The Stance of Literature in Modern Chinese Aesthetics

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1 Current Research Trends in Chinese Aesthetics

The process of revisiting traditional scholarship in East Asia through imported Western intellectual models dates back to the late 19th century. A "Western and Eastern" dichotomy has been extensive globally, spanning various perspectives such as geographical or discursive spaces. The present study, when applied to Chinese aesthetics, reveals two significant viewpoints: "Chinese aesthetics" (a potential Chinese analogue of the Western field of aesthetics) and "aesthetics in China" (Western aesthetics conducted in China). Drawing a parallel with Chinese philosophical inquiry, where a discourse of "Chinese philosophy" vs "philosophy in China" first arose and which has undergone more mature development than aesthetics, we can expect to gain a deeper understanding of the latter. "Chinese philosophy" posits that "philosophy" as a discipline originated in the West and it has universality, with similar elements found in China. For instance, logical thinking in the West finds its counterpart in ancient China through figures like Gongsun Longzi 公孫龍子, Mozi 墨子, and Xunzi 荀子. On the other hand, "philosophy in China" contends that the so-called universality of "philosophy" is inseparable from its cultural context in the West and as such can only be practiced and developed in a China that has already been forced into Western "modernity," like engaging in analytic philosophy or phenomenology. However, in the case of "Chinese aesthetics" we must note a subtle difference. In mainland China, there is a tendency to perceive few common elements between Western and Chinese aesthetics. For instance, while the mimetic theory is critical in the West, it has limited presence in traditional Chinese art theories. In other words, the position of "Chinese aesthetics" is notably weaker compared to that of "Chinese philosophy." "(Western) aesthetics in China" is indeed valued, with discussions on aesthetic thought from Plato and Aristotle to Kant and Hegel taking place in China regardless of the varying attitudes over time. In this context, the realm of Chinese aesthetic study is understood by its insistence on the particular differences between the West and China.

The initial conceptualization of Chinese aesthetic discipline as distinctly different from Western aesthetics presents difficulties in recognizing the dynamic changes within both traditions. Western aesthetics has often been perceived as already concretized when used as a point of comparison. This issue is not unique to aesthetics but was shared across various disciplines in the decades following the Second World War. As part of the response to this challenge, in the past five years Japan has witnessed the emergence of the "world philosophy" movement. One of its leading figures, Professor Takahiro Nakajima (University of Tokyo), advocates for a new perspective that redefines philosophical inquiry or discipline on a global scale. His strategy involves engaging in a philosophical practice rooted in China's experiences, characterized by critical reflection and openness to universal engagement. Key methods include translation and posing critical questions to disrupt prevailing text frameworks, focusing on inherent structures and spaces--the nested forms intersecting with other

texts and ideas. This approach involves the "de-construction of Chinese philosophy," subsequently leading to the dismantlement of other philosophies and worldviews at large[1]. This perspective offers valuable insights for the consideration of Chinese aesthetics. While this essay does not delve into translation or textual analysis, it pursues the goal of transcending the "Chinese aesthetics" or "aesthetics in China" dichotomy that adheres to the Western aesthetic paradigm. As indicated by the title, this essay will concentrate on literature to comprehend the developmental process of modern Chinese aesthetics.

Before this let us briefly examine the current global research landscape on Chinese or Eastern aesthetics.

In Europe, the birthplace of aesthetics studies, a well-established tradition exists in the field, where aesthetics is considered a subdiscipline of philosophy. Despite literary studies often being referred to under the umbrella of aesthetic study, the presentations and relevant publications of the European Society for Aesthetics reveal a noticeable bias towards philosophical aesthetics. Also, the research subjects revolve mainly around Western issues, and researchers in Eastern aesthetics are notably scarce.

In the United States, aesthetics is acknowledged as a subdiscipline of philosophy, yet topics falling under aesthetic studies span diverse fields such as art history, film studies, literature, and rhetoric. While both Western and Eastern themes (modern and pre-modern) are actively explored, an Eastern aesthetics that holds its original philosophical underpinning seems to lack a solid footing. For example, I received comments from a number of American professors suggesting that presenting my studies on Chinese aesthetics as cultural studies, rather than aesthetics, would enhance its acceptance in the United States.

