

# Four Essays on Aesthetics

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## Toward a Global View

Zehou Li and Jane Cauvel



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Foreword

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Introducti

**Part I:**

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A classic in Chinese philosophy of aesthetics for the past twenty years, Zehou Li's *Four Essays on Aesthetics* (*Meixue-sijiang*) has finally been translated into English to bring philosophical insight to Western readers. Li's seminal work focuses on the widely-debated philosophies in China concerning the origins, manifestations, importance, and transformative power of beauty, art, and aesthetic experiences. Drawing upon the influences of both Eastern and Western philosophers and writers, Li discusses the origins of the practices of beauty and aesthetics, in addition to the origins of art credited to shamanistic rituals. He rejects the concepts of Western aesthetics and embraces the traditional Chinese purpose for art: to mold human minds. He stresses the importance of the involvement of aesthetic philosophers in advocating technology and other vital aspects of society that will contribute to harmony among individuals, environments, and social relationships.

In an initial series of engaging conversations, Zehou Li and Jane Cauvel reveal their philosophical presuppositions and expose a deeper, crosscultural understanding of the philosophy of aesthetics. Their groundbreaking work creates a bridge between the traditional and the modern, the East and the West, and brings us one step closer to understanding the beauty in human nature.

**Zehou Li** is widely regarded as China's leading scholar of traditional and modern intellectual history and philosophy. Placed under house arrest for three years in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square Massacre, he was granted permanent resident status in the United States in 1991.

**Jane Cauvel** is Professor Emerita at Colorado College.

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## PHILOSOPHY, INCLUDING AESTHETICS, MUST BELONG

Aesthetics has and continues to be an ever-growing, interacting network of games, an *open family*, as Wittgenstein says. Within aesthetics, there are only family resemblances, for it is hard to say that there is something in common among calligraphy aesthetics, science and technology aesthetics, and movie aesthetics. Earlier, I wrote that aesthetics is a “branch of learning which, with aesthetic experience as its central focus, studies beauty and art.” This way of looking at aesthetics sets forth an area of study commonly held by philosophers. However, my approach, as any approach, is limited. I believe that philosophy must belong not only to professional philosophers but also to all people. It seeks the truth and the poetry of life, and aesthetics is one aspect of this endeavor. Everyone has the capacity to seek the truth and enjoy the poetry of life.

The *aesthetics fever* in China during the 1980s exemplifies the truth of my belief. Following the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), there was a period known as *aesthetics fever*. From 1979 to 1984, scholars, students, and the public were interested in aesthetics. Courses in aesthetics were in demand at schools and universities, even engineering schools. Public lectures attracted thousands of students and even common workers. Books on aesthetics were best sellers and found in philosophy and humanities sections of bookstores, whereas books on ethics, epistemology, and political philosophy were absent. Many students applied for postgraduate study in aesthetics. Jiangping Gao’s excellent essay, “Chinese Aesthetics in the Past Two Decades,” includes important information about this period.

These years saw a historical recovery of aesthetics as a discipline. From the late 1950s to the early 1960s, there was a “great debate (or discussion)” on aesthetics. The “debate” was originally intended to establish Marxist aesthetics in China. This was part of the effort to establish the national ideology after the Chinese Communist Party took power in 1949. During this period, there were many “debates” in the fields of literature, art, history, and philosophy, and all of them shared the same purpose. The “debate” on aesthetics was different, however.

There was a common pattern among all the other “debates”: in the beginning, different opinions appeared and then the highest political leader made a conclusion, which was immediately accepted and, in the end, the criticism toward the exponents of the “wrong opinions” began, sometimes accompanied by personal punishment. The aesthetic “debate” might be the only exception, however; it ended in no consensus, and each of the participants of the “debate” voiced his own opinion separately and independently and, along with the continuation of the discussion, the discussants paid more and more attention to the character of scholarship in their arguments. Everyone claimed to

be the true Marxist and, in fully. This “debate” educated a general interest, overwhelmed by the ideology during the subsequent Cultural Revolution. It did not disappear but became

The “aesthetics craze” during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) (logical liberation) also regarded as both the Renaissance and the Cultural Revolution. For example, I was told by some scholars in 1980, after the first congress of the Chinese Aesthetics Association, some aestheticians before they came back to their hometowns, they overflowed to the Cultural Revolution in China—Its Causes and Consequences (1997). The following

Zhou Li: *Meixue lun* (Aesthetics Theory), twenty-five papers, most published in journals or newspapers from 1979 to 1984, 20,000 copies. Zong Baihua: *Meixue* (Aesthetics), a collection of twenty-two papers, 20,000 copies; 1982: 46 papers on Beauty, a book in which aesthetic ideas are explained in 1984, altogether 195,000 copies. *Meixue*, a book describing aesthetics, more than 200,000 copies published. These books were printed by different publishers. Each book had more than one million copies.

