

Li Zehou's Major Works on Chinese Aesthetics:  
*The Path of Beauty and The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*<sup>1</sup>

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Li Zehou's *The Path of Beauty* (*Mei de licheng* 美的历程) was first published in 1981. An English translation by Gong Lizeng appeared 1988 (richly illustrated) and 1994 (with few illustrations only).<sup>2</sup> The book had a tremendous impact in China, leading to an "aesthetics craze" (*meixue re* 美学热). In the following, the main characteristics of the book shall be introduced and compared with *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition* (*Huaxia meixue* 华夏美学) which appeared seven years later in 1988.

### I. *The Path of Beauty*

In a 1983 lecture "On Some Problems of a Chinese History of Aesthetics," Li Zehou described *The Path of Beauty* as a "broad" history of aesthetics.<sup>3</sup> First, he points out some fundamental problems of a Chinese history of aesthetics: Compared to the West, aesthetics in China has no tradition of a systematic discipline. The word for "aesthetics" (literally: study of beauty – *meixue*) is a neologism that is often still misunderstood. (Li begins his article "What is Aesthetics" with the anecdote that, when asked the question in the title of the article, someone replied helplessly that it was probably an abbreviation for "American studies."<sup>4</sup>) The category of "beauty" was not discussed by the literati and artists in traditional China. The "beautiful" had no special value in art, rather the "balanced" (*he* 和) or the "natural-spontaneous" (*ziran* 自然).<sup>5</sup> In this respect, we find "aesthetically" relevant expressions mostly in literary

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on my introduction to the German translation of Li's *The Path of Beauty* as *Der Weg des Schönen. Wesen und Geschichte der chinesischen Kultur und Ästhetik*, Karl-Heinz Pohl and Gudrun Wacker (eds.), Freiburg: Herder, 1992, pp. 10-19 (new edition: Bochum: Europäischer Universitätsverlag, 2022, pp. 18-27).

<sup>2</sup> Li Zehou, *The Path of Beauty. A Study of Chinese Aesthetics*, Gong Lizeng transl., Beijing: Morning Glory Publishers, 1988; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994. The page references in the following are to the 1994 edition.

<sup>3</sup> "Guanyu Zhongguo meixueshi de jige wenti (关于中国美学史的几个问题)" in: *Li Zehou zhexue meixue wenxuan* (李泽厚哲学美学文选), Zhonghe 1987, p. 474. See also Heinrich Geiger, "Die Pragmatik der großen Systeme. Überlegungen zu einer eng- und einer weitgefaßten Geschichtsschreibung der chinesischen Ästhetik, ausgehend von einem Text Li Zehous," in: *Chinablätter* 18 (Nov. 91), pp. 166-77. Geiger, however, characterizes *The Path of Beauty* there as a "narrowly conceived" history of aesthetics.

<sup>4</sup> America is called in Chinese *meiguo* 美国 – literally: beautiful land, thus *mei* (beautiful) often stands for "America" or "American;" the word for studies in Chinese is *xuewen* 学问. Hence, the combination *meixue* can also be understood as "American studies." Li Zehou, "Shenme shi meixue (什么事美学)," in: *Zou wo ziji de lu* (走我自己的路), Taipei 1990, p. 73.

<sup>5</sup> As to the development of aesthetics in the modern period, see my article, "Western Learning as Substance, Chinese Learning for Application": Li Zehou's Thought on Tradition and Modernity," in Roger T. Ames and Jinhua Jia (eds.), *Li Zehou and Confucian Philosophy*, Honolulu: U of Hawai'i Press, p. 57-73.

or art-critical writings, which are often also characterized by an unsystematic and un-theoretical character, as well as in isolated statements of philosophers related to artistic activity.

What, then, asks Li Zehou, should belong to a Chinese historiography of aesthetics? The aphorisms of Chinese thinkers of Confucian, Daoist, and other provenance that apply to music, art, or literature? Or the well-known literature and art tracts? All this undoubtedly belongs to a historiography of aesthetics, but to a "narrow" one.<sup>6</sup> Such a history, however, runs the risk of distorting or contradicting the historical development of aesthetic consciousness. Thus, for example, Confucian comments on the odes of the *Book of Songs* do not necessarily reflect the aesthetic consciousness that produced these early testimonies of Chinese literature. In contrast to such a limited view, it is necessary to include the most important works of literature and art in a "broadly" conceived history of aesthetics. Moreover, in order to document the development of Chinese aesthetic consciousness, one must also take into account other forms of artistic design, e.g., architecture, arts and crafts, and ceramics, especially from prehistoric and early historic times, as well as the social, material conditions that produced them. In this respect, the "Path of Beauty" that Li traces logically begins with the production of jewellery and the magical rituals of prehistoric people – with "totem cults from the earliest times."

