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Aesthetics Studies of Chinese Leisure Culture

Liyong Pan

Abstract

Given the present situation and problems of the research on contemporary China's leisure culture and aesthetics, it is the highest priority of leisure studies to make leisure return to the nature of human self-creation and self-improvement; to learn to intelligently spend leisure time in the realm of aesthetics; to deeply examine and carry forward the national tradition and wisdom of Chinese leisure; and to establish a modern leisure culture and theory with Chinese characteristics and Chinese discourse.

Meanwhile, it is the highest priority of aesthetic research to transcend the tradition of discussing abstract concepts and focusing only on art; to enter the daily life of contemporary society and more actively meet the needs of social development; to make it more realistic and play its social and cultural role more effectively; and to transform aesthetics from the pure theory of audio-visual arts into the vivid learning of the unity of body and mind. In this sense, aesthetic research on contemporary leisure culture helps to improve the quality of contemporary life and is of important theoretical significance and practical value. So, it is necessary for contemporary Chinese aesthetics to include leisure and to guide the leisure culture. Consequently, leisure aesthetics should be an important and necessary part of contemporary Chinese aesthetics, and it is the inevitable requirement of history and reality to thoroughly and systematically construct Chinese leisure aesthetics.

Key Words

aesthetics; leisure aesthetics; leisure culture; theoretical construction

1. Introduction

Ten years ago, the author put forward in an article the intrinsic, inevitable relationship between leisure and aesthetic. Fundamentally speaking, leisure is a state of human self-dependent life and free feeling. Thus self-dependence, freedom, and self-actualization are the core features of leisure; so are the aesthetic activity's most essential principles. The aesthetic activity is the highest level and the main way of leisure. Therefore, leisure culture should be studied from the perspective of aesthetic thinking to grasp the essence of leisure culture and reveal its inner state. Meanwhile, aesthetics should be understood from the perspective of the inner state of leisure to make aesthetics go deeper into the practice fields and fully display its humanistic and practical value. The former is the aesthetics of the survival state, and the latter is the leisure lifestyle of the aesthetic realm. In sum, as the ideal state of life leisure and aesthetic activity have the common nature of human self-dependent life and free feeling.^[1]

The following issues deserve academic concern and research

for the theoretical construction of Chinese leisure culture and leisure aesthetics.

2. Research on aesthetics and leisure from the perspective of humanistic philosophy and humanistic psychology

The intrinsic relationships between aesthetics, leisure, and the survival state should be analyzed. The essential principle of leisure and aesthetics, human self-dependent life, and free feeling should be revealed. And finally, the nature meaning of aesthetics and leisure in the ideal state of society and human survival should be clarified.

The concept of leisure is frequently used in daily life. It is also easy for people to have prejudices on the concept of leisure. For instance, surfing the Chinese Leisure Website, we see the content is roughly about the sauna, pedicure, and so on. It seems that the leisure activity and leisure culture are mainly these kinds of recreation. In fact, it is a kind of bias to the leisure culture because of a lack of understanding of the profound humanistic value of leisure culture. Therefore, it is difficult for scholars to dispel those prejudices and to make leisure theory of aesthetic value by going beyond the general application of leisure activities and phenomenon and revealing its humanistic philosophy and psychological basis. But we should do that. We should make clear that leisure is one of the ideal states of human life and a process of a human being's self-improvement, and that leisure is a means of not only looking for happiness but also of seeking for the meaning of life. At the same time, we should distinguish intelligent and reasonable leisure from simple or negative leisure or pleasure to reveal the ideal leisure state.

Leisure is not only an absolute measure of society but a kind of relative attitude towards life. Absolute social measure refers to the absolute level of social economic development. If the development of productivity has not been able to provide enough free time and economic base, people's leisure lacks the necessary external conditions. But the wisdom of having appropriate leisure is that people can break through the limit of the absolute measure by adjusting their attitude towards life and get relative freedom of the spirit in their present situation, and thus into the leisure realm of life. That is a kind of relative attitude towards life. From the perspective of humanistic philosophy, the natural existence of a human being depends on the emergence of the original world, that is to say, human, authentic feeling towards the world. The significance of the world for people depends on people's free feeling towards the world. After all, self-dependent life is authentic life, and free feeling is authentic experience. though we may not be able to change the reality, we can get free mind space and to the ideal life realm by adjusting our attitude towards life. So besides focusing on the development of the material world and improving the material level in order to enhance the external environment of living, we also can't ignore self-regulating and self-upgrading in spiritual realm.

