

Comparative Study on “Images” in Chinese and Western Culture and Art

With Rudolf·Arnheim and Zhu Guangqian Centered

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Abstract—This paper compared the art thoughts of two aesthetics masters—Rudolf · Arnheim and Zhu Guangqian, analyzed the connotation of “image” and the change of “image” in Chinese and Western, and drew the conclusion that there were both similarities and differences in grasping and understanding the connotation of image due to the difference of cultural background of each country.

Keywords—Chinese and Western; culture; art; image; comparison

I. INTRODUCTION

The so-called image is an artistic image with unique emotion which is created through the observing experience on objective target. Simply, it is an objective target on which the subjective feeling is attached. There are statements such as “images abstracting from viewing” and “creation of images for full expression” early in ancient China, but most of them belongs to the category of philosophical theory. Every country has its cultural characteristics; every nationality has its ethnic characteristics; and art is the concentrated reflection of national culture. Through analyzing and comparing the “image” in Chinese and Western culture and art, we can know the difference of Chinese and Western in the aspects such as value, mode of thinking and aesthetic taste, truly understand the real connotation of “image” in Chinese and Western culture, truly realize cross-cultural communication, so as to promote the communication of Chinese and Western art and culture.

II. INTERPRETATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE “IMAGE” CONCEPT IN CHINESE AND WESTERN ART

A. Origin and Development of “Image” in Chinese Art

In traditional Chinese culture, “image” is an important aesthetics concept, which perfectly integrates aesthetics concept with Chinese tradition. Notes to Book of Changes has two very important definitions for “image”; one is “images abstracting from viewing”, the other is “creation of images for full expression”. That is to say, we can draw support from the image to fully express the thought, and express personal emotion and lofty image with “spontaneous expression”. The statement of “image” in “creation of

images for full expression” is the earliest concept of “image” in China. In the following, this paper will discuss the concept of “image” in Five-element Theory, Confucian thoughts, Taoist thoughts and Buddhist thoughts which have significant impact on the historical development of China, and their influence on the “image” viewpoint of Chinese scholars. Five-element Theory (“metal, wood, water, fire and earth”) is a part of traditional Chinese philosophical thought. Yizhoushu said, “Among five elements, white represents metal; blue represents wood; black represents water; red represents fire; yellow represents earth”. Hence five elements are linked up with five colors. Therefore, the use of colors by the ancients is often dominated by the emotional concept of one image. The core thought of Confucianism is the “rites and music” thought. This image of Confucianism influences the whole feudal society afterwards. The image of Taoism advocates the spiritual transcendence. Lao Zi said, “whoever is aware of the white (Yang) yet retains the black (Yin) is as a standard for the entire world.” Therefore, the image of Taoism always pursues an inner realm of “behave as per personality, enlighten with color”. The image of Buddhist and the local Yin-Yang Five-element Theory are different in approach but equally satisfactory in result. The image of Buddhism is the symbol of “wisdom” and “power”. Using color to compare wisdom and using color to indicate power are the basic beliefs of Buddhism. All statements and applications are derived from this.

Since modern times, many scholars in China have formed their unique image viewpoints. Of which, Zhu Guangqian’s image thought of “agreement of interest and image” in image intuition and Zong Baihua’s image thought of mutual blending and mutual penetration of “life sentiment and objective natural scenery” are the most representative. Image is neither a specific concept nor an abstract concept in modern and contemporary aesthetics, but a complete perceptual world full of implication and interest. This is the so-called image world of integrating emotion and environment for modern and contemporary aesthetics in China.

B. Origin and Development of “Image” in Western Art

As for the West, the origin of “image” can be dated back to Plato’s thinking on the subject-object relation of “see” and

“being seen” in Ancient Greek period. It can be said that Plato starts the “image” of the West. Especially in the renaissance period of Western countries, various thoughts were witnessed prosperous development. The theory of “image” is no exception. Benedetto Croce and Immanuel Kant are main representatives. The whole theoretical system of Arnheim focuses on the “importance of human visual perception”. Its understanding for all arts is symbolization. Symbolization here represents “image”. Italian aesthetician Croce advocates idealism. With respect to this point, Kant holds the same with the basic theory of Croce. He held that the center of everything in world is spirit, and spirit creates everything. Basic activities of human spirit can be divided into cognitive activity and practical activity. Of which, the cognition related to “image” is represented in “intuition” and “concept”. It can be seen from the above that what the Western scholars pay close attention to is “visual perception of human”, and that they emphasize the authenticity and intuition of vision, which are very different from the Chinese “freehand” thought.

