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## The Universal Validity of the Conceptions of Artistic Creativity and the Perception of Beauty in Pre-modern China: A Comparative Examination

*Junghwan Lee*

### Abstract

In contemporary aesthetics, artistic creativity and the perception of beauty are the key concepts in explaining aesthetic consciousness. From the birth of modern aesthetics, an underlying assumption has been that artistic creativity and the perception of beauty are each genuinely universal in human experience, which is worthy of particular attention. To examine the universal validity of Western aesthetic claims on these two distinctive subjects, this paper presents a very brief outline of pre-modern Chinese interpretations of both concepts. Specifically, in comparison to Kant's concept of genius and aesthetic judgment, I draw two conclusions. First, although there was no concept equivalent to art as an umbrella term to embrace diverse artistic activities, pre-modern Chinese intellectuals paid particular attention to originality, naturalness, and ineffability as common and essential features of artistic creativity, which show a high degree of similitude with the Western accounts. The similitude, along with its spontaneous emergence, attests, to a large extent, to the universality in experiencing, characterizing, and interpreting artistic creativity. Second, although there were many words in Chinese vocabulary similar to beauty, pre-modern Chinese intellectuals did not give particular conceptual significance to the perception of beauty. More specifically, in relation to Kant's conception of aesthetic judgment and Stolnitz's definition of aesthetic attitude, despite its long tradition of a disinterested attitude towards objects, pre-modern Chinese intellectuals did not relate this attitude to aesthetic experience. These tentative conclusions also lead us to question the universal validity of the association between art and beauty that was created by modern aesthetics and which contemporary aesthetics still claims as its legitimate field of research.

### Key Words

artistic creativity; the perception of beauty; disinterested attitude; universal validity; pre-modern China

### 1. Introduction

From the early modern period, East Asian intellectuals have been looking for East Asian equivalents to the key concepts of Western aesthetics. Like many other academic fields, they also dug up massive amounts of East Asian documents to find symbolic remains that show a certain degree of similitude to Western ideas on art and beauty. They intended to demonstrate the spontaneous development of aesthetics in East Asian traditions. The underlying assumption is that Western aesthetics offers the full-fledged, or the most advanced, forms in studying artistic activities and aesthetic experience. However, it is time to raise fundamental questions not only as to the appropriateness of the hitherto East Asian

methodologies but also as to the universal validity of Western aesthetic claims.

The empirical universality of artistic creation and the perception of beauty does not guarantee universal validity in understanding and explaining aesthetic consciousness. Particularly because of the inexplicable nature of aesthetic consciousness, it is one thing to assert that the experiences of aesthetic consciousness are self evidently true and universal, and it is a different thing to understand and translate them into human languages. Taking into consideration the long traditions of artistic activities and the interpretive approaches to human consciousness, along with the incomparable history of documentations on these issues, the aesthetic tradition of pre-modern China is the most reliable yardstick for assessing the universal validity of Western aesthetic claims.

In this paper, I present very brief historical outlines of pre-modern Chinese interpretations of art and beauty, which contemporary aesthetics still claims as its legitimate domains for research. More specifically, taking advantage of Kant's conceptions of genius and aesthetic judgment, this paper examines two correlated questions. First, in comparison to Western counterparts, how did they explain artistic creativity, which has been understood as the most essential feature of artistic activities and one of the most puzzling issues in contemporary aesthetics? Second, are there any accounts for the perception of beauty that are equivalent or comparable to the Western conception of aesthetic experience? More specifically, in relation to Kant's conception of aesthetic judgment and Stolnitz's definition of aesthetic attitude, how did they understand disinterested attitude toward objects, one of the central issues for Chinese intellectuals from the early stage? Particularly, did they relate it to aesthetic experience?

Through the course of suggesting answers to these questions, I draw two overarching, albeit tentative, conclusions. First, although there was no concept of art as an umbrella term to embrace diverse artistic activities, pre-modern Chinese intellectuals paid attention to originality, naturalness, and ineffability as the common and essential features of artistic creativity. Second, although there were many words similar to beauty, they did not give particular conceptual significance to the perception of beauty, nor did they relate a disinterested attitude, or the disinterested state of mind, to aesthetic experience. On this basis, I pose two big questions to contemporary aesthetics in the conclusion.