Given the many examples of people trapped because of too much money or idle time, money and spare time isn't a sufficient condition for enjoying appropriate leisure. Therefore, even being not very well off, people can still keep a happy

state of mind in their specific environment, and that is appropriate leisure. In that case, relative attitude towards life plays an important even decisive role.

3. Research on the situation and promotion in the form of aesthetics of contemporary Chinese leisure culture

First, the contemporary Chinese spiritual state about leisure, such as leisure needs, leisure ideas, leisure psychology, and leisure experience, should be studied. Second, contemporary Chinese behavioral phenomenon about leisure, such as leisure activities and leisure patterns, should be studied. Third, contemporary Chinese social and economic phenomenon about leisure, such as leisure industries, such as leisure tourism, culture entertainment, and leisure sports, and leisure consumption is also worth our attention. And finally, there is the research on the phenomenon at the ontological level about the relationship between leisure and living, in addition to leisure and the life value. By means of the above research, we can draw the outline of the trajectory and trend of development of the leisure culture in contemporary China to analyze problems and put forward suggestions. Especially, we should pay attention to the aesthetic meaning in the development of leisure culture, and reveal the theoretical value and practical significance of the aesthetics on promoting leisure culture.

The vigorous development of present China's leisure culture greatly improves and enriches the spiritual life both socially and nationally, but there is a negative phenomenon: improper leisure and the alienation of leisure consumption. Overall, the negative impact of the leisure life is caused by the process of so-called modernization, including materialization, monetization, technicalization, digitization, and virtualization, and by the process of globalization that mixes negative factors of traditional Western and Eastern cultures. So, although the development of present China's leisure culture helps people to enjoy a more colorful life, it also leads people into sort of spirit predicament that then leads to a kind of alienation: one-dimensional, objectifying, and false. It treats leisure as purely sensual pleasure or vanity symbols, drowning in the perceptual materialized world and chasing sensual pleasures, with no rational thinking or understanding of art and life. As a result, in being overly satisfied with sensual pleasures, and even with vanity, people are willing to be slaves of their senses and of material symbols. Meanwhile, people are unconsciously losing their abilities of judgment, contemplation, and criticism. The true meaning of leisure is lost in the desire for material possessions. Therefore, how to enjoy appropriate leisure has become a hot topic, of mutual interest to social scholars and common people.

It's necessary to dialectically analyze the multiple influences of leisure activities and culture on society and life. Besides affirming that appropriate leisure is the premise of self-actualization and the symbol of social civilization, we should analyze the alienation phenomena in the process of leisure development and evolution. We should also analyze the historical, social, and psychological reasons for the alienation of mentality, and for ways of leisure and consumption, and the two-facedness of leisure and consumption. Leisure activities

may be elegant or vulgar, even evil sometimes; this deserves our attention. Thus, negative effects of consumption alienation should be revealed, and appropriate leisure should be separated from negative and idle recreation to make the ideal leisure realm clear. We will discuss the possibility and necessity of improving leisure activities and culture by means of aesthetic attitude and realm, and the realistic possibility of a healthy leisure culture as the way of specific aesthetic education. By exploring ways to dispel the alienation phenomenon in leisure by means of the aesthetic salvation, we expect to provide some theory of value and practical significance for people to enjoy their leisure reasonably and wisely.

At present, it's necessary and vital to improve the leisure culture by means of aesthetics. Because leisure activity is actually a kind of life experience, in leisure people should possess a healthy mentality and aesthetic consciousness and measure in order to perceive things in this experience.