III. COHESION OF MOMENT AND ETERNALITY - DISCUSSION ON SPIRITUAL DEMAND OF RUDOLF·ARNHEIM AND ZHU GUANGQIAN

A. *Perceptual Prejudice — Based on Analysis on Arnheim’s “Visual Thinking” and “Art and Visual Perception”*

Rudolf Arnheim follows one of the founders of Gestalt psychological school--Kohler, and focuses on the art psychology study all his life. The whole theoretical system of Arnheim focuses on the “importance of human visual perception” which is well reflected in *Visual Thinking* and *Art and Visual Perception*. When summarizing “representation” in the book, he emphasizes that the understanding of art lies in that “all arts are symbolic”; if art creation only directly mocks the object, and wholly reproduces the object, it won’t occupy such an eminent position in society. In fact, “symbolic” said by Arnheim includes human’s feeling towards object through visual perception. No matter being defined as representation or reproduction, works are infused the subjective sensation and emotion of human as the subject. Art defined by him can be understood as the works touching human’s sensory perception. The reason why works are touching lie in that elements in works and collocation of elements form a certain forces and the mutual interaction process of forces, and such an interaction relationship exactly corresponds to human’s inner feeling structure.

Rudolf Arnheim believes that human’s visual perception ability is congenital; but the congenital of this ability needs a mature process; the development of ability is limited by external conditions. In *Art and Visual Perception*, Arnheim believes that “such ability is an inborn ability--an ability with which visual observations continuously refine and specialize with growth, and an ability of grasping overall structure of object.” However, due to certain inhibiting effect of certain conditions in real society on congenital ability of human, people neglect the importance of sensory perception (equal

to the value of rationality). In *Visual Thinking*, Arnheim fully discusses the important value of sensory perception ——the right half spirit of human, to raise people’s attention to their sensory perception. The theory of Arnheim was matured around 1970, which is also a response to the imperfect understanding of sensory perception and knowledge & skill in his era.

B. *Agreement of Interest and Image, based on Analysis on Zhu Guangqian’s “Poetics” and “Psychology of Literature and Art”*

Zhu Guangqian is a famous esthetician in China. His representative writings include *Psychology in Tragedy*, *Poetics* and *Psychology of Literature and Art*, etc. His aesthetics and literary thoughts center on humanism, combine with modern psychology, and apply the aesthetic theory of modern humanism psychology to literary studies. Since his aesthetic thoughts are established on strict practice, many principles stated by him are accepted by people. Therefore, he has been honored as by the expert in the aspect of Chinese aesthetic thoughts.

In the beginning of Chapter I of his *Poetics*, Zhu Guangqian says, “If you want to know the essence of one thing, you’d better study its origin. Just like if you want to know a person’s personality, you’d better know his ancestor and environment.” Main thoughts of Zhu Guangqian’s *Poetics* believe that poem is a “reflection” of “human life and worldly image” and obtained through continual amendment to words and phrases. In this way, poem is doom to contain the author’s will. Therefore, no matter creating poem or appreciating other people’s creation, we must “see” the artistic conception of poem. The word “see” embodies the “image” in Zhu Guangqian’s poetry. “See” is “intuition” or can be understood as that “the seen image will doom to express an interest.” “See” is an initiative action, a creativity and a sublimation. We all know that Zhu Guangqian’s *Psychology of Literature and Art* mainly studies aesthetic experience. Zhu Guangqian explains aesthetic experience from cognitive activity. The so-called aesthetic experience is aesthetic activity from inner feeling, and analyzing one thing in the way of “perception”. The sequence of its development is “intuition --perception --concept”. They cannot be understood separately.

Zhu Guangqian wrote in *Poetics*, “For the artistry of various arts, there is a common element, that is, an image full of interest; there is a common psychological activity, that is, seeing an image which can perfectly represent an interest. The unity of art and physical form are inseparable.”^[1] Zhu Guangqian explains the psychological activity when aesthetic experience happens with easily understood examples in his book *Psychology of Literature and Art*. It is the perception in your mind when you see the natural scenery. For instance, when you stand on the beach, your instantaneous perception is that your heart is as wide and selfless as the sea. Such a perception will generate an aesthetic experience. Such a perception not only can be obtained from natural scenery, but also can be obtained from people’s living environment. Aesthetics is analyzing such an experience. The “aesthetic experience” said by Zhu

Guangqian is the “experience of intuition”. They belong to the same concept. The object of intuition is image, and the experience of aesthetic feeling is the intuition of image. At this point, traditional Chinese theory is interlinked to the Western theory. Zhu Guangqian agrees with and accepts the theory of the West, which is also the common part of traditional Chinese theory and Western theory.

