

The Application of Confucianism and Taoism in Zong Baihua's Chinese Art Theory*

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Abstract: This paper aims to clarify the transition process of Zong Baihua's application of Confucianism (Kongzi, Mengzi) and Taoism (Laozi, Zhuangzi) for the purpose of establishing his unique Chinese art theory from the 1930s to the 1970s. In his earliest Chinese art theory in 1932, Zong defined the ideal "aesthetics" as a discipline that takes distinct phenomena of art in certain cultures into accounts while reflecting the cosmic view pursued by the culture. At that time, he mainly referred to the concepts of Confucianism and Taoism to explain Chinese pre-modern art theory and art phenomena. However, after the 1960s, he reconsidered the role played by classic philosophy in "aesthetics" and thus turned to utilize pre-modern art theory, instead of classic philosophy, to re-explain art phenomena, while attempted to construct a mutual complementation system of Confucianism and Taoism as the reflection of cosmic view underlying Chinese art phenomena.

Keywords: Zong Baihua, Modern Chinese Art Theory, Confucianism, Taoism, Qi-yun Sheng-dong

1. Introduction: Regarding prior research on Zong Baihua

Zong Baihua (1897-1986) is a representative Chinese aesthetician of the 20th century. He studied a wide range of Eastern and Western disciplines, and in particular applied Chinese classical philosophical thought to Chinese art theory, which exerted a decisive influence on the subsequent development of Chinese art theory. According to "Formation of Modern Chinese Aesthetics" included in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, he is categorized as a second-generation scholar in China during the formation of "aesthetics" as a discipline¹. Compared to the first-generation scholars like Wang Guowei, Cai Yuanpei, and Liang Qichao, this generation had a deeper understanding of both Eastern and Western thought and a better environment for studying abroad. In this milieu, two of the 20th century's greatest aestheticians, Zhu Guangqian (1897-1986) and Zong Baihua, emerged. In general, Zhu Guangqian's style is more in line with modern Western aesthetics, emphasizing clarity and precision, while Zong Baihua's style is known for its emotive expressions, which could be appreciated as literary works themselves.

However, due to this expressive style, it is challenging to delineate the core of Zong Baihua's theories. There is a wealth of research on him in China, but the development of his ideas remains unclear, with a tendency to mix his discourses from different periods or to cite without considering

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¹ See Zang, Xinming, "Formation of Modern Chinese aesthetics," in The Japanese Society for Aesthetics (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, Tokyo: Maruzen Publishing, 2020.

context while explaining his thoughts. To understand some aspects of this issue, let us look at the argument of Ye Lang (1938-), an important researcher of Zong Baihua and a student of his.

In his *Outline of Chinese Aesthetics History* (1985), Ye Lang attempted to construct Chinese aesthetic history based on the achievements of modern aesthetics research, tracing its roots back to pre-Qin thought. In this context, Zong Baihua's ideas are frequently cited². For instance, in the first chapter, third section, Ye Lang discusses how Laozi's thought is reflected in the phenomenon of Chinese art, using Zong Baihua's 1979 article "Preliminary Exploration of the History of Chinese Aesthetics (hereafter denoted as "Preliminary Exploration")"³ as a reference.

However, as mentioned later in this paper, in the 1970s, Zong Baihua had already departed from his stance of the 1930s and 1940s, where he directly interpreted the phenomenon of Chinese art through classical philosophy. Hence, Ye Lang's reference does not align with Zong Baihua's actual intentions at the time. Similar problems can be observed in other significant research works on Zong Baihua, such as Lin Tonghua's *Research on Zong Baihua's Aesthetic Thought* (1987), Zou Shifang's *Biography and Critique of Zong Baihua* (1989), and Yun Huixia's *Research on Zong Baihua's Literary and Artistic Thought* (2009)⁴. Although Zong maintained concerns he held in the 1930s, his academic stance had undergone significant changes. The aim of this thesis is to clarify the process of this transformation.

In recent years, there has been increasing attention to the chronological changes in Zong Baihua's Chinese art theory. For instance, Sun Zongmei (2014) has focused on the issue of "symbolism" and pointed out the shift in Zong's attention towards Zhuangzi within Taoist thought⁵. Additionally, Jin Lang (2016) has highlighted Zong's growing interest in Confucian thought during the 1940s, where his focus changed from Confucian moral perspectives to Confucian influence on the arts⁶. However, these observations are somewhat abridged and concentrate only on certain aspects of Zong's discourse.

In contrast, this paper will extensively re-evaluate Zong Baihua's arguments from the 1930s to the 1970s, with a central theme of the application of Confucian thought (represented by Confucius and Mencius)⁷ and Taoist thought (represented by Laozi and Zhuangzi). At each stage, the study will examine what classical philosophical content Zong Baihua applied and how he referred to it. To comprehensively understand the evolution of Zong's Chinese art theory, it is

² Ye, Lang, *Outline of the History of Chinese Aesthetics*, Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2017.

³ This paper is based on Zong Baihua's manuscripts from 1960 to 1963 and the Chinese Aesthetics History Course at Peking University in 1963. It was organized by Ye Lang, who was serving as an assistant to Zong at that time.

⁴ E.g., Lin, Tonghua, *Research on Zong Baihua's Aesthetic Thought*, Shenyang: Liaoning People's Publishing House, 1987; Zou, Shifang, *Biographical Evaluation of Zong Baihua*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong News Publishing House, 1989; Yun, Huixia, *Research on Zong Baihua's Literary and Artistic Thought*, Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2009.

⁵ Sun, Zongmei, "The Concept of 'Yijing [Aesthetic Realm]' and Taoist Thought: Analyzing Exemplary Cases in Modern Chinese Aesthetics Research," in *Journal of Wuhan University (Humanities Edition)*, Vol. 67, No. 6, 2014.

