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Report: The XVIIIth International Congress of Aesthetics- "Diversities in Aesthetics" (Peking University, Beijing, China, 9-13 August 2010)

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Report: The XVIIIth International Congress of Aesthetics- "Diversities in Aesthetics" (Peking University, Beijing, China, 9-13 August 2010)

Michael Ranta

For about one century now, the international association of aesthetics has organized eighteen congresses all over the world, in Europe, Asia, and North and South America. The first congress took place in Berlin in 1913, the second one in Paris in 1937, while, interrupted by the Second World War and its aftermath, those from 1956 onwards began to take place at four-year intervals.[1] These congresses were initiated by the *Comité International d'Esthétique*, consisting of prominent scholars in aesthetics, such as Mikel Dufrenne, Harold Osborne, Luigi Pareyson, Tomonobu Imamichi, Milan Damnjanovic, and Thomas Munro. However in 1988, the *International Association for Aesthetics* (IAA) was established, having a formal constitution which included membership for national societies and individual scholars and specified election procedures for IAA's officers and its executive committee.[2] Under the auspices of the IAA most of the congresses afterwards took place at three-year intervals: in Madrid (1992), Lahti, Finland (1995), Ljubljana, Slovenia (1998), Tokyo (2001), Rio de Janeiro (2004), and in Ankara (2007).

The most recent congress was held on 9-13 August at Peking University in Beijing, P.R. China, organized by the IAA together with the university and Beijing Municipal Education Commission.[3] Whereas the previous congress in Ankara had about 400 participants, as many as 1000 active participants attended the five-day congress in Beijing, about 400 of them stemming from China itself (with about 200 additional Chinese attendees). The attention and interest which the congress received, not least within China, was certainly remarkable, and the fact that Yuan Guiren, the Chinese minister of education, gave one of the opening speeches was significant.



Opening ceremony of the congress.

Peking University, which has one of the best reputations in China (and indeed is ranked as no. 47 on the QS University Ranking List),^[4] and its campus provided an excellent setting for the congress. Numerous shops and restaurants were available, and park and garden areas with lakes invited relaxing strolls. Moreover, the university also hosts several museums, and the architectural setting consists of modern buildings as well as traditional Chinese houses and pagodas. Beijing itself, having more than 20 million inhabitants, can sometimes be densely crowded and busy, so the campus area felt something like an oasis in the middle of this huge city.



Park area on the university campus.

In general, I experienced the atmosphere on this beautiful campus as very friendly and peaceful. Most of the participants were accommodated in university residential facilities and hotels nearby (at subsidized prices), and so the conference locations were quite easily accessible.

As for the conference itself, I must admit that I and, as I heard later, some other delegates had initial worries over its practical and organizational realization, but these doubts were completely assuaged. The congress website with its call for papers, launched at the end of 2009, was certainly promising. Ten main topics were suggested:

1. The global and the local: Western and non-Western aesthetics
2. The definition of art and the analysis of concepts of art
3. Conflicts and interactions between cultural studies and aesthetics
4. The relationship between aesthetics and philosophy, ethics, psychology, or anthropology, etc.
5. The relationship between aesthetics and forms of art, such as music, painting, sculpture, architecture, calligraphy, movie, and design, etc.
6. The relationship between aesthetics and nature/environment/ecology

7. The relationship between aesthetics and economy, society, and politics
8. Aesthetics and aesthetic education
9. Aesthetics: historical traditions and modernization
10. Aesthetics: information technology and the cyber-space

As is customary, information about the congress fee (200 USD) as well as instructions for the abstracts and the presentations etc. were included, the latter with a suggested length of 30 minutes, including 10 minutes for discussion. The initial website ceased to work after a while, and no connection to it could be made. After about two months this site was replaced by another one, which was much more elaborate, but where some of the function buttons did not work. Moreover, the communication by email to the executive staff proved to be difficult, expected answers were often much delayed, and hotel reservations and payments in advance proved in several cases to be difficult, even impossible, demanding a lot of time-consuming correspondence. So my initial worries were perhaps understandable, but they proved in the end to be unnecessary. The XVIIIth International Congress of Aesthetics, I would say, turned out to be a great success!

The registration procedure at the beginning of the congress proceeded very smoothly at various locations and with the help of innumerable student volunteers who, in my own experience, usually had very good English skills.