IV. CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS ON “IMAGE” IN CHINESE AND WESTERN CULTURE AND ART

A. *Connection of “Image” in Chinese and Western Culture and Art*

Firstly, “image” in Chinese and western culture and art pays attention to the comparison of subjective emotion and objective things. It can be seen from analysis on the views on image of Rudolf Arnheim, a western representative and Zhu Guangqian, a Chinese representative, that Zhu Guangqian structured his own aesthetic concept with some concepts in western aesthetic theories and blended them with Chinese traditional aesthetic theory to complete a modern restructuring of aesthetics. It owes to not only his deep understanding on the thinking of western aesthetic theory but also his cultivation of traditional Chinese culture, i.e. “putting his own thought in the academic history at all times and in all over the world for comparison, investigation and positioning, and absorbing their nutrition to modify and supplement his opinion”. From the aesthetics of Zhu Guangqian, he learnt the analysis of “Practice” theory on aesthetics from the acceptance of Benedetto Croce to the “intuitionism” theory starting from psychology, and then to the impact of Marxist thoughts. However, these are not the acceptance by Zhu Guangqian himself, Zhu Guangqian used these theories in his theory to let the aesthetic field in China to know and introduce. This is the largest influence and impact of Zhu Guangqian on the aesthetic field in China.

Secondly, “image” in Chinese and western culture and art values concise language. It is easy to be found in most of Chinese poems. Since the 20th century, the Chinese aesthetics represented by Zhu Guangqian also gradually formed. The theory of aesthetic experience proposed by Zhu Guangqian plays a leading role for Chinese aesthetics to accept the western aesthetics. Most of the aesthetic experts accepted the aesthetic view points of western scholars such as Schopenhauer, Benedetto Croce, and Kant et al. via distinguishing acceptance and rejection, and using concise words. In terms of contents, they also accepted “intuitionism”, “empathy theory”, “psychological distance” and other psychological aesthetic thoughts which were also taken as the core part of their aesthetic theory systems. Advanced theory and new research methods of modern western psychological aesthetics open the field of vision of Chinese aesthetic field, and bring a new research field for Chinese aestheticians starting from a new concept.

B. *Differences of “Image” in Chinese and Western Culture and Art*

Chinese aesthetic theories are developed from the traditional aesthetics: This is an advanced theory belonging to us, forming a sharp contrast to the new research methods of modern western psychological aesthetics. Of course, Zhu Guangqian blended Chinese tradition esthetics theories with western aesthetic psychology theories, bringing us a new breakthrough and leading a new path for the combination of Chinese and western aesthetic theories. Ye Lang believes “Zhu Guangqian is a representative of modern Chinese aesthetics, and his contribution lie in three aspects: firstly, Zhu Guangqian’s aesthetic ideology reflected the tendency of western aesthetics from classical to modern aesthetics—way of thinking from the mode of “subject-object dichotomy” to “unity of heaven and man”; secondly, Zhu Guangqian’s aesthetic ideology reflected the historical trend of aesthetic development since the modern times, looking for fusion of Chinese and western aesthetics; thirdly, Zhu Guangqian attached importance to and studied ‘aesthetic image’”. Zhu Guangqian’s aesthetic ideology is based on the point of view of human, emphasizes on the ideological taste of human in aesthetic experience, which is another innovation point to Chinese traditional aesthetics. Zhu Guangqian attached importance on the humanistic thoughts and redefined mental feeling of human. The process of development has different performance stages. The acceptance of Zhu Guangqian on “intuitionism” of Benedetto Croce is another new understanding on the human mental ability, and this reflection is utilized in the aesthetic experience of art. The reason why psychological methods are used to research is to show the psychic reaction of human. These research methods were different from those of Benedetto Croce, and then Zhu Guangqian was more determined in his theoretical direction, gradually apart from Benedetto Croce’s thoughts and theories. Zhu Guangqian at that time paid more attention to the focus on human. It can be seen from the focus of Zhu Guangqian on literature & art and morality that he once said “respect human dignity and put the human above all”. Thus it can be seen that Zhu Guangqian puts psychological reaction of human on a high position.