In China, the study of so-called Chinese aesthetics is naturally vibrant. However, it is noteworthy that when aesthetics is treated as a subfield within philosophy, it primarily engages with Western content. In contrast, aesthetic studies that grapple with Chinese thought are more prevalent in literary studies, art studies, and art history. The tendency to focus on literature also underscores the necessity for us to reconsider its role in aesthetic studies. It shall be explored further in the essay, but rather than categorize all or part of Chinese aesthetic inquiry under literary studies, this essay contends that aesthetic inquiry in modern China was initially constituted within the realm of literature. Furthermore, during the development of the discipline of aesthetics in China, art history has maintained a close connection to literature.

In Japan, most universities tend to combine aesthetics and art history into a single department. However, at the University of Tokyo, "aesthetics" is treated as an independent discipline addressing "thoughts" (in contrast to "concrete events or facts" which are dealt with more in art history), with "philosophy" and "ethics" as adjacent departments, aligning with the categories of Kant's conception of human cognitive abilities. Nevertheless, the current state of Japan's aesthetics field predominantly concentrates on Western topics. Japanese aesthetic research is limited, not to mention Chinese

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[1] See the preface of Nakajima, Takahiro, *The Reverberation of Chinese Philosophy: Language and Politics*, University of Tokyo Press, 2007; Nakajima, Takahiro and Ding, Yi "Chinese Aesthetics from the Perspective of World Philosophy: Interview with Professor Takahiro Nakajima, University of Tokyo," *Chinese Aesthetics*, No. 15, 2004, Forthcoming.

aesthetics[2]. However, given its profound philosophical underpinnings and the aforementioned "world philosophy" movement, which views Japan as a unique topos bridging the East and the West, this study, conducted in Japan, should be understood not merely as filling a gap in Chinese aesthetic studies but as shedding light on a novel form of Chinese aesthetic inquiry.

2 Outline of Modern Chinese Aesthetics

This section will reveal some aspects of the nature of Chinese aesthetics by focusing on the development of this discipline in modern China.

The development of modern Chinese aesthetics is generally divided into four periods: the early 20th century to the 1930s, the 1930s to the 1950s, the 1950s to the end of the 20th century, and the 21st century onwards. However, as evident from the varying lengths of these stages, the progress in each phase was not homogeneous. The most crucial turning point was the 1950s, specifically, after the establishment of the People's Republic of China. Before this period, Western thought was primarily acquired secondhand through Japan, due to the limited study abroad opportunities for Chinese scholars. After this, with increasing direct exposure to Western influences, Chinese scholars gradually engaged themselves in a sober reflection on their impact, resulting in a deeper understanding of both traditional Chinese and Western cultures. Additionally, the coexistence of diverse political stances and identities during this period meant that there was no singular, guiding academic direction. From the 1950s onward, mainland Chinese academia underwent radical self-reflection, reevaluating and transforming its previous achievements, and thus accomplished a settled mode of modern and subsequently contemporary Chinese aesthetics.

Between the 1950s and the close of the 20th century, two pivotal events marked the trajectory of aesthetic discourse in China: the "Grand Discussion on Aesthetics" of the 1950s and 60s, followed by the "Aesthetics Fever" of the 1970s and 80s. The former was characterized by a thorough exploration of the essence of beauty through the lens of idealism/materialism, driven by the pervasive influence of Marxist thought. Scholars with a materialistic stance critiqued figures like A. G. Baumgarten, I. Kant, and G. W. F. Hegel, alongside Chinese scholars who admired them and categorized them as proponents of idealism. The subsequent "Aesthetics Fever" transcended academic realms, evolving into a societal phenomenon where the term "aesthetics" permeated daily life—visible even on the streets, for instance, adornment of barbershop boards. Against the backdrop of the post-Cultural Revolution era, amidst a yearning for a rejuvenated intellectual environment, the evaluation criteria extended beyond the content of ideas to include the manner of their expression[3].