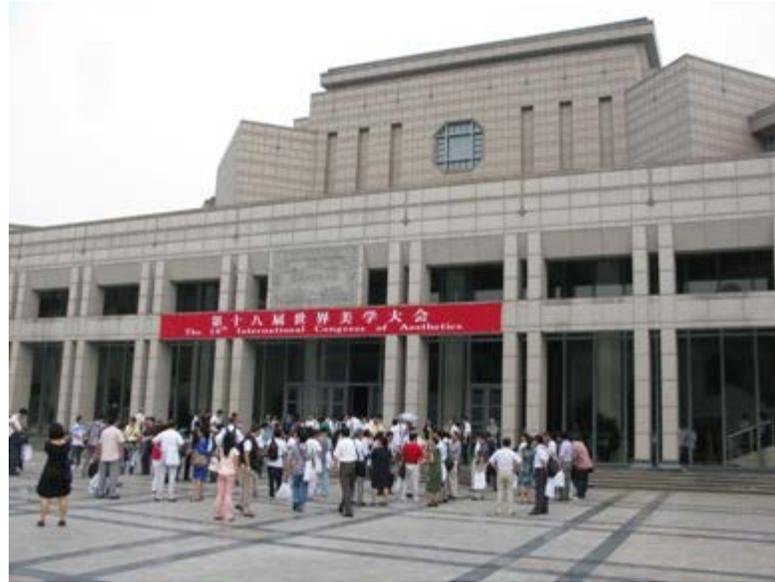


One of the registration desks with student volunteers.

Each participant received a strong cloth bag containing a book with all abstracts (the size of a phone book!), a set of errata and corrections, a beautifully designed booklet about Chinese aesthetics, information about artistic events, and free lunch/dinner vouchers for all congress days. The enthusiastic and responsive assistance of the volunteers here was outstanding, as well as at the other locations, such as lunch/dinner places, during the cultural events, and at the congress venues in general, and contributed to a large extent to the friendly atmosphere during the congress! Their efforts

undoubtedly deserve respect and much gratitude!

One of the larger university buildings functioned as the main venue for the presentations, so it was quite easy to get from one session to another without any noteworthy delay.



Peking University Hall, venue for the opening ceremony and the dance performance.

The session rooms were bright, modern and functional, with up-to-date technical equipment. The various presentations were, as usual, structured as plenary or panel sessions and (more or less coherent) thematic paper sections with a great variety of topics, certainly doing justice to the congress title, "Diversities in Aesthetics." These included, for example, analytic as well as continental aesthetics and philosophy, art education, architecture and urban planning, music, cinema, environmental aesthetics, literary theory, neuroscience and psychology of art, contemporary art, Marxist aesthetics, calligraphy, history of aesthetics, and digital art. Notable was also the occurrence of numerous sections on dance aesthetics, which usually have not been as prominent in other IAA congresses of aesthetics I have attended so far. Illustrations 1-3 show so-called "word clouds," which reveal the emphasis put on certain issues presented during the congress. The size of a word in each of these visualizations is proportional to the number of times the word appears in the input text, in this case the most common nouns and predicates in the titles of all presentations. In cloud 2, I have filtered out "Aesthetics", "aesthetic", and "Art". In cloud 3, I've filtered out "Chinese", "China", and "Dance."

prevented most of the Chinese presentations from being translated simultaneously, and so they were incomprehensible to most foreign participants. (This, I have been told, is a common difficulty at international congresses.) This was unfortunate, as the titles show that a great number of them might have given non-Chinese listeners substantial and important insights into Chinese culture and artistic practices. However, there were numerous possibilities for informal meetings and inspiring discussions besides the actual lecture sessions. Apart from meetings at the congress venues and during the lunches, two large banquets with exquisite Chinese cuisine were arranged. One especially noteworthy highlight of the congress took place one afternoon when bus excursions to the Forbidden City and to the Qing emperors' Summer Palace, respectively, took place and also provided many opportunities for discussion. Another cultural highpoint was an aesthetically absolutely overwhelming dance performance one evening by members of the Beijing Dance Academy.





Moreover, at the university library an exhibition took place showing traditional Chinese arts and crafts, as well as calligraphy. At the congress's main venue, another exhibition of contemporary (though, I think, hardly controversial) Chinese painting could also be seen.

To conclude I would say that this congress was well-organized.

It provided many opportunities for stimulating intellectual and personal meetings, as well as outstanding aesthetic experiences, and it had a generally friendly and open-minded atmosphere. In these respects, the Beijing congress indeed met the high standards already set at the exceptionally well-arranged congresses in Tokyo 2001 and in Ankara 2007. All of the presentations will be issued on a CD, while a selection of them will be published in book form. Hopefully, these publications will also include translations of (at least some of) the Chinese presentations into English. So there is every reason to congratulate the congress organizers, most notably perhaps, Gao Jianping, Peng Feng, Ye Lang, and Zhu Liangzhi, and all the other persons involved, not least the student volunteers, on this very successful gathering. The next International Congress of Aesthetics will take place in Kraków, Poland in 2013.[5]

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Endnotes

[1] Venice 1956, Athens 1960, Amsterdam 1964, Uppsala 1968, Bucharest 1972, Darmstadt 1976, Dubrovnik 1980, Montreal

1984, Nottingham 1988.

[2] Further information about the IAA can be obtained at its website: <http://www2.eur.nl/fw/hyper/IAA/>

[3] Website of the congress:
http://www.caae.pku.edu.cn/ica2010/List/List_426.html

[4] <http://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings/2010/results>

[5] I would like to thank Jos de Mul and Arnold Berleant, who both were participants at the congress, for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this report.