

# The Art Spirit of Chinese Culture

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**Abstract:** The attainment of the humanistic spirit of traditional Chinese culture was mainly through rites and musical enlightenment. The spirit of Chinese culture concerns ethics and art. A good combination of moral and art education is the highest state of moral pursuit and artistic pursuit, as well. In the context of Chinese culture and art, music is more than a means to satisfy a person's physical appetite; it also serves to inspire people to cultivate a sound and complete personality. No art form can exist in isolation. Art should express the subject consciousness of individual artists and, more importantly, the common pursuit of all human beings. Such a philosophy should be reflected in every piece of artwork. The social guiding role of aesthetic education is a key feature of Chinese culture and there has been a civilizing influence pervading all aspects of Chinese culture and art. In a profound way, traditional Chinese art conveys the mental outlook and joy of Chinese culture. The fundamental humanism of Chinese culture is demonstrated in every aspect of Chinese art, which collectively highlights Chinese people's tastes and cultural pursuits. Therefore, it is easier to approach truths through art.

**Keywords:** art spirit; rites and music enlightenment; cultural consciousness; approach truth from art

Valuing rites and musical enlightenment is a key feature of Chinese culture. Rites and musical enlightenment is important to the cultivation of humanism. Rites enlightenment concerns ethical education; while musical enlightenment is about art education which enriches the traditional Chinese culture with an artistic touch. This pursuit of art, embodied in a variety of art forms, encourages self-improvement and emphasizes conveying truth in writings and guiding art with truth. Chinese art attaches great importance to expression, comprehension and experience, encouraging artists to seek laws of nature, explore

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the essence of everything and cultivate a moral consciousness before they pursue the cause of art. This profoundly echoes the mental outlook and joy of Chinese culture.

## 1. The spirit of ethics and art in Chinese culture

Chinese culture, being fundamentally people-oriented, advocates humanism and embodies a humanistic philosophy. The cultivation of humanism is mainly through rites and musical enlightenment. Rites education advocates the spirit of ethics; while musical education falls into the category of art or aesthetic education and embodies the spirit of art. The spirit of art covers far more than the generally accepted art education and practice. It does not exactly refer to specific art categories such as poems and paintings. Instead, it signifies a state of persistent art pursuit. To some extent, it is a spirit that transcends any specific form of art.

Thus, the spirit of Chinese culture mainly includes two aspects, ethics and art, which are interconnected and inseparable. Rites serve to regulate people's social identity and status, i.e. "differentiation" and "classification." They are supposed to identify every person's social responsibilities, obligations and rights and thus establish social order. From a traditional perspective, music serves to promote "harmony" and "unity." Society is formed by the masses, who, based on rites, are given different identities, ranks and status along with corresponding responsibilities, obligations and rights. It is also through rites that harmony is achieved among different social strata. Rites enable people to express their aspirations and feelings and communicate with each other to build harmonious interpersonal relationships. In traditional Chinese culture, rites and music are closely tied. Rites and musical enlightenment is expected to cultivate human integrity, sincerity and nobleness. In the past,

traditional Chinese culture was merely regarded as an ethical culture. This is somewhat a one-sided view, for it only focused on rites education and failed to pay due attention to musical education. In fact, musical education has always been valued throughout Chinese history. In ancient times, Chinese society, seemingly rigidly stratified, was quite harmonious in nature. Given that, it is impossible to see the whole picture of Chinese culture without learning its rites and art spirit.

Chinese culture is a culture of art. When it comes to the culture of art, a diversity of art forms naturally come out of people's minds. Take literature as an example. Outstanding literary forms throughout Chinese history include Han verses, Tang poetry, Song poetry, Yuan verses and Ming & Qing novels. In terms of music, there are also a wide variety of styles that combine traditional music with foreign music and dance. In addition, there are various forms of stringed instruments, chess, calligraphy and painting that have been retained as a tradition even today. In retrospect of earlier Chinese history, there were the six art forms of poetry, calligraphy, rites, music, shooting and horse driving, all of which are art treasures. And this can be exemplified by the *Guzhen* (ancient Chinese zither) and the Kunqu Opera. The *Guzhen* is arguably the world's oldest musical instrument in use today. It has a history of at least 3,000 years. Compared with the Sanskrit drama of India, the tragic drama of Greece and the classic drama of Japan, *Kunqu* stands out in terms of literary and artistic value, playing and singing techniques, stage performance, as well as the overall system of drama theories. Greek tragic drama is no longer in existence and can now only be accessed in the form of literary works; Sanskrit drama of India can only be traced in modern Indian dances; the Noh drama of Japan has a history a few hundred years longer than that of *Kunqu*, however, from script and aria to performance theory, Noh is not so comprehensive and diverse. Of all ancient dramas of China, Kunqu Opera is an extensively kept type.

