

# PHILOSOPHICAL AND HISTORICAL RECONSTRUCTION OF CHINESE AESTHETIC VALUES

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## Abstract

This article analyzes the nature of values in general and the semantic meanings of the concept of "aesthetic values" in particular: material-objective, psychological, and social. The transformation of ideas about aesthetic values is examined through the lens of Confucianism and Taoism. The role of system-forming categories in the context of Chinese aesthetic values is substantiated: beauty (mei), the energetic substance of the universe (qi), "wind" (feng), virtue (hao), naturalness (ping), and the "heavenly pattern." The value of Chinese philosophical-aesthetic thought is shown in its ability to offer a cosmic dimension to world perception and to create a new ontology of harmony—of the world with itself and with the Absolute.

**Keywords:** value, aesthetic values, morality, aesthetic experience, beauty, naturalness, heavenly pattern, harmony, Truth-Goodness-Beauty.

## Introduction

The problem of values occupies a key position in the axiosphere. Values constitute the foundation of human existence. In the social and human sciences, the nature of values is considered in their positive significance for humans and society. They are objects, processes, and phenomena involved in social reality and purposeful human activity. The concept of values reveals a special aspect of human relationships with the world. The German philosopher R. H. Lotze developed his own formula regarding values: "The world of values is the key to understanding the world of forms. The truth of knowledge lies in the fact that it reveals the meaning and purpose of the world. That which ought to be is the cause of everything that exists, and what exists serves to realize values within it" [5, p. 75]. The totality of value orientations is fundamentally important in the life activity of an individual. The being of value is grasped in an emotional rather than an intellectual act. Subjective desirability manifests itself in the form of evaluation, that is, the establishment of the significance of various phenomena for a person. Nature is axiomatically neutral; it becomes a value only in the context of humanity. The evolution of Chinese aesthetic values is deeply rooted in the nation's philosophical and historical contexts, with Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism significantly shaping artistic expression and appreciation.

### **Confucian Influence**

Confucianism emphasizes morality, social harmony, and the cultivation of virtue. Art, under this philosophy, serves as a medium to promote ethical values and societal cohesion. Artworks often depict themes of filial piety, loyalty, and righteousness, reflecting Confucian ideals of propriety and respect for tradition.

### **Daoist Contributions**

Daoism advocates for harmony with nature and spontaneity in artistic creation. This perspective encourages artists to draw inspiration from the natural world, leading to the prominence of landscape painting that captures the essence of natural scenes. The Daoist principle of aligning with the rhythms of nature fosters a sense of unity between humanity and the environment.

### **Buddhist Impact**

Buddhism introduced spiritual and symbolic dimensions to Chinese art, emphasizing themes that transcend the material world. This influence is evident in artworks that explore concepts of enlightenment and the impermanence of life, adding depth to the aesthetic experience.

### **Modern Developments**

In contemporary times, Chinese aesthetics have undergone significant transformations. The 20th century witnessed efforts to integrate Western philosophical and aesthetic theories, leading to the creation of "aesthetic utilitarianism." This framework aimed to cultivate the enlightenment potential of aesthetic appreciation, achieving goals of moral refinement and life enhancement.

Furthermore, scholars like Li Zehou have synthesized traditional Chinese aesthetic thought, incorporating ideas from Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, and examining the influence of Western philosophy during the late-imperial period. Li's work highlights the fundamental role of aesthetics in shaping Chinese cultural and psychological structures.

In philosophical science, aesthetic values are considered as a synthesis of three main meanings: material-objective, psychological, and social. The material-objective meaning includes the characteristics of the external properties of things and objects, which act as objects of value relations. The second meaning characterizes the psychological qualities of a person as the subject of value relations. The social meaning refers to relationships between people through which values acquire generally recognized significance. The uniqueness of aesthetic values lies in the specific relationship of a person to reality that is characteristic of aesthetics. This implies a sensually spiritual, selfless perception of reality, aimed at comprehending and evaluating the inner essence of real objects. From this perspective, we consider the aesthetic values formed in the artistic-cultural and philosophical traditions of Ancient China.