## 2. Artistic creativity

Creativity and originality are concepts that have supplied the very ground for the autonomy of art. The paired concept demarcates the boundary of the artistic realm from those of science and techniques. In contrast to Aristotle's venture to formulate the rules of making (*poiesis*), Kant summons up a mythological term, genius, to refer to the artistic ability of production, and associated it with originality as its primary characteristic:

That it cannot itself describe or indicate scientifically how it brings its product into being, but rather that it gives the rule as **nature**, and

hence the author of a product that he owes to his genius does not know himself how the ideas for it come to him, and also does not have it in his power to think up such things at will or according to plan, and to communicate to others precepts that would put them in a position to produce similar products. (V308)[1]

Here, instead of claiming to have revealed the secret of creative power, Kant intends to clarify his agnostic stance to say that one cannot deny the existence and function of an inner power of creation but this power is unknowable, even to those who exercise it. Nature here signifies a sort of seeming contradiction that an author must have followed "the rule" to create an original work of art, in the sense that a work of art with originality is not an accidental production, and that the author does so without any intentional and conscious efforts to conform to the rule. At the risk of oversimplification, the rule of creativity indeed exists and works but remains in the realm that transcends human knowledge and language. Otherwise, the uniqueness of artistic creativity as a kind of productive power must be reduced into the area of science, more specifically, into the field of technology. From a different angle, with the concepts of originality and naturalness, Kant clarifies and thus draws attention to the limit of understanding and language in explaining artistic creativity.

An exploration of the history of East Asian art theories leads to a bold claim that such attention to the characteristics of artistic creativity is not unique to the Western aesthetic tradition. Despite the enormous philosophical differences that lie between the two traditions, artistically oriented Chinese thinkers also paid attention to the mysterious characteristics of artistic production, such as creativity, originality, naturalness, and ineffability, that deserve an analytical comparison. Arguably, the earliest writing on artistic creativity, despite its nascent state, is found in the third-century work, *The Poetic Exposition on Literature (wen fu)*, by Lu Ji (261-303). The following part of it is particularly relevant:

1-1: Thus it begins: retraction of vision, reversion of listening,

Absorbed in thought, seeking all around,

1-2: My essence galloping to the world's eight bounds,

My mind roaming ten thousand yards, up and down.

2-1: And when it is attained: light gathers about moods (*qing*) and they grow in brightness,

Things (*wu*) become luminous and draw one another forward;

2-2: I quaff the word-hoard's spray of droplets,

And roll in my mouth the sweet moisture of the Six Classics;

2-3: I drift between Heaven and the abyss, at rest  
in the current,

I bathe in the falling stream, immersed in its  
waters;

3: Then, phrases from the depths emerge  
struggling as when the swimming fish, hooks in  
their mouths, emerge from the bottom of the  
deepest pool;

and drifting intricacies of craft (or drifting ornate  
expressions) flutter down, as when the wining  
bird, caught by stringed arrow, plummets from  
the tiered clouds.

4-1: He gathers in writing (*wen*) omitted by a  
hundred generations,

Picks rhymes neglected for a thousand years;

4-2: It falls away—that splendid flowering of  
dawn, already unfurled,

But there opens the unblown budding of evening.

5: He observes all past and present in a single  
moment,

Touches all the world in the blink of an eye.<sup>[2]</sup>

This third-century piece of writing is truly groundbreaking in the history of East Asian art theory.<sup>[3]</sup> Broadly, it indirectly declares the independence of literary creation from state-centered perspectives and ethically oriented traditions that had restricted the ambit of literature within the normative constraints. More specifically, this declaration is based on the fact that no earlier literary thoughts had paid particular attention to the process of artistic creativity, which still remains at present as one of the most mysterious spheres of artistic activities. In the passage cited above, Lu attempts to cast light on the aesthetic consciousness of literary creation.