Kunqu Opera and *Gujin* of China have successively been inscribed on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List. Examples like these indicate that some art forms of China have already reached a top level and are therefore of incalculable value.

A good combination of moral and art education is the highest state of moral pursuit and artistic pursuit. The Chinese people embrace “truth, goodness and beauty.” “Truth” refers to the pursuit of knowledge and facts; “goodness” refers to adherence to ethics and morals; “beauty” means striving for a higher state of art. They also advocate the “integration of truth, goodness and beauty,” as well as the “unity of man and nature.” The pursuit of ethics is totally in line with the pursuit of art, for which the two should be integrated. Moreover, the Chinese people also practice the spirit of art in everyday life. It is believed by many that the Chinese people lead an artistic way of life. Chinese culture inherently advocates higher art attainment, to which rites and musical education is the key.

In a narrow sense, musical enlightenment refers to music education. In ancient China, the term “music” covered an extensive range of art, including poems, songs and dances. In a broad sense, musical enlightenment refers to art education, or rather aesthetic education. Regarding musical enlightenment, Confucius used to say “self-cultivation starts from poetry learning, improves through rites learning, and is accomplished in music learning” (“Tai Bo”, *Analects of Confucius*). According to Confucius, human cultivation should be completed through “music”, which is considered the highest state of personality perfection. The reason why ancient people valued musical enlightenment so much lies in the fact that they believed music to be the quickest, most profound and touching way of expression capable of transforming social traditions. The “Record of Music” in the *Book of Rites* centers on the emergence of music and its social functions. It concerns art education as well as the art form of music. The “Record of Music”



Confucius

begins with an explanation of the emergence of music, holding that “all music is but the echo of human feelings deep inside.” (The “Record of Music”, *Book of Rites*). Music is created to convey human emotions, which are developed in the heart and expressed through the voice. However, not all sounds are music. “Sounds, through polish and re-arrangement, can be transformed into rhythms” (The “Record of Music”, *Book of Rites*). To create music, such rhythms must be “connected to form a chapter with fluctuated pitches and fast-and-slow alternations” (The “Record of Music”, *Book of Rites*).

Music is formed with rhythms and based on “human feelings of the external world” (The “Record of Music”, *Book of Rites*). Music is an eruption of human emotions. Enhanced emotions are expressed through the voice, which is transformed into rhythms, which are further arranged into music. That is how

music comes into being. "The temptation of the material world is infinite." People get in touch with a variety of things every day, which gives rise to different feelings. This is more than natural. Without the necessary control of individual "likes" and "dislikes," men can easily fall victim to a materialistic world. Once being materialized, people would "lose their natural kindness and succumb to their swelling desire." Given that, music should be properly applied to guide and regulate human values and behaviors. Therefore, "music" is in nature an important means of enlightening the masses. In Chinese history, rites and music were of the same status as the punishment-governance. "In essence, 'rites and music' and 'punishment-governance' serve the same ultimate purposes" (The "Record of Music," *Book of Rites*). "The theory of music has a lot in common with that of governance" (The "Record of Music," *Book of Rites*). According to the "Record of Music," *Book of Rites*, there are three levels of audio-appreciation. The first is the "animal level, which cannot tell voice from sound"; the second is the "mass level, which makes no distinction between voice and music"; the third is the "*Junzi* (a man of complete virtue) level," which means a profound appreciation of music. The "Record of Music" also considers "rites" and "music" as two interactive parts and attaches great importance to "music". Moreover, it considers music to have the most powerful influence and appeal to humans, claiming "effective musical education can profoundly enlighten the general public, enhance civic virtues, improve the social climate and thereby enable social stability and harmony" (The "Record of Music," *Book of Rites*).

Evidently, in the context of Chinese culture and art, music is more than a means of satisfying a person's physical appetite; it also serves to inspire people to cultivate a sound and complete personality. "For a superior man, pleasure comes from the acquirement of morality; while for a mean man, pleasure comes from the satisfaction of a vulgar desire" (The "Record of

Music," *Book of Rites*). The "morality" here refers to a superb state of personality. And it is also believed that "controlling selfish desires through moral cultivation can harvest happiness without excessive indulgence in lewdness; while satisfying selfish desires and ignoring any moral cultivation can lead to bewilderment without happiness" (The "Record of Music," *Book of Rites*). Traditional Chinese culture attaches great importance to the role of music in guiding social morality and cultivating lofty sentiments. The form of art does matter. Yet, the external form cannot reveal the essence of music. "Traditional music notes like Huangzhong and Dalu, songs and dances are merely minor details of Chinese music and do not matter that much to the essence of music" (The "Record of Music," *Book of Rites*). In fact, a similar view was expressed by Confucius in questioning, "Does gift only refer to luxuries like jade and silk? Does music only refer to bells and drums?" ("Yang Huo Text", *Analects of Confucius*). True music enlightenment, or rather the spirit of art, lies in seeing through the appearance to perceive the essence and reach a higher state of human consciousness. The goal of music is to cultivate moral integrity and conduct, instead of perfecting musical skill. "Moral attainments outweigh artistic attainments; moral cultivation comes always before task accomplishment" (The "Record of Music," *Book of Rites*). Art is not so much about competition or performance. Among the six art forms of poetry, calligraphy, rites, music, shooting and horse driving, "shooting" and "horse driving" should in fact fall into the category of sports, which are supposed to cultivate sentiments and inspire ambition. The "Record of Music" places "moral integrity" at the first place and "art skill" second. Via art, people pursue the fundamental truths of life. Taste cultivation and level-lifting requires approaching life's truths from art and at the same time guiding art with life's truths, which is arguably the quintessential essence of Chinese musical enlightenment.



