Literally, it means ‘to show something by indirectly hinting at it.’ In artistic discourse, it is often coupled with the word ‘aesthetic’ and so becomes an aesthetic principle. It generally refers to a desirable artistic quality highly valued in different forms of art, especially in poetry.”<sup>44</sup>

In giving us a lead into what the future may bring to the development of a modern Chinese aesthetic application to design, I will argue that while Ming Dong Du is alluding to the metaphysical aspects of literary art and poetry, the same arguments can be applied to the aesthetics of art/design. In trying to explain the limitless way to represent or explain innumerable phenomena in art, he explains that, “...In their efforts to make art adequately representative of observed reality and imaginative thought, Chinese artists found in suggestiveness an effective way to represent unlimited life with limited artistic means. This discovery set Chinese thinkers on a journey of inquiry into the rationale and techniques of suggestiveness, a journey lasting all the way from high antiquity to modern times.”<sup>45</sup> and I would add “and beyond”. To see this in modern contexts, he quotes from the *Yi (Book of changes)*, “The *Yi[Book of Changes]* is to make manifest the past events and to observe future events so that the subtle may be shown and the profound may come to light. Its creators started by giving the hexagram images proper names so as to distinguish objects, and appending proper hexagram statements so that the language for judgment is ready at hand. The names for hexagram images and lines are insignificant, but their symbolized categories are great. Its thought is profound; its rhetoric is colourfully patterned; its language is tortuous but accurate; its allusions are blatant but their implications are concealed.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid p.490

<sup>45</sup> Ibid p.491

<sup>46</sup> Ibid p.492

### Projecting current thoughts into the future

As far as the future of art/Design is concerned, Ming Dong Gu makes a most interesting comment on the future development of aesthetics in the Chinese context. And I would again argue that with the example of the *Yi*, we have an incredible potential for creative Chinese artistic expression and representation now and its further development in the future, because we now have to explore the current potential so as to be able to “predict the future” from a solid historical stand point. And he confirms my argument by elaborating on it. “The *Xicizhuan* has always been considered a philosophical text. I suggest that what this passage says concerns more than philosophy, for it touches on a theory of artistic representation with incredible potential for openness.

Aristotle makes a radical distinction between history and poetry: ‘The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen. Poetry, therefore, is more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular’. In claiming that ‘The *Yi [Book of Changes]* is to make manifest the past events and to observe future events so that the subtle may be shown and the profound may come to light,’ the *Xicizhuan* seems to say that the Book of Changes as a system of representation is capable of sketching not only what may happen, but also what has happened - the universal as well as the particular. Indeed, the book has been treated as such over history. Certain hexagram statements have been explained as records of certain historical events, but at the same time these particularized explanations have not prevented people from using these statements to predict what may happen.”<sup>47</sup>

This leads to the inspiration of later poets and artists to explore further into the realm of the higher level of the metaphysical aspects of suggestiveness until it culminates into the ephemeral. Ming Dong Gu describes the performance of a female performer thus, “The poet describes with vivid language how her music conveyed her sorrowful life story. In the middle of her performance, she suddenly stopped playing the instrument. The sudden silence following the sound of the pipa produced an endless effect that was adequately summed up by the poet in once poetic line: ‘The silence at that time was louder than any sound.’ This line, equivalent to ‘thunderous silence,’ is a triumphant achievement in describing sonic absence and limitless affective associations.”<sup>48</sup> Some artists went further, “...’Only in the midst of indistinction, he sees brightness; only in the midst of no sound, he hears harmonious sound.’

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid p.492

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, p.494

Zhuangzi's statement has a visual dimension that interconnects with Laozi's idea of *daxiang*. Zhuangzi's remark touches on both the visual and acoustic images in the composition of a symbol. Moreover, it attributes the source of endless associations to the simultaneous presence of concealment and revelation, silence and sound, finite and infinite, visible and invisible."<sup>49</sup>

### **The boundless boundaries, and lingering sensations**

As this metaphysical approach to aesthetics culminates into an association of Art and Design, I would like to quote Ming Dong Du again with his intriguing observation about this aspect and thus to clarify the paradox, he observes that, "...Similarly, the paradoxical connotations of *yiwei* (*lingering taste*) are compatible with Laozi's explication of the *Dao* in terms of *wuwei* (*no taste*) and *weiwai wei* (*flavor beyond flavor*)."<sup>50</sup>