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[2] The introduction of modern Chinese aesthetics and philosophy in Japan can be considered to have a turning point around the year 2020. Prior to this, there had been extensive discussions on classical Chinese thoughts and theories of art from pre-modern China in Chinese philosophy or art history areas. However, when it comes to addressing modern and contemporary China as the main topic in introductory books, Wang Qian's "Modern Philosophy in China" (in *World History of Philosophy*, Vol. 8, Chikuma Shobo, 2020) and Zang Xinming's "Formation of Modern Aesthetics in China" (in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics,* edited by the Japan Society for Aesthetics, Maruzen Publishing, 2020) are groundbreaking.

[3] To understand the aesthetic expectations post-1980s, Hu Jihua's work, *Zong Baihua: Cultural Sentiments and Aesthetic Symbols* (Beijing: Wenjin Publishing House, 2005, p. 3), provides valuable insights. This work was

In other words, the inquiry expanded beyond "what is aesthetics" to encompass "how to conduct or practice aesthetics." During this period, a poetic style that directly appealed to the senses emerged as a dominant form of aesthetics, retaining its significance to this day. Moreover, after the 1950s, the movement of scholars from mainland China to Hong Kong and Taiwan led to a divergence in the development of aesthetics within the Sinophone world. This nonlinear evolution of thought and regional disparities, marked by turning points and differences across various areas, challenges the conventional chronological narrative, and prompts an understanding that a chronological division of developmental stages may not fully capture a comprehensive overview. In response to this, this essay seeks to delineate the contours of these developments by taking scholars as the unit of measurement.

The first generation of modern Chinese aestheticians includes notable figures such as Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 (1868–1940), Liang Qichao 梁啓超 (1873–1929), and Wang Guowei 王国維 (1877–1927). While each contributed to the foundation of modern Chinese aesthetics, their contributions took different directions. Liang Qichao, for instance, exerted a significant social influence on popular education rather than focusing directly on the establishment of aesthetic thought. Cai Yuanpei formally incorporated the aesthetic discipline into the education system. In terms of the exploration of aesthetic thought, particularly the introduction of Western aesthetics and the quest for China's own aesthetics, Wang Guowei is considered the true founder. His position foreshadows various characteristics of modern Chinese aesthetics, which will be further discussed in the following sections.

Representing the second generation are Zhu Guangqian 朱光潜 (1897–1986) and Zong Baihua 宗白華 (1897–1986), both considered *the* towering aestheticians of modern China. While they were widely recognized as the second generation, their active academic leadership persisted consistently through the subsequent generations of the 1930s all the way to the 1970s or even the 1980s. Referring to both Eastern and Western knowledge, Zhu Guangqian initiated aesthetic research from the perspectives of psychology and education. He translated and analyzed a vast range of Western aesthetic thoughts from ancient classical Greece to Hegel and B. Croce. On the other hand, Zong Baihua, building on theories like art science (Kunstwissenschaft) and cultural morphology, reexamined classical Chinese philosophy and ancient art theories, mainly represented by Confucianism and Taoism, through a modern lens[4]. Additionally, renowned as a prose writer, Zong Baihua demonstrated a writing style that has been considered representative of Chinese aesthetics especially from the 1980s onwards; namely, rather than offering logical argumentation, it is more important to convey how one experiences artwork or understands art theory in an emotional or affective manner.

Within the half-century that Zhu and Zong stood at the forefront of aesthetic academia, it is essential to acknowledge numerous other aesthetic explorations that took place. For example, Deng Yizhe 鄧以蟄 (1892–1973), once esteemed alongside Zong Baihua–often referred to together as "Zong in the South [affiliated with Nanjing University] and Deng in the North [affiliated with Peking University]"–was largely forgotten in the latter half of the 20th century. Deng Yizhe's significance in

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subsequently revised and published as *The Aesthetic Dimension of Chinese Cultural Spirit: A Brief Introduction to Zong Baihua's Aesthetic Thought* by Hu Jihua (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2009).

