**beauty/美(Měi)**

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In 1883, the Japanese scholar Nakae Chōmin used the term “aesthetics” to translate Eugene Veron's L'Esthétique, and since then, the Spanish word for Aesthetik has been given a stable name in the East Asian Han-character culture. In this context, understanding "beauty" has become a new qualitative question pertaining to Chinese (or Japanese) aesthetics. The most widely relied upon historical source for the original meaning of the word "beauty" comes from Xu Shen's *Description and interpretation of Chinese characters (Shuowen Jiezi)* of the Eastern Han Dynasty, which states: "The character for beauty, which means gan (sweet), is related to the characters for “sheep” and “great”, which are mainly used for dietary needs among the six domestic animals; beauty and good are the same meaning." From this interpretation, it is clear that there is a consistency between traditional Chinese and Western perceptions of beauty in that both affirm the sensual quality of aesthetic activity, but there are cognitive differences in the sense organs on which this sensuality resides. In the West, sight and hearing are considered the most superior aesthetic senses, while taste, touch, and smell are "non-aesthetic or inferior." The sense of taste, in particular, is “not so finely and firmly distinguished as the ear, and the art of cooking and wine-brewing, which everyone is somewhat proficient in or attentive to, deals with materials too inexpressive to be called beauty.” [[1]](#footnote-1)But this lower sense was given the original meaning of beauty in the ancient Chinese language. For example, the Japanese scholar Kasahara Chūji argues that although the Chinese word for beauty places emphasis on visual (“great”) and gustatory (“sweet”) sensations, the etymology of the word is etymologically related to the word “sheep,” one’s perception of the fatness of sheep must ultimately be ascribed to taste and beauty. In this way, “the most primitive aesthetic sense of the Chinese originated in the gustatory sensation of “sweet” after all.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

It can be argued that sensibility, and the sense of sight and taste on which it is based, constituted the fundamental meaning of beauty as understood by the early Chinese. In terms of their sensual grasp of the world, they can be divided into two dimensions, macro, and micro. On the macro level, Chinese philosophy began with imagery or pictorial understanding of the world, referred to in the *Book of Changes* as “Observing Object And Extracting Intrinsic Image (象Xiang).” According to the *Book of Changes*, the ancient Chinese sage, Baoxi Shi, looked up at the trajectory of the sun, moon, and stars in the sky and looked down at the patterns of the mountains and rivers on the earth, as well as the traces left by birds and animals, and eventually abstracted the eight trigrams as a simple schema of the world. At the micro level, Chinese characters, as pictograms, were created on the principle of “Pictogram by category,” i.e., through the formal simulation of everyday objects and things, so that human experience of the world could be symbolically transmitted figuratively. Of course, in addition to perceptual intuition, Chinese philosophy also has a metaphysical dimension, as in the case of the Taoist concept of “Tao,” which is often compared to Western philosophy’s idea of entities such as Forms. Still, in fact, Tao is not a self-existent entity. For example, Lao Zi’s statement that "All things in the world are born from being and being is born from nothing" is an apparent attempt to nihilism the transcendental side of the Tao with the help of “nothing.” He goes on to call the presentation of the Tao “trance” and “chaos.” At most, this pushes the boundaries of human awareness to a critical point between the sensible and the insensible, and does not, on the whole, go beyond the realm of the sensual. In this context, Chinese scholars tend to refer to traditional Chinese thinking as Xiang (image) thinking. Its sensual character defines it as a kind of aesthetic thinking or epistemological aestheticization. Against this backdrop, the world as a whole is presented from the collocation of image with image, which Western Sinologists have called correlational thinking. The resulting picture of the world is contextual or aesthetic; it is a space-time conceived and constructed on an anthropogenic scale rather than a space-time itself. This also indicates that Chinese philosophy is not so much a philosophy but an aesthetics in the general sense.

