



Decoding Zong Baihua's aesthetic thoughts on rhythm theory

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Abstract. Rhythm theory is the core and soul of Zong Baihua's aesthetic thought, a deep reflection of the life spirit of Chinese art. Influenced by Bergson and Chinese life philosophy, Zong Baihua formed an aesthetic view of artistic expression of life rhythm. Rhythm is the noumenon of art, the inner cadence within the image, the melody of music, and the mood of the subject's mind. Zong's rhythm theory is a model of aesthetic criticism of intuitive experience and the core aesthetic category of China, which makes a profound and incisive interpretation of Chinese art. Under the background of mutual learning between Chinese and Western civilizations, Zong's rhythm theory is of great value to the construction of contemporary art theory with Chinese characteristics.

Keywords: Zong Baihua; rhythm life noumenon; intuition; artistic conception

1 Introduction

Zong Baihua is an important aesthetician, art critic and poet in modern China. He made a profound and incisive study of Chinese painting, calligraphy and poetry with the aesthetic thought of rhythm theory, which deeply grasps the essence of Chinese culture and accords with the spirit of traditional art. However, Zong engaged in aesthetic research in the way of strolling aesthetics, rhythm theory thoughts scattered in the micro interpretation of specific artistic phenomena, so rhythm theory has not been systematically studied and sorted out. The theoretical characteristics based on intuitive experience have important research value.

After a thorough survey of the relevant materials, it is found that Zong's research on rhythm theory has achieved certain results, but the formation process, philosophical basis, aesthetic connotations, artistic presentation and construction path of rhythm theory still require further study. Currently, the academic community is concerned with the construction of art theories with Chinese characteristics, and Zong's rhythm theory has a distinct national characteristics and modernity, which is of great value in constructing a system of Chinese aesthetic discourse.

2 The philosophical foundation of Zong's rhythm theory

The philosophical foundation of Zong's rhythm theory is the philosophy of life, which has two sources. In the early period, he accepted the life philosophy of Bergson, and in the later period, he returned to the traditional Chinese life philosophy of *The Book of Changes*. Zong formed a unique view of artistic essence on the basis of absorbing Chinese and Western life philosophy. Bergson's philosophy of life holds that there exists an eternal and active impulse of life in the universe, which is the fundamental driving force for the development and change of everything, and is also the noumenon of the universe life. The aim of art is to reveal this elusive and unpredictable noumenon of life. The life noumenon in Chinese philosophy is the gasified life interwoven with Yin and Yang, which is rhythmical, living and orderly. Therefore, Zong said that the rhythm of life or rhythmical life is the source of Chinese art.

In the early period, influenced by Bergson's thoughts, Zong's artistic research was based on the philosophy of life. Bergson's *Creative Evolution* was spread to China during the May Fourth Movement and formed a widespread and profound trend of thought in life philosophy. In Zong's opinion, Bergson's theory of creation contains a great spirit of active participation, which is most suitable for our teenager's cosmology. Bergson regards the eternally active impulse of life as the origin of the universe, and the impulse of life is embodied in the unintermittible stretch of time. It continues to erupt upward, producing all forms of life; It falls down again and again, producing all inanimate matter. Life noumenon is an endless creative process, evolving from inorganic matter to organic matter, from low-level life form to advanced life form, and to the highest life rationality, emotions, feelings. This is how life in the universe continues and creates forever. Influenced by Bergson's philosophy of life, Zong believed that art should express life and be the manifestation of eternal and active life noumenon. He also believed that art was the highest creation of the human spirit and the outward development of the human spirit, and it brought lifeless matter to life, spiritualized it, and idealized it. In 1920, Zong wrote an article "After Seeing Rodin's Sculpture", which said that Rodin's art showed the eternal life vitality of the universe, and that all the natural things were constantly changing, all of which were the manifestation of a deep and strong life vitality of the universe. Rodin especially emphasized that sculpture should express "motion", because "motion" is the basic feature of the vitality of life in the universe. Only "motion" can demonstrate life and spirit, can present the incredible life noumenon hidden behind nature. To express the truth of the universe, art must express "motion". In the 1930s, Zong published his masterpiece "Goethe's Inspiration of Life", which further interprets the view of artistic expression of life noumenon. Goethe revealed the truth of human life with his life. He experienced the period of a young poet, a middle-aged politician, and an old thinker and scientist. Each life stage has become a profound symbol of life noumenon. Goethe's life never fixed in a place, stasis is a curse, because life noumenon is always dynamic and active. The source of all his poetry is his vivid life.