The fever for aesthetics was a time free from the ideological constraints for four decades and ended. These serious, scientific, and social ideas always open to renewed discussion, to gain new perspectives, and to gain new perspectives on scholarship that people

On the popular level, the aesthetic ideas of the revolution were their homes, to color

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be the true Marxist and, in order to prove that, they read Marxist classics care-fully. This "debate" educated a generation of Chinese aestheticians, and cul-tivated a general interest in the discipline. Although aesthetics was over-whelmed by the ideological propaganda, political crisis, and social turbulence during the subsequent Cultural Revolution, the achievement of "debate" did not disappear but became a precious legacy of Chinese scholarship.

The "aesthetics craze" met the need of Chinese society immediately after the Cultural Revolution. An ideological movement (which was called ideolo-gical liberation) also occurred during this period; it can, in some sense, be regarded as both the Renaissance and Enlightenment in China. To take as an example, I was told by some former students of Sichuan University that, in 1980, after the first congress of the Chinese Society of Aesthetics held in Yun-nan, some aestheticians went to Sichuan University and gave lectures there before they came back to Beijing. The lecture hall was filled by students and they overflowed to the outside. I published a paper titled "The 'Aesthetics Craze' in China—Its Cause and Significance" in *Dialogue and Universalism* no. 3-4 (1997). The following works illustrate the extent of the craze.

Zehou Li: *Meixue lunji* (Collected Essays on Aesthetics, a collection of twenty-five papers, most of which had already been published in various jour-nals or newspapers from the 1950s to the 1970s), 1980: 15,000 copies; 1981: 21,000 copies. Zong Baihua: *Meixue sanbu* (Peripatetics in Aesthetics, a col-lection of twenty-two papers written from the 1920s to the 1970s) 1981: 25,000 copies; 1982: 46,000 copies. Zhu Guangqian: *Tan mei shu jian* (Let-ter on Beauty, a book in the form of a collection of letters in which some aes-thetics ideas are explained in simple language), printed four times from 1980 to 1984, altogether 195,000 copies. Zehou Li: *Meide de Licheng* (The Path of Beauty, a book describing the development of tastes in ancient China), more than 200,000 copies published. It is difficult to know how many copies of these books were printed eventually, since later they were printed by many different publishers. Each of them, particularly the latter three, must have sold more than one million copies.<sup>11</sup>

The fever for aesthetics arose during this period of *ideological liberation*, a time free from the ideological constraints that had controlled Chinese peo-ple for four decades and a time when different theories and opinions were de-bated. These serious, scholarly debates were ones in which resolutions were always open to renewed challenges. In contrast to the sensitive political, eth-ical, and social ideas at that special time, issues of aesthetics were safe to de-bate; to gain new perspectives, scholars began studying the traditional Chi-nese scholarship that preceded the 1949 Revolution.

On the popular level, people were feeling a sense of liberation from the re-strictions of the revolutionary asceticism. They explored new ways to deco-rate their homes, to color and cut hair, and to try various fashions of dress. As

they did so, they were asking, What is truly beautiful? This question led to many discussions, especially between the young and the old. Some young people wanted longer hair, others shorter; many girls wanted to wear colorful dresses, others wanted jeans and sneakers. All wanted to express their own tastes and to manifest their own individuality. Fashion in clothes and household decorations were lively subjects of discussion and instead of following the dictates of the government, people sought peer approval. In spite of the interest in contemporary fashion, since the mid-1980s, both the popularity of aesthetics and scholarly study has declined.

However, because aesthetics is more influential and the field broader in China than in the West, it continues to connect directly to the daily life of common people. Today people in China talk a lot about the so-called aesthetics culture, which has become, once again, a matter of public as well as scholarly interest and significance—this is not surprising since aesthetics has traditionally held a much higher position in China than in the West.

