

International Congress of Aesthetics 2007 “Aesthetics Bridging Cultures”

The Beautiful in the Presence: A Phenomenological Interpretation of Traditional Chinese Aesthetics¹

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What is the beautiful? If we take the beautiful as aesthetic object, from the perspective of traditional Chinese aesthetics, we can say the beautiful is the appearing, that is, to borrow terminology of Chinese aesthetics, the *Xiang* (象). Here the *Xiang* cannot be understood as figure, form, or contour line as what it is usually taken to be. The *Xiang* should be interpreted as the common act of viewing and viewed, or seeing and manifesting, which is the dynamic state of appearing or perceiving.

A story

Let's begin with a story.

There is a story recorded in Wang Yangming's *Instructions for Practical Living* (*Chuanxilu*, 传习录), which can help us to understand what the *Xiang* means:

The master (Wang Yangming, 1472-1529) was roaming in Nanzhen (the Kuaiji Mountain in present Zhejiang Province, 浙江会稽山). A friend pointed to a flowering tree on a cliff and said, “[You say] there is nothing under heaven external to the mind. This flowering tree on the high mountain blossoms and drops its blossoms of itself. What has it to do with my mind?” The master said, “Before you look at this flower tree, it and your mind are in the state of silent vacancy. As you come to look at it, its colors at once appear clearly and vividly. From this you can know that this flower tree is not external to your mind.”

From ordinary perspective, the dialogue between Wang Yangming and his friend seems to be quite strange. In our everyday life, we usually neither have the idea of “flower in the state of silent vacancy”, nor the idea of “flower appearing clearly and vividly”. The cognitive function automatically conceptualizes the flower with the name of peachblossom, pearblossom, chrysanthemum, cottonrose, azalea, and so on, which can be easily found on the mountain where Wang and his friends roamed.

Let us suppose the flowering tree which Wang Yangming and his friend looked at is cottonrose. Now we properly have three kinds of cottonrose: cottonrose in the state of silent vacancy, cottonrose appearing clearly and vividly, and cottonrose with the name “cottonrose”. We use “the cottonrose with the name ‘cottonrose’” to denote the result of cottonrose's appearing, that is, the representation or knowledge of cottonrose.

In short, the three kinds of cottonrose can be named cottonrose-in-itself, cottonrose-in-

appearing, and cottonrose-as-representation. According to Chinese aesthetics, the beautiful or aesthetic object is not any cottonrose-in-itself or cottonrose-as-representation, but all cottonrose-in-appearing. Cottonrose-in-appearing, to borrow terminology of Chinese aesthetics, is the *Xiang* (象) or *Yixiang* (意象) of cottonrose.

Differentiation

What is the difference between cottonrose-in-itself, cottonrose-in-appearing, and cottonrose-as-representation? Let us look away from metaphysical perspectives and comply with our ordinary experience. The cottonrose-in-itself is a kind of tree. It is, for example, a tree three meters high, with complicated branches, green broadleaves, and pink flowers. We can take count of the number of the branches, touch the trunk, smell the flowers, and taste the leaves if we like. We can also find many other properties in the cottonrose-in-itself, whether we know its name is cottonrose or not. This kind of cottonrose can exist outside one's mind, and might be "in the state of silent vacancy".

The cottonrose-in-appearing is the cottonrose in our perception or the perceived cottonrose, to borrow Wang Yangming's terminology, the cottonrose appearing in the mind. When Wang said "there is nothing under heaven external to the mind," he appropriately pointed out that we only have the cottonrose appearing in the mind. We cannot have the cottonrose-in-itself. It seems not very difficult for us to agree with Wang Yangming, since we cannot know anything before we perceive it. But the cottonrose-in-appearing should not be misunderstood as something totally created by the mind. Here the mind should be understood as a "mirror", the metaphor we can easily find in the text of Zen Buddhism, with which the cottonrose manifests itself. So in many respects the cottonrose-in-appearing is very close to the cottonrose-in-itself. The only difference is the former is a perceived object and the latter is a presumed physical or natural object.²