Zong's rhythm theory was formed gradually along with the evolution of his exploring of life noumenon. The life noumenon of Bergson's philosophy is a potential and unpredictable life impulse which is repressed under rationality. This life force is the

source of everything in the universe, and dynamic is its basic characteristic. Later Zong found another source of life philosophy and formed the aesthetic view of rhythm theory from *The Book of Changes*. The life noumenon of Chinese philosophy is rhythmical, and Chinese art is rooted in the philosophical spirit of "Yin and Yang together constitute the Tao". Zong's rhythm theory has a profound connection with the cosmological view and life view of Chinese philosophy in *The Book of Changes*. The view of life based on Qi philosophy emphasizes more on the rhythm and order of the dynamic life process.

From the perspective of the cosmology, the Chinese universe is not a mechanical, three-dimensional space, but a Qi universe, in which the motion of Qi flows around but does not dwell, bypassing and does not interfere. The universe is an infinite and vast field of Qi in space. The move of Qi from Yang to Yin or from Yin to Yang is rhythmic, and the growth and reduction of Yin and Yang follow objective laws. Chinese cosmology pays attention to the factor of time, space is permeated with time, the Chinese universe is a rhythmic, musical space-time integration. In the Qi universe, the Qi of Yin and Yang ebb and flow, forming the rhythmic changes of the four seasons and the 24 solar terms in a year. Time commands space to run in circle, the whole universe is a vivid and orderly harmony.

From the perspective of life, Yin and Yang are the two most basic elements that constitute life in the universe, and they accumulate with each other to form a rhythmic life. "Yin and Yang together constitute the Tao", Chinese philosophy holds that any life contains two aspects, Yin and Yang, which are opposed to each other and unified to form a harmonious and rhythmic state. Tao is the noumenon of life and produces Qi which is divided into Yin and Yang. Yin and Yang are constantly interwoven to form a rhythmic life, promoting the birth, change and development of everything in the world. Change is the fundamental characteristic of life, there is no immutable thing, the fundamental reason of life change is the result of Yin and Yang pushing each other constantly.

The life philosophy of China not only reveals that life is rhythmic, endless and orderly, but also regards human beings and nature as unified whole, in which all things must conform to the rhythmic alternation of the seasons and the circulation of the universe. Both human beings and nature are born of the Qi, and the Qi pervades the whole world. The flow of Qi leads to the interconnectedness of human life and natural life, forming a whole universe of great life, humans and all things are immersed in the ebb and flow with the Qi of the universe. Humans and all things share the same rhythm, and this has resulted in a harmonious life as a whole. "Human beings and all things are interconnected with each other, the Qi makes the seasons, climate, human emotions, phenology and farm works in the same rhythm."^[1] Human beings and all things share the Qi of Yin and Yang, so the rhythm of the mind can resonate with the rhythm of all things and become unity with them. This Taoist view provides the philosophical basis for Zong's rhythm theory of the subjective mind.

Under the influence of Chinese philosophy of life, Zong formed a rhythm aesthetic theory. The expression of rhythmic life in the universe should be regard as the fundamental purpose of art, and the artist should also express the rhythm of his own mind, which is connected with the rhythm of everything in nature. Chinese philosophy of

life has created the unique aesthetic form of Chinese art. Artist should present the life of Qi, rather than the three-dimensional realistic scenery. Every grass and wood, has an internal charm and spirit concentrated in it, and must present a lively sense of life. The mountains and rivers in Chinese paintings are full of inner vitality, and the presentation of "rhythmic vitality" has become the general principle.

3 The aesthetic connotation of Zong's rhythm theory

Rhythm aesthetics penetrates into all aspects of art, such as art ontology, art image, art form and subject mind, with specific connotations as follows:

First, at the ontological level, rhythm is the noumenon of Chinese art. Zong's rhythm theory has a strong metaphysical color. He believed that the most fundamental and original source of art existed deep in the universe. This kind of metaphysical thinking was common in ancient China, however, in modern times, it has been stripped away by shallow rationalism, which is a symbol of vitality exhaustion. Zong inherited this traditional mode of thinking, and the distinguishing characteristics of Chinese art are based on the basic philosophy of *The Book of Changes*. Yin and Yang are two elements of everything, and they are interwoven into a rhythmic life, which is the source of Chinese art, Chinese art thoroughly carries out the philosophy spirit. According to Zong's opinion, Tao is embodied as a rhythm of life, or rhythmical life, ancient Chinese art wants to present the rhythm and harmony of life that prevails behind everything. Therefore, the ancient Chinese aesthetic is close to comprehend the Tao, and the highest realm of aesthetic is to experience the rhythm and harmony of life, which is eternal noumenon.