What leisure aesthetics advocates is that the leisure life should be transformed from its purposeless external form into a purposeful authentic life experience to reflect its noble, positive aesthetic value and encourage human life activities into a higher level of value and significance. Indeed, research on leisure in aesthetic terms is based on the purposeless finality of aesthetic activities that has the effect of making people liberate and release themselves. In accordance with that, leisure aesthetics is concerned about the survival of mankind, concerned with people, and showing the aesthetic characteristics of an uplifted life and liberation of personality. Leisure aesthetics play an important role in supporting and protecting human spiritual life, overcoming negative cultural erosion, and promoting people's free development. Therefore, it is important to fully study leisure culture from the aesthetic perspective; thoroughly explain the meaning of the leisure and aesthetics; analyze the aesthetic elements of leisure culture; and express the theoretical and practical significance of aesthetic consciousness, aesthetic measure, and the aesthetic realm to promote leisure culture.

4. Research on the practical character and application value of the leisure aesthetics

As the humanistic foundation of the experience economy and cultural industry, aesthetics and leisure have a positive meaning in developing harmonious entrepreneurship, building a harmonious society, and improving quality of contemporary life.

Leisure activity is the intermediary and carrier that connects spiritual experience and practical industry because leisure activity itself is a kind of experience, and its carrier is a kind of industry. To satisfy people's mental demand at a high level, the product of leisure activities has a huge added spiritual value, so that leisure activities and its carrier become the experience economy and aesthetic economy. Therefore, by integrating aesthetics and industry, aesthetic activities will be combined with the actual reality and manifest its humanistic and industrial value by means of leisure experience and consumption—the humanistic foundation and the soul of cultural industry—and lay the realistic foundation of an

aesthetic economy. It should be noted that leisure is a very specific and realistic way of people's life and activity, and its carrier relates to various industrial types, so leisure aesthetics has strong applicability. The research on leisure activity should rely on quantifying and empirical data rather than stay in speculation and abstract argument. As for specific research places of Chinese leisure aesthetics, Hangzhou, Chengdu, and other cities, where leisure activities were carried out earlier and the leisure industry developed rapidly, are good examples. Using these cases, we should meticulously study the realistic value of leisure and aesthetic activities and ideas from the perspective of improving the quality of contemporary life, and realize the connection of the theory and practice of the leisure economy.

5. Comparative research on Chinese and foreign aesthetic and leisure theory and wisdom and, in particular, exploring leisure culture and aesthetic wisdom of Chinese elements and Chinese discourse

We should analyze the theory and wisdom of Chinese and foreign aesthetics and leisure, and their value, to enhance the quality of contemporary life and build a harmonious society. In that way we can also provide theoretical resources for the construction of a contemporary Chinese leisure aesthetics. And in order to establish a real theoretical system with Chinese characteristics, we should particularly explore the Chinese discourse of leisure culture and leisure aesthetics.

A wealth of reasonable leisure wisdom, which has important practical significance for improving the quality of modern life and especially for life experience satisfaction, lies in the ancient and modern leisure concepts and theories. We should make a comparison between Chinese and Western leisure cultures from the perspective of globalization, and combine the development of Chinese and Western leisure cultures and their influence on contemporary leisure cultures, and then explore the traditional genius of contemporary leisure culture. In doing so, we should pay special attention to the historical and practical reasons for the Western leisure culture, development of its theory, and colonization. We should explore leisure culture and the aesthetic wisdom of Chinese elements and Chinese discourse in order to have dialogue with Western leisure culture and theory, and to establish a local discourse of contemporary Chinese leisure culture and leisure aesthetics theory. More specifically, contemporary Chinese leisure culture and aesthetic research should learn from traditional wisdom and concepts, such as *Xian*(leisure), *Shi*(fitness), *Yi*(appropriateness), *Du*(degree), *Zhong* (moderation), *He*(harmony), *Le Sheng* (the joy of life), *Ge De Qi Fen* (each performs its own nature), *Wan Wu Shi Qing*(play for returning to one's nature), and *Xun Le Shun Hua* (learning joyfully by doing naturally), and also the theoretical description of *Ben Ti*(the original Being of life, or ontology), *Gong Fu*(life practice) and *Jing Jie* (ideal life realm). Therefore, the local characteristics and theoretical discourse of Chinese leisure culture and its aesthetic research and theoretical construction will be formed in the future.