4 For English literature on Zong Baihua's scholarship on reevuating classic thoughts, see Ding, Yi's "The Application of Confucianism and Taoism in Zong Baihua's Chinese Art Theory," *Aeshetics*, No. 28: 76-90, 2004.

understanding modern Chinese aesthetics lies in his being one of the few aestheticians of his time who specialized in "aesthetics" as a subfield of philosophy right from the beginning, in contrast to, for example, Zhu's specialization in education and psychology. However, Deng's ideas, which relied heavily on Western aesthetic practice, did not become mainstream. This fact also suggests a certain distance between the inclination towards Western aesthetic study in China vis-à-vis such study in the West. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that both Zong Baihua and Deng Yizhe were key figures in establishing the modern discipline of Chinese art history, and this fact highlights the connection between modern Chinese aesthetics and art history.

Furthermore, if we attempt to truly grasp the pinnacle of modern Chinese aesthetics, Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書 (1910–1998)[5] emerges as the most paramount figure. While Qian was generally considered more of a literary figure than a philosopher, I argue for repositioning him as a significant philosophical contributor who propelled modern Chinese aesthetic study to a new stage, building upon and critically engaging with the foundation laid by Zhu and Zong. Profoundly versed in scholarship from both the East and the West, and often showcasing his prodigious linguistic talents with mastery of a multitude of foreign languages, including ancient Greek, Latin, French, German, Italian, and, of course, English, Qian Zhongshu's aesthetic philosophy is characterized by his adept integration of knowledge from various cultures and periods. Among all his pursuits, his critiques of Chinese literature particularly manifested extraordinary aesthetic brilliance.

It is worth noting that the aforementioned thinkers did not exhibit much interest in, or did not achieve as a result, a systematic construction of Chinese aesthetic theories. The first systematic work on artistic theory in modern and contemporary China is considered to be Xu Fuguan's 徐復觀 (1904–1982) *The Spirit of Chinese Art* (1966). Xu Fuguan was a crucial member of the "New Confucianism" philosophical movement that culminated in Taiwan and Hong Kong between the 1950s and 1970s. Modern or contemporary "New-Confucianism" is generally understood as distinct from the "Neo-Confucianism" of the Song and Ming dynasties, as well as from the "Confucianism" of the pre-Qin period. It involves reevaluating earlier thought from Buddhism, Laozi, and Zhuangzi, while also integrating Western philosophy positively with the aim of revitalizing traditional cultural in the face of Western hegemony. While the intellectual movements in Taiwan and Hong Kong during that time inherited the preceding mainland ideologies, there was an evident tendency to consider aesthetics from a moral perspective (e.g., Tang Junyi 唐君毅, Mou Zongsan 牟宗三). Following this line, Xu Fuguan, prioritizing moral issues, believed that art, particularly painting, most fundamentally reflected human nature. He therefore constructed an aesthetic theory centered around the discourse of painting. In a sense, Chinese art theory, for the first time, gained a systematic structure to some extent as a byproduct of moral discussions.

The figure leading the "Thought Liberation" movement that swept across the entire intellectual sphere in mainland China from the 1980s was Li Zehou 李泽厚 (1930–2021). His aesthetic work *The Path of Beauty* (1981) comprehensively discusses the history of bronze artifacts, Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhist thought, literature, painting and crafts as well as the overall historical context

[5] One of the best works in English on Qian Zhongshu's scholarship is Theodore Huters's *Qian Zhongshu*, published by New York: Twayne Publishers in 1982.

behind them. This mode of articulation differs significantly from the dominant idealist/materialist perspective that emerged after 1950 and is characterized by a poetic expression. In his later work *Hua-xia Mei-xue* 華夏美学 (1989, lit. "Chinese *Aesthetics*"), Li Zehou traced the role of Confucian and Taoist thought in the establishment of aesthetics. Upon this foundation, he developed topics related to society, emotions, and politics, contemplating the nature of beauty and metaphysical pursuits in China. According to Li himself, *Hua-xia Mei-xue* was more academically mature, but *The Path of Beauty* played a leading role in the 1980s "Aesthetic Fever," making it more widely known. During the same period, Ye Lang 葉朗 (1938–) compiled a textbook-style summary of Chinese aesthetic thought in *Outline of the History of Chinese Aesthetics* (1985). Having served as an assistant to Zong Baihua in his later years and studied under Zhu Guangqian, Ye Lang is thought of as an extension of Zhu and Zong's legacy, but he also incorporated theories from figures like Qian Zhongshu. Many scholars have credited Zong Baihua for establishing the position of Confucianism and Taoism in Chinese aesthetics, but it can be more accurately stated that these ideas were nascently present in Zong Baihua's work and later solidified into a theoretical form through the works of Li Zehou and Ye Lang.