The origins of the Chinese aesthetic tradition date back to the Zhou period (11th–3rd centuries BCE), marked by the disintegration and secularization of archaic culture. The Chinese tradition never knew a contradiction between moral effort and natural givenness, freedom and necessity,

the moral and the aesthetic. Chinese researchers of aesthetic thought often define this quality with the ideologeme formulated in the 2nd century BCE as “the coinciding unity of Heaven and man” (*tian ren he yi*), implying that belonging to the world is simultaneously the measure of human separation from it [2, pp. 9–10]. Over time, ritual in Zhou-era China lost its connection to archaic cult content and acquired the meaning of an aesthetically valuable model of universal harmony.

The rethinking of ancient ritual laid the foundation of Confucianism. In Confucius’s philosophical views, the aesthetic relationship to the world is presented very clearly and concisely. The forms of behavior corresponding to moral norms, in Confucian understanding, possessed aesthetic value. In the awareness of continuous moral effort, the Confucian gentleman acquired *joy (le)* [3, p. 55]. In ancient China, this term referred to various forms of art and the pleasure derived from them. Thus, moral self-perfection in Confucianism cultivated harmony of spirit, which art was capable of inspiring.

The focus of Taoist thinkers was also on the symbolic connection between the inner and outer aspects of being. The external appears as a mirrored, “extremely distant” form or “shadow” of internal reality. True being—*dao* (“the way”)—was interpreted by the Taoists as the universal, non-essential limit of all forms, equivalent to the constant “absence of presence,” “non-givenness” (*wu*). They also called reality “emptiness” (*xu*), implying that, firstly, emptiness can contain everything, and secondly, it nullifies itself, “empties out.” Accordingly, in Taoist philosophy, “emptiness” signified both “absence of presence” and the ultimate integrity of the “one body” of the world and the infinite prospect of the self-transformation of being, reflected in the category *hua* (“transformation”) [8].

Beauty (*mei*) in Taoism appears, according to the law of symbolic form, as a contrasting unity of concealment and expression. The *Zhuangzi* says: “Heaven and Earth possess perfect beauty, but do not speak of it; the four seasons follow a clear order, but do not discuss it” [9, ch. 22]. Many Taoist concepts and images transitioned into traditional Chinese aesthetic theories. The very idea of a perpetually non-identical chaos as an inexhaustible diversity without idea or form had essentially an aesthetic character. The aesthetic nature of ancient Taoist worldview prevented aesthetics from emerging as an independent field of knowledge. While Confucians subordinated aesthetic values to ethical requirements, for the Taoists, the aesthetic merged with natural being.

Founder of Chinese practical aesthetics Li Zehou conducted a detailed analysis of the specificity of aesthetics as a system of values, expressed through six “unities.” Researcher Zhang Runmei offers her interpretation of these principles [10, pp. 109–118]. These include: 1) unity of beauty (*mei*) and goodness (*shan*); 2) unity of the sensual and the ethical—synthesizing outward expression (*qinggan*) with rationality (*lixing*), serving as a foundation for moral-educational aesthetic experience; 3) unity of conscious perception (*renzhi*) and intuitive perception (*zhijue*); 4) unity of Heaven and humanity—human creativity must harmonize with Nature [11, p. 192]; 5) the spirit of humanistic values underlies ancient Chinese aesthetic experience [10, p. 116]; and 6) the highest level of the aesthetic realm equals the highest sphere of human existence—the unity of Heaven and man as the ultimate expression of freedom.

The inseparability of the aesthetic and the natural in ancient Chinese thought is reflected in fundamental concepts of traditional aesthetics. Central among them is not “beauty,” but *qi*, symbolizing the energetic configuration and substance of the universe, and a key notion in all Chinese natural and human sciences. As the substrate of all that exists, *qi* transforms in every point in space and time; its nature is the infinite mutability of “emptiness.” In Chinese tradition, *qi* came to signify the artist’s creative individuality.

Another fundamental concept is *feng*—“wind” or “breath”—pointing to the *dao* as an all-embracing yet intangible empty stream [3, p. 55]. However, Chinese aesthetic tradition cannot be described as one of “ephemerality.” Rather, it strives to reconcile the artificial and the natural, the civilized and the wild, nature and man—a tendency reflected throughout the Chinese cultural and aesthetic tradition [8, 11].

