Translator’s Introduction

Contemporary Chinese philosopher Li Zehou (b. 1930) has been an influential thinker in China since the 1950s, but became a particularly important figure on the cultural scene during the “culture fever” of the 1980s. A member of the Institute of Philosophy at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Li left China for the United States after his works were banned in China following the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989, as authorities feared their possible role in inspiring dissent against the leadership of the Communist Party. The present volume is a translation of Li’s Huaxia meixue (1989), a work he regards as one of his most important. Because it is beyond the realm of my expertise to attempt a comprehensive discussion of Li Zehou’s philosophical framework or of his significance to contemporary Chinese thought and society, I am glad to be able to refer the reader to the works listed below, under “Suggested Readings.” I will confine my discussion here to a few key terms in Li’s aesthetics, and to the broad contours of Li’s argument in this book.

Quite apart from its value as an introduction to the philosophy of one of contemporary China’s foremost thinkers, an English translation of Li Zehou’s The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition fills an important gap in the literature on Chinese aesthetics in English, as works that address Chinese aesthetic theory have for the most part treated either literature or art but rarely both. This work presents Li’s synthesis of the whole trajectory of Chinese aesthetic thought, from the earliest times through the beginning of the modern period, incorporating pre-Confucian and Confucian ideas, Daoism, Chan Buddhism, and the influence of Western thought beginning in the late imperial period. As one of China’s major aesthetic Marxists1 and China’s preeminent authority on Kant, Li is uniquely positioned to observe this trajectory and make it intelligible to contemporary readers, discussing the Chinese aesthetic tradition with reference to comparable trends in Western aesthetic thought.
Chinese aesthetics goes beyond literature and art to encompass the “art of living.” Right government, the ideal human being, the path to spiritual transcendence—all these fall into the province of aesthetic thought. This was the case from early Confucian explanations of poetry as that which gives expression to the often political, always socially oriented intent; through Zhuangzi’s highly artistic depictions of the ideal person who can discern the natural way of things and live according to it; to Chan Buddhist-inspired notions that nature and words can come together in surprising ways to yield insight and enlightenment. Artistic and literary production in China has always been closely intertwined with political aspiration (through the orientation of the educational system toward qualification for civil service), social critique, and issues surrounding the lifestyle of the intellectual (such as the decision to withdraw from the political scene, or the designing of homes and gardens).

For this reason, aesthetics has always played a key role in Chinese views of society and education, from the Confucian imperative to study the Book of Songs, to Western-influenced modernizers like Cai Yuanpei and other May Fourth intellectuals for whom literature and the arts were an indispensable ingredient of the intellectual and scientific enlightenment China required. Li Zehou is an inheritor of this tradition, and indeed consciously affirms the practical, humanistic rationality of the Confucian tradition, even as he sees in it part of the reason for China’s inability to modernize effectively.

Li is also highly critical of Maoist voluntarism, seeing it as deeply rooted in Confucian and Daoist views of the power of a virtuous personality to effect good. Just as this view tended to inhibit modernization in China, it also explains, in Li’s view, Mao’s overly idealistic excesses (such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution). Li sees the fundamental importance of science, technology, and post-Enlightenment theories (including Marxism) in the West as an important corrective that China must more thoroughly comprehend and internalize as the basis of its further cultural, social, and material progress.

In each chapter of The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition, Li demonstrates how the incorporation of a new idea or set of ideas took Chinese aesthetics further along the path of the accumulation or “sedimentation” (jidian) of what he calls the human “cultural-psychological formation” (wenhua xinli jiegou). The term “sedimentation” is one Li is credited with originating, and one that plays a crucial role in what he describes as his anthropological ontology. In the process of the accumulation of material cultural experience (beginning with the use of tools) and the accrual of aesthetic value into ritual activity, the slow process of building up the cultural and psychological structures that will come to define “humanity” begins. Subsequently, each new development in aesthetic thought adds a new level of “sediment” to this process. In Li’s own words: “I wanted to
investigate the appearance of the rational in the sensuous, of the social in the individual, of the historical in the psychological. This is how I came up with the term, ‘sedimentation.’ The meaning of sedimentation is the accumulation and condensation of the social, rational, and historical to become something individualistic, sensuous, and intuitive. It happens in the process of the humanization of nature.”