The world is constructed and thought of sensually, reflecting the universal nature of traditional Chinese culture and philosophy. Specifically, the perception of beauty is based on human visual perception. According to the composition of Chinese characters, the ancient Chinese generally believed that the character for beauty（美）was formed by the combination of the upper part of the character for sheep（羊）and the bottom part of the character for great（大）, i.e., “A great sheep is a beauty.” In recent times, with the use of modern interpretations and the discovery of new character materials such as oracle bones and Jinwen, new interpretations have been emerging. For example, Ma Xulun, in *A review and empirical evidence of the* *six theories of Chinese character composition in The Description and Interpretation of Chinese Characters (Shuowen Jiezi Liushu Shuzheng),* points out that “beauty (美)” is similar to “媄,” “At the beginning of this word , the word ‘媄’ was associated with great, and with women, and the so-called ‘媄’ referred to ‘good-looking women’.”[[3]](#footnote-3) According to cultural scholar Xiao Bing, the so-called “sheep is beauty” is actually “sheep with the person are beauty,” which refers to a person dancing with a head of a sheep and is associated with the totem worship in primitive songs and dances.[[4]](#footnote-4) These interpretations are all based on a “take the words too literally” of the word “beauty,” and have the general characteristic of taking visual perception as the orientation for interpreting meaning. However, the differences in understanding around the character “beauty” between ancient and modern times are still fairly obvious. The origin of the character “beauty,” for example, is that it was associated with the sheep, roughly because, as one of the six domestic animals, it was mainly used for rituals in ancient China, and the sacredness of the rituals and the spiritual need for good fortune reinforced its aesthetic value. It is worth noting, though, that at the level of Pragmatics, traditional Chinese literature rarely contains any cases of aesthetic evaluation of sheep in terms of their “beauty” but is more concerned with the human appearance. The word beauty, as in the oldest collection of Chinese poetry, *the Book of Songs,* is all about people. This suggests that the ancient Chinese conception of beauty, even if it originated in the affirmation of the value of the sheep, still formed a cluster of aesthetic evaluations around people in its word-meaning flux. Of course, in the shift of character meanings from sheep to man signaled by beauty, not all people can be called beauty. Most women or men celebrated in literature such as *the Book of Songs* and *the Zuo Zhuan* are plump, tall, and robust, which means that the “great” in the so-called "Great Sheep is Beauty" is also replaced with an aesthetic evaluation of the human being. Historically, the establishment of this criterion is associated with the material shortage or poverty that predominated in ancient times. Poverty inspired a desire for abundance and worship of physical strength, and the “great” or plump, tall, and robust body served as a sensual representation of this ideal of life.

In addition to resorting to the visual beauty of people, the enjoyment of taste was also an aesthetic experience that was highly valued in early Chinese society. For example, in *The Book of Songs, Deer chirping (Lu ming)*: “I have a fragrant wine for guests to feast and roam,” and in the *Fish in abundance (Yu Li):* “A nobleman treats his guests to a wine that is not only fragrant but also plentiful." The *Green Sparrow (Sang Hu)*: “In the curved horned mug, the wine is full and fragrant.” And so on. The Chinese character for “Zhi”（旨）is written as “” in the oracle bone script and “” in the Jinwen and is roughly the same in character form. The upper part of the character is like a spoon, and the bottom part is like a mouth to show the delicacy of the taste. In *the Book of Songs,* the word “Zhi” is mostly used for the feasts of the nobility, where the scene is joyful, harmonious, and full of self-restraint. This is in marked contrast to the previous period of King Zhou of the Yin Dynasty when “a pond made of wine and a forest made of meat” and “the foul smell of wine and meat was everywhere.” This indicates that following the Zhou dynasty’s decree on the control of drinking (Jiugao) and the Zhou duke’s establishment of rites and rituals, food for the nobility was gradually elevated from the satisfaction of general physical pleasure to an aesthetic palate and a means of emotional communication. In these poems, the word “Zhi” often appears simultaneously with the word “Jia”（嘉）, which refers to not only the excellent taste and delicate fish but also the honored guests and the lovely word. This transition illustrates the characters' shift from "beauty" in terms of taste to "good" regarding emotional communication. Here, the physiological co-purposiveness of food and drink gradually leads to a moral co-purposiveness, i.e., from beauty to goodness.

The pleasure of sight, the enjoyment of taste, and the virtuous purposes that such joy derived from basically sum up the aesthetic orientation of early Chinese society. In contrast, Xu Shen’s Exegetical Conclusion in the *Shuowen Jiezi,* based on the ancient definition of the word “beauty,” can easily be seen as persuasive in understanding the traditional Chinese idea of aesthetics. In this regard, the phrase “beauty is gan (sweet)” refers to the beauty of taste as reflected in the Book of Songs; the term “relates to sheep, relate to big” reflects the visual characteristic of fatness and chubbiness as the beauty of an object, and The phrase “beauty and goodness are synonymous” is a good clarification of the aesthetic value orientation of beauty leading to goodness and unity of beauty and goodness. However, it should be noted that early Chinese literature, such as the Book of Songs, still lacked an internal unification between the perceptions of visual and gustatory aesthetic experiences, expressed as two separate discursive systems: “vision-beauty” and “gustation - Zhi." This led to the formation of a juxtaposition of the two aesthetics. Xu Shen’s “interpretation of beauty by Gan” means that he unites the “gan” of gustation with the “beauty” of vision, thus making the visual and gustatory experiences, which were initially separate, one around the “beauty” forms a concept of unity.