Actually Wang Yangming did not cancel the cottonrose-in-itself but transformed it into the cottonrose-in-appearing. In our ordinary experience it seems quite definite that we have the cottonrose-in-itself, because we can see, touch, smell, and perhaps taste, if we like, it. What is the main difference between our ordinary opinion and Wang Yangming's profound insight? From Wang Yangming's perspective, which is mostly based on Zen Buddhist metaphysics, the cottonrose-in-itself in ordinary experience is not the real cottonrose-in-itself but the representations or illusions of cottonrose. We usually take some kinds of representation of cottonrose as the cottonrose-in-itself. For example, today we are likely to take the scientific representation of cottonrose as the cottonrose-in-itself, because modern science is often dominant and privileged over other ideologies. The scientific representation is not the cottonrose-in-itself but the modern botanist knowledge of cottonrose. We have other representations of cottonrose, that is, for example, Chinese traditional herbalist knowledge. From different perspectives we can get different representations or knowledge of cottonrose. The privileged representation or knowledge of cottonrose are often mistaken as the cottonrose-in-itself.

What is the difference between the cottonrose-in-appearing and the cottonrose-as-representation? As to the cottonrose-in-appearing, Wang Yangming simply said "its colors at once appear clearly and vividly." He did not say he saw a different kind of color or even a different tree. Let us presume that we can see the same kind of color, for example, pink, on the cottonrose in the moment. The difference between what Wang Yangming saw and a botanist or herbalist sees is not different kinds of color, that is, for example, the

difference between pink and red, but different states of the same color, that is, the difference between a pink in the state of vividly appearing and a pink in the state of silent vacancy or a pink in the state of determined knowledge. As we noted earlier, a pink in the state of silent vacancy is not a perceived object. However, a pink in the state of determined knowledge should be a perceived object. Since both a pink in the state of vividly appearing and a pink in the state of determined knowledge are perceived object, one can rightly ask the question what is the difference between them. Briefly speaking, a pink in the state of determined knowledge was a perceived object, but now it is transformed into a speculated or abstract object which is not vivid and clear but determined and distinctive. We can think of a speculated object without the presence of our perceiving. On the contrary, a pink in the state of vividly appearing can hold or last in the state of appearing, and our perception can linger in the state of perceiving, therefore the appearing would be not transformed into any representation, and the perception would be not transformed into any knowledge. It seems appropriate for us to take Nelson Goodman's theory of languages of art to characterize the state of appearing. The five characters which Goodman had taken to characterize art works, that is, syntactic density, semantic density, relative repleteness, exemplification, and multiple and complex reference, are suitable to characterize the state of appearing.³

Ontological status

What kind of thing is the appearing? Is it a physical object, ideal kind, or imaginary entity? Western philosophies teach us two kinds of division of ontological categories: physical object that exists in the out world and imaginary object that exists in the inner mind; or concrete object that exists spatio-temporally and abstract object that exists non-spatio-temporally. However, such divisions seem to leave no room for the appearing. The appearing is not a physical object, but, it is also not an imaginary object. Similarly, it is not a concrete object, but, it is also not an abstract object. Here either/or is not the case. If we have only these divisions of ontological categories, we cannot find a satisfactory answer to the question what kind of thing is the appearing. Perhaps we need a new division of ontological categories, but this task apparently lies outside the reach of this paper.

Aesthetic reduction

Why is it that Wang Yangming could see the appearing of cottonrose but a botanist or herbalist cannot? Is it because Wang Yangming observed the cottonrose more carefully than a botanist or herbalist? No, Wang Yangming could not observe the cottonrose carefully as he was roaming in the mountain and saw the flower subsidiarily. The work of the botanist and herbalist requires high concentration on the cottonrose. They must scrutinize every minute detail and particularities more carefully than Wang Yangming. Nonetheless, the botanist or herbalist would not see the cottonrose-in-appearing. Wang Yangming did, although he did not observe the tree carefully. Distraction rather than concentration is needed, in order to see the cottonrose-in-appearing.⁴ This is a traditional Chinese wisdom. As Laozi said, "The pursuit of learning is to increase day after day. The pursuit of *Dao* is to decrease day after day."⁵ To reach the knowledge we need to increase. To reach the appearing we need to decrease. What we need to increase in pursuing learning is the same with what we need to decrease in pursuing the *Dao*, that is, human intelligences and desires. As Laozi (老子) said:

Abandon sageliness and discard wisdom; then the people will benefit a hundredfold. Abandon humanity and discard righteousness; then the people will return to filial piety and deep love. Abandon skill and discard profit; then there will be no thieves or robbers. However, these three things are ornament (*wen*) and not adequate. Therefore let people hold on to these: manifest plainness, embrace simplicity, reduce selfishness, have few desires.⁶

Wang Yangming did see the cottonrose-in-appearing because he was roaming in the mountain. In that time, he did not do any research as a botanist or herbalist usually does; he did not think of any interests as ordinary people usually do. A botanist or herbalist can also see the cottonrose-in-appearing, but he cannot linger in the state of perceiving and the cottonrose-in-appearing is immediately transformed into the cottonrose-as-representation. For one to linger in perceiving, he needs to be distracted and abolish restrictions from habits, knowledge, and desires. This distraction, to borrow terminology of Chinese aesthetics, is *uplifting* (*xing*, 兴). Wang Fuzhi (王夫之, 1619-1692) said:

He who can be uplifted emotionally and spiritually (*xing*, 兴) is a heroic character. Such uplifting resembles the life that is originated from the vital energy (*qi*, 气). In contrast, he who just adapts himself to the social environment so passively by means of conformity without making any distinction between right and wrong is a different being. For he would toil day and night but fail to go beyond his confinement to such things as social status, private property, daily necessities and family routine together with his wife, children, etc. As time passes by, he would become frustrated and less ambitious to the extent that he looked up to the sky but failed to see its height, and looked down at the earth but failed to see its thickness. He seemed to be dreaming when awake, and be blind when glancing around, and similarly, his mind would be inactive even when his limbs were busy all the time. This being the case, he could not be uplifted at all. Therefore the sage would make the most of the education through poetry in order to purify the mind of such spiritual corruption and to help the person get rid of his slackness, hoping to transform him into a heroic character and eventually into a worthy man with sageliness. This is in fact an important task intended to save the *Dao* of humanity out of the chaos of the world.

For Wang Fuzhi, the very defining character of poetry is its function to make one uplifting and to keep one lingering in direct perception. Wang Fuzhi used *pratyaksa* (*xiangliang*, 现量), a term borrowed from Buddhism, to denote this direct perception. *Pratyaksa*, as Wang Fuzhi understood, can be construed into three meanings: 1) present (*xianzai*, 现在); 2) immediately made (*xiancheng*, 现成); and 3) manifesting the truth (*xianxian zhenshi*, 显现真实). "Present" means what does not come from the past; "immediately made" means direct perception without reflection; and "manifesting the truth" means to let a thing exist as itself without fabrication.

Actually the subject's uplifting is the same dynamic state with the object's appearing. Both unveil the interwinded origination of subject and object. If one wants to be a hero or sage, he should reach the bottom of his existence through aesthetic education and base his personality on it. Only one who reaches the depth of his existence, can he see the appearing, and so find truth, of things.

A summary of Mikel Dufrenne's phenomenological aesthetics

The most important part of Dufrenne's aesthetics seems to be his theory of the aesthetic object. In *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, the first part on aesthetic object is the longest and perhaps the most important part among the four parts of the book. Like

Roman Ingarden and other phenomenologists, Dufrenne distinguished between the work of art and the aesthetic object, which are usually confused with one another in many aesthetic theories. According to Dufrenne, the work of art is the preduring structural foundation for the aesthetic object. It has a constant being which is not dependent on being experienced, while "the aesthetic object is an object which is essentially perceived. This means that it is destined to be perceived and is completed only in perception."⁷ But, it does not mean that the aesthetic object is created by the subject. Aesthetic object as perceived object "exists not only as lived by me but as independent from me, refusing the complicity which binds it to me in perception and urging on me an objectifying attitude which upholds the truth of its objective being."⁸ If the aesthetic object is not totally created by the subject, then its presence should be signifying, and "there is a truth in this signification which lingers at the horizon of the presence and invites us to grasp it."⁹ It is that Dufrenne insisted a truth embodied in the presence of aesthetic object makes his theory very different from Ingarden's theory. So the difference between the art work and the aesthetic object is that the later is just the appearing of the former.