In view of the inclusiveness of Li Zehou's approach, his work can also be understood as a cultural anthropology in the broadest sense, because his actual goal, as Heinrich Geiger formulates it, is "to work out the context of an organic, meaningful development process of the Chinese civilization oriented to the idea of beauty."<sup>7</sup> Although, as mentioned, the idea of the beautiful did not play a role in the traditional consideration of art and literature, Chinese intellectuals of the modern era were all influenced by Western thought – by the appreciation of the "Good, True and Beautiful" – and therefore Li Zehou's pursuit of "The Path of Beauty" is no exception.

As his work can be understood as a cultural anthropology, anthropological questions dominate the beginning of the book. By understanding man primarily as a producer and his products as a reflection of his social conditions and his social consciousness, it starts from basic Marxist anthropological premises.

Hence, important for the understanding of this work are leading Marxist Ideas regarding anthropology and history. So, we find repeated reference to Marx' scheme of five social stages in historical development: primitive communism, slave society, feudalism, mercantilism and capitalism. There is also repeatedly mention of "class struggle" as well as Marx' concepts of "basis and superstructure." Apart from this, there are significant references to Marx' "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," in particular to his concept of human nature – "*Humanismus der Natur*" (humanism of nature). The following quote from Marx "Manuscripts" is crucial:

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<sup>6</sup> Li Zehou began a "narrow" history in 1984 in collaboration with Liu Gangji: his multi-volume (though unfinished) *History of Chinese Aesthetics* (*Zhongguo meixue shi* 中国美学史); see footnote 32 below.

<sup>7</sup> Heinrich Geiger, *Philosophische Ästhetik im China des 20. Jahrhunderts: Ihre Stellung zwischen Tradition und Moderne*, Frankfurt 1987, p. 36.

“Thus *society* is the complete unity of man with nature – the true resurrection of nature – the consistent naturalism of man and the consistent humanism of nature.”<sup>8</sup>

It is interesting and significant, though, that Marx' terms “humanism of nature” and “naturalism of man” were interpreted by Li with a certain twist: “humanism of nature” is understood as “humanization of nature” (*ziran de renhua* 自然的人化) and “naturalism of man” as “naturalization of man” (*ren de ziranhua* 人的自然化).<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, the sections referring to Marx' anthropology (in the 1<sup>st</sup> chapter of the book) are deleted in the English translation (not so in the German translation...).

While Marx still applied his terms to anthropological and sociological considerations, Li Zehou transfers the “humanization/humanism of nature” (*ziran de renhua*) into an aesthetic dimension. Regarding “Humanization/humanism of nature,” Li Zehou makes a distinction between outer or external and inner humanization. The external one is the shaping of the objects of nature by man's labour, whereby nature becomes man's nature, and “beauty” can be realized in the external world. More important, however, is an inner “humanization of nature,” which Li himself considers the pivotal point of his theory of aesthetic sensibility.<sup>10</sup> Inner “humanization of nature” means humanization of man himself, his sensory perception and his emotions, through which only aesthetic feeling can be realized in the human psyche.

In the aesthetic feeling of the human being Li also distinguishes two kinds, a sensual, intuitive, disinterested kind and a rational, social-beneficial kind. In order to explain how both are interlocked with each other, i.e., “how the sensible is expressed in the sensual, the social in the individual, and the historical in the psychic,”<sup>11</sup> Li coined a word that, as the cultural debate of the 1980s in China showed, has since become widely used – that of “sedimentation” (*jidian* 积淀). What is the meaning of this metaphor borrowed from geology, which evokes processes that take place over a long period of time? Li thus attempts to grasp the emergence of aesthetic sensation

<sup>8</sup> Karl Marx, *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, transl. by Martin Milligan, Section: “Private Property and Communism.” <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/comm.htm>, p. 44. (“Also die *Gesellschaft* ist die vollendete Wesenseinheit des Menschen mit der Natur, die wahre Resurrektion der Natur, der durchgeführte Naturalismus des Menschen und der durchgeführte Humanismus der Natur.”)

<sup>9</sup> In the original German, the phrases “consistent humanism of nature” and “consistent naturalism of man” are translations of: “durchgeführter Humanismus der Natur” and “durchgeführter Naturalismus des Menschen.” I am thankful to Gregor Paul who remarked that, unlike the English “consistent,” the German word “durchgeführt” (carried through) implies completed processes; hence, the “certain twist” with which Li Zehou interprets these phrases – as humanization resp. naturalization – appears justified on the basis of the original German wording. Today, the official Chinese translation of the passage is like this: 因此，社会是人同自然界的完成了的本质的统一，是自然界的真正复活，是人的实现了的自然主义和自然界的实现了的人道主义. (<https://www.marxists.org/chinese/marx/marxist.org-chinese-marx-1844.htm>) The Chinese wording, *shixianliao de ziranzhuyi / rendaozhuyi* (实现了的自然主义 / 人道主义: realized naturalism / humanism) appears closer to the original German (*durchgeführt*) than the English “consistent.” Paul also pointed out that, a page earlier, Marx has the phrases “vollendeter Humanismus / Naturalismus” (completed humanism / naturalism) which is translated into English as “fully developed humanism / naturalism”: “This communism, as fully developed naturalism, equals humanism, and as fully developed humanism equals naturalism; It is the *genuine* resolution of the conflict between man and nature and between man and man” (“Dieser Kommunismus ist als vollendeter Naturalismus Humanismus, als vollendeter Humanismus Naturalismus, er ist die *wahrhafte* Auflösung des Widerstreites zwischen dem Menschen mit der Natur und mit dem Menschen”).

