Four Dimensions to Construct China’s Modern Discourse of Aesthetics—Based on China’s Aesthetic Development in 20th Century*

HU Jun
Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Shanghai, China

Contemporary Chinese scholars proposed that China should construct modern Chinese aesthetic discourse system, therefore, we should attach great importance to China’s own aesthetic development in 20th century and learn experience from it. There are four dimensions of learning. First, we should seek the origin of methods from Marxism. Second, the study should deeply rooted in Chinese traditional culture. Third, we should refer to ancient and modern Western aesthetic theories. Last but not the least, all the scholars should be encouraged to express their views freely and equally. The four dimensions, which plays an important role in constructing China’s modern discourse of aesthetics, derived from the conclusion and experience of China’s modern aesthetic development in 20th century.

Keywords: Chinese aesthetic, experience and conclusions, modern discourse

Modern Chinese aesthetic discourse system must be derived from the legacy of last century’s history of China’s Marxism aesthetics. Therefore, based on the aesthetic development in 20th century at the background of Marxism spread in China, this essay restores general features and atmosphere at that time, sums up the experience and regular pattern of China’s aesthetic development in 20th century so as to accelerate the construction of China’s modern aesthetic discourse system.

Origin of Methods: Seeking From Marxism Aesthetics

It is the fundamental driving force of China’s aesthetics in 20th century that seeking origin of methods in Marxism. In the beginning of 20th century, Western theories and thoughts had been widely introduced to China. In terms of aesthetics, renowned scholars as Guowei Wang, Qichao Liang embraced the western aesthetic theories with corresponding China’s traditional aesthetics. In 1920s, more and more Western theories, including

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HU Jun (1978- ), female, a post-doc from Shanghai Jiao Tong University and an assistant research professor from Thought and Culture Research Center, Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences. She mainly focused on the study of aesthetics and literary theory.
Marxism, were translated into Chinese. Hence, western aesthetics were systematically brought into China as a branch of learning. Some local aesthetic textbook had sprung up, such as “Introduction to Aesthetics”, “Literary Psychology” by Guangqian Zhu and so on. Meanwhile, Marxism aesthetics entered China as well, Wangdao Chen translated Carl Marx’s works, Xun Lu appeared to have a realism aesthetic view with Marxism characteristics. Other than that, well-known estheticians, such as Guangqian Zhu, Baihua Zong and Yizhe Deng, appeared at that time. In 1940s, Marxism showed great advantages in contentions among various literary theories and aesthetic thoughts. As a result, Marxism aesthetics with Chinese characteristics had formed, Zedong Mao, Yi Cai, Yang Zhou and Feng Hu respectively adopted Marxism aesthetics.

During the first aesthetics wave and contention in 1920s, Marxism aesthetics represented by Yang Zhou and Yi Cai had made it conspicuous. They also criticized the older aesthetic views represented by Shiqiu Liang and Guangqian Zhu with scientific and forward-looking Marxism aesthetics. Yang Zhou pointed the new direction for new aesthetics and abandoned the old one. Yi Cai elaborated the system of new aesthetics with Marxism as the philosophical basis. “New art theory” and “New aesthetics” written by Yi Cai was regarded as the earliest masterpiece that used Marxism’s materialist epistemology to analyze artistic and aesthetic issues and regular patterns. These two books had some theoretical vulnerabilities to some extent, nevertheless, it shows the basic views of Marxism literary and aesthetic theory very clearly, systematically and completely. Therefore, this marked the real use of Marxism to form aesthetic school in China.

In 1950s and 1960s, Marxism had established its status that guiding China’s modern aesthetics during second aesthetic contention. Thanks to this contention, “aesthetic fever” emerged and knowledge about aesthetics popularized in the whole society which led to modern development of China’s aesthetics. Also, because of the contention, many estheticians had became famous. Based on their different interpretation on “essence of beauty”, there were four schools of Marxism aesthetics, which are “Subjective school” represented by Ying Lu and Ertai Gao, “Subjective and objective are unified school” represented by Guangqian Zhu, “Objective school” represented by Yi Cai and “Objective and social school” represented by Zehou Li. All estheticians claimed that their research were guided by Marxism and they all used one of Marxism’s concept or issue as their philosophical basis. Even Ying Lu, the scholar from “subjective school” who believed that beauty is merely a concept, also seek theoretical basis in Marxism masterpieces. This situation became more conspicuous when “Economic & Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844” became phenomenal during the third aesthetic contention.