To sum up in an analytical manner, this exposition begins with normative descriptions on the initial perceptive and mental condition (1-1) and the thus-achieved unrestrained state of mind (1-2). It continues to illuminate the primordial state of creativity; the gradual manifestations of the inner dimension ("moods") and the outer sphere ("things") in the author's consciousness (2-1); their encounters with linguistic and intellectual elements (2-2); and the author's unintentional and unpremeditated ride on the flow of creative process (2-3). After that, literary expressions that capture the primordial encounters between the author's intentionality and the flow of language into concrete terms naturally emerge in the mind of the author (3). Then, the author put down thus created

unprecedented (“omitted,” “neglected”) expressions in a passive manner (4-1), that embody creative and original qualities (“the unblown budding”) (4-2). Finally, the author observes that a literary work thus produced represents universal values in a limited use of language (5).

Concerning creativity and originality, Lu Ji highlights, with poetic articulation, that the process of production is wholly natural in the sense that the conscious intervention of the author is completely neglected or, more strongly, disallowed. In this sense, the core of literary creativity described in Part 2 and Part 3 is reminiscent of Kant’s words that “Beautiful art is an art to the extent that it seems at the same time to be nature.” (V308). The role of the author is minor, as he simply “gathers” and “picks” words and rhymes that spontaneously manifest themselves in the author’s consciousness, even at the last stage of the creative process. The requirement of originality, poetically expressed in Part 4, comes to be achieved purely consequently rather than deliberately.

Lu Ji’s elaboration does not signify a claim to articulating artistic creativity in a scientific manner. Rather, his attention to the creative process signals the burgeoning awareness that the true uniqueness of arts goes beyond comprehension and language. The unbridgeable gap between creativity and human language drives him to approach this operative but ever elusive sphere only by means of resorting to artistic, here poetic, formation of language. Lu does not even touch upon “the rule” that may regulate artistic creativity. Instead, he underscores ineffable naturalness in the emergence of literary expressions that the author is expected to acquire only through “rest[ing]” on the self-regulating (*ziran* in Chinese, meaning “naturalness”) process of creativity itself.

Lu Ji’s focus on naturalness, originality, and ineffability in creativity opened a new horizon for Chinese art theories. In literary thoughts, Liu Xie (ca. 465-520) devotes a full chapter, titled “Spirit Thought” (*shensi*), in his monumental work, *Carving Dragons with Literary Mind* (*wenxin tiaolong*), in order to further illuminate the mysterious characteristics of literary creativity.<sup>[4]</sup> In art theory, a literary man, Fu Zai (d. 813), depicts a process of painting performed by a literati-painter, Zhang Zao (eighth century), as follows:

Right in the middle of the room he sat down with his legs spread out, took a deep breath, and his spiritual ability (*shenji*) began to issue forth. Those present were as startled as if lightning were shooting across the heavens or a whirlwind sweeping up into the sky. Ravaging and pulling, spreading in all directions, the ink seemed to be spitting from his flying brush. He clapped his hands with a cracking sound. In a flurry of divisions and contractions, strange shapes were suddenly born. When he had finished, there stood pine trees, scaly and riven, crags steep and precipitous, clear water, and turbulent clouds. He threw down his brush, got up, and looked around in every direction. It seemed as if the sky had cleared after a storm, to reveal the true essence of ten thousand things.

Then, Fu Zai presents a generalized description on Zhang Zao and his art:

When we contemplate Master Zhang's art, it is not painting, it is the very Dao itself. Whenever he was engaged in painting, one already knew that he had left mere skill (*jiqiao*) far behind. His consciousness (*yi*) reach into the dark mysteries of things, and for him, things lay not in the physical senses, but in the spiritual part of his mind (*lingfu*). And thus he was able to grasp them in his mind (*xin*), and make his hand accord with it.

It seems that, unlike Lu Ji and Liu Xie, Fu Zai pays much less attention to the creative process itself. Instead of going into details, as seen in expressions such as "spitting from his flying brush," Fu highlights the suddenness of the process. Analogies to natural phenomena like "lighting," "whirlwind," and "the sky had cleared after a storm" are deliberately chosen to emphasize its naturalness in addition to suddenness. Here, suddenness and naturalness figuratively imply a creative process that is entirely free from the intentional intervention of the painter, as seen in Lu Ji's poetic exposition.