In addressing other important philosophical aspects of the "lingering taste and lingering sound" he develops these concepts that may be the base on which one artistic expression or term can be substituted into another, giving the latter a connotation or association (definition) never attributed before. Exploring these with words, he went on further to clarify the *Dao*, "The *Dao* has a universal essence existing in everything under heaven, but it is not any of the tangible things. It therefore does not confine itself to the qualities of any material thing. The essence of the *Dao* is like the tastelessness of all tastes. Because it is tasteless, it can embody all the tastes. Here we find the genius of negative metaphysics that is completely the opposite of Platonic ontology. The 'Record of Music' itself echoes Laozi's and Zhuangzi's ideas. In the passage describing the zither (a Chinese musical instrument) in the Purity Temple, the 'Record of Music' states: 'The grandeur of music does not reside in the extremity of sounds; the protocol of the sacrificial feast does not rest on the greatest flavours.'<sup>51</sup>

Other scholars have analogised the playing of the zither, and he quotes Zhong Rong's words to that effect, "...Because of vibration and the acoustic design of the instrument, other string on the same zither resonate. These reverberations may be the basis for the philosophical idea of 'lingering sound.' Insofar as literary compositions are concerned, these reverberations are apt acoustic images for literary effects. On the one hand, they are sorts of faint sound; on the other, they are not the original sound. It is a

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid p.494

<sup>50</sup> Ibid p.494

<sup>51</sup> Ibid p.494

sound generated by another sound through acoustic vibration and borders on no sound. As a borderline sound, it comes close to Zhuangzi's philosophical idea of *wusheng* (literally, 'soundlessness'). Since it is suggestive of endless resonance, these reverberations may be comparable to the intertextual relations of and extratextual responses to a profound writing: the words of a text have come to an end, but the implications have not."<sup>52</sup> This brings to mind the concept of persistence of vision within the context of design. It is the phenomenon of the effects that the perfect tangible design product should have when it has been observed, initially, during and after: lasting visual effects that still persist even when the design object has disappeared. It is the persistence of that lingering image that all designers crave about, and set their ultimate aspiration to that end. With the real hope that, one day, their design creation will acquire.

### **Suggestiveness, Semiosis, Art and Design**

Analogising further the same concept of sound and words, I would suggest that, perhaps images can be applied to this expression, when substituting words for images, " In many ways, Lu Ji's innovative adaptation of the passage from the 'Record of Music' paved the way of Zhong Rong's famous sayings, 'words may come to an end but the meanings are endless'. Overall, Lu Ji valued a textual condition that opens the text beyond itself with limitless implications, like unlimited semiosis in Western semiotics.

In Laozi's thought, for the expression 'A great note is a rarefied sound' there is a parallel idea: 'A great image is rarefied in shape.' Wang Bi explains this saying as follows: 'Once an object has shapes, it can be distinguished. That which can be distinguished is either warm or cool, either hot or cold. Therefore, an image with tangible shapes is not a great image.' By this statement, Wang Bi means to say that an image with a tangible shape is limited in perception; only an image with no tangible shape is capable of arousing unlimited perceptions of it. Evidently, the image in Laozi's and Wang Bi's conception does not refer to any concrete object; it is a mental representation of a certain idea that transcends the limitations of the senses. In philosophical *Daoism*, the transcendental idea represented in verbal terms is the *Dao*.

But in reality, what sort of images can be counted as images without tangible shapes? Wang Bi does not give us any example."<sup>53</sup> Evidently, there are no examples, because those concepts were explored by aestheticians on a purely theoretical basis.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid p.495

<sup>53</sup> Ibid p.495

However, there is no doubt that in the mind of the designer, she/he would certainly give tangible examples. And if nothing else, Wang Bi is challenging designers to research those “images without tangible shapes”. What an exciting prospect that is challenging designers. There is also no doubt that there are many obstacles to be faced, and some of the dangers have already been flagged.

### **Media application to Metaphysical Suggestiveness**

There are some dangers lurking when adapting one media from another as Ming Dong Gu explained, “The failure is partly due to the lack of metaphysical suggestiveness. In adapting a literary work for the theatre or cinema or other visual media. One inadvertently deprives the work of its status as having many ‘great images.’ For the adapted version in visual form will inevitably curtail the signifying flux of a verbal image. In this respect, Lu Xun’s observation about literary imagery may serve as footnote to Laozi’s ‘great image.’