To experience aesthetically the visual arts, poetry, music, and scenes of nature was always a valuable pursuit for the Chinese. According to the Chinese tradition, including Confucian, Daoism, and Zen Buddhism, the aesthetic experience is an experience of the highest state of mind-heart. It holds a position of importance similar to that of the religious experience in Western cultures. Confucius says it is "building up (your personality) through rites but completing it through music." It is a wholly *human* experience, which gives a person the feeling of transcendence, of a higher level of being. It is not an experience of Plato's world of ideas, or of a transcendent world of God, or a pure spiritual experience. It is a wholly human experience of this world without dual realms.

### THE CHINESE EMBRACE A ONE-WORLD VIEW

The Chinese reject a dualistic worldview with its essential divisions between mind and matter, soul and body, and reason and emotion. I was curious about the origin of our one-world view and as I pursued the question, I discovered that its beginnings lay in the rationalized shamanistic tradition. In this tradition, human beings have great powers to communicate among several realms, including heaven and earth. They believe human faculties and actions influence and control many things, even heaven and earth, and play an active and determining role in making the world. Almost every tribal culture has its shamanistic stage but in China, at a very ancient time, these shamanistic powers were rationalized and transformed into external rites and internal music. The external rites became rational guides to behavior, and the internal music

became the emotional magical forces of the shaman. When this occurred, they had the power of the shamans. In contrast to that for happiness in external life and, since the harmonious and happy inspired artist in the powers could inhabit the of the muses and her artists, and religious serious endeavors. Partition of the arts—how controlled. He referred never able to comprehend and reason is no longer fosters these feelings which distract people from knowing themselves through sound arguments. In which they are subject to which they are governed by way of reason to Ideas.

If all subsequent North Whitehead writes arts for human development several reasons: Therefore, they intensify feelings, and they connect them to the transcendent.

I find major contemporary writers do not believe reasoning ability by imagination because the stage for a dualistic ideas and our shadow distinction between. For them, the arts are only realm or, at

became the emotional, poetic responses to the harmonies of the world. The magical forces of the shamans became the spiritual morality of the sages. When this occurred, music and poetry became transformative arts because they had the power to transform a person in ways reminiscent of the powers of the shamans. In classical texts, the Chinese word for music was the same as that for happiness. Happiness meant moderation in a human's internal and external life and, since music moderated human excesses, it contributed to a harmonious and happy life. In a similar way, we might trace the origin of the inspired artist in the West to the Greek oracles and muses whose creative powers could inhabit human beings. In fact, it was the very seductive power of the muses and hence of the arts that may have led many philosophers, scientists, and religious writers to reject the arts or at least to exclude them from serious endeavors. Plato, more than most philosophers, recognized the attraction of the arts—how they could intoxicate people and hence needed to be controlled. He referred to a poet as a "light and winged thing, and holy, and never able to compose until he has become inspired, and is beside himself, and reason is no longer in him."<sup>12</sup> Poetry feeds the emotions for "it waters and fosters these feelings when what we ought to do is to dry them up."<sup>13</sup> Emotions distract people from responsible citizenship, which required human beings to know themselves rationally and to guide themselves by reason and sound arguments. Humans should develop intellectually from the stage in which they are subject to the opinions of others to the stage of knowledge in which they are governed by sound principles. Ideally, humans should develop by way of reason to the realm of Truth itself, to a glimpse into the realm of Ideas.

If all subsequent Western philosophies are footnotes to Plato, as Alfred North Whitehead wrote, then we can understand the problematic nature of the arts for human development. From Plato's perspective, the arts are suspect for several reasons: They seduce people from serious activities governed by reason, they intensify humans' emotional nature leaving them subject to volatile feelings, and they chain individuals to the shadowy realm of opinion binding them to the transitory world of appearance.

I find major contrasts between the Chinese worldview and Plato's. Chinese writers do not believe that emotions and imagination detract from a person's reasoning ability but penetrate it. They do not contrast reason to emotion and imagination because they should function together harmoniously. Plato set the stage for a dualistic worldview by distinguishing between the realm of ideas and our shadowy, imperfect realm. Many Christians believe in a sharp distinction between heaven and earth, soul and body, and spirit and matter. For them, the arts are creations of this world and distract us from the heavenly realm or, at best, point us toward the heavenly realm. From this per-

spective, the arts have no intrinsic value and must not impede a human's spiritual growth.