China’s aesthetic study didn’t revitalized until the end of cultural revolution. The third contention, happened in late 1970s and 1980s, is the extension of the second contention in the new era. The four schools plus Kongyang Jiang continued to discuss and argued about issues like “essence of beauty”, “origin of beauty” and “the noumenon of beauty”. During this time, almost all the schools unanimously acknowledged practical aesthetics of Marxism except Yi Cai who stuck to his view of epistemological aesthetics of Marxism. However, the scholars’ interpretations about practical aesthetics differed a lot and showed rich dimensions of analysis. Zehou Li proposed “theory of accumulation” and “new sensibility”. Kongyang Jiang pointed out that beauty should be regarded as a complex with consistent openness and creativity, which also consists of multiple accumulation of natural material, perceptual representation, social history and psychological sense.

Since 1990s, Marxism Practical Aesthetics lost its dominant status. In fact, the boom of Marxism practical aesthetics was echoed with political needs and social progressive trend at that period. Naturally, it showed lots of
contradictions in itself as time went by. Furthermore, functions of aesthetics given by ideology disappeared and ideology lost its impact on academia anymore in 1980s. Thus, anti-practical aesthetics and ultra-practical aesthetics emerged. Post-modern aesthetics became flourishing in China. Many kinds of aesthetic theories appeared, such as life aesthetics, existence aesthetics, experience aesthetics, denial aesthetics, ecological aesthetics, harmony aesthetics and so on. All of these aesthetic theories enriched the patterns of aesthetic studies and aesthetic studies have more forms. Nevertheless, post-modernism deconstructs any authority, so Marxism aesthetics gradually lost its attraction to some scholars. However, we’re pleased to find out that many theories still have the marks from Marxism aesthetics, such as cognition aesthetics, ecological aesthetics and so on. It proved that Marxism aesthetics remains its value for further study.

Thus, it’s necessary for us to probe China’s current aesthetic issues by using Marxism’s basic points and guide the way in a scientific perspective.

**Root and Origin: Chinese Traditional Aesthetics**

The modern transformation of China’s aesthetics can’t be successful and prosperous without seeking its origin in Chinese traditional culture. The modern transformation is not westernization or becoming Marxism. The essence of Chinese traditional aesthetics can’t be inherited without the foundation and heritage of Chinese traditional aesthetics, let alone to construct a modern discourse of China’s aesthetics. China’s traditional aesthetic thoughts has been prosperous for ages because the traditional aesthetic habits, thinking patterns, range and structure has been carved into Chinese people’s heart. It can be learned from China’s aesthetic development in 20th century that the only way to construct China’s modern discourse of aesthetics and broaden its way is to take Chinese people’s aesthetic demand in concern, make good use of the Chinese traditional aesthetics’ essence and its core range, aesthetic thoughts and structure’s good parts, such as image aesthetics or harmony aesthetics.

In the 20th century, aesthetics, although a discipline from the west, was quickly fond of by Chinese people, much quicker than that of other disciplines. One of the reasons is that “beauty” has much richer meaning in China’s local traditional linguistic environment and cultural psychology than it did in western linguistic system. In Chinese traditional aesthetics, “beauty” was interrelated with human being’s good state of existence and an ideal state of mind. There’re many elaboration in Confucius aesthetics that binds beauty and human being’s existence together, like “the gentleman helps others to achieve their moral perfection but not their evil conduct”, “abundance brings beauty” and “in the actual practice of propriety, flexibility is important. This is what the ancient kings did so well- both the greater and the lesser used flexibility”. Furthermore, “The Tao in its regular course does nothing (for the sake of doing it)” by Lao Zi, “A Happy Excursion” by Zhuang Zi and “Zen” in Buddhism is also can be interpreted as a description and yearning for human being’s existence of beauty.

In Chinese traditional aesthetics, the concept of “beauty” and “kindness” is inseparable. According to our ancestors, a beautiful state of mind must be consist of beauty and kindness. Aesthetics usually linked with nobel morality and it goes without saying that beauty and kindness are supposed to be a certain status of a human being. Meng Zi pointed out that “A man who commands our liking is what is called a good man. He whose goodness is part of himself is what is called real man. He whose goodness has been filled up is what is called beautiful man”. Xun Zi also hold the thought of “beauty and kindness complete each other”. These thoughts are the unique interpretations of Chinese tradition of “beauty and kindness is integrated.” Like Chinese traditional aesthetics,
Marxism aesthetics also regard beauty and kindness, which is inseparable, leads to ideal status. It emphasis social, educational, moral and spiritual function of beauty and art which is noble spiritual possession for human beings.

There’re lots of similarities between Marxism aesthetics and Chinese traditional aesthetics, nevertheless, they generated in different cultural, social and historical background. Chinese traditional aesthetics have some shortcomings, for instance, it doesn’t distinguish the subject and the object. It should be improved and completed by Marxism aesthetics to generate modern meaning for Chinese traditional aesthetics. Meanwhile, we should make Marxism aesthetics more accustomed to China’s condition by China’s traditional forms in its culture, thoughts and philosophy. By doing this, Marxism aesthetics could reach the bottom of people’s heart and embrace a great development in the aesthetic academia.