⁶ Jin, Lang, "Aesthetic Interpretation of Confucian Ritual and Music: Simultaneous Analysis of the Aesthetic Discourses of Zhu Guangqian and Zong Baihua during the Anti-Japanese War Period," in *Literary and Artistic Debate*, Issue 11, 2016.

⁷ While Zong Baihua frequently discusses Xunzi's thought and the *Yijing*, both associated with Confucianism, this paper does not touch upon these topics.

essential not only to analyze the ratio of citations from Confucian thought and Taoist thought but also to elucidate the roles these two philosophical traditions played in shaping his artistic theories.

2. 1932 - References to Classical Philosophy in the Early Period

2.1 Background of Zong Baihua's Application of Classical Philosophical thought

In the year 1932, Zong Baihua authored two essays: "Introducing Two Books on Chinese Painting Studies and Discussing Chinese Painting" (abbreviated as "Chinese Painting Studies" hereafter) and "Xu Beihong and Chinese Painting." These writings constitute Zong's early organized discourse on Chinese art theory. According to "Chinese Painting Studies,"

What is the deepest spirit [心] conveyed by Chinese painting? The answer is not one that worships and imitates the world as a finite, harmonious realization [like ancient Greek art], nor is it an endless pursuit of the infinite world with anguish and restlessness [as seen in post-Renaissance art]. The spirit [精神] that seeks to express it is a kind of "profound and tranquil merging with this infinite nature and universe in a state of blend and harmony." (II, 44)⁸

What Zong Baihua explores of Chinese art is about the concept of "spirit [心]." In this context, "spirit" implies an understanding of the universe and life, which is further linked to Zong's understanding of the discipline of "aesthetics [美学]."

The study of aesthetics should encompass the entire realm of aesthetic objects, including cosmic beauty, the beauty of life, and artistic beauty. However, traditional aesthetics has often focused solely on artistic beauty or considered it as the primary starting point for study.... [Nonetheless,] each individual art form has its own unique worldview and emotional connection to life, serving as its deepest foundation. (II,43)

As the previous study pointed out, Zong Baihua's emphasis on the "spirit" of art and understanding of the cosmos is rooted in Oswald Spengler's cultural morphology. According to Wang Yichuan (2016), Spengler's idea that "each culture has a unique Culture-soul (die Seele einer Kultur)," which reflects a "completely distinct way of observing and understanding the natural world in each culture," is considered one of the Western thoughts that had the most influence on Zong Baihua in the 1930s and 1940s⁹.

On the other hand, Zong Baihua's idea that cultural differences in art must be taken into account seems to have been influenced by Max Dessoir's idea of "Kunstwissenschaft." Dessoir was Zong's teacher during his studies at the University of Berlin (1920-25), and upon his return

⁸ In the following, citations from Zong Baihua's works are provided from *The Complete Works of Zong Baihua*, edited by Lin Tonghua in four volumes (published by Hefei: Anhui Education Press, 1994), in the form of (Vol. Page). The English translations from Zong's works in this paper were undertaken by the author.

⁹ Wang, Yichuan, "The German 'Culture-soul theory' in China: A Case Study of Zong Baihua's 'Spirit of Chinese Art,'" in *Peking University Journal (Philosophy and Social Sciences)*, Vol. 53, No. 2, 2016, pp. 60-61.

to China, Zong wrote the following in his manuscript on “Aesthetics” (1926 to 1928):

Aestheticians often use several principles of beauty as standards (e.g., Greek paintings) or employ various specific methods for critique. However, this cannot be universally applied to all forms of art. This is because art varies with the changes in each era, and therefore, it becomes possible to discuss it only after isolating it. (I, 511)

Zong Baihua criticized traditional “aesthetics,” which prioritized theory, and instead sought a discipline that discusses art with specific cultural contexts. So, how did Zong construct a new “Chinese art theory” with such characteristics, and what uniqueness did it have compared to other Chinese art theories of the time? To answer this, let us examine his interpretation of the central concept of “Qi-yun sheng-dong” (vitality of spirit and rhythm)¹⁰ in pre-modern painting theory and his perspective on blank expression in the context of his two essays from 1932.

2.2 The “Dynamic” of Chinese Painting (Qi-yun Sheng-dong)

Zong discussed “the deepest spirit conveyed by Chinese painting” in the essay “Chinese painting studies:”

While the state it demonstrates is tranquil, the cosmos, which operates according to the laws of nature, is both dynamic and tranquil. Likewise, a life align with the spirit of nature is dynamic yet tranquil. The subjects portrayed within it, such as mountains, rivers, people, flowers, birds, and insects, are all filled with the vitality of life— Qi-yun sheng-dong. However, since nature follows its own laws (what Laozi and Zhuangzi refer to as the “Tao [道]”), and the painter harmonizes with nature, profound tranquility is concealed within the canvas. (II, 44)

According to Zong, Chinese painting fundamentally aims for a state of “tranquility” while also possessing qualities of “dynamics.” In previous studies, it has been noted that Zong regarded the spirit of Chinese art as “tranquil” by referencing the ideas of Laozi and Zhuangzi, thus pioneering the view in the history of Chinese art theory¹¹. However, the recognition of Western culture as “dynamic” and Chinese culture as “tranquil” in the context of the so-called “East-West Culture Debate” that lasted from around 1915 to the 1920s had already gained wide acceptance¹². Hence, Zong’s examination of the “dynamic” elements stands out for its uniqueness.