The dualistic worldview was sharpened by the writings of Descartes in which the mind (thinking, reasoning) characterized human beings, and the body was a material tool or machine of the mind. In Hegel's hierarchy of human development, the arts were encouraged, as long as people recognized they were subservient to religion, and religion to philosophy and philosophy to the Absolute Spirit. Likewise, Kierkegaard classified *Aesthetic* man lower than the *Ethical*, and the *Ethical* lower than the *Religious*.

Fortunately, these judgments of philosophers did not impede the creativity and imaginative production of Western artists. They simply set the arts apart from the serious study of the sciences. Feeling and imagination function differently from the structures and principles imposed on science. The arts are designed for pleasure, for imaginative insights, while the sciences are designed for the search for truth and are grounded in reason.

I believe these contrasts are truly thought provoking. Chinese sages transformed and rationalized the power of the shamans into rites and rituals and interpreted these powers as manifested in music and poetry to be constructive. Western scholars considered the powers of the muses attractive and powerful, but whimsical, and a threat to humans' most treasured faculty: reason. The historical aesthetic culture of China continues to give the study of the arts and natural beauty great importance, whereas the Western world gives more attention to science and religion. Because of great differences between Chinese and Western approaches to art and aesthetics and because of the variety of approaches within worldviews, it seems obvious there can be no one principle, essence, or law governing the study of art and natural beauty. However, rather than thwart the study of aesthetics, this diversity enhances it and encourages a plurality of approaches.

#### PHILOSOPHICAL AESTHETICS SEEKS TO UNDERSTAND THE BASIC VALUES AND CONSTITUTION OF HUMAN EXISTENCE

Among the various approaches to aesthetics is the philosophical one. Prior to the twentieth century, this approach constituted the major writing on aesthetics in the West. Following from Plato, philosophers pondered over the questions that fell under the categories of the True, the Beautiful, and the Good. The nature of art, the aesthetic experience, the essence of beauty, and the ways in which beauty affects human experience were all of great interest. Among the most influential philosophers were Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, Hume, Croce, Nietzsche, and Dewey. Each of them developed aesthetic con-

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ceptions that formed the issues and methodology for many successive thinkers. They literally shaped the domain for writing and thinking about beauty and art. Even though these philosophers were not interested in the concrete issues of specific works of art and did not make a detailed study of aesthetic psychology, their abstract and even obscure theories had a profound and far-reaching influence. As time elapsed, philosophers ignored the more detailed studies of specific works of art, but continued to review the classical theories.

Today, very few people read the scientific writings of Newton, Euclid, or Darwin, yet many read and reflect on the ideas of Plato, Laozi, and other major philosophers. Scientific writings, however great the discoveries, cannot escape being sifted into obscurity by Father Time, whereas profound philosophical writings and great works of literature and art remain ever-green. Why is that so? Perhaps because it is here that we find the charm of the unique *poetry of life*. The poetry of life is not of art but of thinking, not of spontaneous emotion but of highly deliberate speculation. It seeks to express and satisfy the intellect and reason as well as the deep emotions that underlie thoughtful speculation and reflection. This poetry of life has immortal charm for it is the highest expression of human self-consciousness and self-realization.

The seeds of this idea may be derived from Marx's conception of the *humanization of nature*. From the middle of the twentieth century until the last decade, Marxist aesthetics dominated and shaped the thinking about art and beauty in China. Even though he did not develop a systematic theory, his brief comments are immensely thought provoking, as suggested in the article "Aesthetics" in *The New American Cyclopaedia*, 1858-1863. Although there is still not enough evidence, I am inclined to believe Karl Marx wrote these comments, even though a few sentences or words may have been revised by someone else. Even if they were not written by Marx, I would still like to give my Marxist interpretation of them.

I believe that Marx's observations of *humanized nature*,<sup>14</sup> and his saying that "man therefore also forms things in accordance with the laws of beauty,"<sup>15</sup> must be thoughtfully considered. Perhaps we can find cardinal questions about beauty from his seemingly outdated, short, but meaningful remarks. It may be that the dazzling material achievements of the modern world have deprived many people of their interest in abstract speculation, or perhaps the exactness of modern technology has made scholars suspicious of sweeping generalizations. Nevertheless, I wonder, how could we grasp and comprehend the world and ourselves, and express our pursuits and attitudes toward life without philosophy? Consequently, in spite of my actively advocating the differentiation and scientification of aesthetics, and the establishment of subjects such as applied and scientific aesthetics, I still insist on the

preservation of philosophical aesthetics as a field of free speculation because the primary problems that philosophical aesthetics seeks to understand are the basic values and constitution of human existence.