## 2. Cultural consciousness and social functions of Chinese art

No art form can exist in isolation. Art should express the subject consciousness of individual artists and, more importantly, the common pursuit of all human beings. And such philosophy should be reflected in every piece of artwork. From a perspective of traditional Chinese culture, art is not pursued for art's sake, which is supposed to be the fundamental feature of art's spirit. According to some people, there is no serious art in China, for traditional Chinese culture attaches excessive importance to the social or political functions of art without highlighting the independence of art itself. Under such circumstances, the so-called cultural consciousness has been a much talked about topic among artists in contemporary China. Many hold that artistic consciousness only means art's separation from politics and reflections of individual pursuits. Alternatively, art should be pursued solely for art's sake. Artistic consciousness only involves the pursuit of perfection in form, without any consideration to whether its content can benefit the masses. Such a view is of course misleading. Nowadays, the "definition of artistic consciousness" has become a key topic for many studies of aesthetics and art.

Judging from the development of Chinese history, as believed by many researchers, it was not until the Wei-Jin Period that Chinese art began to develop an artistic consciousness. In the Pre-Qin Period and the Qin and Han dynasties, emphasis had been placed on musical enlightenment's subordination to ethics, state governance and personality improvement. Different from that, the Wei-Jin Period valued individuality, respected nature, and had human nature liberated via art. Regarding this, there is no shortage of misunderstandings. Indeed, during the Wei-Jin Period, people were encouraged to display their individuality and nature and rid themselves of various

social constraints. Such a context gave rise to a trend of "abolishing the rituals and returning to nature." Prominent representatives of this trend were the "Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove"; Ji Kang, Ruan Ji, Ruan Xian, Liu Ling, Xiang Xiu, Wang Rong and Shan Tao, all of whom were known for being self-indulgent and unrestrained. A thorough examination, however, can reveal that their seemingly unscrupulousness, to a large extent, was adopted as a shield against a then fierce political struggle. Their inner-self was not truly indulgent. Quite the opposite, they attached great importance to rites and music. Take Ruan Ji as an example. Though being unrestrained, he told his son not to learn his unscrupulousness. Also, it is precisely Ji Kang that proposed "abolishing the rituals and returning to nature" and warned possible harms of self-indulgence in his *On Health Maintenance*. Thus, it can be seen, historically, Chinese artists were endowed with social responsibilities and distinctive social ethics. Traditional Chinese culture gives an accurate definition of art and a profound interpretation of the relationships between art and personality cultivation. Every artist is supposed to have a great sense of social responsibility and is not allowed to create at will. Or else moral degradation may trigger terrible social problems. This traditional value is not well retained in modern Chinese society, where musical enlightenment lets go unchecked and even creates a negative influence. To tackle a lack of social responsibilities among many artists nowadays, it is of great importance for contemporary people to learn how traditional Chinese culture views the education of music, art and aesthetics.

The social guidance of aesthetic education is a key feature of Chinese culture. In Western culture, moral and art enlightenment is mainly through religious practices. In fact, over 90% of artworks in the West contain religious elements. The enlightenment of rites and music relies heavily on religious institutions. Not having been dominantly influenced by any

religion, China may risk its national roots by merely pursuing the modern Western world's "free expression of individuality" without paying due attention to the cultivation of personality and interpersonal relationships. Fundamentally, religious ethics and morality are deeply rooted in the West and have been a moral line for Western people. Beneath the advocacy of individualistic expression lies a time-honored tradition of religious enlightenment. If China abandons its enlightenment of rites and music and turns to pursue the Western-style individualistic and unrestrained expressions, it will lose its defense against moral degradation, which will bring serious consequences. Previously, many art forms used to play a significant role in moral enlightenment of the masses, most of whom had no chance to receive a proper education and learned life principles through various forms of art enlightenment such as story-telling and opera performance. Despite the high illiteracy rate then, most Chinese people probably knew better about personal conduct than the well-educated few. Moreover, back then artistic cultivation was highly valued among the intellectuals. Via art pieces, artists should try to express their ambition, personality and life pursuit; while their recipients are supposed to understand the meaning and significance of life.