Second, at the level of artistic image, rhythm is the vivid life, and the manifestation of the vitality of all things. Chinese painting emphasizes on the capture of the vitality behind the image, and opposes excessively strict likeness of the form. The more you get the likeness, the more you lose the charm, Chinese painting emphasizes revealing the spirit of life behind the object. To present the beauty of vitality in Chinese painting, it is necessary to be simple and pure, and triviality and carving are all rejected by artists. Chinese calligraphy is also an art of expressing life power. Unlike painting, which can reproduce external images, calligraphy expresses the rhythmic life or the rhythm of life through the strokes and structures of Chinese characters. It is necessary to give power to the strokes by using special tools, and calligraphy pursues dynamic state in structure. Therefore, every abstract stippling form becomes a symbol of enduring vitality.

In "After Seeing Rodin's Sculpture", Zong said that "motion" is the truth of the universe, and all natural phenomena are in "motion". Rodin advocated showing the intermediate state of transition from one state to another in order to seize its suggestive moment. Rodin's motion is the external movement of objects, which is different from Chinese vividness. The motion expressed in Chinese painting is vivid and the inner rhythm of life. The two basic elements of life, Yin and Yang, ebb and flow to form a rhythmic, organic and methodical inner motion. The vividness of Chinese painting is not to present the external motion of objects, but to present the vivid and

real life. The rhythm of Chinese art is deep and orderly by the push of Yin and Yang, which form the inner rhythm of life.

Third, in terms of artistic form, rhythm is a musical harmony produced by a series of opposing and unifying formal categories. Opposing and unifying categories permeate all artistic forms, including composition, lines, colors, tones, etc. The categories of motion and stationary, emptiness and fullness, light and shadow, density and sparsity, thickness and thinness, wetness and dryness, etc, symbolize the two fundamental elements of Yin and Yang circulating around the objects, forming the rhythm of artistic space. In terms of spatial composition, Chinese art emphasizes the interdependence of emptiness and fullness, sometimes by entering the empty space from the full space, and sometimes by condensing the empty space into fullness, emptiness and fullness form a two-dimensional spatial structure. The gathering and dispersing of natural Qi creates the basic shapes of all things. Natural Qi gathers to create all kinds of things, and everything return to the void when Qi disperses. Therefore, the spatial composition of Chinese painting is a two-dimensional spatial structure of emptiness and fullness. In terms of the organization of form elements, Chinese art pursues a combination of motion and stillness, the rhythm of the art image is generated by the combination of static and dynamic elements. In calligraphy art, the static regular script lines and dynamic cursive lines are integrated, forming the changes in speed and rhythm, producing a musical rhythm and harmony.

Fourth, at the level of art subject, Chinese art symbolizes the rhythm of the artist's subject mind through the rhythm of the image. Chinese art conveys its own life emotion through external natural images, and symbolizes the realm of life through natural landscapes. The images and the artist's mind are in the same rhythm, the objective scenery becomes the carrier of the subjective feelings, and the flow of the natural life and the flow of the subject's life merges together. Chinese painting takes the rhythm of harmony as the research object. "learning from nature and obtaining from the source of mind" which is the basic method of Chinese art creation. In the moment when the nature life and human's feelings merge with each other, the artistic conception is creating. Taking the highly mature landscape painting of the Song and Yuan Dynasties as an example, landscape painting is not the pursuit of delicate realism and representation, but a symbol of spiritual realm. Artists convey subjective feelings through landscape, the rhythm of the objective image reproduces the rhythm of the subjective mind. The artist's emotions are fluctuating and myriad, which can not be expressed by a fixed image outline. Only the vivid mountains, rivers, vegetation and clouds of nature can be enough to represent the vigorous and endless inspiration of the artist's mind.