When the issue of aesthetic psychology through aesthetic research appeared, researchers of aesthetic experience emerged in large numbers in China. It also became a feature in Chinese aesthetic research in 1980s. In addition to translating the works of psychology from the foreign researchers, there were many scholars put forward different views on the western aesthetic psychology. In this period of time, more Chinese esthetics research scholars also got liberation in their thoughts, and new understanding and experience on the research of human and human psychology. They determined their own research directions again. The aesthetic subject and aesthetic experience theory stalled for a long time in the research of Chinese aesthetics, and aesthetic psychological research brought innovation opportunity in the new field. Breakthrough in aesthetic psychology research goes deep into the aesthetic and artistic issues, and promotes the change in the research method of aesthetics, and brings a

macro development to the aesthetic research in the new period.

C. Discussion on the Causes of Differences in Chinese and Western "Images"

Each country has its own characteristics, so does each thought which is also the concentrated reflection of a nation in aspects of way of thinking, mode of life and aesthetic taste. China and the West have both commonality and differences in terms of "image". The commonality has greatly helped Chinese and western scholars in learning and mutual transformation; oppositely, the diversity also increases the difficulty to understand each other and hinders the intercultural communication. In view of the above reasons, I think it is necessary to discuss the causes for cultural differences of Chinese and western "images" to go deep into the cultural background and its connotation implied behind the "image", thus laying a solid foundation for correctly understanding the cultural image contained in different cultural backgrounds.

1) Differences in values

Value is the cognition, judgment, understanding and selection made based on certain human senses, this is an orientation and thinking of human for identifying and recognizing things. On the one hand, the value shows the value target, that is orientation of and pursuit to value of a people; on the other hand, it has become a standard, measure and criterion of value for people to judge things. Chinese and western differences in living environment, social background, etc. also cause different values of Chinese and western people. It can be found from the relationship between things and images in China and the west that people's evaluations on the values are different. In China, "pine", "bamboo" and so on all are labeled with special emotional symbols; while in the west, they are only material objects without other extended senses or strong emotional coloring.

2) Differences in way of thinking

The way of thinking is the procedures with which the brain used in thinking the things reflected by the outside world, controlling people's words and behaviors. Way of thinking has four outstanding features of universality, typicality, territoriality and nationality. The Chinese are used to and good at mastering things from the macro on the whole, pay special attention to the flexible application of abstract thinking and generalization ability, like to elaborate via external environment and other sides, attach importance to critical thinking skills, thus revealing more profound significance. Therefore, in terms of language expression, some of the more general fuzzy concepts are used to explain and interpret. Geographical environment of the west causes the westerners to be more sensitive to things, pay more attention to the things themselves and attach importance to the practicability. Hence they usually use vivid, specific words to express their thoughts and feelings in expression. Differences in the way of thinking are more prominent in relevant Chinese and western images.

For example, Zhu Guangqian gives an example, when watching the ancient pine tree, its vigor has been blended

with me when I was concentrated and my breath has also been blended with the ancient pine tree. Is this an association? You can find the answer in this section. "People externally project or sense themselves into the natural objects, while the artists or poets externally project or sense us into the natural objects". When attaining the state of concentrated observation, the realm of forgetting everything will naturally appear, and forgetting everything is also the result of identity between object and person. When we saying the ancient pine tree's vigor has been blended with me when I was concentrated and my breath has also been blended with the ancient pine tree, we actually mean the identity between object and person.

3) Differences in aesthetic taste

Aesthetic taste is also known as aesthetic judgment, it is a preference shown by the aesthetic subject in aesthetic activities, directly reflected on the aesthetic choice and evaluation. Due to geographical environment, customs, etc., both Chinese and western aesthetic tastes have obvious local characteristics. For example, in the field of aesthetics in China, the cultural aesthetics is pursued from the perspectives of "upgrading the life" and "making life be full of art" since ancient times. After Zhu Guangqian introduced western aesthetic theories, aesthetic views in aesthetics in China was somewhat changed. Later, Zhu Guangqian published *Psychology of Literature and Art* proposing a new perspective of aesthetics, at the same time introduced the aesthetic theories of aesthetic experience research starting from psychology. During this period of time, literature and art psychology, literature and art aesthetics and literary sociology had gone through a complementary research model on the concept. Formerly, we only studied from a single philosophical aesthetics view, which limited our vision of aesthetics. Introduction of psychological aesthetics broadens our vision and opens another path for us to research aesthetics. The aesthetic experience can not only be studies from the perspective of philosophy. Aesthetic creation and appreciation activities can be studied by utilizing psychological aesthetics, which are a new perspective and also a new research method.

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