In this terse description of a painting process, Fu focuses on the naturally given ability of creation inherent in the painter. He identifies Zhang as a master painter, "spoiled with the generous gifts of Heaven" (*tianzong zhi si*). Similarly, the term *shenji*, here translated as spiritual ability, means the innate mysterious ability of creation. As a compound word, *shen* has connotations such as wondrous, unfathomable, and ineffable, whereas *ji* has a meaning of mechanical function. Fu then contrasts it with "mere skill," which connotes a deliberate manipulation of imitable techniques. The account that the spirit of Zhang is connected to the mysterious realm ("His ideas reach into the dark mysteries of things") without being constrained by his "physical senses" also signifies Fu's attention to the mysterious characteristics of artistic creativity, such as profundity and ineffability. Overall, instead of particularizing the creative process itself that is, by nature, ineffable, Fu encapsulates it into these esoteric terminologies that are largely reminiscent of Kant's description of genius as "the gift of nature" that "is apportioned to each immediately from the hand of nature" (V309).

In the eleventh century, Su Shi (1037-1101), arguably the most prominent cultural icon throughout pre-modern Chinese history, comprehensively inherits previous expressions on the creative process and the naturally given ability of artistic creation. On this basis, he reestablishes these ideas on a more philosophical ground. Specifically, he focuses attention on naturalness and originality as the primary qualities of artistic creativity, which is also reminiscent of Kant's definition of genius. In addition, he broadens the scope of these ideas by applying them to diverse artistic fields of poetry, painting, and calligraphy. Although there was no single umbrella concept equivalent to art in the West that may bind diverse artistic activities together, he draws attention to artistic creativity and its naturally inherent ability as the common and essential features of them. Due to his status as an unchallenged versatile artist, his accounts on artistic creativity held

considerable authority over later discussions on arts in pre-modern East Asia.[5]

### 3. The perception of beauty and aesthetic attitude

The perception of beauty is not universal. On the contrary, it is contingent on in what way this experience is understood, evaluated, and incorporated into the entire value system of a culture. An exploration for equivalents to beauty or related ideas in East Asian tradition leads to a result nearly opposite to that of art. As seen above, no term equivalent to the concept of art in the West existed until the concept was translated into *yishu*, with Chinese characters, in the early modern period. Nonetheless, the awareness of artistic creativity and its innate ability spontaneously emerged as early as the third century and led to the growing attention to them as the core features of diverse artistic activities. In contrast, there are dozens of words in the Chinese vocabulary that can be translated into 'beauty' or 'beautiful.' None of them, however, is as significant and all-inclusive as the concept of beauty in the Western context. In the early modern period of East Asia, a Chinese character, *mei*, was chosen as an equivalent to 'beauty.' In pre-modern times, however, this word refers to, with rare exceptions, a visual quality that arouses instinctive sensory satisfaction that lacks any profound connotations. Rather, it was consistently coupled with a warning against our instinctive inclinations toward ostensibly attractive objects. Apart from works of art, therefore, objects in the natural realm, including landscapes, were also rarely highly praised for the reason of the quality of beauty. For this reason, the beautiful rarely attracted intellectual attentions, nor was it singled out as a core value to pursue in East Asian traditions. It seems that preceding searches for East Asian counterparts for the idea of beauty in the Western aesthetic sense was doomed to failure from the beginning.

On the other hand, why the experience of beauty, if it is truly universal, results in such a substantial difference in evaluating it deserves further investigation. In relation to aesthetic consciousness, this question redirects our concern to the subjective sphere. Specifically, how different are the traditions of the East and the West in understanding and explaining the nature of consciousness in interacting with the world in general, to which the perception of beauty belongs? In a comparative perspective, the idea that attracts particular attention is disinterestedness.

In the statement, "Taste is the faculty for judging an object or a kind of representation through a satisfaction or dissatisfaction without any interest. The object of such a satisfaction is called beautiful," (V211) Kant proposes disinterestedness as the key mental condition for aesthetic judgment. In the twentieth century, Jerome Stolnitz rephrases it as "disinterested and sympathetic attention to and contemplation of any object of awareness whatever, for its own sake alone" and calls it "the aesthetic attitude," thus underlining its conditional nature for the aesthetic experience.[6]

A review of East Asian aesthetic tradition throws a question on the connection between aesthetic attitude and the perception of beauty. Specifically, if the subjective feeling of satisfaction

or dissatisfaction arises in the mental condition of disinterestedness, in response to a certain object, does this experience invariably lead to the perception of beauty? Otherwise, is the aesthetic attitude merely a necessary, rather than sufficient, condition for the aesthetic judgment, so that disinterestedness may also lead to an experience other than the perception of beauty? Concerning these questions, Chinese intellectual history suggests an intriguing answer. In summary, an idea that is fairly similar to disinterestedness was formed as early as the third century B.C.E. and, later, this idea was conjoined with the feeling of pleasure as it relates to artistic activities and appreciations. However, this combination of disinterestedness, arts, and pleasure was hardly associated with the perception of beauty.