Having surveyed the development of modern Chinese aesthetics based on individual scholars, let us revisit the issue of chronological divisions. Indeed, the 1950s was a crucial turning point, and considering the works of Li and Ye, the 1980s can be seen as a stage where Chinese aesthetics achieved systematic maturity. Yet, if we rigidly set the 1950s as a dividing line, we risk overlooking the undeniable continuity in scholars' thinking across this line. We also risk ignoring the variability in the degree of scholarly transformation among different individuals, a transformation that was particularly demanded in the mainland after the 1950s. Moreover, an overemphasis on the 1950s may result in a biased perspective when evaluating Chinese aesthetics, and lead to an excessive focus on post-1950s scholarship. Currently, the period before the 1950s is acknowledged as the "dawn and preparation period of modern Chinese aesthetics" in China[6]. However, this recognition is inherently based on the post-1950s framework. This article aims to shift the focus to the first half of the 20th century, and explore the continuity of tendencies that have shaped the characteristics of present-day Chinese aesthetics. The paper particularly highlights the significance of literature in Chinese aesthetics.

3 Literature in Modern Chinese Aesthetics

As previously mentioned, the "Aesthetics Fever" of the 1980s not only spotlighted the substance of aesthetic discourse but also underscored the importance of its expression, particularly its inclination towards a poetic style. When evaluated against the scholarly standards of Western aesthetic studies, much of the research in Chinese aesthetics is critiqued for its lack of rigorous argumentation and its prioritization of the description of sensory experience. While this inclination is often viewed as a limitation in Chinese aesthetic studies, it should also be acknowledged as one of its distinctive traits. Despite debates surrounding the challenges of Chinese aesthetics, this paper aims to explore how

6 See the aforementioned Zang Xinming's "Formation of Modern Aesthetics in China," 2020.

literature has influenced the development of Chinese aesthetics, shaping both its subject matter (content) and its form.

Before discussing the role of literature in the formation process of modern Chinese aesthetics, it is necessary to first explain the term "literature" as used in the Chinese context. This is essential because the concept of Western-derived literary genres that we use today, even in China, do not correspond to traditional Chinese literary classifications. In modern China, literature has generally been categorized into four genres, following Western categories: prose, novel, poetry, and drama. Among these, prose and novel are the most prominent styles in modern Chinese literature.

The popularity of "novels" holds a dual significance: in the Western sense of the word, for instance, the science fiction novels emerging in the late Qing dynasty were esteemed by Chinese intellectuals as ideal tools of enlightenment. On the other hand, "novels" in the pre-modern Chinese sense, exemplified by works like *Water Margin*, were readily embraced by the masses. There has been ongoing debate over whether to include literary styles such as the Tang dynasty's *Chuan-qi* 傳奇 (short fiction stories) within the framework of the modern concept of novel. As for "prose," it carries a traditional meaning different from *Pian-wen* 駢文 (characterized by highly stylized writing with strict metrical, tonal, and thematic parameters) or rhymed verse 韻文, but encompasses both the modern Western notions of "essay" and "prose." Distinct from the style of "prose" (in the Western sense) or official writings (such as historical texts or classics), private writings represent another significant style in China. These writings, somewhat resembling "essays" (in the Western sense), have been intricately tied to Chinese cultural tradition and have retained high value into the modern age. The hierarchy of literary genres in modern China underwent significant change throughout the New Culture Movement. The New Culture Movement, spanning from the late 1910s to the 1920s, stood out as one of the most pivotal intellectual and cultural movements of the early 20th century. Characterized by its radical modernization and reform efforts, it was deeply connected with social and political issues of the time. While the abolishment of the imperial examination system (*Ke-ju* 科舉) in 1905 marked a significant shift, the entrenched educational tradition was ultimately challenged and dismantled by the New Culture Movement. Subsequently, the classical writing style of Chinese was abandoned in favor of promoting vernacular spoken language, known as *Bai-hua* 白話. In terms of literary genres "prose" was notably marginalized, shifted from the cultural center to the periphery. In the pre-modern context, "prose" held a central position in literature, succinctly expressed in the phrase "Prose [*Wen-zhang* 文章] is the great enterprise of governing the country, an immortal and splendid affair" (from Cao Pi's 曹丕 "Dian-lun 典論"). During pre-modern times, novels and dramas were considered lower-tier genres, but since the 1920s, their status has significantly risen. Also noteworthy are genres such as essays and *Zha-ji* 札記 (reading notes), which were popular during the Ming and Qing dynasties but did not have equivalents in Western categories. Many relevant thoughts by Wang Guowei, a key figure in the early stages of Chinese aesthetics, and Qian Zhongshu, who ushered in its golden age, are presented in the form of discussions on poetry or literature taking the form of Zha-ji. While these discussions differ from the creative act of literary composition, given the tendency in China to appreciate literary theory as literature itself they can be considered as belonging to the realm of literature. Contemporary Chinese scholars (e.g., Wang Zengqi 王曾祺, Chen Pingyuan 陳平原) have even attempted to interpret these styles as bridging "prose" and "fiction" in the Western