<sup>10</sup> Li Zehou, “Meigan tan (美感谈)” (On Aesthetic Sensation), in *Li Zehou zhexue meixue wenxuan*, p. 437.

<sup>11</sup> “Meigan tan,” p. 439.

and artistic form in the process of the "humanization of nature," namely how ideas and concepts – that is, the mental – are deposited in aesthetic-sensual sensations, as well as social content in individual forms. In *The Path of Beauty*, he develops this idea using the example of prehistoric and early historical art, in which he not only demonstrates the first beginnings of aesthetic consciousness and artistic creativity, but also shows how there was a development in Chinese prehistory from sketchy images of animals with still concrete content – such as figures of totems – to abstract, linear symbols on Neolithic (*Yangshao* 杨绍) ceramics or *Taotie* (饕餮) bronze masks, in which original social content was deposited and dissolved. Li explains:

“What is the key to understanding the mystery of the eternal nature of art? [...] Why is it that the aesthetic value and artistic style of works of long ago still accord with the sentiments and interests of people of our time? Why do they still evoke such intimate feelings in us? Is it that the sentiments accumulated and condensed in them are related to and act upon the psychological structure of people today? Is the human psychological structure a product of the accumulation and condensation of historical experience? If so, the secret of the eternal nature of art may reside therein. Or, it may be the other way round – that is, the universal human psychology resides in and is promoted by the eternal nature of art. [...] Psychological structure is a product of the sedimentation of human history and civilization; art is the psychology that reveals the soul of the times. Maybe this can explain human nature as related to art.”<sup>12</sup>

In this respect, the beautiful is not ordinary beauty of form, but, in that meaningful social content has been sedimented into form, "significant form" (*you yiwei de xingshi* 有意味的形式), a term Li has borrowed from the writings of Clive Bell (1881-1964) and Susanne Langer (1895-1985)<sup>13</sup>:

“The social consciousness – the passions, concepts, and psychology of primitive humans – crystallized and concentrated in these pictorial symbols, invested them with a meaning and significance that was beyond pure graphic representation. Primitive humans perceived in them properties and values that transcended pure psychological responses. In other words, these natural forms were sedimented with social values and content, and man’s perceptual power and sensibility had acquired a rational quality. This unquestionably was the beginning of an aesthetic awareness and artistic creation.”<sup>14</sup>

In an even more comprehensive way, Li understands "sedimentation" as the culture-specific shaping of social and historical content, which he calls "cultural-psychological structure" (*wenhua xinli jiegou* 文化心理结构) – another key concept in Li’s thought. This cultural-psychological structure is that which has been deposited throughout history in a culture-specific way in psychic conditions, i.e., human behaviour patterns, ways of thinking, emotional attitudes, and also art.

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<sup>12</sup> *The Path of Beauty*, p. 235f.

<sup>13</sup> Clive Bell, *Significant Form in Art*, 1914; Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art*, 1953.

<sup>14</sup> *The Path of Beauty*, p. 9.

As a structure of cultural and social sedimentations over a long period of history, it also implies the question of cultural identity. On the one hand, the formation is inherited through a process of education; hence it is important for people of today to become conscious of the forces of history that have shaped their present. On the other hand, the formation is constantly formed anew as it is not determined by the sedimentations.

In the Chinese cultural-psychological structure Li locates – as coordinates, as it were – three basic elements to which not only general cultural phenomena but also "aesthetics" can be related: Confucianism, Zhuangzi's Daoism with its transitions into Chan (Zen 禅) Buddhism and, as a third, the poetry of the "Elegies of Chu" (*Chu ci* 楚辞) associated with the name Qu Yuan 屈原 (ca. 340-278 BC). Confucian beauty is characterized by humanistic contents; here the Marxian thought of "humanism of nature" – in the form of humanization and harmonization of the inner nature of man – finds its most perfect Chinese expression. The beautiful in Zhuangzi 庄子, on the other hand, is the free, spontaneous, natural beauty, which Li sees as the Chinese equivalent of the ideal of a "naturalism of man" that also appears in Marx's "Manuscripts." Finally, the beautiful in Qu Yuan is symbol of moral integrity.<sup>15</sup>