Different from the ideas and discourse systems of the traditional Western philosophy that focused on abstract conception and logical form, what the traditional Chinese philosophy emphasized was the system of *Bent Ti-Gong*

Fu-Jing Jie, and, different from the purely rational philosophy, Chinese philosophy was a practical learning of the unity of body and mind. According to Chinese traditional leisure philosophy, the *Ben Ti* of leisure was the moderate *Xian*, in which each performed its own nature, and each experienced the ideal realm of "follow what my heart desired, without transgressing what was right." (Confucius: *Confucian Analects*) Moreover, the *Gong Fu* of the leisure was *Shi*, referring to living moderately and reaching the realm of *Wu Xian* (let nature take its course) by means of *Xin Shi* (a fit state of mind), the deep meaning of which was that people enjoyed leisure life in the current situation after moderate satisfaction of physical and mental desires. Finally, based on the *Ben Ti* of *Xian*, the *Jing Jie* of leisure, as well as aesthetics, was clarified by means of the *Gong Fu* of *Shi*. And the traditional leisure aesthetic realm (*Jing Jie*) is divided into three kinds, the escapist realm, the harmonious realm, and the self-actualized realm. Among those, the latter was at the highest level.^[2]

Xian has been viewed as the original value and significance of life in Chinese traditional ideas and, therefore, the *Gong Fu* of the leisure (*Xian*) has put emphasis on inward regulation. In the traditional Chinese philosopher's view, leisure depended on intrinsic spiritual character. Relative to the *Shen Xian* (physical leisure), the *Xin Xian* (mental leisure) had more fundamental meaning, and the so-called inward regulation referred to self-adjustment of mind. Mencius said those who couldn't be successful should introspect themselves (*Mencius*). In the Chinese concept of leisure, this inward reflection of the cultural and psychological structure was expressed by the *Gong Fu* of *Shi*. The reason for this was that *Shi* had the meaning of "only" and "just right" from *Zhi*. *Zhou Yi* had explained humanity for *Wen Ming Yi Zhi*, and *Zhu Xi* had regarded this *Zhi* as *Ge De Qi Fen* (each performs its own nature) (*Zhou Yi Ben Ji*), which we now say "just right." So, the meaning of *Shi* was mixed with achievement, satisfaction, moderateness, and so on. As the *Gong Fu* of the leisure, *Shi* was mainly about living moderately and performing one's own nature, so that people enjoyed leisure life in the present circumstances after moderate satisfaction of the physical and mental desire. In this sense, *Shi* was both *Zhi* in *Zhou Yi* and *He* (harmony) in *Zhong Yong*. *Zhi* meant that each performed its own nature, and correspondingly, *He* meant the original state of the world. So, by means of *Shi*, people would grasp the true meaning of life, and experience the true meaning of leisure, and finally achieve the ideal realm of Oneness of Universe and Human (*Tian Ren He Yi*).

6. Research on the body mechanism of leisure culture and leisure aesthetics

We should pay attention to the significance of somaesthetics to the research on leisure culture and leisure aesthetics, and analyze the concept about the body mechanism of leisure and aesthetic experience, such as game, peak experience, flow, and *Wan Wu Shi Qing* (play for returning to one's nature). In addition, physical and mental needs and satisfaction as driving forces of leisure experience and consumption, and relationship between physical feeling and the index of happiness or satisfaction, and the significance of physical condition to the quality of life, should be studied too.

Traditional aesthetics only took the eyes and ears as the aesthetic senses, with a kind of distant form in the aesthetic way, with art centered as the aesthetic object, and with the free experience beyond the object as the aesthetic nature. In contrast, leisure aesthetics views all the senses of the human body, and even the whole body and mind experience, as the aesthetic body mechanism, with direct perception of the whole body and mind in the aesthetic way, with the current specific context as the aesthetic object, and with the free experience integrated into the practice as the aesthetic nature. That is to say, leisure aesthetics goes beyond the traditional aesthetics, mainly as a kind of aesthetic activity of contemplatively enjoying the distant significant form and thus accessing a transcendent experience to achieve an integrated practical experience of the oneness of the body, mind, and object, the practical concern of the leisure aesthetics.