He was opposed to the idea and endeavour of adapting his masterpiece the *True Story of Ah Q* for the theatre and cinema on the grounds that the work would be reduced to comic effects on the stage. After some dramatist went ahead with the adaptation, Lu Xun requested that ‘the best thing is not to make the play too particularized, but capable of rather free adaptation.’ Obviously, he was aware of the potential loss of hermeneutic potential due to visual adaptation.”<sup>54</sup> From this passage I wonder whether it will be possible to verify (or test) the concept of “soundless sound” with an analogy to a graphical context, associating it to an “image that is imageless”, that is, articulating a design process that is capable of producing an “image” that can only be described as imageless; a design that produces an object that has limitless images in every sense of the word. I think that we have examples in the western design and artistic culture. In the architectural field Architect Frank Gehry has successfully applied that concept with great visual impact when he used the appropriate and adequate technical means in the application of the software CATIA to resolve his “formless form” of his celebrated design of the Bilbao Guggenheim Museum. In sculpture Henry Moore has also adopted the same concept of “formless form” to great effects in his sculptures in the most diverse environment. In painting quite a few artists have employed similar concepts to generate their artistic creations captivating the effects of the formless forms, among them; Paul Klee, Kandinsky and Joan Miro

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid p.496



The above striking examples of the ‘formless form’ of contemporary design of the Bilbao Guggenheim Museum by Architect Frank Gehry



Henry Moore formless form sculptures in diverse environment



Paul Klee formless form paintings



Joan Miro formless form paintings



Kadinsky formless form paintings

### The “*HanXu*”

To further develop his concept of “soundless sound”, Ming Dong Gu introduces a new approach to it, the “*HanXu*” (reserve) and argues that it is crucial to the understanding of the Chinese aesthetics of suggestiveness, as developed by Sikong Tu (837-908). The latter refined this concept and developed it using poetry as an artistic vehicle to make his points. He explains it thus, “by comparing literary taste to the tastes of food, he disapproved of a literary work imparting a single flavour. Instead, he advanced the famous dictum that poetry should be capable of conveying flavours beyond flavour: ‘it is nearby, but does not float; it is distant, but not exhausted-only after these conditions are met can one speak of reaching beyond they rhyme...if one complements it with full beauty as artistry, he would know what the meaning beyond flavour is.’ In a letter to a friend, he advocated ‘image beyond the image and scenes beyond the scene.’ As his advocacy touches on the visual, auditory, and gustatory senses, he seems to have conceived of a good poem as a multimedia art product within multiple levels of expressions. Of implications capable of appealing to the reader’s five senses.”<sup>55</sup> And those five senses are part and parcel of the design process. In this way I would add that it would lend to opening the exciting prospect of approaching the formal aspect of design in function of the senses to such an extent that it would transcend form.

He went on to overflow this concept into the area of semiotics, when he introduces the concept of “meaning beyond meaning” in poetry, (as an extrapolation to any other artistic expression?), “*Shen* (the divine) is a vague term in Chinese poetics. One of its hallmarks is whether a poem has meanings beyond words. Li Chonghua, a scholar of the Qing dynasty, identified this quality after examining some first-rate poetry in terms of Sikong Tu’s dictum, ‘set the divine in motion as through the void, set the pneuma in motion like a rainbow.’ Li declared: ‘...The reason poetry especially values divinity is precisely because a poem that has achieved divinity evokes meanings beyond its words.’ ”<sup>56</sup> If modern design is about meaning, what exciting prospects this statement opens for further research and debates on design.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid p.497

<sup>56</sup> Ibid p.497

### **“HanXu” and Design**

The concept also opens up further potential refinement of applying the “*HanXu*” aesthetic values to Design. And it is quite intriguing to contemplate the possibility of exploring whether we can pursue the “*HanXu*” further into a research program that would somehow create a link with the intricacies of the design process.

I would later develop the concept of articulating form, space, colours and meaning as the main elements of design. And further develop and articulate whether Design has meaning beyond form, space, colours and meaning or any other connotation associated with it. Its logical and next development would be to develop a Chinese Design with “limitless form beyond form, meaning and colours or any other association to design”. In that context the proposed path is obvious; because of the simple fact that the “*HanXu*” is basically and intrinsically Chinese, and what better than use it as a vehicle for the Sinicisation of Chinese Modern Design. It is yet another challenge indeed for the current Chinese artists and designers.

## Chapter 7: Concluding Comments: Challenges

### Modern Chinese challenges

Ming Dong Gu has already flagged some of these challenges, when he points out that the *HanXu* has intrinsically 4 degrees of difficulties in order to grasp it fully in a practical way, and commenting on this aspect he says, “First, it is full of indeterminate or ambiguous words. Second, some wording occurs in variant forms. Third, it is dominated by metaphysical thinking heavily indebted to philosophical Daoism. Last and most important, its own poetic language is characterized by an interpretation of logical thinking and imagistic thinking. The last difficulty is perhaps the principal barrier and also the key to an adequate understanding of the meaning of the passage.