In his book, Li shows how the development process of Chinese culture – "The Path of Beauty" – after its beginnings in prehistoric times, unfolds in constant relation to these coordinates: Apart from its humanistic contents, the ideal of an artistically balanced design, a "harmonious beauty" (*zhonghe zhi mei* 中和之美), i.e., a harmony of content (*zhi* 质) and form (*wen* 文), of reason (*li* 理) and emotion (*qing* 情), originates from Confucian thinking. The ideas of Daoism and Chan Buddhism, on the other hand, play an important role in capturing the unfathomable (*shen* 神) essence of artistic creativity, of intuition and inspiration, in images and words. Finally, with Qu Yuan begins the tradition of lyrical expression, that is, the creation and interpretation of poetry (the most important art form in Chinese cultural history) as an expression of an individual and morally cultivated personality. Within these basic directions, Li Zehou relates literature, art and philosophy to each other in many ways and shows a wealth of structural correspondences and classification possibilities: e.g., three types of Buddhist sculptures, three "worlds" of poetry and three conceptions of landscape painting, whereby the typifications correspond to each other to a certain degree.

In his lecture mentioned at the beginning, Li Zehou also points out four characteristics of Chinese aesthetics, partly formal and partly substantive, which are also reflected in *The Path of Beauty*: 1. the central importance of music, 2. the art of line, 3. the fusion of reason (*li*) and emotion (*qing*), and 4. the unity of heaven/nature and man (*tian ren he yi* 天人合一).<sup>16</sup> Music is, as it were, the art form of Confucianism. Confucius says of it that man is "perfected in music" (*cheng yu yue* 成于乐)<sup>17</sup>. The harmonizing effect of music on man and its socially unifying function – in contrast to the ordering and dividing effect of the rites, with which it is always mentioned in the same breath – is also in the foreground of the "Chapter on Music" in

<sup>15</sup> "Guanyu Zhongguo meixueshi di jige wenti," p. 492.

<sup>16</sup> "Guanyu Zhongguo meixueshi de jige wenti," p. 477-91; see also Geiger, "Die Pragmatik," p. 168-71.

<sup>17</sup> *Analects*, 8.8. See also: *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, p. 49.

the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 礼记). Its educational significance, so important for early Confucian thought, lies in its ability to temper man's primal feelings, thereby socializing him and directing his emotional world in a "reasonable" direction.<sup>18</sup> In this respect, the third characteristic is already implied in this first one: the fusion of emotion and reason, which also implies a harmonious unity of the individual and society.

The second characteristic is the "art of the line." Compared to the more sensual colour, the line possesses something spiritually abstract. It is, as it were, the visible form of music, its melodic slurs and rhythms. The "art of the line" finds its most perfect artistic realization in Chinese calligraphy – an art form that in China is ranked far higher than painting. Remarkable is again a development from sketchy, line-like illustration in the form of simple pictographic characters to spontaneous, rhythmic lines and abstract structures, in which not only the original pictorial quality, but also the feeling, thinking and power of the writer have been "sedimented," and which have thus become "significant form" in the truest sense.

Finally, the last trait, the "unity of heaven/nature and man," occupies a central position in Li's thinking: he regards it as a core idea of traditional Chinese philosophy, which is reflected in art in manifold ways. We encounter it in analogies between nature or heaven (*tian* 天) and human virtues, as in the *Book of Changes* ("The movements of Heaven are powerful. Following its example, the superior man strengthens himself without ceasing.")<sup>19</sup> or in the talks of Confucius ("The wise man delights in the water, the kind man in the mountains.")<sup>20</sup>, but also in the demand for fusion of emotion (*qing* 情) and landscape/nature (*jing* 景) in poetry and landscape painting.

This idea of the "unity of heaven/nature and man," which can be traced in different interpretations from the *Book of Changes* to Daoist philosophy, the Han Confucianism of Dong Zhongshu (董仲舒, 179-104 BC), and the Neo-Confucians throughout the history of Chinese philosophy, has also given Li, albeit in a different context, a new, current significance, namely as a Chinese alternative with universal relevance to the Judeo-Christian opposition of man and nature, which has begun to show threatening consequences for the whole of humanity.<sup>21</sup>

When Li Zehou, finally, offers "unity of heaven/nature and man" as a Chinese elaboration of Marx's "humanization/humanism of nature" and the "naturalization/naturalism of man," this is more than a simple correspondence, because Li starts from Marx, but he returns to traditional Chinese philosophical themes. One could speak of a dissolution of Marxian thought in Chinese structures: Marx's speculative anthropology is adapted and sinicized in a "practical-rational" way – for Li a trait of Confucian thought.

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<sup>18</sup> "Guanyu Zhongguo meixueshi de jige wenti," p. 483.

<sup>19</sup> Picture-Commentary to the first Hexagram *Qian* (乾) in the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易经).