context.

The concepts surrounding literature were imported and transformed in this manner during the modern period of China, but how did literature affect the formation of modern Chinese aesthetics? In the following sections, we will focus on two issues.

3.1 The Position of Literary Theory in the Early Period of Modern Chinese Aesthetics

Let us turn our eyes to the starting point of modern Chinese aesthetics, marked by Wang Guowei. It is evident that literature had already acquired a special status by this time. Wang Guowei stood out as the first individual to formally introduce Western philosophy to China from an academic standpoint, in contrast to the prevailing trend of learning from Western sources for social, military, or political purposes. While deeply immersed in the study of Kant, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche, Wang underwent a significant ideological shift, which led him to redirect his focus towards literature:

> I have grown weary of philosophy for quite some time. In philosophy, generally, what one loves cannot be believed, and what one believes cannot be loved. I am acquainted with truth, yet I also find myself drawn to the fallacies of scholarship. Great metaphysics, solemn ethics, and pure aesthetics are what I greatly adore. However, when it comes to seeking what should be believed, it lies more in epistemology, hedonism in ethics, and empiricism in aesthetics.[7]

In the broad sense of philosophy (including metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics) conceived by Wang Guowei, he believed that what one loved could not coexist with what one should believe. Therefore, he found himself in distress and "gradually shifted from philosophy to literature, seeking direct solace within it."[8] The contrast between "what one loves and what one should believe," as articulated by Wang Guowei, is generally associated with a comparison between the ideas of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche and those of Yan Fu (1854–1921)[9]. Yan Fu was among the pioneering translators of the late Qing dynasty and early Republican era who introduced Western ideas to China. His notable translations include Thomas Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics* and Herbert Spencer's *The Principles of Sociology*. However, beyond merely conveying philosophical content, the aforementioned quote also sheds light on Wang Guowei's scholarly disposition. In this context, the "contrast between knowing the truth and loving the fallacy" may suggest a "conflict between *Logos* and *Pathos*" that tore him apart. In other words, for Logos, which seeks truth, one should believe in hedonism and empiricism. But for Pathos, which generates passion and emotions, even if fallacies are involved, it is a state of loving metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics.

Throughout history, those who prioritize Logos often gravitate towards philosophy, while individuals favoring Pathos typically lean towards the arts. Rare exceptions, like B. Pascal, success-

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7 Wang Guowei, *Wang Guowei Collection*, Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2008, Vol 2: 298.