Excellent poems and essays win universal praise for their beautiful rhetoric, and, more importantly, for their thought-provoking implication. And this can be exemplified by *Ode to the Lotus Flower*, an essay written by scholar Zhou Dunyi in the Song Dynasty. Short as it is, this masterpiece has a deep implied meaning. Its comparative analysis of peonies, chrysanthemums and lotus flowers highlights the different pursuits of people respectively in love with the above three flowers. Of the countless essays written by ancient Chinese men of letters, *Memorial to Yueyang Tower* is a widely known piece, in which the author, Fan Zhongyan, advocated that "one should be the first to worry for the future of the

state and the last to claim his share of happiness." Being elegant, beautiful and thought-provoking, the reputed saying has been used for myriad years. Similar examples can also be found in antithetical couplets. For instance, "Bamboo knots are already formed before bamboo shoots come out of the ground; bamboos remain hallow when they grow high into the sky" (In Chinese language, "knot" is a homophone for "moral integrity," while "hallow" is a homophone for "modest"). This is a vivid depiction of the exemplary conduct and nobility of character that bamboo symbolizes. Also, it calls for humans to learn from bamboo, which remain upright and modest irrespective of how high they reach. In this way, the spirit of art is embedded in Chinese culture and guides people towards kindness and positivity. The spirit of art incorporates social responsibility. After all, writings are for conveying truth. Art is created not just to satisfy desires, but also for the purpose of enlightening the masses, facilitating social harmony, making provision for recovery and cultivating sentiments. One must not sap one's spirit by seeking pleasures, or lose control of his or her likes and dislikes. Instead, one should improve self-cultivation through art. More specifically, the philosophy of "conveying truth in writings and guiding art with truth" should be exercised to improve the masses' taste in art, raise their aesthetic realm and subsequently deepen their understanding of life's significance and value. The cultivation of life should cover not only ethics but also art. Art education forms an important part of "all-round development." However, current education, particularly the so-called extra-curricular art training basically falls into the category of utilitarian education. Under such circumstances, art cannot play its due role in cultivating temperaments and deepening the understanding of life at all. Worse still, it may foster vanity. It has become imperative to find proper approaches to appreciating and carrying forward the art spirit in traditional Chinese culture.

### 3. Aesthetic implications and life reflections of Chinese art

In terms of the relationship between art and its social functions, Chinese art attaches great importance to the social functions of art. When it comes to artistic features, however, Chinese art pays more attention to “meaning” than “form.” As Confucius once asked, “Does gift only refers to luxuries like jade and silk? Does music only refer to bells and drums?” What Confucius really meant is that the content of music matters more. Ever since the Wei-Jin Period and the Northern and Southern Dynasty (220AD—589AD), such an emphasis on “meaning” has gained theoretic support, which was originally concluded by metaphysicians when interpreting the *Book of Changes*. The Western and Eastern Han Dynasties placed more emphasis on the “image numerology” of the *Book of Changes*, while in the Wei-Jin Period its philosophical connotations were preferred. Wang Bi, a renowned metaphysician in the Wei-Jin Period, raised a very important proposition—“obtaining the significance and forgetting the words.” According to Wang Bi, superficial phenomenon is a reflection of thought and language is a demonstration of superficial phenomenon. There is no better means than superficial phenomenon when it comes to the conveying of ideas. And there is no more detailed means than language when it comes to the depiction of superficial phenomenon. Now that descriptive language is based on superficial phenomenon, the latter can be observed through language analysis; and now that superficial phenomenon is based on intrinsic quality, the latter can be concluded through superficial phenomenon observation. In short, intrinsic quality is demonstrated by superficial phenomenon; while superficial phenomenon is conveyed by language. Language serves to convey superficial phenomenon and once the superficial phenomenon is grasped, the language can be forgotten; superficial phenomenon serves to

demonstrate intrinsic quality and once the intrinsic quality is appreciated, the superficial phenomenon can be overlooked... Otherwise, attaching undue importance to descriptive language cannot generate proper conveyance of superficial phenomenon; and paying excessive attention to superficial phenomenon cannot come to real appreciation of intrinsic quality. Although superficial phenomenon reflects intrinsic quality, the two are not exactly the same thing; although descriptive language conveys superficial phenomenon, the two are by no means identical. However, true appreciation of intrinsic quality requires not clinging to superficial phenomenon; real grasping of superficial phenomenon means avoiding paying too much attention to descriptive language. Idea conveyance is all about no obsessive clinging to superficial phenomenon; while phenomenon appreciation is all about no undue attention to descriptive language. For this reason, (ancient sages) conveyed their ideas through superficial phenomenon. Once the idea was clear, they no longer cared much about the superficial phenomenon. Likewise, the truth of the universe can be explored by overlapping two pieces of the Eight Diagrams (eight combinations of three whole or broken lines formerly used in divination). Once the truth is ascertained, there is no longer any need to stick to the form of the Eight Diagrams (“An Interpretation of the *Book of Change*—On Image Numerology”).