<sup>20</sup> *Analects*, 6.21.

<sup>21</sup> Li Zehou, "Shitan Zhongguo de zhihui (试探中国的智慧)" (Some remarks on Chinese wisdom) in: Cao Yuetang (ed.), *Lun Zhongguo chuantong wenhua*, Peking 1988, p. 37f.

Summing up, the characteristics of *The Path of Beauty* are, first, its design as a “broad” explication of the Chinese aesthetic tradition and, second, its Marxist approach by referring to the latter’s anthropology and history. Hence, we find for each historical period that he discusses, first, an explication of the socio-economic situation and class affiliation of actors (the “base”) before he turns to literature and art (the “superstructure”). This also accords with Li’s position of “unity of objectivity and sociality” which he took in the great “Aesthetics Debate“ of 1956: There arose a discussion between Zhu Guangqian 朱光潜 (1897-1986) for whom beauty was a “synthesis of the subjective and the objective” (*zhuguan he keguan de tongyi* 主观和客观的统一) and Li Zehou whose counter argument was: “Unity of objectivity and sociality” (*keguanxing yu shehuixing xiang tongyi* 客观性与社会性相统一). With this he referred to the possibility of establishing a connection with a specific object because that object has always already been contextualized and conceptualized within a sociality of many other things and relations.<sup>22</sup>

Apart from that we also find in Li’s book Marx’ optimism regarding human progress, as well as Marx’ critical attitude about religion, in this case toward Buddhism (chapter VI: “A miserable World” and “Illusionary Praise”). Criticism of religion may have become part of mainstream Western thought in Europe since the Enlightenment; for China, however, it could be alienating when it applies to Buddhism, which is so popular in the West and often perceived as an alternative religion. Yet it is important to know that Chinese Marxists, on the one hand, are only continuing the tradition of Confucian criticism of Buddhism, while, on the other hand, the Confucians, especially the Neo-Confucians (from around the 11<sup>th</sup> century), were significantly influenced by Buddhism. In this respect, Li Zehou’s treatment of Buddhism has also this ambivalent attitude. Worth mentioning, lastly, not as a homage to Marx but as an inheritance of thought patterns of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, is the way he transfers classifications of the European intellectual history to China, in this case “Romanticism” (chapters IV and X) – both to the time of the Chu and Han culture and, after a time jump of about 1,500 years, to epochs of the Dynasties Ming and Qing. This – from today’s point of view uncritical – handling of Western thought patterns goes back to the time of the May 4<sup>th</sup> movement (around 1919), during which European romanticism advanced to the favourite style epoch of Chinese intellectuals.

## II: *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*

Li Zehou published *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition* (*Huaxia meixue* 华夏美学) in 1988. An English translation by Maija Bell Samei appeared in 2010.<sup>23</sup> Li considered it to be one of his major works and more important – i.e. more philosophical – than *The Path of Beauty*. What are the major differences between the two works? *The Chinese*

<sup>22</sup> “*Lun meigan, mei he yishu*” (论美感、美和艺术 About sense of beauty, beauty, and art). *Studies of Philosophy* (*Zhexue yanjiu* 哲学研究) 1956/5. See also: Qi Zhixiang 祁志祥, “Li Zehou shijian meixue sixiang ji chengjiu de xitong pingxi” (李泽厚实践美学思想及成就的系统评析 A Systematic Review of Li Zehou’s Practical Aesthetic Thought and Achievements), Shanghai Jiaotong University, 2021: <https://iah.sjtu.edu.cn/Web/Show/370>

<sup>23</sup> Li Zehou, *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, transl. by Maija Bell Samei, Honolulu, U of Hawai’i Press, 2010.

*Aesthetic Tradition* is also a history of Chinese aesthetics, but in a “narrow” sense, as it traces more the philosophical tradition, based on the written documents.

Li focusses on themes which are – in his view – constitutive for a Chinese aesthetics, such as:

- “Rites and Music” – according to Li Zehou, China is a “culture of rites and music” (*li yue zhi wenhua* 礼乐之文化);
- “Confucian Humanism” – with a focus on harmony between emotion and reason, society and individual;
- Daoist “Free and Easy Wandering” (*xiaoyao you* 逍遥游) – with an emphasis on the concept of freedom;
- Qu Yuan and the *Elegies of Chu* – its themes are human emotionality and mortality;
- “Metaphysics” – such as in Chan-Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism; here Su Shi 苏轼 (1037-1101) comes in as a main figure in Chinese aesthetics;
- Encounter with Western thought – from Ming Dynasty thinkers such as Wang Yangming 王阳明 (1472-1529) and Yuan Hongdao 袁宏道 (1568-1610) to the introduction of Western thought by Wang Guowei 王国维 (1877-1927) and Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 (1868-1940).