8 Ibid.

9 E.g., Zhang Chuntian, "'Humanity', Literature, and Emotional Politics: Rethinking Wang Guowei's Life Choices and Literary Culture," in *The Flying Station: Literature and Culture in the Late Qing and Early Republic Era*, Shanghai: Commercial Press, 2003.

fully reconcile both tendencies within themselves (esprit géométrique and esprit de finesse). Some scholars, such as Miki Kiyoshi, strive to establish a unified theory encompassing both Logos and Pathos. However, Wang Guowei's approach was distinct; he sought a realm beyond the conflict of Logos and Pathos, turning to literature instead. Despite his aspiration for such an ideal, Wang Guowei was, in reality, more inclined towards Pathos. It can be seen from how he interpreted the views of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche through a Pathos lens, drawing upon his own sensory experiences in literature composition as the foundation of his logic exploration[10]. What is significant for this paper is Wang Guowei's quest for reconciliation between what should be loved and what should be believed, which, for him, was ultimately found within the realm of literature.

Wang Guowei's emphasis on literature defined the uniqueness of modern Chinese aesthetics. Subsequently, scholars in later generations generally regarded Wang Guowei's literary study as the essence of his aesthetic thought. As a result, the field of literature naturally became integrated into the study of Chinese aesthetics.

Another point to note is that Wang Guowei's study of aesthetics was formed by the reception of Western thought secondhand through Japan, but it diverged from the study of Western aesthetics in Japan. During Wang Guowei's time studying in Japan, namely the mid-Meiji era, those who sympathized with Schopenhauer and Nietzsche from a Pathos perspective were mainly literary figures operating outside of academia, such as Mori Ōgai and Takayama Chogyū. Expanding our perspective to Western theorists who were highly welcomed in the Chinese aesthetic study in the first half of the 20th century, we find figures like G. E. Lessing, J. W. v. Goethe, and Novalis, known for their inclination towards literature or art theory and who were received very differently, also more outside of academia, in Japan. From these differences between modern Japan and modern China, another important perspective for understanding modern Chinese aesthetics emerges: the distance between the literary world and academia.

3.2 Tension between the Literary World and Academia

The term "academia" used here encompasses not only the products of modern Western institutions, such as university lectures and scholarly writings in specific formats, but also the broader production and handling of academic thought in general, including disciplines like *Kao-zheng*考証 (searching for evidence in historical texts) and historiography, which were central to academic activities during the Qing dynasty. On the other hand, the "literary world (文壇)" refers not only to a discursive space formed by professional writers and journalists, as observed in modern Japan, but also to the general activity of writing articles seeking so-called literary qualities or tastes. Neither of these entities were entirely new as modern concepts introduced from the West but rather have connections with China's traditions.

Regarding the transformation of literature in the modern age Chen Pingyuan points out that since the late Qing dynasty, under the influence of the West, Chinese intellectuals were no longer able

[10] This section is based on my presentation "Man's Way of Being in Wang Guowei's *Ren-jian Ci-hua*," at the 13th New Liberal Arts symposium held in August 2023 at East Asian Academy for New Liberal Arts (EAA), the University of Tokyo.

to maintain the tradition of simultaneously pursuing both "literature (文)" and "scholarship (学)." As societal activities became more specialized, a conflict between either "advancing scholarship, declining literature" or "advancing literature, declining scholarship" became inevitable. Chen Pingyuan divides writings into two categories: "literary writings (文人之文)" and "scholarly writings (学者之文)." "Literary writings" are exemplified by the prose of the late Ming dynasty, which pursued individual spirituality and the essence of life through written expression. This style was valued and re-invigorated between the 1920s and 1930s, with Lin Yutang 林語堂 and Zhou Zuoren 周作人 as representative authors. On the other hand, "scholarly writings" were represented by the writings of *Kao-zheng* and historiography in the Qing dynasty, which were used to convey academic thoughts. However, according to China's tradition, there is no clear distinction between the two, and rather, their combination is considered ideal. In general, scholars with literary talent can more easily infuse their "scholarly writings" with the qualities of "literary writings," thus achieving a blend of these two styles. However, expecting prose writers to produce highly scholarly work is more challenging[11]. What deserves to be noted is that modern Chinese academia, which follows the Western framework, was not composed solely of "scholarly writings," but was always influenced and guided by "literary writings." Furthermore, "scholarly writings" are encompassed within the realm of literature itself. This is in contrast to the situation observed in modern Japan or in the West, where literary and academic activities progressed relatively separately.