The theory of “dynamics” here is explained by the central concept of pre-modern art theory,

¹⁰ For English translations of “qi-yun sheng-dong,” representative ones can be listed as “the life-movement of the spirit through the rhythm of things” by Okakura Kakuzo (*The Ideals of the East: With Special Reference to the Art of Japan*, 1903) and “rhythmic vitality” by H. A. Giles (*An Introduction to the History of Chinese Pictorial Art*, 1905).

¹¹ See Niu, Guangbao, “Interpreting Western Aesthetics through the Traditional ‘Artistic Theory of Heart and Spirit,’” in *Qishu Academic Journal*, 2001, Issue 3, pp. 72-79 etc.

¹² The ‘East-West Cultural Debate’ is exemplified by the debate between *La Jeunesse* and *The Eastern Miscellany*. Refer to Lin, Yusheng, etc., *May Fourth: Multiple Reflections*, Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 1989; Sakamoto, Hiroko, *A History of Modern Chinese Thought and Culture*, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2016, pp. 139-147.

“Qi-yun sheng-dong.” “Qi-yun sheng-dong” drew significant attention as a unique characteristic of Chinese art when traditional Chinese painting was criticized for lacking realism due to the impact of Western painting in the 20th century¹³. An exemplary essay discussing this is Chen Shizeng’s “The Value of Literati Painting” (1922). Chen Shizeng stated that “literati painting [, a representative style of Chinese painting,] places the highest importance on spirit and does not emphasize form. ... Hence [the painter] values ‘Qi-yun’ the most.”¹⁴ Here, “form” refers to the pursuit of a western-like realism¹⁵. The term “Qi-yun,” signifying the spirit of literati painting, is contrasted with this, and the conclusion of the same essay, i.e., “the elements of literati painting are, first, moral character; second, scholarship; third, talent and taste [才情]; fourth, thought”¹⁶, indicates that qi-yun originates from the artist’s spirit. The terminology of “Qi-yun sheng-dong” here is close to that of the pre-modern era¹⁷.

In contrast, Zong Baihua brought about a change in the interpretation of the concept of “Qi-yun sheng-dong” by referencing classical philosophy. In “Xu Beihong and Chinese Painting,” he says:

In this cosmos, the consistent Way flows through all things, everywhere it goes. ... Laozi calls this emptiness [虛無], but this emptiness is not true emptiness; it is the principle of chaos and creation within the cosmos, and it is the so-called lively “Qi-yun” within the realm of painting. When a painter represents nature, they are expressing this lively “Qi-yun.” ... “Qi-yun sheng-dong” is indeed the ultimate subject and result of painting. (II, 50-51)

Zong Baihua also considered “Qi-yun sheng-dong” as a defining characteristic of Chinese painting, but he viewed it as a reflection of Laozi’s “Way” and “emptiness” at the level of painting. According to Zong, the artist harmonizes with nature, and the painting itself aims to embody nature. Therefore, Chinese painting, with its direct connection to the “Qi-yun sheng-dong” that is intertwined with nature and the cosmos, is considered by Zong to be nothing but the “most objective” and “most realistic” of works (II, 45-46). In this manner, “Qi-yun sheng-dong,” combined with classical philosophy, rather than realism regarding form but in the sense of aiming for the truth of the cosmos, obtained a different evaluation.

2.3 Blank Expression in Chinese Painting

During this period, Zong Baihua also emphasized the blank expression in Chinese painting, and he demonstrates the application of classical philosophy to the analysis of artistic phenomena.

¹³ For the criticism and re-evaluation of 20th-century Chinese painting, refer to Pan, Gongkai, translated by Ishii, Satoru etc., *The Way of Modern Chinese Art*, Tokyo: Sayusha, 2020.

¹⁴ Chen, Shizeng, “The Value of Literati Painting,” in Wu, Xiaoming (ed.), *Selected Essays on the Republic of China’s Painting Theory*, Hangzhou: Xiling Seal Society Publishing House, 2013, p. 35.

¹⁵ Refer to the previous note 13, p. 38.

¹⁶ Refer to the previous note 13, p. 38.

¹⁷ Refer to Usami, Bunri, *Chinese History of Art Theory: Philosophical Discourses*, Kyoto: Sobunsha, 2015.

Chinese people perceive the depth of the cosmos [depicted in painting] as an intangible and colorless void, and this very void is, in fact, the source and essence of all things, an unceasing creative force. Laozi and Zhuangzi refer to this as the “Tao,” “Nature,” and “Emptiness,” while Confucianism calls it “Heaven [天].” All things originate from emptiness and return to emptiness. Therefore, the blank spaces on paper are the true foundation of Chinese painting. ... The blank spaces in Chinese painting are not a true void in a literal sense; they are precisely where the spirit of the cosmos and life flows (i.e., “Qi-yun sheng-dong”). ... This unpainted blank space is exactly the “emptiness” in the cosmos as understood by Laozi and Zhuangzi. (II, 45)

The representation of cosmos and life in Chinese painting is notably glimpsed through such blank spaces. This discovery is made in contrast to Western oil painting, which starts by “first filling the entire canvas with pigments” and then “creating illusions through perspective” (II, 45).

A prominent example of applying classical philosophy to artistic phenomena is already seen in Zhu Guangqian's “Speechless Beauty” (1924). However, Zhu takes Confucius' phrase “speechless beauty” as a starting point and discusses examples of artworks that correspond to it. In other words, Zhu precedes classical philosophical thought and, accordingly, deduces the characteristics of artistic works¹⁸. In contrast, the “blank expression” that Zong Baihua focuses on is not directly observable in classical thought. Zong's interpretation is not based on explicit words mentioned in classical philosophy texts but rather on the idea that the cosmology of classical philosophy aligns with the cosmology behind artistic phenomena. This has opened up new possibilities for the application of classical philosophy.