Although the term “sedimentation” may be somewhat awkward for English readers who are not familiar with its use in a philosophical context, it is of too great a significance to Li Zehou’s thought to translate with terms that might be more familiar to our philosophical discourse, such as “distillation” or “condensation.”

Sedimentation occurs on at least three levels. First, as primitive society develops the use of tools, form begins to give birth to the notion of beauty. Second, this primitive sense of beauty is distilled in the artistic and aesthetic production that evolves from society’s ritual activity (such as shamanistic song and dance). And finally, the “social atmosphere” of any particular period sediments into its artistic production. In Li Zehou’s words, “If you infuse a work with social atmosphere, and are able to give your work a certain aesthetic tone, then life will have sedimented in art.”

The first, primitive level of sedimentation is the subject of Chapter 1. Here, Li begins his argument by tracing the major themes of Chinese aesthetics (beauty and goodness, society and nature, feeling and form, art and politics) back to the pre-Confucian tradition of rites and music. He finds the roots of the Chinese aesthetic psyche in the nonhedonist but nonetheless strongly sensuous cultural tradition that grew out of primitive totemic ritual and dance. The life-affirming, this-worldly character of the Chinese aesthetic tradition has its basis in this pre-Confucian foundation.

The key role of music here in shaping and socializing the natural human emotions was to exert a definitive influence on the trajectory of the subsequent development of the aesthetic tradition. Li notes, "precisely because it is a tradition rooted in music, Chinese art seeks to shape and mold humanized emotions directly, rather than to represent the visual world in order to call forth people's recognition, and thus (indirectly) move their emotions."

Chapter 2 considers the emergence of Confucian humanism, including the development of a self-consciousness of humanity (the human nature that at once is determined by its biology and transcends it); the perfection of the human personality through the arts and music (attaining inner freedom through the mastery of technical skills and external natural laws); and the apprehension of mortality (which, importantly, leads to the “emotionalization of time” in the arts and literature). Progressing from Confucius through Mencius, Xunzi, and the Book of Changes, Li demonstrates how the Chinese tradition develops a sense
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of dynamic, moral (or virile) beauty, which functions similarly to the Sublime in the Western tradition. This beauty is embodied in the inner moral power of
the sage, in whom heaven and humanity are unified. “The unity of heaven and
humans, the intercommunication and resonance between heaven and humans,
or the correspondence between heaven and humans, 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 idea of the ‘humanization of nature’ in Chinese
philosophy and aesthetics.”

In Li Zehou’s take on this Marxist concept, aesthetics plays a key role in the
humanization of both internal and external nature. I quote from Zhao Shilin’s
explanation:

In the humanization of subjective (inner) nature, the product or expression
of sedimentation is an aesthetic psychological structure. In the humaniza-
tion of objective (external) nature, the product or expression of sedimen-
tation is the aesthetic object. It is precisely the historical sedimentation
occurring within the realm of the subject’s practical action—i.e., the cre-
ation of the aesthetic—that fundamentally alters the relation between
humans and nature, bringing about the humanization of nature, and mak-
ing humankind truly human.5

The complement of the humanization of nature is the “naturalization of
humans,” which Li discusses in Chapter 3’s treatment of the contributions of
Daoism (especially the Zhuangzi). “The former contends that a person’s natu-
ralness must be conformed to and permeated with sociality in order to attain
true humanity. The latter argues that to become truly human one must shed
sociality, allowing one’s naturalness to remain unpolluted and to expand to
achieve unity with the universe.” Clearly, this is a totally different concept of the
unity of heaven and humans than what we see in Confucianism. Sharing with
Confucianism a fundamentally positive view of sensuous life, Daoism would
become a mainstay for the private and artistic lives of intellectuals who were
fundamentally Confucian in public.

Zhuangzi’s main contribution to the aesthetic tradition was in the broad-
ening of the aesthetic object to encompass the ideal personality (character-
ized by transcendent freedom rather than moral greatness or strength, as in
Mencius), and the beauty and greatness of objective nature. In Li’s words:
“Any thing, regardless of appearance or form, could now become the object
of aesthetic appreciation. This would come to include . . . anything unusual,
grotesque, or naïve. . . . This constituted a tremendous liberation for Chinese
art. . . . By the same token, the clumsiness of great artistic genius became a much higher aesthetic standard than simple refinement . . . because what is appreciated is not the outward form but the ‘virtue’ that permeates it. . . .” It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of this “naturalization” to the Chinese tradition, whether in farmstead and nature poetry, landscape painting, or calligraphy.