The aesthetic object compels us to maintain two propositions which spell out the formula 'in-itself-for-us.' On the one hand, there is a being of the aesthetic object which forbids its reduction to the being of a representation. On the other hand, this being is dependent on perception and is attained in it, for the being at stake here is an appearance.¹⁰

However, the autonomy of the aesthetic object needs the witnesses of its spectators to confirm it. The aesthetic object needs us to complete it, since "the aesthetic object is completed only in the consciousness of the spectator."¹¹ The aesthetic object is the object "whose presence is indubitable because I am present to it."¹² That is to say, the aesthetic object can only appear itself in aesthetic perception. But, aesthetic perception is different from ordinary perception. Dufrenne wrote:

Aesthetic perception is, in effect, the most distinctive and uncluttered type of perception. It wants to be only perception, refusing to be seduced either by imagination, which invites one to muse about the actual object, or by understanding, which tempts one to reduce the object to conceptual determinations in order to master it. Ordinary perception, always tempted to become intellectualized as soon as it reaches the level of representation, seeks a truth *on* the object, which eventually provides a basis for praxis. It also seeks this truth *around* the object, in relation uniting it to other objects. Aesthetic perception, in contrast, seeks truth *of* the object, such as it is immediately given *in* the sensuous. The spectator, being completely responsive, gives himself over without reservation to the manifestation of the object. The perceptual intention culminates in a kind of alienation comparable to that of the creator who sacrifices himself to the demands of the creation. One might venture to say that, in its purest moment, aesthetic experience fulfills the phenomenological reduction.¹³

According to Dufrenne, the presence of the sensuous is something shared by the spectator and by the aesthetic object: "the sensuous is an act common both to the person who feels and to what is felt."¹⁴ Aesthetic experience manifests the depth of both subject and object and their pre-reflective relationship, "because in this experience object and subject are not yet distinguished."¹⁵ So, Dufrenne endowed the aesthetic experience with the foundational role as "the beginning of all thought and the root of all truth."¹⁶

Conclusion

The thoughts on aesthetic object and aesthetic experience from traditional Chinese aesthetics, which we just outlined above, are close to Mikel Dufrenne's phenomenological aesthetics in several respects. First, both recognize that aesthetic object is not a special kind of thing, for example, the thing with special form or content,

but a special state of thing, that is, the state of appearing. Second, both agree aesthetic experience is not a special kind of experience or emotion, for example, pleasure, but a dimension of experience beneath any kind of experience, that is, the lingering, distracting, uplifting which are not yet determined by or transformed into any abstraction, such as habits, concepts, knowledge, and so on. Third, both presume a common origination of subject and object, that is, to borrow terminology of Chinese philosophy, the oneness of man and nature, where subject and object, or man and nature, reveal each other on the one hand, and limit each other on the other hand. This common origination is the dynamic harmony in which many dichotomies such as subject and object, man and nature, being and nonbeing, and so on reach their reconciliation.

¹ I am greatly indebted to Prof. Wang Keping for his English translation of my quoted materials of traditional Chinese aesthetics.

² See Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, trans. E.S. Casey and etc. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 218-222.

³ Nelson Goodman, "When is Art?" in *The Nature of Art: An Anthology*, ed. T.E. Wartenberg (San Francisco: Wadsworth, 2001), 200-208.

⁴ A suggestive analysis of "distraction" or "entertainment", see Richard Shusterman, "Entertainment: A Question for Aesthetics", *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 43 (2003): 289-307.

⁵ *Laozi*, par. 48.

⁶ *Laozi*, par. 19.

⁷ Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, Edward Casey etc trans. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 218.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 221.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 222.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 223.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 204.

¹² *Ibid.*, 221.

¹³ Mikel Dufrenne, *In the Presence of the Sensuous: Essay in Aesthetics*, Mark Roberts etc trans. (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1990), 4-5

¹⁴ Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, 225.

¹⁵ Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, 221.

¹⁶ Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, 222.

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