Moreover, in the above excerpt, it is important to note that Zong Baihua, in explaining the concept of blank expression, draws upon various concepts from Laozi, Zhuangzi (“Tao,” “Nature,” “Emptiness”), as well as Confucian concepts (“Heaven”). This is by no means due to a lack of understanding of classical philosophy on Zong's part. At that time, the research findings of classical philosophy, such as Hu Shi's *Outline of Chinese Philosophy History* (Vol. I, 1918) and Feng Youlan's *A History of Chinese Philosophy* (Vol. I, 1931), had significant impacts, and Zong himself authored manuscripts related to classical philosophy¹⁹. For example, in *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, Feng Youlan argued that the Confucian concept of “Heaven” could refer to “the natural heavens, i.e., the operations of nature” or “the moral heavens, i.e., the highest principle of the cosmos,”²⁰ which aligns with concepts from Taoism. Taking into consideration

¹⁸ For more details, refer to my article, “Zhu Guangqian's ‘Laokoon Theory’: An Examination of the Development of Comparative Studies of Poetry and Painting in Modern China,” in *Aesthetics and Art Studies*, Issue 38, 2019, Chapter 2, Section 1.

¹⁹ Refer to Wang, Qian, “Modern Chinese Philosophy,” in *World History of Philosophy*, Vol. 8, Tokyo: Chikuma Shobo, 2020. Concerning Feng Youlan's *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, Zong Baihua referenced and esteemed it in his manuscripts on the history of Chinese philosophy and Laozi from 1946 to 1952 (II, 706). While there are extant manuscripts of Zong's thoughts on classical philosophy from around the 1930s, there are two proposed theories regarding the writing period: 1928 (I, 648-660) and the mid-1930s.

²⁰ Refer to Feng, Youlan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, Volume I, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2014, p. 54.

these contemporary achievements in the study of classical philosophy, Zong explored the philosophical basis that would harmonize with artistic phenomena. It is worth noting that the interests of Hu Shi and Feng Youlan fundamentally lay in political and social reforms²¹, not in the realm of art theory. Therefore, Zong's approach can be considered distinct, differing from both contemporary classical philosophy researchers and aestheticians.

Incidentally, at this stage, Zong considers the blank expression in Chinese painting as "emptiness," which can be understood as viewing the painted portions on the canvas as "reality." As discussed later, a different interpretation emerged in his later years.

3. Mid-1930s to 1940s: Taoist-Centric Art Theory

From 1932, Zong Baihua had been discussing various concepts from Confucianism and Taoism while examining pre-modern art theory and artistic phenomena. However, he reached a turning point in 1944 with the publication of "The Birth of the Aesthetic Realm (State) [意境] in Chinese Art (Revised Edition)" (hereafter referred to as "Aesthetic Realm"). In this work, he firmly established Taoist philosophy as the foundation of his art theory. Nevertheless, the inclination towards Taoism was already discernible in the mid-1930s. Let us explore this matter starting from the 1934 essay, "The Origin and Foundation of Chinese and Western Painting Techniques" (hereafter denoted as "The Origin of Painting Techniques").

3.1 The Issue of Rhythm and the Retreat of Confucian Thought

In the 1934 essay "The Origin of Painting Techniques," there is no significant change in Zong's approach of applying classical philosophy. "The vividly depicted objects within the painting are integrated with 'blank spaces' here and there, connecting to an overall flowing, spiritual rhythm. The blank spaces... merge within the inner workings of all [depicted] things, being the virtual and spiritual 'Tao' that participates in the dynamics [=Qi-yun sheng-dong] of all things" (II, 101). Zong continues to naturally link the blank expression in painting, its dynamic characteristics, and the "Tao." However, what holds significance in this context is the discernible stance of Zong towards Confucian thought, evident through the problem he raised concerning "rhythm."

At the beginning of this discourse, Zong Baihua references Walter Pater's renowned quote, "all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music" (II, 99)²². Zong places the state of music and rhythm at the core of art expression. He pays attention to the expression of "vivid and abstract" lines found in the patterns of bronze vessels from the Shang and Zhou periods, considering them as the origin of various Chinese arts representing the movement of cosmic life ("Tao") (II, 101). According to Zong, the essence of rhythm can be observed in the genre of calligraphy. While it may not be difficult to comprehend through the abstract brushwork in

²¹ Refer to Nakajima, Takahiro, *Zhuangzi: Become a Rooster and Announce the Time*, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2009, Chapter 3.

²² Walter Pater's quote can be traced back to the third edition of *The Renaissance* published in 1888, in the section "The School of Giorgione."

calligraphy, the following descriptions require attention:

In China, the teachings of music[樂教] no longer passed down, and poets could no longer sing to stringed instruments. Therefore, they express the emotions and sentiments of the heart through calligraphy and painting. Especially, calligraphy is an abstract art that replaces music (II, 101-102).

Similar discourse can be found in another passage:

The formal beauty of ancient feudal ritual music has already perished. In response, the genius of the [Chinese] people, through the dynamism of brush and ink, ... expresses a free, transcendent rhythm of the heart (II, 100).

When Zong Baihua asserts that the brush and ink in painting and calligraphy are the best forms for expressing “the emotions and sentiments of the heart = the rhythm of the heart,” he has in mind the collapse of Confucian thought related to “music education” and “ritual music life.” Confucius advocated the idea of cultivating one’s character through music, extending from the individual to society, forming a kind of order and norm²³. However, this music system had fallen into disuse during the period when Chinese representative arts, namely calligraphy and painting, flourished. Given this description, it can be inferred that, for Zong, Confucianism during this period ceased to be a central theory capable of explaining Chinese art. While the marginalization of Confucianism in Zong’s theory of Chinese art can be indirectly discerned here, when combined with the emphasis on Taoist thought, as discussed in the next section, his theoretical focus during this period becomes even clearer.