The *Zhuangzi*, one of the ancient Daoist classics, deals with an ideal mental attitude toward the world as one of its key issues. The central feature that the text attributes to this attitude is emptiness. It contrasts this attitude, called "*xin zhai*" (literally, "the fasting of the mind"), with a state of the mind called *cheng xin* (literally, "a made-up mind") that is regulated by the ideas of right and wrong, and also truth and falseness. Nor is the empty state of the mind swayed by feelings of happiness, joy, and so forth. This attitude of the mind is completely free (literally, "empty") from any subjective interests, such as possession and utility, and also diverse evaluative criteria. These characterizations are reminiscent of disinterestedness to a large degree. In this vein, the text compares this ideal attitude to a mirror free of any dust on its surface that is, according to its description, "not welcoming external things as they come or escorting them as they go." In this sense, this attitude is also differentiated from an apathetic attitude toward things that rejects the validity of interactions with objects. However, there is no sign that the text connects this disinterested attitude to a particular experience, let alone the perception of beauty. Rather, the *Zhuangzi* calls attention to the relativistic nature of aesthetic judgment and its ensuing negative effects on the ideal state of the mind.<sup>[7]</sup>

The precautionary, or sometimes even adverse, attitude to external things was predominant until the mid-eleventh century. Concerning emotions and aesthetic experiences arising in response to external things and events, Confucianism also directed the focus of attention to its precarious aspect. In the eleventh century, a fundamental change was introduced by Ouyang Xiu (1007-1072) and Su Shi. Ouyang Xiu, a towering figure in Chinese intellectual history, consistently characterized his personal attitude toward calligraphy, in creation and appreciation, as a pursuit of pleasure. No precautionary remarks are attached to this pursuit. In comparison to earlier justifications that artistic activities resorted to their utilities in illuminating morality and truth, that is, the Way, Ouyang refused to combine his attitude toward calligraphy with any external purposes or interests, which reminds us of Kant's combination of aesthetic pleasure, or satisfaction, and disinterestedness. Unlike precious concerns, according to Ouyang, this mode of attention to artistic creation and appreciation is exceptional because it is well compatible with enjoyment and pleasure without involving any undesirable consequences. Ouyang named this kind of special attitude "*yu xin*" or "*yu yi*" (lodging one's interest and attention to things).

Su Shi, who claims the status of the legitimate heir of Ouyang, directly adopted this idea and further elaborates on it. Concerning the subjective attitude toward external objects, Su contrasts *yu yi* with detachment and attachment. Detachment, or an indifferent attitude, drives a subject to sacrifice even morally acceptable feelings of happiness but contradicts the natural inclinations of humanity. At the other end of the spectrum, attachment, or an excessive attention to particular things, is self-contradictory, first, because it is more likely to result in a tragic consequence than happiness and, second, because it tends to make the self be overwhelmed and determined by external things. Contrastingly, Su highlights that there is an appropriate attitude between these two opposite extremes that enables one to experience pleasure in the middle of paying attention to external things without bringing out undesirable outcomes. He thus describes the attitude of *yu yi* as an attitude of moderate distance from external things.[\[8\]](#)

In the following inscription, Su Shi elaborates on the compatibility between pleasure and attention to objects:

All things have some attractive aspect that is worth looking at; and anything that is worth looking at may bring pleasure (*le*; or happiness), not just things that are extraordinary, imposing, or ornate. One can become gaily drunk even on weak wine or dregs, and the appetite may be satisfied even by vegetables, berries, and nuts. Extrapolating from this, where in the world might I go that I could not feel pleasure?