In addition to the naturalization of humans, Zhuangzi’s influence on the artistic tradition is also felt in his development of the role of the unconscious in artistic creation, or, in other words, the “aspect of all creative processes that cannot be captured in ordinary conceptual language or logical thought.” Here we see a clear example of sedimentation as the “accumulation and condensation of the social, rational, and historical to become something individualistic, sensuous, and intuitive,” for “the unconscious does not refer to ‘dormant’ animal instinct, but to a kind of nonconscious condensation or sedimentation achieved through conscious human effort.”

Whereas Chapter 3 discussed Zhuangzi’s broadening of the aesthetic tradition to encompass nature and spiritual freedom, Chapter 4 shows how “the arts are freed from their service as a tool for spreading Confucian ethical thought,” as the Daoist and Confucian strains encounter the tradition surrounding the Songs of Chu and their purported author, Qu Yuan. Li Zehou demonstrates the importance of the “deep emotion” Qu Yuan experiences in his ruminations on mortality, through which “universal emotional form is freed to express uncontainable happiness and unbearable resentment.” This injection of emotional lifeblood would have a profound effect on Wei-Jin literati such as Ruan Ji and Ji Kang, and when paired with the value placed on nonconceptual insight in that period, would come to constitute the Wei-Jin style.

The role of natural imagery in the Songs of Chu constitutes a significant development for Chinese aesthetics. No longer defined by its natural, rational associations or restricted to the symbolization of moral categories, imagery is freed to portray emotion in a direct, unmediated free association that paves the way for the development of the crucial practice of qing jing jiao rong (fusion of feeling and scene). Analogous to the Western notion of “empathy,” this practice “can be said to consist of the melding of the appreciating (or creating) self with the appreciated (or created) object. The appearance or action of the object calls forth my mental and emotional activity, which is subsequently dissolved in the full concentration of my faculties in the process of appreciation or creation, so that it is eventually replaced by the features and actions of the object, resulting in the unity of my own subjective emotions with the objective form. . . . In the artistic conception (yijing), in the fusion of feeling and scene, there is no need for a conceptual medium between emotion and object. . . . Reason dissolves
completely into the emotions and imagination, and loses its independent character, to become a sort of unconscious or nonconscious player.”

This dissociation of natural imagery from Confucian ethical categories was an important precondition for the aesthetic influence of Chan Buddhism, the subject of Chapter 5. Li demonstrates how the Chan notion of sudden enlightenment (which often occurs through awakening to nature) leads to the enduring importance of transcendent states of mind and “lingering flavor” in Chinese aesthetics. In his own words:

What Chan Buddhism aims for is neither the personality extraordinary for its imposing power (as in Confucianism), nor the personality extraordinary for its freedom (as in Zhuangzi); nor yet is it the intense emotional state of persistent sorrow or indignation (as in Qu Yuan). Instead, what Chan seeks is an inner state of spiritual realization. . . . In Chan enlightenment, human attitudes find their expression in natural scenery, which in turn points to a certain spiritual state of mind. This leads to yet another version of the “humanization of nature” (which we saw in Confucianism) or the “naturalization of humans” (which we saw in Zhuangzi).

The nonconceptual insight that played such a key role in Wei-Jin metaphysics reappears here as well:

The idea of “subtle awakening” brings with it a new round of instability and progress in people’s inner rational structure, in which nonconceptual understanding—the element of intuitive wisdom—overwhelms the imagination and the senses, and merges with the emotions and intentions in such a way as to direct and shape their development.

This effect on the construction of the psychological subject would prove to be the major element of Chan’s influence on the aesthetic tradition. Another major legacy of Chan would be the widespread and long-standing preference for the aesthetic characteristic summed up in the word “blandness” (dan), which Li describes as “something that is without taste, but at the same time full of flavor. . . . [I]t consists of purposeful attempts to describe the most ordinary natural scenes, so as to portray the empty illusoriness of life and the spiritual realm in a way that arouses thought and deep feeling.”