3.2 The Relationship between “Tao” and Art: Reference to Zhuangzi’s Thought

Zong Baihua’s theory of Chinese art underwent a significant transformation with his 1944 essay, “Aesthetic Realm.” In this discourse, he attempted for the first time to theoretically explain the applicability of classical philosophy to art. “Zhuangzi is a philosopher possessing artistic genius, and his interpretation of the highest attainable realm or state of art is the most exquisite. In his philosophy, the metaphysical principle known as ‘Tao’ fits together seamlessly with ‘art’” (II, 367). Zong came to recognize that there was a gap between the metaphysical philosophical concept “Tao” and art, and it was Zhuangzi, instead of Confucius or Laozi, who successfully bridged that gap.

In this essay, Zong cites several passages from *Zhuangzi*. Here, we would like to focus on the parable of “Butcher Ding Carves an Ox.” The skilled cook, the “butcher Ding,” wields his knife following the natural grain of the ox’s body - a metaphor for the inherent “Tao” -

²³ As for music education as part of Confucianism, it has already been discussed by Hu, Shi in *An Outline of the History of Chinese Philosophy* and Feng, Youlan in *A History of Chinese Philosophy*. Additionally, Koana, Akiako provides a concise explanation in her book *Why Do People Seek Beauty? An Introduction to Aesthetics as a Way of Life* (Kyoto: Nakanishya Publishing, 2008), pp. 86-87.

transcending technique into something greater, the “Tao” beyond technique.

...[As the butcher wields his knife,] there came the sound of slicing flesh and wielding the knife – it is all pleasingly attuned to the musical tones, in harmony with the “Mulberry Trees” [a dance], and fitting the rhythm (syllables) of “Jing-shou [經首]” (a chapter of music in King Yao’s time) as well. (II, 368; partial omission from Zong Baihua’s quotation)²⁴

Via focusing on this parable, Zong Baihua asserted that “the life of the ‘Tao’ enters into the ‘technique,’ and the “technique” that “reveals” the “Tao” transforms into “art” (II, 367). Similar to the Western thought that art evolves from mechanical techniques, there was an understanding in China that art also develops from technical skills. During the same period as the essay “Aesthetic Realm,” Zong, in his work “Discussing the Emptiness[空靈] and Substantial[充實] Aspects of Literature and Art” (1943, hereafter “Emptiness and Substantial”), declared that “art is a type of technique” (II, 347). The interpretation that distinguishes “art” from “technique” based on whether it can lead to the “Tao” represents one of the earliest articulations of the modern sense of the concept of art in China. Furthermore, the possibility of such an interpretation is believed to have emerged in connection with rhythm. While the emphasis on rhythm in Chinese art had been a recurring theme for the past decade, the passage from *Zhuangzi* in this context became a clear theoretical foundation for it.

Moreover, this passage, for instance, drew attention as a point of distinction between technique and art in the works of later scholars, such as Xu Fuguan’s *The Spirit of Chinese Art* (1966) and Ye Lang’s *Outline of the History of Chinese Aesthetics* (1985). However, both of them perceived *Zhuangzi*’s portrayal of musicality as a metaphor for uselessness, understanding the contrast between usefulness (butchering an ox) and the aesthetic significance of art (suitable for musicality)²⁵. In contrast, Zong Baihua stated that “the life of the ‘Tao’ and the life of ‘art’ harmonize with the rhythms and cadences of dances in the Mulberry Trees and the Jing-shou. The essence of these lies in the rhythms of music” (II, 368), taking the meaning of rhythm literally. In this manner, through this passage from *Zhuangzi*, Zong discovered an argument within classical philosophy itself that justifies the connection from philosophy to art.

As later elucidated by Xu Fuguan in *The Spirit of Chinese Art*, Laozi and *Zhuangzi* originally did not intend to discuss art. However, the “Tao” they presented ultimately came to best represent the “the highest spirit of art” in China²⁶. In this sense, one could argue that Zong Baihua’s interpretation of Taoist thought at this stage represents a more fundamental resource within classical philosophy for discussing art, compared to the superficial interpretations of the terms “art” and “beauty” that are explicitly mentioned in the texts of classical philosophy. This marked

²⁴ *Zhuangzi*, Chapter Three. The modern Chinese translation is based on *Zhuangzi*, translated into English by Wang, Rongpei and into modern Chinese by Qin, Xuqing and Sun, Yongchang, Chapter Three “Essentials for Keeping a Good Health,” Hunan People’s Publishing House; Foreign Languages Press, 1999, P. 43.

²⁵ Refer to Xu, Fuguan, *The Spirit of Chinese Art*, Beijing: Jiuzhou Publishing, 2014, pp. 61-62. See also Ye, Lang, *An Outline of the History of Chinese Aesthetics*, as mentioned in note 2, pp. 20-121.

²⁶ Refer to Xu, Fuguan, *The Spirit of Chinese Art*, as mentioned in the previous note 25, pp. 58-66.

a turning point in the formation of modern Chinese aesthetics.

3.3 Revisiting Confucian Ethical Thought

While Zong Baihua emphasized Taoist thought over Confucianism, it should be noted that he did not entirely dismiss Confucianism. Scholars have argued that Zong integrated Confucian thought into his aesthetic framework, a perspective supported by his explicit admiration for Confucian ideas in his 1941 work, “Discussing the Beauty of People in Jin in the *Shi-shuo xin-yu* 世說新語” (hereafter noted as “The Beauty of People in Jin”). However, I contend that even in this case, Confucianism had not yet been employed to construct his theory of art.