The book is, most of all, orientated on Confucianism. In the preface he says: “What I mean by ‘Chinese Aesthetics’ in this volume is Confucian-based traditional Chinese aesthetics.”<sup>24</sup> However, as in *The Path of Beauty*, the basis of his approach is an “anthropological ontology,” in Li’s words: “To talk about and to seek the root of human existence.”<sup>25</sup> Hence we find also in this work reference to Marx’ “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844,” that is, to the already mentioned concepts of “humanism/humanization of nature” (ch. 2) as well as “naturalism/naturalization of man” (ch. 3). When Marx writes, as already quoted at the beginning in the context of *The Path of Beauty*, that “society is the complete unity of man with nature – the true resurrection of nature – the consistent naturalism of man and the consistent humanism of nature,”<sup>26</sup> we see that for Li this idea corresponds to the Chinese tradition of “Unity of Heaven/Nature and Man” (*tian ren he yi*):

“The unity of heaven and humans (天人合一) [...], is a very widespread and long-lasting notion in Chinese aesthetics and artistic creation. [...] From today’s perspective, however, this principle can be seen to be simply a roughhewn and roundabout expression of the ‘humanization of nature’ in Chinese philosophy and aesthetics.”<sup>27</sup>

Li Zehou considers aesthetic experiences to be the most meaningful experiences in life. In this context he elaborates on concepts of aesthetics which were introduced by Wang Guowei. Wang Guowei represents the early encounter of Chinese with

<sup>24</sup> *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, p. vii.

<sup>25</sup> *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, p. x and 225; Li Zehou and Jane Cauvel, p. 170-171

<sup>26</sup> See footnote 8 above.

<sup>27</sup> *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, p. 72.



European ideas. He coined basic aesthetic concepts for the 20<sup>th</sup> century such as *jingjie* 境界 (“aesthetic state,” often also understood as “aesthetic realm” or “consciousness”) and *yijing* 意境 (“aesthetic idea”)<sup>28</sup> to denote a perfect aesthetic fusion of artistic idea (or feeling) with a concrete scene (*qing/yi jing ronghe* 情/意景融合). Wang first used the term *jingjie* only with regards to poetry and without any theoretical explanation; but this term soon gained a general aesthetic meaning, signifying both an aesthetic idea as well as a most sublime state of mind. Wang Guowei derived his concepts from Chinese tradition, using Buddhist vocabulary. The term *yijing* was first used in Yogacara Buddhism (*Faxiangi zong / Weishi zong* 法相宗 / 唯识宗) of the Tang Dynasty. The character *jing* 境 (Sanskrit: *viṣaya*), as Wing-tsit Chan explained, has the meaning: realm, conception, domain of perception; external world (the “sphere or realm in which the mind gropes for an object which is its own imagination”).<sup>29</sup> There we find the distinction between the following three realms or conceptions: *wujing* 物境 (realm of things), *qingjing* 情境 (realm of feelings) and *yijing* 意境 (realm of ideas).<sup>30</sup> Today, the Buddhist origin of these ideas is hardly subject of discussion anymore; the influence of Western thought appears to be more interesting, as in Wang Guowei’s thought the terms *yijing* and *jingjie* are imbued with meaning that he found in Kant and Schopenhauer (Kant’s “aesthetic idea”); hence, they represent early intercultural exchanges of thought between China and the West.

In *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, Li Zehou defined Wang Guowei’s concept *jingjie* in the following way:

“The aesthetic realm [*jingjie*] is the revelation of life through the relationship between feeling and scene, and the objectified realm of the artistic subject – in other words, it is a manifestation of the realm of human life.”<sup>31</sup>

Hence, in their monumental (though not completed) *History of Chinese Aesthetics* (*Zhongguo meixue shi* 中国美学史), Li Zehou 李泽厚 and Liu Gangji 刘纲纪 (1933-2019) marked as the last and most important characteristic of traditional Chinese aesthetics the idea that an “aesthetic consciousness” (*shenmei jingjie* 审美境界) was regarded as the “highest and noblest consciousness to be attained in life.”<sup>32</sup>

The more philosophical bent of *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition* reveals itself predominantly in its reference to Kantian thought and terminology, such as “*noumenon*” (*benti* 本体). It has to be added, though, that the usage of the term *benti* in Chinese does not quite correspond to the term “*noumenon*” in Western philosophy – neither the term *bentilun* (本体论 literally: theory of original substance) to “ontology”

<sup>28</sup> Adele Rickett, *Wang Kuo-wei’s Jen-chien Tz’u-hua – A Study in Chinese Literary Criticism*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1977, p. 23ff, and Karl-Heinz Pohl, *Ästhetik und Literaturtheorie in China. Von der Tradition bis zur Moderne*, München: Saur, 2007, p. 409ff.