Despite the unmistakably profound influence on aesthetics of the two anti-conventional schools of Daoism and Chan Buddhism, Li demonstrates in this chapter the continuing defining power of the Confucian ethical imperative in the public lives of even confirmed Daoist or Buddhist intellectuals. Even in
artistic works, “the life-affirming, relational spirit of Confucianism and Daoism always made its way back, one way or another, into Chan-inspired art and literature. . . . The beauty of the natural scene always manages to shine through its illusory quality, a lively vitality through the desolate stillness. Chinese art that is informed by a Chan aesthetic often uses the natural scene to evoke a metaphysical realm, while on the other hand, the demonstration of this metaphysical realm draws people back toward real-life concerns.”

Philosophically, the influence of Chan Buddhism makes itself felt in the neo-Confucians’ “unification of morality and art in the realm of life” and their expansion of the notion of “literature” to include every aspect of a person’s life and personality. Although neo-Confucian thinkers like Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi were in general disparaging toward the arts, their aesthetic casting of the moral realm paved the way for the elevation of the aesthetic to serve an almost religious function in the Chinese tradition. “[I]n 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.” This religious function of the aesthetic would develop further with the addition of Western thought to this mixture, as we see in the discussion of Cai Yuanpei in Chapter 6.

The aesthetic does not begin to truly diverge from the ethical realm of Confucianism until the Ming dynasty, when desire begins to emerge as an artistic subject in its own right. In Chapter 6, Li demonstrates the roots of this affirmation of desire in the contradictions inherent in Wang Yangming’s theory of Mind, in which the Dao Mind is inseparable from the Human Mind, and Principle becomes identified with desire. The individualistic strain that thus entered Chinese art and literature was an important element in setting the stage for the transition to modernity. This “return to the real flesh-and-blood individual and the sensual, worldly love between the sexes would end in the modern road to self-destruction for traditional aesthetics. Because from here the next step is the manifestation of individual independence and expression . . . and in the process, the gradual denial or even repudiation” of the traditional aesthetics rooted in the rites and music tradition and Confucianism. “One need no longer avoid, but should actually pursue, the kind of shocking, vulgar, romantic, or startling effect” that previously would have been almost universally proscribed. This “modern” trend was interrupted, however, by the struggle for national salvation in the twentieth century, when individual desire and the arts in general once again submitted, Confucian-style, to the needs of society and the state.

Western readers of traditional Chinese literary and art criticism often experience the difficulty of pinpointing the exact meaning of its critical terminology, reporting that Chinese criticism in general is impressionistic and
imprecise. In Chapter 6, Li acknowledges the fact that Chinese aesthetics has yet to submit to the baptism of a thoroughly modern analysis. This may have to do with the general preference in traditional Chinese thought for the holistic over the particular, as well as its distaste for overly logical or purely abstract reasoning. There are probably numerous other explanations, including the role played by literature and the arts as gatekeepers to the elite echelons of society, and the heavy reliance on intertextuality and allusion in Chinese writing and painting. The need to define a term is obviated when one’s audience is familiar with its usage in the work of an admired writer in the past.

Take, for example, Wang Guowei’s notion of the jingjie, or aesthetic realm, which Li Zehou discusses in Chapter 6. Despite the clear influence of Western thought on Wang’s critical framework (in his adoption of such notions as subjectivity and objectivity, for example), he himself explains this crucial term largely by citing lines of poems that either have or convey an aesthetic realm or do not, clearly relying on his audience’s shared knowledge of elite aesthetic values. Li defines this term that has been the subject of various interpretations over the years as follows: “[T]he aesthetic realm 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.” The high level of embeddedness of terms such as this within their intertextual contexts also creates difficulties for the translator and demonstrates the impossibility of fitting Chinese aesthetic categories neatly into an English terminology that has evolved in the context of Western aesthetic systems.

One area in which the attempt to match these disparate categories has created some confusion has been the question of expression and representation in Chinese aesthetics. It has been tempting for commentators to suggest that whereas Western aesthetic theories have been preoccupied with mimesis, Chinese theories have been preoccupied with expression. Li weighs in against this oversimplification, showing that in fact art and literature in China have always been expected to reflect, or actually to be an organic extension of, cosmic and natural realities, in a type of imitation that is conceived of in a much more organic fashion than Aristotelian mimesis. Correspondingly, traditional Chinese expressive theories were never framed in terms of the expression of individual emotion. Rather, art was seen as a vehicle for the expression of universal human emotional realities. To quote from section two of Chapter 1:

[I]t is possible to state that Chinese art is “representational”; what it represents, however, is not discrete situations, things, or phenomena, but rather the natural universal law, order, and logic of the cosmos. At the same time, we can state that Chinese art is “expressive,” though what it expresses is not individ-
ual subjective emotions or personality, but rather universalized emotions that must be able to objectively “harmonize with heaven and earth.” . . . Clearly, it is not a question simply of either “representation” or “expression.” No such dualistic distinction exists in Chinese aesthetics or art.