In fact, any part in the *Book of Change*, whether it is about *Guaxiang* (manifestation of a divination), *Tuanci* (generalization on divination), *Guaci* (explanation of the meaning of different diagrams) or *Yaoci* (explanation of diagrams for divination), is nothing but a means of expression. For users, the ultimate purpose is to grasp the essential meaning (intrinsic quality), rather than remaining at the superficial phenomenon or linguistic level. It is the meaning that users are seeking. Given that, once the meaning is grasped, the language and the superficial phenomenon

can be forgotten. Only by deliberately forgetting the superficial phenomenon and language can one truly obtain the real meaning of a particular thing. In this sense, “meaning beyond the actual words” formed an important part of Zhuangzi’s philosophy. Metaphysics in Chinese philosophy is primarily based on the *Book of Change* and philosophies of Laozi and Zhuangzi. Regarding the relationship between tools and purpose, there is a passage in *Zhuangzi*:

*Quan* (fish trap) is used to catch fish; once fish are caught, *quan* can be thrown away. *Ti* (rabbit snare) is used to catch rabbits; once rabbits are caught, *Ti* can be thrown away. Words are used to convey meaning; once the meaning is grasped, the words can be forgotten. Where can I find a man capable of grasping meaning and forgetting words so we can thoroughly understand each other without the need to say much? ( “Foreign Objects, Miscellaneous chapters” )

This view was also used by Wang Bi to explain the relationship among language, superficial phenomenon and intrinsic quality, arguing that “language is to superficial phenomenon what *Ti* (rabbit snare) is to rabbits or *quan* (fish trap) is to fish; once rabbits are caught, *Ti* can be thrown away and once fish are caught, *quan* can be thrown away.” That is how “meaning” is prioritized in Chinese philosophy. Yet, there is no fixed approach to the acquisition of meaning, which can be grasped through individual experience. Dong Zhongshu, a renowned scholar in the Western Han Dynasty, held that “There is no invariable explanation of the *Book of Songs*, no fixed prediction in the *Book of Change* and no immutable terminology in the *Spring and Autumn Annals*” (*Luxuriant Dew of the Spring and Autumn Annals*). There can be a thousand interpretations of the *Book of Songs* among a thousand people. And this can be exemplified by the interpretation of its widely known verse that “A ragged fringe is the floating-heart, left and right we

trail it; that mild-mannered good girl, awake, asleep, I search for her” (“Airs of the States”, *Book of Songs*). Some believe this verse depicts love between a man and a woman, while Neo-Confucianists think it is more than love and that it also contains the “virtue of the queen”. This echoes the view of no invariable explanation of the *Book of Song* and in nature means “obtaining the significance and forgetting the words.” “Grasping what is beyond the actual words” gives rise to a very important feature of Chinese art, “conveying truth in writings.” And Chinese authors always endow their works with their ambition, pursuit, idea or ideal. Viewers can also get what they want from these works and do not necessarily need to accurately “decode” the authors’ original intention. In this sense, this is not just a matter of textual criticism, but more of thorough apprehension. Chinese art is created by artists and recreated by viewers. Nowadays, people’s understanding of some art pieces may have completely deviated from their original meaning. Take the poem *Ascending the Stork Tower* as an example. The title of this poem clearly indicates its content, a truthful depiction of a tower-ascending experience. It must have been an extemporaneous piece by Wang Zhihuan. When later generations read this poem, the real-time scenery that the poet depicted has long gone and therefore they can only appreciate the “profound implication” behind the surface text. The last verse “For a grander view, one must mount for a greater height” has always been thought-provoking.

A key feature of Chinese art lies in the “double creation” by artists and viewers. Chinese art values connotations much more than external forms. The highest standard of art creation is supposed to be great conception, vivid representation, lingering charm, strong attraction and lifelike depiction. Art pieces that only represent the form and fail to capture the spirit can by no means rise to a top grade. Real appreciation of art requires acquisition of meaning, understanding of core ideas, “reading between the lines” and enjoying in



retrospect. Only focusing on the degree of resemblance may miss the real meaning of a painting. As Su Dongpo, a great man of letters in Chinese history once put it, “Those who evaluate a painting only by its degree of resemblance have no better eye for it than kids; those who write poems only by depicting the image without exploring artistic charm and conception cannot have a profound understanding of poetry” (*Two Poems on the New Painting by Wang from Yanling*). This incisively points out the characteristics of Chinese art. Real appreciation of a painting should not be solely based on the degree of resemblance it portrays. Blind pursuit of similarity in form can only bring about a childlike naive understanding. When it comes to poetry appreciation, there is no chance for those who cannot read between the lines to have a thorough understanding of a poem. In fact, Su Dongpo’s view echoed that of Ouyang Xiu, another man of letters of the Northern Song Dynasty, who once argued,

Traditional Chinese painting attaches more importance to artistic conception than configuration. For example, a winter sweet painting is always inscribed with a poem at the margin in praise of the spirit that the winter sweet signifies. However, excessive emphasis on the artistic conception and symbolic significance without due attention to configuration can only lead to a clumsy portrayal, which cannot compare with a picturesque poem (*Panche Painting & Poem*).