The reason people seek good fortune and avoid calamity is that good fortune brings pleasure, while calamity brings grief. However, people's desires are infinite, and yet the things in the world that can satisfy those desires are finite. Therefore, valuations of good and bad (or beautiful and ugly) fight inside us, and the problem of which things to acquire and which to reject hangs before us. Consequently, our moments of pleasure are few, while our moments of grief are many. This amounts to seeking calamity and avoiding good fortune. How could that be human nature?

The fact is, people let themselves be overwhelmed by things. People wander around inside the realm of things (*you yu wu zhi nei*), rather than outside it (*wu zhi wai*). Now, it is true of all things, whether big or small, that if we look at them from the inside, they seem towering and huge. With all this hugeness towering over us, we become befuddled and are at a loss. It is like watching a fight through a crack in the wall. How can you tell which side is winning? So it is that notions of good and bad (or beautiful and ugly) are haphazardly created, with happiness and sorrow following upon them. Is it not regrettable?[\[9\]](#)

In this inscription, Su Shi rephrases *yu yi* attitude into the attitude of “wander[ing] around outside the realm of things.” The opposite of this attitude is described as the state of mind that is “overwhelmed by things,” which also indicates that, in this condition, one’s attitude to things is predetermined by personal interests. Therefore, one tends to evaluate the quality of things in accordance with personal interests (“valuations of good and bad fight inside us”), instead of listening to the sense of pleasure or displeasure that one spontaneously feels in the course of interacting with things. Pleasure here does not mean a purpose to pursue. Rather, it is a consequence that is expected to bring out, when one takes the proposed attitude, in one’s interaction with things. Here, Su advises that in one’s interaction with things one should switch the focus of attention from the objective qualities and values of things (“extraordinary, imposing, or ornate”) to a subjective attitude toward things. Therefore, it becomes least important what kinds of things to “acquire” or “reject” because pleasure as the ultimate end hinges upon the state of one’s attitude. In this vein, Su expands the range of appreciation, to use Stolnitz’s words, to “any object of awareness whatever.”

One thing to note is that this inscription includes equivalents to key ideas in Western concepts of the aesthetic attitude and the aesthetic experience, such as disinterestedness, pleasure, subjective attitude, and judgment of an object, but this combination of ideas is not associated with the perception of beauty. Unlike their predecessors who consistently underline the precautionary attitude, Ouyang Xiu and Su Shi boldly defend the pursuit of pleasure in relationship with objects by formulating the special subjective attitude that, they believe, makes subjective pleasure not inconsistent with moral values. However, they have no intent to associate subjective pleasure arising in the disinterested attitude with the idea of beauty. Particularly, Su Shi argues that desirable pleasure has little to do with the qualities of an object and that the disinterested attitude on the subjective side extends the possibility of satisfaction to the limit.

Neo-Confucianism, which ascended to the state orthodoxy in thirteenth-century China and then dominated the East Asian intellectual world until the end of the pre-modern period, also drew particular attention to the disinterested state of mind. However, this morally oriented ideology set apart the possible connection between this attitude and the sense of beauty even further. Zhu Xi (1130-1200), the *de facto* founder of this intellectual tradition, defines disinterestedness (*gong*) as the original state of the mind, and consistently contrasts it with the mind stimulated by personal interests (*si*). He describes the disinterested state of mind as the precondition for morality in two ways. Internally, the state of mind without personal interests is the essential condition for ensuring the manifestation of innate moral nature. Externally, the disinterested attitude is a prerequisite for acquiring true knowledge, in the course of investigating objects and events. However, he also hardly associates the disinterested state of mind with aesthetic experience. He does not deny either the value of beauty as an objective quality of an object or the spontaneity of satisfactory feeling in reaction to such an object. Nonetheless, because human nature is identified as the ultimate origin of morality, the perception of beauty has no

ground for validating its genuineness. Rather, in his metaphysical framework, the sense of beauty falls into the category of personal interest that is likely to obstruct the spontaneous manifestation of moral nature, mostly because the satisfaction that the sense of beauty may bring about is limited to the perceiver alone without accompanying any moral significance.