Scholarly interest in Eastern philosophical-aesthetic thought lies in its capacity to offer a cosmic dimension to world perception, to encompass the image of a human being as a creative subject capable of generating a new ontology of harmony between the world, the self, and the Absolute. This is not merely an aesthetics of serenity—it presents the consciousness with complex dilemmas. It is, rather, an aesthetics arising from spiritual experiment, from perceiving nature as a space of eternal testing for the human being. According to Chinese socio-philosophical thought, just as it is easy to lose the natural, it is equally difficult to acquire the human.

In Chinese philosophical-aesthetic experience, we find the understanding that “a person cannot remain merely an observer, admirer, or possessor of aesthetic value—that is, external beauty. In the Chinese language, the characters *mei* (beauty) and *hao* (virtue) are synonymous not only lexically, but psychologically” [7, p. 187]. In the *Dao De Jing*, the central theme becomes the key aesthetic category of “the beautiful” (*mei*), which Laozi intertwines with a series of oppositions revealing the relativistic nature of his philosophy’s categories [4, p. 26]. Laozi argues that “when everyone recognizes beauty as beauty, there arises ugliness; when everyone knows goodness as goodness, evil arises. Thus, being and non-being produce each other, difficult and easy complete each other, long and short shape each other, high and low incline toward each other, sounds harmonize, and before and after follow each other” [4, p. 26]. Therefore, “the idea that beauty only opposes ugliness, rather than being inherently alien to it, is vital for the aesthetic phenomenon of Chinese painting, where ugliness may convey beauty and vice versa” [4, p. 27]. This principle extends beyond painting—it permeates the entire system of Chinese art. Hence, Chinese philosophy holds that “aesthetic pleasure cannot be purely spiritual. It necessarily invokes utilitarian, hedonistic, or emotive evaluation—an aesthete and an ascetic rarely coexist in one person... Beauty should permeate all aspects of life, nourishing not only the soul but also the body,” thereby fully harmonizing the personality [7, p. 188].

The well-known philosopher Wang Chong, paradoxically, places “truthfulness” above all aesthetic categories. Before Wang Chong, this was not seen as an aesthetic value, but he demanded that art first reflect goodness and truth, and only then beauty and charm. He clearly

favored *shan*—appealing virtue—over *mei*—external beauty and refinement [4, p. 46], thereby ensuring the authenticity of form and essence in artistic representation.

“Naturalness” holds a special place in E.V. Zavadskaya’s philosophical and cultural concept. This notion appears both in the broad sense of a person’s primordial freedom and in the narrower sense of a true artwork’s quality of “simplicity and sincerity,” its “plainness and blandness” (*pingdan*). Naturalness is understood as the inherent being of a thing, “something contrary to what is man-made,” where artisans are ranked by merit (*ping*). The *ping* category in Chinese aesthetics revealed stages or facets of the creative process in poetry, calligraphy, and painting [4, pp. 72, 193], forming a distinctive world of Chinese aesthetic vision. The aesthetic permeates all aspects of traditional Chinese world-perception. Chinese thought makes no distinction between rational and aesthetic judgment. Moreover, “researchers of Chinese art often note that the Chinese aesthetic perception is sensually restrained by rationality” [1, p. 103], meaning art is closely tied to intellectual activity.

A system-forming category of Chinese aesthetic values is the “heavenly pattern,” synthesizing both natural and symbolic principles. A key phrase from *Zhuangzi* reads: “All things are like a vast net, with no beginning” [9]. The absence of metaphysical principles necessitates recognizing the unity of the universal and the particular. This is evident in Chinese tradition, where the point of departure for reflection is the beauty of a ceremonial—and thus conscious and morally justified—gesture, whose motive and goal is the experience of a spirit-illuminated life [6, p. 199].

## Conclusion

The social and practical experience of Chinese society, imbued with unique cultural meanings, possesses the distinctive parameters of a modern aesthetic worldview. Aesthetic perception of values by individuals proves more meaningful than ordinary aesthetic admiration. Aesthetic values can evoke not only emotional resonance but also a sense of the absolute grandeur of the world, of naturalness, and full-fledged freedom through creative realities. The idea of harmonious unity between humanity and Heaven is a hallmark of Chinese holistic thinking, which sees nature and man as one whole. In the value orientations of Chinese cultural tradition, the principle of six “unities” functions as the aesthetic ideal. The foundation of world order consists of three components: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. These categories reflect the dialectical interconnection between ethical and aesthetic principles in Chinese cultural tradition.

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