4 The theory of rhythm as a paradigm of intuitive aesthetic criticism

The theory of rhythm is a paradigm of intuitive aesthetic criticism. It doesn't aim to construct a large logical system and philosophical edifice through conceptual reasoning, but to grasp the life rhythm of specific, microscopic natural objects via aesthetic

experiences. Bergson's life philosophy regards the impulse of life as the noumenon of the world. Traditional rational thinking, using concepts, analysis, judgment, and reasoning, cannot grasp the flow of life, but can only obtain motionless fragments of life knowledge. Bergson emphasizes grasping the pure flow of life through intuition, "Intuition is a fusion of intellect. This fusion will place the subject within the object, corresponding with the unique and ineffable thing."^[2] "Knowledge has two forms: either intuitive or logical, either imagined or derived from reason, either concerning individuals or concerning universals, either concerning particular things or concerning their relationships. In short, knowledge produces either images or concepts."^[3] For an artist to achieve intuition, they need to rely on empathy, which is the artist's ability to resonate with their own life flow and the external life flow in the same rhythm. With empathy, the artists grasp the flow of life through intuition. Therefore, they experience the eternal vitality and enter the essence of life, which is the epistemological path of Bergson's aesthetics of life. Zong believed that Artistic life was a life of empathy, infinite empathy for nature, life, and infinite empathy for starry skies, clouds, birdsong, and spring water, and it was his purpose of creating small poems. The emphasis on the study of the microcosm reflects Zong's unique strolling aesthetics. Strolling is a free and unrestrained action, and the charm of walking lies in the ability to calmly and elegantly grasp the meaning of cosmic life. A flower, a passing cloud, a scroll of painting, a beautiful poem, and so on, can all reveal the realm of life and the truth of the universe. Zong's strolling aesthetics bring a poetic literary style and a unique critical method. The rhythm theory of criticism places emphasis on intuitive experience, where the aesthetic subject faces the emotional image, appreciate its colors, lines, composition, melody, rhythm, stillness and movement, and realizes the lively life atmosphere and spiritual vitality of the image, thereby glimpsing the rhythm of their own minds. The subject's heart rhythm merges with the vital rhythm of the image, and the objective image becomes a symbol of the subject's inner world. On the ontological level, the rhythm theory of criticism points to the overall rhythm and harmony of the universe's life.

In 1948, Zong published "the Significance and Value of Dunhuang Frescoes", which made a profound interpretation of Dunhuang frescoes by means of rhythm theory criticism. In terms of art forms, Dunhuang murals show the rhythm and harmony of the whole pictures. The round light of Buddha's back, the wave under Buddha's feet, combined with many swirling lines, formed a beautiful and complex melody and contained the rhythm of the body in it, symbolizing the rhythm of the universe. From the level of artistic images, Dunhuang murals depict many flying images and demonic animal images in religious stories, beating the rhythm of life. The point of these flying figures is not to express volume, but to a flying melody and rhythm that overcomes gravity. The main clothing of their bodies is not close-fitting shirts, but floating and flying stripes. From the perspective of the subject's mind, Chinese artists get rid of the ties of rites of the Han Dynasty, under the stimulation of religious emotion, freely use their imagination, "flying" is their spiritual ideal, and the flying rhythm is the concentrated embodiment of their spiritual rhythm and life vitality. From the ontological level, the realm of "dance" is the highest realm of art. Because this "dance" can reveal the harmony and rhythm of the universe. "Dance" is not only

the highest realm of all artistic expression, but also a symbol of the creation process of the universe. "Dance" represents a high degree of rhythm, order, harmony, but also the highest degree of life, rotation, power and passion. Many Chinese arts, such as Zhang Xu's calligraphy, Wu Daozi's painting, and the murals of Dunhuang, all point to the realm of "dance".

5 The value of rhythm theory in constructing Chinese contemporary art and critical theory

Zong's academic vision and research method of mutual learning between the East and the West culture reflected in the rhythm theory, have important significance for the construction of contemporary art theory. "The aesthetic interpretation of the Chinese national cultural spirit makes rhythm theory a theoretical system with national character and modernity, which has important theoretical value and practical significance for the construction of modern Chinese aesthetic discourse".^[4]

First, the rhythm theory reinterprets "rhythmic vitality" and realizes the modern transformation of classical Chinese aesthetic category. In the Southern Dynasties, Xie He proposed six principles of Chinese paintings, "rhythmic vitality" as the general principle has become the basic law of Chinese paintings for thousands of years. Among the six principles, "rhythmic vitality" was the theme of Chinese painting. Zong used the rhythm theory to further explain "rhythmic vitality", and the connotation of rhythm was constantly expanding, it gradually became an important and modern category that embodied the life spirit of Chinese art. "In Zong's rhythm theory, the connotation of 'rhythm' has a process of transformation from 'consistency' in form to 'order' in life and philosophy. The former is a kind of 'mathematical rhythm', which refers to the harmony of form and comes from the periodic repetition of a certain formal element. While the latter is a kind of 'rhythm of life', it refers to the laws and order of everything in the universe".^[5]