Hence, the early understanding of beauty in Chinese society can be described as a historical process in which the subject was constantly involved with objects and thus developed a relatively fixed idea of aesthetics. Among these, the philosophical 'Observing Object And Extracting Intrinsic Image' and the daily cognitive level of 'Pictogram by category,' although still challenging to be fully considered as aesthetic problems due to the lack of involvement of the subject's emotions, nevertheless laid a sensual foundation for aesthetics by resorting to subjective observation and image imitation. With this background, the change in character interpretation from Yin and Shang to Western Zhou and the Spring and Autumn Period offers a rare clue to understanding the awakening of Chinese aesthetic consciousness and the development of aesthetic concepts. In *the Book of Songs,* the word 'beauty' is specific to the aesthetics of the human body. It celebrates the plumpness and robustness of the human figure, giving a relatively fixed yardstick for aesthetic judgment at the visual level. Likewise, the character "Zhi," as an acknowledgment and glorification of the taste of food, sets the standard to be fulfilled by the aesthetics of gustation. Meanwhile, both the pleasure of sight and the enjoyment of taste should lead a person to the goodness of purpose at a transcendental stage. As a result, the beauty of color, the purpose (Zhi) of taste, and the goodness of virtue essentially sum up the early Chinese idea of aesthetics.

In Chinese history, the pre-Qin period was the axial era of Chinese culture. The aesthetic ideas developed during this period dominated the aesthetic tradition in China for thousands of years afterward. It is to be pointed out, however, that a self-conscious discipline of aesthetics did not exist in China itself until Western aesthetics was introduced into the Chinese context. This implies that its perception of beauty could not be limited by the current choice of the word “beauty” from the Chinese character but rather exhibits infinite openness and pluralism. Traditional Chinese Confucianism, for example, is characterized by its “reverence for humanity” (Shangwen), which defines it as receptive to all natural and human beauty, including sensual pleasures. Still, it is also vigilant against the abuse of beauty, believing that "too much is as bad as too little." This denotes the pursuit of harmony between sensuality and rationality; beauty and goodness are their actual destination. This is what Confucianism calls the beauty of Moderation(Zhongyong), or the beauty is in harmony. At the same time, for Confucianism, beauty must appeal to sensual forms, but sensuality is not the boundary of beauty; instead, any sensual object should shape the hints of a more profound spiritual realm and present meaning. Confucianism, for example, speaks of “Objects are used to hold and express rites,” emphasizing that it is in seemingly unremarkable objects (rites objects) that the world order is contained. In this respect, Taoism goes even further. For example, Laozi’s assertion that “All things under heaven have been born from being, and being is derived from nothing” may seem like an inability to escape from a sensual understanding of the world. Still, he also builds a pathway to infinity for one’s aesthetic feelings. The infinitude and infinity of this "nothing" represent the highest goal of beauty. Therefore, while the visually constructed images, in reality, are beautiful, true beauty is the transcendence of the image, i.e., “the great image is invisible”. In contrast, the five flavours (Wuwei), in reality, that the sense of gustation can perceive, are beauty; true beauty points to tastelessness, i.e., “No taste is the best flavor.” Thus, the so-called sensual beauty is always a means or medium, leading to the supra-perceptual, supra-linguistic side of the world, which Lao Zi called “the Subtle (Miao).” In later times, Zen Buddhism, a product of the Chinisation of Buddhism, speaks of “Being amid appearances（相Xiang）but detaching from appearances” and “Dharma is the raft that crosses the river, but does not obsess about the Dharma,” also considering all sensible and tangible appearances as a means of comprehending the emptiness of the world’s nature. In this respect, although Chinese aesthetics is based on the idea of the image (Xiang), its understanding of beauty is transcendent, using the finite object of presence to present the infinite realm of absence. Of course, this empowerment makes all the sensual things in the world eternally meaningful, making the aesthetic activity a spiritual journey that appeals to and transcends sensuality.

1. George Santayana,The Sense of Beauty, translated by Miao Lingzhu, Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 1983, p. 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Kasahara Chūji*, The Beauty Consciousness of the Ancient Chinese*, translated by Yang Ruowei, Beijing: Joint Publishing 1988, p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ma Xuelun, *The Description, and Interpretation of Chinese Characters* II, Shanghai: Shanghai Bookstore Publishing House, 1985, p. 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Xiao Bing, *From "sheep is beauty" to "sheep with the person are beauty,"* Harbin: The Northern Literary Studies., 1980, no. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)