In this discourse, Zong Baihua designates the Wei and Jin periods as the era that most aptly embodies the spirit of Chinese art. He attributes this to the understanding of Confucian thought by the people of the Jin dynasty. According to Zong, the moral thought that Confucius seeks is none other than “the true nature, the true spirit, the so-called the heart of a newborn [of human beings],” and all rituals and systems are “nothing more than their external garments” (II, 282). However, since the Han dynasty, they have been solely utilized as tools for seeking employment (II, 282). Therefore, “the people of the Wei and Jin dynasties, with their eccentricities, rebelled against a society where appearances differed from the reality [i.e., openly advocating Confucianism while secretly pursuing worldly fame and fortune] ... and sought to unearth the true meaning of life and morality within their true nature and spirit” (II, 283). In the 1934 essay “The Origin of Painting,” Zong mentioned that the educational system of Confucianism had already declined during the time when Chinese painting and calligraphy were thriving. However, in this context, he re-evaluates the influence of Confucianism on the moral perspective of artists.

Jin Lang (2016) argues that Zong Baihua's essay defended the “Jin people” who were considered to have rejected Confucianism, and reinterpreted Confucian moral thought²⁷. However, as also pointed out by Jin Lang, this essay (“The Beauty of People in Jin”) has a broader context. In the late 1930s, after the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War, many intellectuals, including Zhu Guangqian, started to re-evaluate cultural traditions like Confucianism due to their growing concerns about societal issues²⁸. Jin Lang does not expand on this argument further, but in fact, Zong Baihua's emphasis on the moral values of Confucian thought was also directed towards social issues in general. A year before this essay was published, Cai Yuanpei, a pioneer in Chinese aesthetic education, passed away. Coincidentally, a series of essays were published in issues 78 (March 25, 1940), 79 (April 1), 80 (April 8), and 81 (April 15) of *Shishi xinbao - Xuedeng* [時事新報 学灯] (Chongqing edition), where Zong Baihua served as the chief editor. These essays brought attention to the fact that, ultimately, Cai Yuanpei's progressive educational ideals were not fully realized (II, 263-266). These societal and educational concerns were also reflected in “The Beauty of the Jin People.” Zong praised the moral education in the Jin period and raised the question of “whether China has similar great educators today” (II, 285).

Moreover, in the “Editor's Postscript for ‘The Beauty of the Jin People’ and Others,” published in issue 126 of *Shishi xinbao - Xuedeng* on April 28, 1941, Zong Baihua stated, “if you

²⁷ As mentioned in the previous note 6, p. 46.

²⁸ As mentioned in the previous note 6, pp. 43-44.

want to know how people sought light and beauty from one of China's dark and chaotic times [the Wei-Jin period], and how they used it to rescue and build their spiritual lives, transform their struggles into creations, and cultivate impressive personalities, please read this essay" (II, 288). Therefore, Zong's re-evaluation of Confucianism was closely connected not only to educational issues but also to broader societal problems. In this essay, however, the philosophical school primarily applied to interpret art is Taoism. Zong Baihua argues that "the aesthetic sensibilities and art philosophy of the 'Jin people' are based on the cosmology of Laozi and Zhuangzi. They are characterized by simplicity, profundity, and an air of mystery, which set the tone for China's aesthetic sensibilities over the next one thousand five hundred years, particularly in the fundamental directions of landscape painting and landscape poetry." (II, 280) In this context, Confucianism contributes to the formation of the moral values of artists. Conversely, the cosmological foundation on which art relies can be found in the philosophies of Laozi and Zhuangzi. Overall, the Confucian thought discussed in this essay is limited to the realm of moral values and is not the primary basis for constructing a theory of Chinese art.

4. Late Period - Confucian-Taoist Mutual Complementarity and the Distinction of Classical Thought in Art Theory

The essay "Preliminary Exploration," considered Zong Baihua's magnum opus, was developed in the early 1960s and published in 1979. In this essay, he explicitly contrasts the concepts of "truth [真]" (Taoist) and "goodness [善]" (Confucian), as well as "void [虚]" (Taoist) and "substance [实]" (Confucian) in Chinese art, aiming to systematically integrate both Taoist and Confucian thought and re-define their roles in interpreting Chinese art. This mutual complementarity between Confucianism and Taoism goes beyond a simple addition of Confucianism to the earlier Taoist application; rather, it re-positions the roles of Taoism and classical philosophy in interpreting Chinese art.

The essay "Preliminary Exploration" comprises a general section along with individual sections covering various art genres, engaging in discussions on "painting," "music," and "gardens and architecture." In the general section, Zong references Taoist and Confucian thought, while in the latter sections, he draws from the art theories developed since pre-modern times to discuss each individual art genre. This structural distinction reveals that Zong moved away from the position of using classical philosophy to encompass all arts within a single concept or theory. Instead, he aimed to provide theoretical explanations for each individual art genre. To clarify his new stance, we will focus on the comparison between Confucianism and Taoism in the following discussion.

4.1 The Confucian "Truth" in Relation to the Taoist "Goodness"

The dichotomy between "truth" (Taoist) and "goodness" (Confucian) is delineated by Zong Baihua, asserting that Chinese art strives for two ideals, ornamentation and natural refinement. According to him, these two ideals align with the relationships of "beauty and goodness" and "beauty and truth," which pre-Qin philosophers deliberate from their respective positions. Confucius and Mencius affirm the ornamentation in art, exemplified by bronzes, and support its

societal and educational role. In contrast, Laozi and Zhuangzi emphasize nature, fundamentally negating art (artifice) and advocating a return to the simple and inherent true nature (III, 454). Thus, Confucian thought emphasizes the relationship between “beauty and goodness,” while Taoist thought focuses on the connection between “beauty and true.” The combination of Confucian and Taoist thought culminates in the demand for a unified concept: “truth-goodness-beauty” (III, 454).