Reference: Western Aesthetic Thoughts

In 20th century, western aesthetic has always been a reference to China’s aesthetic. The cornerstone of China’s modern aesthetic theory cited a great deal from western aesthetics, philosophy and cultural resource, including Marxism aesthetics. Many Chinese estheticians build their own theoretical system at the basis of western philosophy, psychology, aesthetics and so on. One of examples is that the discussion on “the essence of beauty” has a strong western-style imprint.

From beginning of 20th century to 1949, western philosophy and aesthetics were introduced to China. Works of renowned contemporary philosophers and estheticians, such as Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Nietzsche, Arthur Schopenhauer, were translated into Chinese. Many Chinese estheticians are deeply influenced by these western theories, such as theory of empathy, theory of inner imitation and so on, and they proposed their own theories on the basis of western theories they fully embraced. Qichao Liang’s “doctrine of taste”, Guowei Wang’s “theory of voluntary” and other estheticians’ theory were inspired by what they learned from the west more or less. These theories contribute to correcting and completing Chinese traditional aesthetics which value experience instead of rationality.

On the other hand, western modern psychology and art-oriented theory had a huge impact on China’s aesthetic development in the first half of 20th century and give birth to schools like psychological aesthetics and art ontology and so on. It’s Western modern art trend and art-oriented theory shed light on China’s aesthetic development made estheticians think in a brand new way. Guowei Wang tried to use Arthur Schopenhauer’s view on art to solve problems in his life, Jinfa Li pursued pure art and aestheticism. Furthermore, due to the demand from artistic study and the considerable progress has been made in western psychology, it’s widely acknowledged that psychology could be used as a method in art study and aesthetic study. For example, psychoanalysis and gestalt psychology was thought to be influential on aesthetics and art study. In this way, it’s safe to say that western modern psychology advanced China’s aesthetic development in the first half of 20th century. Guangqian Zhu’s study on aesthetics began with psychological methods. On the other hand, western modern psychology promote China’s aesthetics from abstract philosophical theory to a scientific and practical one.

If taking a reference to western thought was a way of development for China’s aesthetics, we have to admit that criticizing western aesthetic thought is also a way of learning. For example, Yi Cai criticized the way of induction that Gustav Theodor Fechner adopted and Theodor Lipps’ theory of empathy. He did the research on
aesthetics with critical thinking. Although he had a different opinion on western subjectivism, he founded the system of aesthetic materialism with the guidance of Marxism.

In 1980s and 1990s, with the flow of western theory and aesthetic thought flew into China, Chinese estheticians not only learn from it to enrich the theoretical basis of the Chinese contemporary aesthetics but also take it critically in terms of western modernism and post-modernism in aesthetics.

In a word, the development of China’s aesthetics in 20th century was profoundly affected by western thoughts of aesthetics. So the development of China’s contemporary aesthetics also need the reference of western aesthetics and integrated with it.

Creating Atmosphere: Equal and Free for Discussion

Probably aesthetic is not that political, several contentions in aesthetic academia were not affected by politics. Because of this, some of basic aesthetic issues were able to be discussed and clarified. Furthermore, aesthetics became so popular in China and gained long-term development afterwards.

Thanks to “let a hundred flowers bloom” principle, scholars were able to express their views freely during the great contention in aesthetic academia in 1950s. And the contention directly generated four major schools of China’s contemporary aesthetics. Many aesthetic issues were discussed through arguments among different schools. According to some records, there’re about a hundred scholars participated the contention. They published more than 300 hundred essays, translated numerous foreign publications and released volumes of books. One of influences of this contention is that it popularized the knowledge of aesthetics nationwide and raise the attention for aesthetic study. Researchers on aesthetics were increasing, many universities set up department of aesthetics and began the study on aesthetics. More important is that many outstanding estheticians became famous. They publicly expressed their views on the object of aesthetics, the range and essence of beauty, aesthetic feeling, natural beauty and the relationship between aesthetics and life. In the end, four schools of aesthetics emerged which were set the basic pattern in aesthetic academia.

Since reform and opening-up, the study of aesthetics once again valued by the public. China’s contemporary aesthetics revitalized through contentions among different schools. The contention about “the manuscript” marked as the new beginning for development of China’s aesthetics.

At the end of 20 century, contention between practical aesthetics and post-piratical aesthetics occurred. It showed that the atmosphere for different opinions remained free and equal. Furthermore, China’s contemporary aesthetics have been keeping a good momentum of “contentions lead to development”. It makes China’s aesthetics diversified and different schools could coexistence.

Overall, the development of China’s aesthetics in 20th century shows us that China’s contemporary aesthetics could be thrive only when the atmosphere is free and equal, the contentions on aesthetic theories are sufficient and effective. This is a great academic tradition and also a vital dimension of constructing China’s modern discourse.

References