The profoundness of art is simply beyond the description of words and can only be appreciated by those with exceptional capacity of comprehension. According to Ouyang Xiu, Mei Shengyu’s poem should be understood like this, “the art of music is profound and elusive; therefore, truly exquisite artistry can hardly be conveyed in words and requires the audience to be able to understand it tacitly” (*Postscript of Mei Shengyu’s Work*). Comparing poetry to music, Ouyang Xiu discussed the topic of poetry appreciation

from the respective perspectives of “creators” and “receivers.” For both creation and appreciation alike, it is “soul communication” that matters most. For creators, it is all about understanding and practicing with great facility; while for “receivers,” it is about grasping and resonance. Neither of the two aspects can be accurately expressed in words. Such an art theory or philosophy is in stark contrast with those of the West.

There has been a civilizing influence pervading all aspects of traditional Chinese culture. Again, take the *Guqin* (ancient Chinese zither) as an example, which is a signature musical instrument in the enlightenment of rites and music. “Among the class of the literati and officialdom in ancient China, a *Guqin* was not supposed to be moved or changed unless there was a special reason” (The “Summary of the Rules of Propriety,” *Book of Rites*), for a *Guqin* represented more than what it appeared to be. According to Tao Yuanming, “once you can appreciate the fun of a *Guqin*, there is no need to prove its charm by playing it” (The “64th Biography,” *Book of Jin*). For a diversity of art forms, the significance lies in personal experience, comprehension and appreciation. Traditionally, Chinese men of letters attached great importance to the *Guqin*, chess, calligraphy and painting, with the *Guqin* topping the four. In the Eastern Han Dynasty, there was a book entitled *Baihu General Principles* (*Baihu Principles* for short). Comprising minutes of meetings convened by Emperor Zhang, this book normalized and systematized the Confucius philosophy on state governance and personal cultivation. Having a variety of social relations normalized, this book also mentioned the enlightenment function of rites and music in the part “Gulin is to some extent associated with ‘prohibition’; it prevents one from becoming evil and brings him or her back to the right path.” This should be the ancient Chinese people’s shared understanding of the *Guqin*’s role. Cai Yong, a renowned scholar of the Han Dynasty, once said, “In

ancient times, Fuxi made the *Guqin* to exorcise evil spirits, prevent wicked ideas, cultivate moral character and return to human genuineness” (*Code of Guqin*). “Returning to human genuineness,” in Buddhist words, means highlighting the original nature of humans. In other words, the *Guqin* was used to help revive the brighter side of human nature, prevent it from degrading, and improve self-cultivation. The Chinese people’s basic view of the *Guqin* remains unchanged. Likewise, other musical instruments play a similar role in this regard.

Chinese art attaches great importance to imitating nature. The word “nature” here covers a diversity of mountains, rivers, plants, animals and above all its original state of being. Given that, Chinese art can bring about an even stronger experience of life. As the saying goes in *On Painting*, the quintessential essence of painting lies in its capability to resonate with human feeling deep inside. One must work hard on self-cultivation before one can excel at an art. According to Guo Ruoxu, an influential painting critic in the Northern Song Dynasty:

Many famous paintings of ancient times were created by inspiring talents or geniuses dwelling in remote mountains in seclusion; they adhered to the principle of ‘benevolence’, explore the profound significance of life and nature, and endow self-cultivation with noble and graceful taste. Works created by painters of excellent character naturally bear profound artistic conception, which then naturally brings about vivid resemblance in spirit. That is why people say ultimate vividness makes a masterpiece (*Record of Knowledge of Paintings*).