It is worth noting that these discussions on classical philosophy are not specifically applied to art here.

This [the discourse by pre-Qin philosophers on art] had a profoundly significant impact on later aesthetic thought. However, in many cases, practice precedes theory, with artisans and artists leading the way before philosophers. [They] first express a new artistic realm in artistic practice, and theories that encompass these new realms emerge afterward. (III, 451).

Here, “theory” refers to that of the philosophers. The theories of classical philosophy are considered to encompass artistic practice.

Hence, how does the concept of “truth-goodness-beauty” encompass any artistic practice? Zong Baihua illustrates this through examples such as bronze artifacts that “predate Confucius by more than a hundred years.” These artifacts feature intricate and densely patterned designs while also embodying a fresh and elegant expression, thus encapsulating two types of beauty. Zong Baihua further references literary critical terms from Zhong Rong's *Poetic Excellence* [詩品] of the Six Dynasties period, including “Cuo-cai lou-jin [錯采鏤金]” (emphasizing ornamentation) and “Chu-shui fu-rong [出水芙蓉]” (describing a naturally refined appearance) (III, 450-451). In this context, not only the expression of artistic works but also pre-modern artistic theories discussing them are considered to precede classical philosophy and are seen as connected to artistic practice.

From 1932 onwards, Zong directly applied Taoist philosophy when discussing artistic practice. However, in his later years, he started to distinguish between artistic practice and classical philosophy, possibly due to a perceived challenge in effectively incorporating Confucian “goodness” into his own theories of artistic practice.

Zong Baihua, in his 1920 “After Seeing Rodin's Sculptures,” asserted that art ultimately aims for the harmony of “truth-goodness-beauty” (I, 328). However, from the 1930s onwards, particularly when he began focusing on the examination of Chinese art (as opposed to art in general), the concept of “goodness” receded, and he primarily discussed “truth.” For example, in the 1934 essay “The Origin of Painting,” he stated that the ultimate function of art is to lead people “from beauty to truth, to the core of the rhythm of life” (II, 99). Nevertheless, he did not discard the “truth-goodness-beauty” framework when discussing Chinese art. In his 1943 “The Emptiness and the Substantial,” he stated that “philosophy seeks truth, ethics and religion seek goodness. Between these two, ‘beauty’ represents the profound realm of our emotions and accomplishes the harmony of character” (II, 347). He also explained that art, in realizing “beauty,” draws nourishment from adjacent disciplines, connecting “truth” and “goodness” (II, 347).

However, this discussion remains a general consideration about the relationships between art and various academic disciplines, rather than a deep exploration of art theory.

The role of the Confucian “goodness” in Chinese art was clearly discussed in 1962 “Ancient Chinese Musical Allegories and Musical Thought.” “Confucius does not merely contemplate the formal beauty of music, but rather places more emphasis on the content goodness of music.” (II, 431) Here, Zong Baihua examines ancient musical thought. Confucius, who sought the “goodness” of music, favored “Shao music,” characterized as “not extreme, not too stimulating, and simple” (II,431). In contrast, Zhuangzi emphasized “Xianchi music,” which “aimed to evoke fear, reduce strength, lead into a state of distraction, and ultimately bring individuals to a state of wandering in bewilderment [the primitive state of nature] to unify with the Tao” (II, 438). Laozi, on the other hand, was not interested in music, saying, “[Artificial] five tones make one’s ears deaf” (II, 440). Thus, in contrast to the “truth” sought by Laozi and Zhuangzi in musical thought, Confucius’ attitude of seeking the “goodness” is revealed. This is an argument similar to the Confucian “goodness” as formalized in “Preliminary Exploration.”

In summary, when discussing Chinese art, Zong Baihua sought the “goodness” within Confucian thought, but he predominantly succeeded at the level of pure artistic philosophy rather than practical art. In line with this, Taoism also appears to be confined to the metaphysical level to establish a complementary relationship with Confucianism. In “Preliminary Exploration,” a distinction was drawn between practical art and metaphysical philosophy. This is how Zong’s scheme of “truth-goodness-beauty” was formulated.

4.2 The Confucian “Truth” in Relation to the Taoist “Goodness”

Regarding Chinese art theory, the stance of distinguishing classical philosophy from practical art and the impact it has brought is further clarified in the context of the “void” and “substance” problem. “The ‘void’ and ‘substance’ problem pertains to the issue of philosophical cosmology, ... when this cosmology manifests in art, it demands the fusion of the ‘void’ and ‘substance’ in art as well.” (II,455) Art continues to reflect the cosmology, but their dimensions are distinguished, and both dimensions are thought to encompass the “void” and “substance.” The issue of void and substance as a matter of philosophical cosmology is explained as follows.

This can be divided into two schools of thought: one represented by Confucius and Mencius, and the other by Laozi and Zhuangzi. Laozi and Zhuangzi regard “void” as even truer compared to “substance,” the cause of all truths, without which nothing can come into existence, and life’s vitality would cease. On the contrary, Confucianism starts its discussion from the “substance,” for instance, Confucius emphasizes the qualities of being “balanced in culture and nature [Wen-zhi bin-bin 文質彬彬],” seeking both inner qualities (nature and simplicity) and external expression (refined culture and demeanor). Similarly, Mencius states that “fulfillment is called beauty [充實之謂美].” (II,455)

The expression “balanced in culture and nature” signifies an ideal state of a person, prescribing concrete demands for both the external and internal aspects of a human being. “Fulfillment is called beauty” suggests that the enrichment and expansion of specific moral virtues (“goodness”)

throughout one's entire character result in the manifestation of "beauty." These arguments are distinctly separate from the discourse on practical art.