<sup>29</sup> Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, Princeton: Princeton U Press, 1963, p. 372. The term entered the realm of poetics through Wang Changling’s 王昌龄 (Tang Dynasty): “Poetical Patterns” (*Shige* 诗格, transmitted in Japanese by the Japanese monk Kūkai 空海, 774-835: *Bunkyō hifuron* 文镜秘府论).

<sup>30</sup> Karl-Heinz Pohl, *Ästhetik und Literaturtheorie in China*, p. 165f.

<sup>31</sup> *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, p. xvi, p. 210.

<sup>32</sup> Li Zehou and Liu Gangji, *Zhongguo meixueshi* (History of Chinese Aesthetics), I, Beijing: Xinhua, 1984, p. 33f.

which is the usual translation for it.<sup>33</sup> Both terms – *benti* and *bentilun* – have experienced an inflationary usage in China, which cannot be said of the corresponding terms “*noumenon*” and “ontology” in Western writings. The reason for the popularity of these terms with modern Chinese intellectuals might be manifold. It surely is due to their uncritical adoption of, if not infatuation with Western terminology; but because of the literal meaning in Chinese, they have a more comprehensive meaning – and not such a narrow philosophical focus as the corresponding Western terms.

As to the *noumenon*, Li Zehou explains:

“The Confucian dominated Chinese tradition of philosophy, aesthetics, art, and literature, as well as ethics and government [... with Daoism and Chan-Buddhism incorporated] are all founded on a certain ‘psychologism.’ [...] This psychologism [...] is a philosophical proposition that takes emotion as the *noumenon*. From its ethical origins to the ‘realm of life,’ the entire stream of the history of Chinese thought has taken this type of sensuous psychology as the *noumenon*. The thing-in-itself is not, then, the spirit, nor is it a deity, nor morality or reason. Instead it is the psychology of human nature in which emotion and rationality are blended.”<sup>34</sup>

What, then, is the *noumenon* – not only in an aesthetic, but in a most comprehensive sense?

“It is ultimate reality, the origin of everything. According to the Confucian-based Chinese tradition, the *noumenon* is not nature, for a universe without humanity is meaningless. Nor is the *noumenon* a deity, for to ask humans to prostrate themselves before a god would not fit with the notions of ‘partnering in the transformation and nurturing of all things’ or ‘establishing the heart of heaven and earth’ (*Doctrine of the Mean, Zhongyong* 中庸). It must follow, then, that the *noumenon* is humankind itself.”<sup>35</sup>

Li’s emphasis that the *noumenon* is the “psychology of human nature in which emotion and rationality are blended” reveals the way he understands his work as a contribution to an “anthropological ontology.”

Lastly, it is interesting to note some analogies between past and present, i.e., between the adaption of Buddhist thought and vocabulary, particularly by the Neo-Confucians of the Song period, and the present transferral of Western thought and terminology. Regarding the former, Li, himself, remarked:

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<sup>33</sup> Jana Rošker informed me some more about the usage of these terms and made the following helpful comment: “There are two ‘usual translations’ for ontology in Chinese; namely *bentilun* and *cunyoulun* 存有论. Although the latter is more commonly used in Taiwan than in PRC, it might be more appropriate, especially because it avoids the problematic rendering of the Western philosophical term substance, which actually has no equivalent in the Chinese intellectual history.”

<sup>34</sup> *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, p. xvii, p. 219.

<sup>35</sup> *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, p. 223.

“In Returning to Confucianism by way of Chan-Buddhism, [the Neo-Confucians] greatly enriched their own thought by establishing this metaphysical *noumenal* realm in which aesthetics supersedes religion.”<sup>36</sup>

One is reminded here of Cai Yuanpei’s assessment of the role of aesthetics for China: As is well known, Cai regarded Westerners to be largely shaped by religion, whereas for China he held aesthetics (a combination of ritual, art and ethics) to be the functional “spiritual” equivalent to religion in the West. For this reason, he demanded for modern China “aesthetic education in the place of religion” (*yi meiyu dai zongjiao* 以美育代宗教).<sup>37</sup>

Returning to the analogy between China’s intellectuals of today and the Song Dynasty Neo-Confucians, the present-day equivalent of Buddhism is Marxism. As the Neo-Confucians of the Song and Ming Dynasties were allured by the “Western” foreign religion, Buddhism, but returned to Confucianism, incorporating much Buddhist thought in their new interpretation of Confucianism, so Li Zehou, likewise, is greatly influenced by the new “Western” (civil)religion: the ideas of Karl Marx; but he also returned to Confucianism, incorporating much of Marxian thought into his new interpretation of the Chinese aesthetic – and ethical – tradition. Li writes: “We have to pass through Marxist thought and go beyond it,” and he sees Marxism as “a theory of the construction of material and spiritual life.”<sup>38</sup>

Hence Marxism, in a sinicized form, has entered the Chinese “cultural-psychological formation.” As the translator of Li’s *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, Maija Bell Samei, writes in her introduction, the Western scientific worldview and post-Enlightenment theories like Marxism “are being ‘sedimented’ into the latest incarnation of the Chinese people’s ‘cultural-psychological formation’”<sup>39</sup> – just like Buddhism before.