One should “aspire to grasp laws of nature, follow such laws, and develop moral consciousness before engaging in a diversity of artistic creation” (The “Transmission”, *Analects of Confucius*). The concept of “art” in ancient China covered not just the narrow sense adopted today, but also all forms of artistry. The

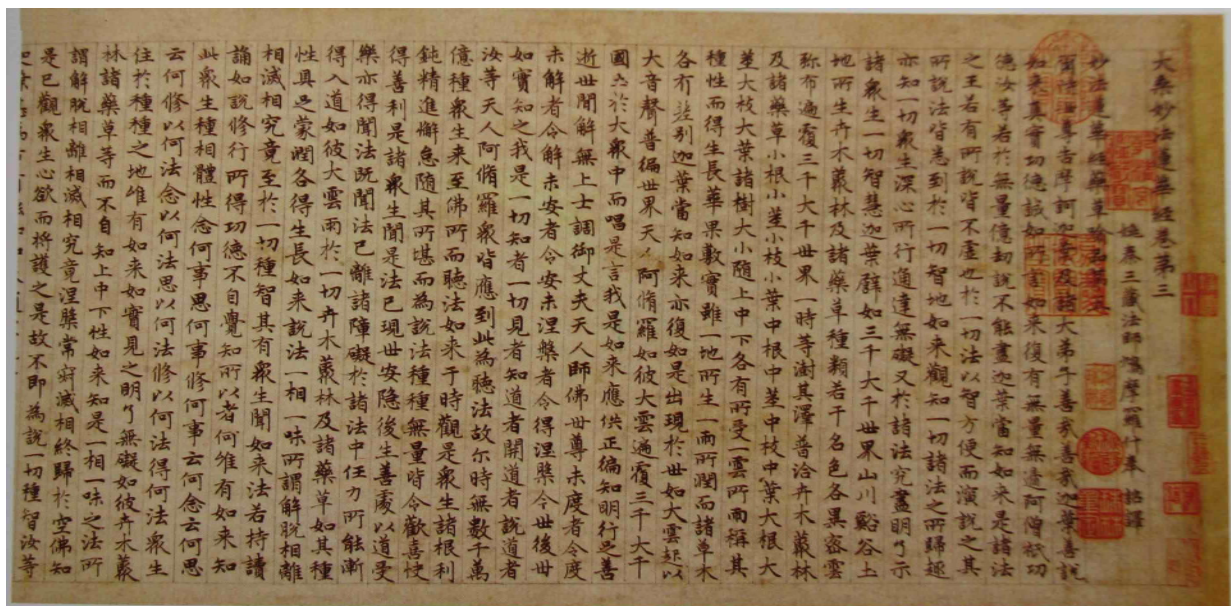
terms “truth” and “art” are relative, with the former referring to general principles and the latter concrete reasons. “Engaging in a diversity of artistic creations” is possible only when one can “aspire to grasp the laws of nature, follow such laws, and develop moral consciousness.” Guo Ruoxu emphasized that both worldly talents and seclusive geniuses developed moral consciousness and engaged in a diversity of artistic creations to explore the profound significance of life and nature. Such a lofty exploration is practiced in painting. How can a painting achieve vivid resemblance in spirit? The painter’s character is of the highest importance. A painting created by one with excellent character naturally bears profound artistic conception, which then naturally brings about vivid resemblance in spirit. Therefore, the key to vivid resemblance in spirit lies not so much in technology, but more in personal cultivation, which, in Ouyang Xiu’s words, is “thorough comprehension”. Only with thorough comprehension can one expect to practice with great facility. That is why the painter’s character is of the highest importance.

When talking about “literati painting”, Chen Hengke, a famous painter in modern China, incisively concluded four major characteristics, i.e. the painter’s character, knowledge, talent and thought. Only when the four characteristics are possessed can a piece be rated a quality “literati painting”. Compared with the artistic skill that a painting exhibits, the profound significance it conveys is much more valued. This is Chinese art, which prioritizes artists’ character, vision, thought and learning over artistic skill and craftsmanship. The value of a painting lies in the profound significance it conveys. Such characteristics of Chinese art are directly related to the social functions it emphasizes and are theoretically supported by the philosophy of “obtaining the significance and forgetting the words”. It is no exaggeration that “meaning beyond the actual words” and “obtaining the significance and forgetting the words” are

demonstrated in every aspect of Chinese society. For example, one's wisdom does not necessarily grow with the number of books one reads. It is all about whether one can think "out of the book". In this sense, "obtaining the significance and forgetting the words" means not only the ability to understand book knowledge but also the ability to free one's mind from the limits of books. Only in doing so can one grasp the essentials and intrinsic quality of a book.

Chinese culture's emphasis on reading between the lines is very much different from the Western way of thinking. Both the analytic philosophy and linguistic philosophy of the West focus on text analysis. By contrast, Chinese people prefer to read between the lines to grasp the essentials, intrinsic quality or spirit underneath. And this is exemplified by a story about Huineng (the sixth generation of the Chan sect) explaining the *Saddharma pundarika Sutra* to Fada. Though chanting the Sutra since childhood, Fada failed to grasp its essence. By the time he visited Huineng,

he had already chanted 3,000 times the *Saddharma pundarika Sutra*. Master Huineng found his problem and told him, "The reason why your 30 years' chanting of the Sutra has not given you any profound understanding of it lies in the fact that you have made no attempt to read between the lines. You should from now on see through the appearance to perceive the essence." Upon hearing this, Fada was suddenly enlightened and said, "I am significantly enlightened by Master Huineng's one word at Caoxi, rather than my 3,000 times of mechanical Sutra enchanting in the temple, now I understand that such mechanical chanting is nothing to be proud of, and that my stubbornness and arrogance should be guarded against so as to echo the purpose of the Buddhist practice. "Since then, Fada worked hard on the essence of the *Saddharma pundarika Sutra* and the Chan sect and strove to "read between the lines when chanting the Sutra". Thanks to this advocacy of perceiving essence, Chinese artworks can withstand repeated evaluation