Many western art theories often have cultural barriers when it comes to explaining Chinese artistic phenomenon, and the conclusions they draw cannot be fully satisfactory. In addition, Chinese classical art criticism theories focus on explaining artistic phenomenon using various metaphors and image language, with a strong color of sensibility. Therefore, contemporary China needs to draw on Western rational and logically thinking methods to build its own theoretical framework and complete the modern transformation of classical aesthetics. Zong's theory of rhythm took the path of absorbing Western life philosophy and ultimately returned to native culture, deeply rooted in the life philosophy of *the Book of Changes* in its true sense. From form to content, from phenomenon to noumenon, from object to subject, Zong greatly expanded the connotation and completed the metaphysical construction of rhythm theory, providing a reference path for the construction of contemporary art theory with Chinese characteristics.

Second, as the foundation of the theory of art, rhythm theory endow new meaning to the theory of "artistic conception", the core category of Chinese aesthetics. Zong combined Chinese and Western aesthetic thoughts to interpret the creation of artistic

conception. On the one hand, Zong was influenced by the general principle of "learning from nature and obtaining from the source of mind" proposed by Zhang Zao in the Tang Dynasty. Zong believed that artistic conception came into being when the rhythm of the subject image and the rhythm of the object mind merged with each other. On the other hand, Zong employed Nietzsche's aesthetic thought to expound on the process of the creation of artistic conception, the artist needs to aesthetically observe nature with the Apollo spirit, and needs to penetrate the core of life and experience the rhythm of image with the Dionysus spirit. Moreover, Zong used rhythm theory to explain the structure of artistic conception, endowing it with deeper theoretical dimensions and modern connotations. "Zong Baihua constructed a modern art metaphysics theory, where all artistic conceptions lead to 'the rhythm of life'."^[6] Artistic conception is no longer a simple representation of nature, but a multi-layered construction of realms. It has three layers of realms in total, including the depiction of the life rhythm of objects, which corresponds to realism and impressionism; the conveyance of the rhythm of the artist's life and emotions, which corresponds to romanticism and classicism; and the revelation of the rhythm and harmony of the cosmic life noumenon, which corresponds to symbolism.

Third, rhythm theory touches the core and soul of Chinese culture and becomes a highly nationalistic modern theory. "Rhythm theory is not only a theory in the field of art, but also it carried out in various aspects. Rhythm permeates every aspect of Chinese culture, including the rite and music system, the artistic realm, the social life, the laws of nature, the spatial awareness, Aesthetic observation method and the mood of human beings, so the ultimate goal of the rhythm theory is to explore the core and soul of Chinese culture."^[7]

The ancient Chinese grasped the secrets of the cosmic melody and the life rhythm in the past, and created a high degree of order and harmony in cultural systems and social life. The Chinese people feel that the universe is "alive and orderly" such as the push of the four seasons, the alternation of day and night, and the continuation of life and death. This "alive and orderly" rhythm is the great principle of the universe's operation, and it is the ontology of all cultural and artistic phenomena. The rhythm and harmony of the universe are embodied in music and rites, and are integrated into social life in practice. Rites and music are the two pillars of Chinese culture, shining with metaphysical brilliance and revealing a deeper meaning of real life. Rites form the order and logic of social life, while music cultivate the minds of Chinese to a state of harmony. However, *the Classic of Music* has been lost, and the ancients cannot play music freely, so they have to entrust the rhythm of music to poetry, painting, calligraphy, dance, architecture, and so on. All Chinese art forms pursue a musical realm, and the rhythm is the ultimate and common goal. In a word, Zong's research of rhythm ultimately aimed to seek the soul of Chinese culture. Therefore, the rhythm theory based on the fundamental spirit of Chinese culture reveals the secrets of Chinese art in a profound and thorough manner, becoming a modern theory with national characteristics.

6 Conclusion

As an important theory of life aesthetics and criticism, rhythm theory permeates every aspect of the noumenon, content, form and the mind of the subject. It is a model of aesthetic criticism of intuitive experience. Zong Baihua's rhythm theory is rooted in the traditional life philosophy, which makes a profound and incisive interpretation of Chinese art and become a deep embodiment of the life spirit of Chinese art. Exploring the connotation of rhythm theory and inheriting the spirit of strolling aesthetics has great value for the construction of contemporary art and critical theory with Chinese characteristics.

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