Seen from this perspective, Li Zehou’s own development regarding aesthetics corresponds to his thesis in: “Western Learning as substance, Chinese Learning for Application” (*xi ti zhong yong* 西体中用), summarized as: “One material civilization, multiple spiritual cultures.”<sup>40</sup> Marxist thought refers to the universal conditions of our common (i.e. universal) material civilization, that is, to the “outer/external humanization of nature,” whereas Confucian/Daoist thought refers to the particular Chinese spiritual culture: its ethics and aesthetics – the “inner humanization of nature.”

<sup>36</sup> *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, p. xv, p. 191.

<sup>37</sup> *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, p. 212. Liu Gangji, “Verbreitung und Einfluß der deutschen Ästhetik in China,” K.-H. Pohl (ed.), *Trierer Beiträge. Aus Forschung und Lehre an der Universität Trier*, July 1996 (Sonderheft 10), pp. 8-13. And the famous writer of this époque, Lin Yutang 林语堂 (1895-1876), remarked that “poetry may well be called the Chinaman’s religion.” *My Country and my People*, London: William Heine Mann, 1936, p. 230.

<sup>38</sup> Li Zehou and Jane Cauvel, *Four Essays on Aesthetics*, Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006, p. 170, cited by Maija Bell Samei in her translation of *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, p. 225. Bell Samei adds that Marxism is not seen here with its narrative of class struggle.

<sup>39</sup> *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, p. xviii.

<sup>40</sup> Li Zehou, “Human Nature and Human Future: A Combination of Marx and Confucius,” 1999, in: Karl-Heinz Pohl (ed.), *Chinese Thought in a Global Context. A Dialogue Between Chinese and Western Philosophical Approaches*, Leiden: Brill, 1999, pp. 129-144. Cf. also to my article cited in footnote 5 above.

### III. Final Remarks

Modern Chinese aesthetics must be seen in the context of the identity crisis triggered by the break with tradition at the beginning of this century. China's self-perception since it was forced (in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century) by the violent actions of the colonial powers to come to terms with Western thought was that of a Chinese culture supported by aesthetics – in contrast to the European culture, which Chinese intellectuals saw as dominated by religion (Christianity). Hence, the first approaches of this discipline, which was taken over from the West, were based on the endeavour to "discover one's own buried essence" by means of beauty and art, i.e., to rediscover a cultural identity and to make it usable for gaining a new national integrity.<sup>41</sup> Today, aesthetics may have become, in the West, a barely noticed sub-discipline of philosophy, but not so in China: There, it occupies an eminent position in intellectual life. If one wants to better understand modern China, it would be necessary – through a change of perspective – to take a closer look at China's self-image, which is shaped by its own cultural and aesthetic tradition.

Li Zehou's historiography of aesthetics at the end of the 1970s, which "emerged in the immediate aftermath of the equally radical rupture of the Cultural Revolution,"<sup>42</sup> as well as his second book written at the end of the 1980s, follow this new line by also viewing Chinese culture predominantly as an "aesthetic" one, namely as a "culture of rites and music" (*liyue zhi wenhua*). But there are clear differences. Now it is also important to help the tradition, which was tabooed during the Cultural Revolution, to regain its value. As the trauma of the encounter with the West was a hundred years ago, the focus is, therefore, no longer on the sometimes cramped efforts resulting from national humiliation, such as those of the first generation of aestheticians, to point out the superiority of their own intellectual and artistic tradition. Much rather, in Li Zehou's assessment of his own cultural tradition, we find a new self-understanding, or a new matter of course, occasionally mixed with pride and pathos. The "aesthetic fever" triggered by his works, however, shows how much he hit the nerve of the time with his histories of aesthetics in China: It was the prelude to the "cultural fever" – the hot debate about one's own tradition and identity – that characterized the second half of the 1980s in China until it was ended by the events of the summer of 1989. The fact that Western theoretical approaches, such as those of Marx, still serve as a starting point but in the further course are transferred into Chinese thinking, is only a further sign of the now more unbiased attitude toward one's own tradition as well as for China's well-known strength, already demonstrated in the reception of Buddhism, of turning foreign thought into something unmistakably Chinese.

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<sup>41</sup> Geiger, *Philosophische Ästhetik*, p. 19.

<sup>42</sup> By his own admission, Li completed *The Path of Beauty* in a few months in 1979, drawing on older preparatory work. Li Zehou, "Yu Taiwan xuezhe Liang Dongguang yu *Mei de licheng* de duitan lu" (Record of a Conversation on the *Path of Beauty* with the Taiwanese Scholar Liang Dongguang), in: *Zou wo ziji de lu*, p. 459.