In contrast, the dichotomy between "void" and "substance" in art is explicated through an analysis of the description found in the *Kao Gong Ji* [考工記], a text presumed to have originated during the Pre-Qin Dynasty, detailing the craftsmanship of a carpenter [梓人] as he creates a musical instrument stand [箛虞]. According to Zong Baihua, this carpenter not only creates the stand but also considers the entirety, including the instrument placed on the stand. Consequently, he carves "ferocious beasts like tigers and leopards" onto the stand of the musical instrument. This allows people, when listening to the sound of the instrument, to simultaneously see the forms of the ferocious beasts, creating an impression as if the beasts are roaring. "The wooden carvings of tigers and leopards are rendered more vivid, and at the same time, the sound of the drum is given a tangible form, resulting in an intensified impact on the entire artwork (II,454). Zong concludes that the form created by the artist represents the "substance," while what stimulates our imagination is the "void" (II,454). To elaborate, the wooden carvings of the visually confirmable beasts embody the "substance," whereas the imagined beasts constitute the "void." In continuation of this interpretation, Zong Baihua states the following."

The thought of combining "void" and "substance" as expressed in the *Kao Gong Ji* is a distinctive feature of Chinese art. Chinese painting places significant emphasis on the utilization of empty space. For example, [the painter from the Southern Song Dynasty] Ma Yuan ... consistently painted only a portion of the canvas. The remaining empty spaces are not filled in, yet they become the sea, the sky, and one cannot perceive them as "empty." (II, 454)

The emphasis on expressing emptiness in Chinese painting has remained consistent since Zong Baihua's early discourse. However, considering the interpretation of the *Kao Gong Ji*, here, the imagined sea and sky are regarded as the "void," while, in contrast, the empty spaces on the canvas are perceived as objectively existing "substance." This interpretation diverges from the earlier discussion, employing Taoist "void" philosophy to interpret the emptiness in Chinese painting, a perspective that posits "emptiness = void." This discrepancy in interpretation fundamentally arises from the shift in Zong Baihua's argumentative framework.

Above, we have clarified a new approach to reference classical philosophy in the context of the "Preliminary Exploration." It is important to note that classical philosophy, ultimately positioned as a metaphysical cosmic view, underscores its association with art without providing a direct explanation of art. At the beginning of the "Preliminary Exploration," Zong Baihua articulates a specific methodology for studying Chinese aesthetics:

In the historical context of China, not only do the writings of philosophers encompass aesthetic thoughts, but also the theoretical works on poetry, painting, drama, and music left by renowned poets, painters, and playwrights throughout history are replete with aesthetic ideas. Consequently, the exploration of Chinese aesthetic history is endowed with abundant source materials, rendering the areas of interest notably diverse. (II, 447)

Pre-modern art theory, along with classical philosophy, constitutes the content of Chinese aesthetics. Moreover, Zong Baihua points out the drawbacks of ignoring artistic practice, stating that “if we were to limit our understanding to texts alone, we would often fail to grasp the concrete and profound aspects of the aesthetic ideas of ancient philosophers.” He emphasizes the importance of “deepening our understanding of literary sources”, while simultaneously referencing “vivid ancient artistic representations” revealed by the gradually developing field of archaeology in China at that time and “ancient literary materials” (II, 448-449). Zong Baihua’s theoretical framework for elucidating Chinese art thus establishes the interplay between classical philosophy and artistic practice.

Conclusion

In his early works on Chinese aesthetics, Zong Baihua defined the ideal “aesthetics” as a discipline that considers distinct art phenomena within specific cultures while reflecting the cosmic views pursued by those cultures. In these early writings, he primarily drew upon Confucian and Taoist concepts, employing pre-modern art theory (Qi-yun sheng-dong) and artistic phenomena (blank space) to expound his ideas. However, in the 1960s, Zong re-evaluated the role of classical philosophy in aesthetics. Rather than directly applying Taoist and Confucian philosophical theories to artistic phenomena, he turned to ancient art theories, constructing a system that mutually complemented Confucianism and Taoism as a reflection of the cosmic view underpinning Chinese art phenomena.

In contemporary Chinese aesthetics, the application of classical philosophy to artistic phenomena is attributed to Zong Baihua’s pioneering efforts. However, it is essential to recognize that Zong did not ultimately adopt this approach himself. A more accurate assessment would be to acknowledge his contributions in initially experimenting with this framework. In his later years, he emphasized the collaboration of classical philosophical theory and pre-modern art theory. In his later years, he emphasized the integration of classical philosophical theory and pre-modern art theory. Subsequent developments in Chinese aesthetics have delved into a more intricate analysis of how classical philosophical concepts are received by pre-modern art theory and further employed in interpreting artistic phenomena. This has led to a distinct development in Chinese aesthetics that differs from Western aesthetics. It was Zong Baihua’s ideas that served as the starting point for this development.

While some may argue that Zong’s contributions are inclined toward the examination of traditional Chinese aesthetics compared to Zhu Guangqian’s focus on Western aesthetics, it should be noted that, as discussed in this essay, Zong drew many insights from Western thought (O. Spengler, M. Dessoir, and W. Pater) in constructing Chinese aesthetics. Drawing from the framework of Zong Baihua’s Chinese art theory outlined in this paper, it is anticipated that subsequent, more nuanced research will delve into his aesthetic thought.

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