#### **4. Conclusion**

From a comparative perspective, I have reached two mutually opposite conclusions. Concerning art, although they did not construct a concept equivalent to arts in Western aesthetics, pre-modern Chinese thinkers understood artistic creativity in a strikingly similar way as philosophers of the modern West, like Kant, did. Those who were sympathetic to artistic activities took note of the uniqueness of artistic production and ventured to translate it into human language. In so doing, they presented originality, naturalness, ineffability, and the transcendence of rules of imitation as the distinctive features of artistic creativity, which apparently resembles Kant's concept of genius. Note that this way of interpretation spontaneously emerged in the third century in literary theory and that it recurred around five centuries later in the theory of painting. This fact, and its spontaneous nature, in particular, attests to the universality in experiencing, characterizing, and interpreting artistic creativity to a large extent.

Concerning beauty, on the contrary, it seems that for pre-modern Chinese intellectuals, the perception of beauty was not an exceptional experience that motivated them to delve into. At the risk of overgeneralization, the idea of beauty did never take a special status comparable to truth and morality. Differently put, the category of the Way was not extended to include beauty as a sense perception. Rather, the beautiful was mostly regarded as a cause of delusion that misleads one into pursuing superficial values. If beauty means an appreciation of objective qualities of objects and phenomena, such as order, harmony, excellence, and so forth, they might describe it by different terms than 'beautiful.' If beauty has more to do with a subjective feeling of pleasure or satisfaction, they hardly constructed a metaphysical foundation on which they would ascribe special significance to this sort of sense perception. The aesthetic tradition of pre-modern China urges us to re-examine the universal validity of the connection between a particular subjective perception and the disinterested attitude of a subject to the notion of aesthetic experience because tradition shows that either of such a subjective perception or a subjective attitude cannot necessarily be linked to aesthetic experience.

On the basis of the tentative conclusions above, if they are valid, one more issue that we should reexamine is the connection between art and beauty that was made at the birth of modern aesthetics. Pre-modern Chinese intellectuals who discerned the deeply profound nature of artistic creativity paid attention to its resemblance to the unfathomable creative process of nature that they also called the Way. Morally oriented figures, such as Neo-Confucians, emphasized the moral effects of artistic creation because they believed the truly genuine manifestation of the Way, or human nature, must

represent moral norms and values. None of them, however, found any reason to connect the essentially awe-inspiring experience from artistic creation to the perception of beauty that, they thought, may have a precarious effect on comprehending the Way.

On this basis, the pre-modern Chinese tradition urges us to throw big questions to contemporary aesthetics. First, is it possible, or even proper, to demonstrate the universality of aesthetic consciousness in relation to the concept of beauty, without resorting to a metaphysical foundation? From a different angle, is it justifiable for contemporary aesthetics, as a discipline of philosophy, to deal with the sense of beauty as a genuinely exceptional experience among sense perceptions, in general? Second, is it still legitimate for contemporary aesthetics to claim both art and beauty at once as its proper subjects? From a different angle, unless it is a structural legacy of the past, can contemporary aesthetics provide a cogent explanation about the possible connection between these two concepts?

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### Endnotes

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[1] For translation, Immanuel Kant and Paul Guyer, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, The Cambridge Edition of *The Works of Immanuel Kant* (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 187. Because I consistently use this translation for the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* in the present paper, I do not put notes hereafter.

[2] For translation, Stephen Owen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Council on East Asian Studies Distributed by Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 96-104 with modifications (numbering added).

[3] *Ibid.*, pp. 73-4.

[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 201-10.

[5] Junghwan Lee, "Originality and Naturalness: Analyzing the Characteristics of Su Shi's Ideas on Artistic Creativity on the Basis of Kant's Concepts of Genius and Arts (in Korean)," *Mihak* 81, 1 (2015).

[6] Jerome Stolnitz, *Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art Criticism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), pp. 29-64.

[7] For translation, Paul Kjellberg, "Zhuangzi," in *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, ed. P. J. Ivanhoe and Bryan W. Van Norden (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2001).

[8] Junghwan Lee, "Reestablishing the Subject-Object Relation and Aesthetic Attitude in Northern Song China: The Ideas of Pleasure and "Lodging One's Interest and Attention to Things" in Ouyang Xiu and Su Shi (in Korean)," *Mihak* 82, 3 (2016).

[9] For translation, Ronald Egan and Su Shi, *Word, Image, and Deed in the Life of Su Shi*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Council on East Asian Studies Harvard-Yenching Institute, Distributed by the Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 161-2 with modifications.