Regarding this situation in modern China, I would like to address it from two specific perspectives. First, despite the official establishment of Western-style educational systems, personal writings regarding their scholarship and university lectures were still treated as separate entities. Since the late Qing dynasty, Chinese intellectuals primarily esteemed the former (personal writings) over the latter (university lectures). While it was acceptable for scholars to excel in personal scholarship but struggle with teaching (for example, Liu Shipei 劉師培), those who performed successfully in teaching but lacked significant scholarly writings (such as Luo Yong 羅庸) were quickly forgotten. From this, it can be understood that in the intellectual milieu of early 20th century China, literary talent was highly valued. Writings which aimed for academic explanations but were also enriched with literary abilities held considerable esteem. Throughout the 20th century, refined tastes and exceptional cultivation towards literature of renowned scholars have been continuously praised, such as the poetic compositions or critiques of the popular romantic novel *Zai-sheng Yuan* 再生緣 by historian Chen Yinque 陳寅恪.

Second, in modern China, literary theory has not been fully absorbed into or constricted by the framework and influence of modern Western academic evaluation systems. Lectures on traditional literary works such as poetry and *Ci* 詞 (a form of Chinese poetry similar to song lyrics developed during the Song dynasty, emphasizing romantic expression) often focus solely on repetitive recitation in accordance with the rhythm without engaging in any analytical examination. This approach is evident in the activities of important literary scholars, including Yu Pingbo 俞平伯, Tang Lan 唐蘭, and Gu Sui 顧隨. Even today, literary critic Ye Jiaying 葉嘉瑩 (1924–) emphasizes the importance

[11] See Chen Pingyuan's *Literary History as a Discipline* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2011) and *From Literary Writings to Scholarly Writings* (Beijing: Joint publishing, 2004).

of reciting poetry and *Ci*. This is also a result of Ye Jiaying's inheriting the academic legacy of her teacher, Gu Sui, and striving to disseminate Gu Sui's scholarship to a wider audience.

Textualized literary theory follows a similar pattern. As a representative example, Lu Xun 鲁迅 did not employ the philological methods (namely, *Kao-zheng*) of his mentor Zhang Binglin 章炳麟 or the evolutionary perspective of Hu Shi 胡適 to mechanically elucidate historical changes when discussing literature or literary history. Additionally, Lu Xun showed no interest in Western literary criticism terms that were popular at the time. When discussing novels, Lu Xun primarily used traditional criteria such as "figure (文采) and imagination (意想)."[12] This approach, which rejects logical explanations and aims to evoke and enlighten the literary tastes of readers and listeners in a sensory manner, has been upheld in China throughout the 20th century to this day.

The characteristic of modern Chinese literary theory not being assimilated into Western frameworks can be further accentuated through a comparison to the literary theory established in modern Japan. For example, Natsume Soseki expressed in his "Preface to Literary Theory" (1906) that he believed that "to know what literature is by reading literary works is just like the approach of washing blood with blood."[13] In contrast, China has primarily sought to convey literary thought through literature itself. From this perspective, it can be inferred that while modern Japan aimed to construct literary interpretations with a bias towards Western models, China, even after the May Fourth Movement (1919), remained more subject to the pulling force of its own tradition. In a sense, unlike modern Japan, the true challenge to be faced within China's modern scholastic establishment may not have been Western thought but rather ancient China, which was better able to understand itself through the illumination of Western thought.

In the formation of modern Chinese aesthetic discipline, despite ideological and academic transformations, literature continues to be a central element. The interaction between pre-modern and modern ideas, as well as Western and Eastern scholarship within the literary sphere reveals nuanced layers of tensions rather than a straightforward dichotomy often assumed in mainstream discussions of aesthetic thought between East and West. Literature serves as a topos where we can explore the defining characteristics of modern Chinese aesthetics.

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12 For further information refer to the aforementioned works by Chen Pingyuan.

13 Natsume, Soseki, "Preface to Literary Theory" in *Collection of Soseki Essays on Literature and Art*, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1986; accessible at https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/000148/files/60818_74606.html.