Previous scholars have noticed all these difficulties. Some of them have also argued that this passage was composed by Sikong Tu to convey his idea of *weiwai zhi zhi* (themes beyond flavour), *yunwai zhi zhi* (meanings beyond rhyme), *xiangwai zhi xiang*, *jingwai zhi jing* (images beyond the image and scenes beyond the scene). Still others have pointed out the difficulty arises from the fact that it was written in imagistic language rather than expository language. No one, however, seems to have paid much attention to the conception of using formal presentation as a supplement to the main theme of the work.”<sup>57</sup> There might be some difficulties for the application to poetry or other artistic expression, but certainly it is quite useful for design, because of the natural use of imagistic language and thinking in elaborating a design concept.

If it was an imagistic language, then what more appropriate than to use this analogy to the process of design where the first step in developing a design concept is imagistic. That is the very first tangible formal result when developing a design concept, the initial representation is “an image”, this establishes the direct link between the aesthetic “suggestiveness” of “*Hanxu*” to design articulation and representation.

This surely opens up yet another area of research and development of a traditional Chinese approach to Design. And Ming Dong Gu suggests that, “This theory may offer a new way of understanding Sikong’s idea of *Hanxu* and its theoretical potential. The act of the *Han* (holding back) and *xu* (storing up) is not simply a generic mode of representation; it is also a psycholinguistic process of signification. What supports my reading is that the idea of *Hanxu* coincides exactly with Derrida’s notion of *difference* in some concrete terms: ‘

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid, p.498

The two apparently different values of *difference* are tied together in Freudian theory: to differ as discernability, distinction, separation, diastem, *spacing*; and to defer as detour, relay, reserve, *temporization* '. We need to pay attention to the series of terms in Derrida's statement, especially to such terms as 'distinction', 'separation', 'diastem', 'detour', 'relay', 'reserve' ".<sup>58</sup>

### Semiosis, "HanXu" and Design

And finally to cover all aspects of design within these broad parameters about the application of the "HanXu", he comes up with some clever arguments about how to introduce semiosis into the whole discourse on the "Han xin" and eventually relating the historical Chinese aesthetics of suggestiveness to the modern concept of semiosis<sup>59</sup>. He explains this association thus, "In the main conceptual discourses, semiosis is viewed as a mental process that underlies the very structure of the mind. In semiosis, there are three primary components: the sign (a representative image or a word), the object referred to (which can be either concrete or abstract), and the meaning that results from the connection between the sign and object through association. Meaning can be unlimited because it results from the successive production of interpretants.

An 'interpretant' is C.S. Peirce's notion of the individual's particular interpretation of the triadic relationship that inheres in semiosis. As the mental effect or thought generated by the relationship between the sign and object, the interpretant produces 1 further interpretant through the process of understanding and interpretation. Peirce calls this successive and perpetual production of new interpretants 'unlimited semiosis.' I consider it to be at the core of Sikong Tu's conception of "Hansu".

In terms of psycholinguistic theory, Sikong Tu's concept of "HanXu" and its poetic explication may be viewed as an intuitive grasp of the signifying mechanism not only of poetic language but also of literary openness. In this connection, the 'real master' in the passage may be the poetic unconscious responsible for the act of 'picking one [apt image] out of ten thousand things observed' and for the artistry of achieving reserve. In the same vein, fengliu which literally means 'wind and flow,' may be construed to mean a dynamic and endless process of signification."<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid, p. 502

<sup>59</sup> Currently there are widespread debates and discussions about semiosis and design

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, p. 503

### Design as space and time

My views on design are essentially about the understanding, articulating and representing space as an inseparable and interactive association with time. As the “*Hanxu*” has given me an opportunity and the possibility of proposing this approach within a Chinese cultural context, I take comfort in what Ming Dong Gu has said in that respect, “the unlimited meanings beyond words are not withheld (*han*) or stored (*xu*) in the open the hitherto unrecognized possibility of envisioning the Chinese idea of *yanwai zhi yi* (meaning beyond words) as psycholinguistic concept built on the free play of signification, in addition to its inherent metaphysical suggestiveness.”<sup>61</sup>

The unlimited meanings resonate with the idea of generating a meaning of unlimited space and to me that can be achieved with the introduction of time as a variable in the elaboration of the nothingness of unlimited space as applied to a design concept. Hence using a traditional Chinese concept of the “*Hanxu*”. One of the great aims for any designer is to be able to manipulate space in design, that is, to have the capability of interpreting “emptiness” (read as in space). We have a clear indication of this when we quote from Ming Dong Gu when he explains what Zhu Bokun, a leading modern scholar on the *Book of Changes*, has to say about the *Dao*, “ ‘ A myriad things and shapes share their home in One. Through what they do they lead to One? Through *Wu* (nothingness)’ Whether it is the Non-Ultimate or the Great Ultimate or the *Dao*, the origin and foundation of the Universe is believed to be ‘*wu*’ a gamut of meanings like ‘absence’, ‘emptiness’, ‘nothingness’, ‘unperceived presence’, and ‘nonbeing’.