Concepts and classifications of the basic values of human existence retain their moving and everlasting charms. Just what are truth, goodness, and beauty? What are the similarities and differences among them; what are their significances to individuals and to humanity; and how do they change with the evolution of time? The eternal existence of humankind will enable philosophy and individual self-reflection to exist forever, as will philosophical aesthetics. Because philosophy deals with the fate of humanity, it is the poetry of life and acquires an everlasting charm.

Because of its inclusive nature, philosophy includes elements of science and poetry. On the one hand, it contains scientific elements to achieve a general comprehension of the basic developments in objective reality (nature and society). On the other hand, it contains the expressions of human subjective intentions, desires, and sentiments in a specific age and society. These philosophical expressions reveal ideas that are subtle and obscure, unable to be grasped and defined by science, and yet which have to do with the existence of human beings, with the value and significance of life, and with the fate and poetic feelings of persons.

Different ages and societies enrich these eternal issues with new and concrete content, and, hence, ancient concepts of truth, goodness, and beauty, as well as philosophical explorations of them, will continue to reemerge and change. Every philosophical school in every age responds to questions concerning human values with its own replies, and applies these words in its own way. Because the replies and applications involve the whole of life and the world, they influence, dominate, and determine the explorations and answers concerning many other issues. For example, different philosophical views about art influence the appreciation, study, and evaluation of various artworks, schools of art, and history of art. Philosophy is always the quintessence of the current thoughts and life poetry of its time. Even though it may appear abstract and remote from worldly affairs, philosophy is rooted in life and deeply involved in the profound questions of contemporary ethics, science, and art. Moreover, since we know that different philosophical systems shape the approaches and content of aesthetics, any study of aesthetics must be a philosophical one that includes elements of the poetry of life, science, and the social and historical aspects of contemporary life.

## NOTES

1. English translation quoted from G. W. F. Hegel's *Introduction to Aesthetics*, translated by T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 5.

2. Hegel, *Intro*  
3. Hegel, *Intro*  
4. Alfred Jules

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11. Gao Jianpi

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12. Plato, "Ion

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13. Plato, "Re

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14. Karl Marx

ed., *The Marx-E*

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15. Marx, *Eco*

2. Hegel, *Introduction*, 6.
3. Hegel, *Introduction*, 6-7.
4. Alfred Jules Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York: Dover Publications, 1943), 113-114.
5. William Elton, ed., *Aesthetics and Language* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), 50.
6. The same compound of the character for bigaku but it has different pronunciations in China and Japan. Who was the first scholar to make this compound? *Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan* (1983) says it was coined by Nakae Chomin (1847-1901) around 1883, but Chinese scholar Lü Cheng wrote that it was coined by Nakamura Atsusuke when he translated Eugene Villon's book *Esthetique* in 1878. See Lü Cheng, *Wanjin Meixue Shuo he Mei de Yuanli (Recent Aesthetic Opinions and the Principles of Aesthetics)* (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1925), 2. The latter seems closer to truth, but further research is needed.
7. Katharine Gilbert and Helmut Kuhn, *A History of Aesthetics*, revised and enlarged (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1954), 289.
8. Gilbert and Kuhn, *History*, 289.
9. Zehou Li, *Zou wo ziji de lu (Following My Own Course)* (Beijing: Sanlian shidian, 1986), 233. The title of this book comes from a sentence quoted by Karl Marx in the preface to the first German edition of *Capital*, vol. 1, as cited in Dante Alighieri, *La divina commedia (The Divine Comedy)*, translated by C. H. Sisson with an introduction and notes by David H. Higgins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). The original sentence is "Segui il tuo corso, e lascia dir le genti." (Follow your own course, no matter what people say.) Li mainly collected his short essays and records of conversations into this book, which shows a more personal aspect of the author than his other books.
10. Li, *Zou wo ziji de lu*, 235.
11. Gao Jianping, "Chinese Aesthetics in the Past Two Decades," *Acta Orientalia Vilnensia* 3 (2002): 129-138.
12. Plato, "Ion," trans. Lane Cooper in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (New York: The Bollingen Foundation, 1961), 220.
13. Plato, "Republic," trans. Paul Shorey, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (New York: The Bollingen Foundation, 1961), 832.
14. Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Robert C. Tucker ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 89.
15. Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, 76.

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