The nose, tongue, skin, and even the body's organs are taken as leisure aesthetic senses, not only for the practical experience of leisure activities but also as leisure academic requirements of their own. This is because leisure is for its own purpose, just as Huizinga's view of the play. He considered that it was not possible to understand play in terms outside itself or as rational behavior, for the fun of play is irrational. Play serves its own ends. The same may be true for leisure or at least much of leisure.^[3] That is to say the purpose of leisure lies in leisure itself, the being and feeling of people in leisure state. Therefore, unlike traditional aesthetics, which only used the eyes and ears, the senses of pointing to the outside world, as its aesthetic senses, leisure aesthetics takes the entire body of the human being as an aesthetic sense and considers that it reflects aesthetic elements: grace in movements; harmony in music; complexity in games and sport; subtlety in taste and expression of every kind.^[4] Thus the whole body senses are included in the study of leisure aesthetics.

Focusing on the current existence of human beings and concerning the natural state of human life, leisure aesthetics will not use the illusion of the otherworld to deny the human physical feelings in this world, nor use rational idea to constrain lively life enthusiasm of life. Therefore, unlike the traditional aesthetics that sought external beauty in the otherworld only by the eyes and ears, leisure aesthetics respects the original state of the human perception of the world, so that the various senses perform their own nature (*Ge De Qi Fen*) and integrate into the leisure aesthetic process with their natural characteristics. In this aesthetic process, people will achieve the nature state and the ideal realm of the leisure. As a result, leisure aesthetics becomes the practical learning of the unity of body and mind from the pure theory of audio-visual arts.^[5] The experience it gives people is not just the freedom and pleasure in formal feeling but the entirety of physical and mental happiness.

7. Research on the theoretical quality of leisure aesthetics.

We should analyze the theoretical and practical significance of leisure aesthetics, analyze the theoretical structure, logical system, and form characteristics of leisure aesthetics, combine the logical relations between the leisure aesthetics and related

disciplines, and try to construct the original leisure aesthetics with Chinese characteristics.

The author often emphasizes many occasions that leisure studies should study not only the metaphysical significance of leisure as the ideal realm but also the practical value of leisure as a realistic activity and industrial carrier. "Metaphysical that the Way, shaped and said that the device" (*Yi Jing*); now some scholars have pointed out what is located in both the Way and device is the heart. Relatively speaking, leisure philosophy focuses on the study of the metaphysical significance, that is the ultimate significance of leisure for the human being and social civilization; leisure industry and leisure economics focuses on "the device," that is, characteristics and laws of leisure products, leisure services, and leisure consumption as the new growth point of the national economy; and leisure aesthetics focuses on the perception of the heart," that is the form, characteristic, and law of the leisure and aesthetics as a common human experience.

Leisure aesthetics must be developed outside of the traditional abstract field and stay away from the art-centered theory in order to be integrated with the rich and lively aesthetic areas of daily life and more able to adapt to the social development. As a result, leisure aesthetics will have a more realistic character and play its due social functions more effectively. And so the aesthetics will become the vivid learning of the unity of body and mind from the pure theory of audio-visual arts.

In sum, the philosophical foundation of leisure aesthetics is the freedom of the human being; the social function of leisure aesthetics is promoting people's self-improvement; the physiological and psychological mechanism of leisure aesthetics is reflected in the practice of the unity of body and mind; the subject of leisure aesthetics is concerned about is the free and authentic life form; and the application value of leisure aesthetics lies in the experience economy. These are the author's general view on the theoretical quality of the leisure aesthetics.

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Endnotes

[1] Pan Li-yong, "Leisure Life and Aesthetics: The Liberated Experience of the Self-dependent Being," *Journal of Zhejiang University (Humanities and Social Sciences)*, 35(6), (2005), 5-11.

[2] Pan Li-yong, Lu Qing-xiang, "Modern Interpretation of

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[3] Thomas L. Goodale, Geoffrey C. Godbey, *The Evolution of Leisure: Historical and Philosophical Perspectives* (Edmonton: Venture Publishing, Inc., 1988), p. 239.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 217.

[5] Pan Li-yong, "Leisure Life and Aesthetics: The Liberated Experience of the Self-dependent Being," 8.