Daoism holds that the *Dao* is the emptiness or nothingness that gives birth to all things. If nothingness (space) gives birth to all things, then we can extend this idea to design, where the generation of space from another space is the culminating act of the design process. I think that the famous Architect Frank Lloyd Wright would certainly agree with that statement. In the *Daode jing* the unnamable and indescribable *Dao* is compared to an ‘empty bowl.’ In Lao Zi’s conception, ‘nothing’ is ontology of the *Dao*, while ‘something’ is its function. Although both ‘nothing’ and ‘something’ are the two aspects of binary opposition in the *Dao*, ‘nothing’ predates ‘something,’ for the *Daode jing* states, in the *Book of Changes*, chapter 14, ‘The myriad creatures in the world are born from Something, and Something from Nothing.’ Zhuangzi also views ‘nothing’ as the origin of ‘something’: ‘In the beginning, there was *wu* or nothing; the nameless *wu* is origin of one.’ In another chapter

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid, p. 504

(*Book of Changes*, chapter 42), Lao Zi describes the generative principle of the Dao: 'The way [Tao] begets one; one begets two; two begets three; three begets the myriad creatures.'<sup>62</sup>

## **Conclusion**

A broad and far reaching topics have been explored in this paper; it is common knowledge that aesthetics is an essential part of the design process and as its determinant influence in the overall aspects of design as distinct from its functional and practical aspects. Then, understanding Chinese aesthetics goes a long way in unravelling Chinese design. Western culture approaches aesthetics differently to Chinese culture. I have tried to illustrate those different approaches and in the process have discovered many interesting and useful aspects of Chinese culture in general and more specifically about the historical and artistic characteristics of Chinese aesthetics. Some influences of Western culture on Chinese aesthetics were dealt with, their impacts and resulting consequences.

One revealing aspect of Chinese culture was the great ability of the Chinese to absorb any other foreign cultural influences (even their conquerors) into theirs and to eventually morphing it into an intrinsically Chinese culture: the process of Sinicisation. In terms of Chinese design we have situated it into its local context and its historical contexts and have demonstrated some common approach of both the Chinese and Western application of aesthetics to design. This was pointed out in the elaboration of the *HanXu* linking it to a current Western approach to the study of semiosis, and extending it to the expression of design. Inferring that there is after all an intrinsic Chinese approach to design that has a counterpart in Western Culture.

The last part illustrates an attempt by the Chinese to Sinicise a western culture and to adapt to an traditional and historical Chinese aesthetics and to find the incompatibility between these two. In conducting a dialogue between metaphysics and aesthetics Ming Dong Gu has demonstrated that, "as an aesthetic, suggestiveness in the Chinese tradition has gone beyond its traditionally recognised bounds to embrace the modern ideas of unlimited semiosis and literary openness".<sup>63</sup> This concluding remark has lead me to explore deeper critical consideration to articulate the possibility of exploring this traditional and yet so modern a concept.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid, pp. 506-507

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, p. 508

The western culture has in some instances westernise oriental culture to great effects producing iconic designs such as Architect Frank Lloyd Wright Kaufmann House (also known as Run Bear Falling Water House). The latter's Japanese influence is pervasive, but the end result is western in all points of view. We have also referred to western designers and artists (Ghery, Moore, Klee, Miro and Kadinsky) that have consciously or unconsciously adopted the Chinese concept of Metaphysical Suggestiveness to produce great works of design and art. Given that western culture has successfully westernise oriental culture, there exists the possibility to reverse the process.



Architect Frank Lloyd Wright iconic Falling Water house

As suggested this is just a part of a more far reaching research project into the possibility of an integral genuine Chinese Design that will accommodate any other modern utilities and technology, (western or local) without compromising its integrity. To demonstrate this some lessons will be drawn from this initial research and recent design accomplishment in China and its current activities.

Ming Dong Gu has opened a big window and has also pointed us into a direction where there are enormous potential for the future of Chinese art and design, knowing it has a solid historical and cultural to build on for an exciting and creative future. This could be the initial stage for research and development in the "Sinicisation" of art and design. It has solid roots in China, and it has the potential to grow even bigger, if we give it a chance to grow in the appropriate cultural and technical climate.

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