Zhao Menghui's calligraphy of *Saddharma pundarika Sutra*

and appreciation from different perspectives. Even the same painting may give different impressions among viewers of different ages and in distinct moods. That is why eternity is a defining feature of art. The art spirit of Chinese culture endows every piece of artwork with eternity and brings a brand-new experience to viewers anytime anywhere. This in fact creates room for art re-creation.

Similar enlightenment can also be found in traditional Chinese culture's continuity principle—"narration without invention" (elaborating the theories of the predecessors without adding any invention to them). The continuity of Chinese culture, to a large extent, is made possible through repeated elaboration of Chinese classics. Chinese culture is basically rooted in such classics as the Three Metaphysics Classics (the *Zhuangzi*, the *Laozi*, the *Book of Change*), the Four Books (the *Great Learning*, the *Doctrine of the Mean*, the *Analects of Confucius*, the *Mencius*) and the Five Classics (the *Book of Songs*, the *Book of Documents*, the *Book of Rites*, the *Book of Change*, the *Spring and Autumn Annals*). Notice the *Book of Change* is included in both the Three Metaphysics Classics and the Five Classics, and the *Great Learning* and the *Doctrine of the Mean* in the Four Books were originally part of the *Book of Rites*. Through merger and recompilation, there are in fact nine "root classics", based on which later generations developed many derivative interpretations. Thus, it can be seen that Chinese culture is "scrambled in appearance but united in spirit". Mechanically restricting the mind to such classics can lead one nowhere, while creatively grasping their essence can give rise to countless new ideas. It is inheritance-based creation that is truly vigorous creation. Many traditions are of great vigor and can only generate more new ideas through long-term research. Nowadays, it has become a trend to embrace originality, which cannot be expected to last long without adherence to tradition. In traditional Chinese culture there is a lot worth our repeated interpretation and appreciation. The seeds of

ideas will not sprout or grow without the nourishment of traditional culture. And this argument is well illustrated by the "Castle in the Air", a story in *Hundred Parables Sutra*. Likewise, abandoning traditional Chinese culture will result in the "disappearance of castle in the air" and, worse still, the extinction of Chinese art.

The traditional Chinese art profoundly conveys the mental outlook and joy of Chinese culture. This should be attributed to the inherent characteristics of art, as well as the relationship between art and society. The ultimate purpose of art education is to equip people with life principles, which enable them to find the essence of life. Chinese art attaches great importance to structure and layout. More specifically, this means harmonious composition, balanced coloring, mutualism of blankness and fullness, and conception beyond image. From a perspective of aesthetics, the technique of "leaving blank" is highly valued in Chinese painting. After all, sometimes, less is more. And this is echoed by the verse in the *Song of the Pipa Player* that "The pipa player's hidden bitterness is highlighted by her abrupt pause, during which silence means more than words." The author, Bai Juyi, believed the abrupt pause to be a powerful "beat" with an exceptional effect. Tang Yifen, a painter of the Qing Dynasty, also argued, "People generally focus on what's portrayed, instead of what's not; sometimes, it is the 'blank part' that matters most; this is what's called 'mutualism of blankness and fullness'" (*An Overview of Painting Appreciation*). An excellent artwork, according to Chinese aesthetics, must feature harmonious composition, balanced coloring, mutualism of blankness and fullness, and conception beyond image. Such an aesthetic ideology includes many life principles. In this sense, the significance of artistic cultivation lies in shaping aesthetic judgment and, more importantly, increasing life wisdom. More often than not, one's character and competence are reflected in one's art taste. The



fundamental humanism and enlightenment of rites and music in Chinese culture is demonstrated in every aspect of Chinese art, which collectively highlights the Chinese people's life tastes and cultural pursuits. The changed cultural environment of today makes it difficult to approach the spirit of Chinese culture from life's truths, which after all incorporates nothing but abstract and hard-to-understand principles. By

contrast, approaching life's truths from art is much easier. Classical Chinese poems and verses still enjoy a huge popularity today. When reading these poems, readers should read between the lines and see through the appearance to perceive the essence by consulting related theories and notes. This would be of great help for us to better understand the art spirit of Chinese culture.

*(Translator: Wu Lingwei; Editor: Xiong Xianwei)*

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