Instead, Li frames the distinction between Chinese and Western approaches as follows:

Generally speaking, Chinese art definitely differs from the type of precise representation of discrete, real situations that we find in the West, and the more “representational” of ancient Chinese stories also lack the kind of expressiveness we find in modern Western works characterized by the presentation of intensely individual feelings. Relatively speaking, individual feelings are not prominent in Chinese works. . . . At the same time, Chinese representation of objective reality does not depart from the expression of emotion. . . . So Chinese art, literature, and aesthetics cannot be said to be either representational or expressive; rather, Chinese art takes the molding of the emotions as its goal. . . .

Because of the primacy of this goal, Chinese aesthetics submits realism to beauty and excludes “unrestrained desire, instinctive impulses, intense emotion . . . purgative distress . . . any objectionable emotional form (or art) that serves up the ugly, weird, evil, and so on.” This exclusion has to do with its fundamental preference for moderation, its life-affirming (rather than sin-oriented) view of humanity, as well as the perceived close relationship between humans and heaven or nature.

The great strength of the Chinese aesthetic tradition, in Li’s view, is its holistic vision, its affirmation of life, humanity, and nature. In Chinese landscape art, humanity is not dwarfed before nature but is found living humbly in its place in the natural order. Humans do not try to conquer nature, but rather allow the emotions and inspiration aroused by nature and mortality to inform their artistic production and ultimately shape their personal and corporate way of life. Elite Chinese aesthetic thought and practice has been remarkably unconcerned with the divine, the hereafter, or the unseen. The ultimate reality, or noumenon, toward which Chinese art and letters strain is a thoroughly human and psychological one, deeply embedded in everyday reality, which is always seen as an extension of cosmic realities. As Li writes in Chapter 6:

[T]he Confucian-dominated Chinese traditions of philosophy, aesthetics, art, and literature, as well as ethics and government, which from their beginnings in the rites and music and Confucian humaneness went on to
incorporate the influences of Daoism, Qu Yuan, and Chan Buddhism, are all founded on a certain “psychologism”—one that took Confucius’ advice to Zai Wo, “Would you feel at ease? . . . If you really feel at ease, then do it,” as the root of all political ethics and ideologically consciousness.

This psychologism cannot be the object of empirical study; rather, it is a philosophical proposition that takes emotion as the noumenon. From its origins to the “realm of life,” the entire stream of the history of Chinese thought has taken this type of sensual 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.

It is, as Li puts it in the Epilogue, “humankind itself.”

It is this human-centered, this-worldly vision that propels Li’s optimism about the Chinese tradition’s ability to support further development—in aesthetics, philosophy, and of course ultimately in society and politics—as it continues to incorporate new influences, just as it has done for thousands of years. Today, it is perhaps the Western scientific worldview and post-Enlightenment theories like Marxism that, like Daoism and Buddhism before them, are being “sedimented” into the latest incarnation of the Chinese people’s “cultural-psychological formation.”

A note about my own contributions and interpolations. A work of this kind spans centuries—even millennia—of history and source material, and refers to numerous writers, artists, and literary and philosophical works. In the process of translation, I have attempted to aid nonspecialist readers by incorporating explanatory material into the text and by adding glosses in the notes. So as not to encumber the text, I have explicitly acknowledged my contributions only in cases where I have made more substantial comments that go beyond the simple explanation of a term or introduction of a person or text. At the same time, I have not wished to sacrifice the brevity and unity of Li Zehou’s text by turning it into a veritable encyclopedia of Chinese culture—such is the breadth and scope of material the work encompasses. I hope that I have struck the right balance here, and that specialist and nonspecialist readers alike will be able to follow the broad contours of Li’s argument without getting lost in the details.

Suggested Readings


