



Concepts of Traditional Chinese Culture and University Aesthetic Education

Xiaoxia Bai*, Jiahui Kong, Shiyi Chen, Lu Zhan, and Yingjie Hu

School of Design, NingboTech University, Ningbo, Zhejiang, China

*bxxlxf@gmail.com

Abstract. Aesthetic education plays a pivotal role in shaping the cultural consciousness and values of individuals in Chinese society. In the era of technology, traditional Chinese culture should exert a greater influence in leading humanity and sculpting values, providing the world and humankind with diverse and more humanistic spiritual nourishment. This paper explores the cultural roots that Chinese university aesthetic education can follow from historical and philosophical perspectives, identifying key views and practices from Confucianism, Taoism, and other traditional Chinese philosophies, offering insights and applicable methods for contemporary university aesthetic education teaching. The study underscores the importance of integrating traditional cultural values into the contemporary framework of university aesthetic education and contributes to the discussion on cultural preservation and inheritance in Chinese higher education.

Keywords: Chinese traditional culture, aesthetic education, university aesthetic education, cultural identity.

1 Introduction

Over the past century, rapid economic development and globalization have had a great impact on traditional Chinese culture, and it has become obvious that the young generation of China lacks sufficient understanding and recognition of the traditional culture and values of their own country. In view of this situation, the Ministry of Higher Education of China has proposed that aesthetic education in universities should be based on the inheritance of the excellent cultural traditions of China and the promotion of the spirit of Chinese aesthetic education, and that the education of aesthetics should be rooted in the deep soil of Chinese culture. In response to this situation, the Chinese Ministry of Higher Education has proposed that aesthetic education in universities should be based on the inheritance of the excellent Chinese cultural traditions, carry forward the spirit of Chinese aesthetic education, and root aesthetic education in the deep soil of Chinese culture. At the practical level of teaching implementation, although some top universities have achieved certain successes[1], there is a lack of clear understanding of the core concepts of Chinese aesthetic education across institutions. This results in varied practices in specific operations, leading to some degree of confusion and inefficiency in school-based aesthetic education. This paper addresses this issue of

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aesthetic education in Chinese universities by (1) clearly interpreting the core concepts of traditional Chinese aesthetic education and the characteristics of aesthetics and human cultivation from the philosophical and historical levels, and (2) proposing feasible ways to integrate traditional Chinese cultural concepts into the modern practice of aesthetic education in the light of the actual state of university aesthetic education in the current stage.

2 Core concepts of traditional Chinese aesthetic education

Chinese aesthetic education originates from the excellent Chinese cultural tradition and Chinese aesthetic thought. In traditional Chinese culture, beauty comes from the harmonious symbiotic relationship between human beings and all things in heaven and earth, and the spiritual realm of beauty and goodness[2]. The three most important sources of Chinese culture, namely Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, have constructed the core connotation of Chinese cultural aesthetics from the dimensions of aesthetics, experience and education.

2.1 The Aesthetic View of Harmony between Heaven and Humanity, and the Unity of Beauty and Goodness

Confucianism integrates obedience to the heavenly way with human relationships and projects the wisdom of the natural universe into daily life through rituals and customs, aiming to educate the human heart. This approach is evident in the Analects of Confucius, which states: "the rise of poetry, set up in the rituals, into the music," highlighting how poetry and music, derived from nature, blend artistic aesthetics with moral ideals and personal education to foster character development[3]. Similarly, Taoism, complementing Confucianism, embraces aesthetics that allow for a transcendence above the mundane, promoting a synchronic resonance with the cosmos through concepts like "the great beauty of heaven and earth without words" and "the unity of heaven and man." As Li Zehou notes, if Confucianism advocates for "the humanization of nature," Taoism encourages "the naturalization of man," suggesting a return to one's natural state to achieve harmony with the universe, thus defining a path to inner freedom within the constraints of the cosmos[4].

Buddhist culture, distinct from the aesthetics of Confucianism and Taoism, focuses on cultivating a "compassionate heart" towards all things and a "transcendental heart" beyond mundane existence[5]. It proposes achieving tranquility and beauty of mind through "Myriad Enlightenment," a unique aesthetic beauty that emerges from a transcendent and empty mind enriched with the wisdom of Eastern philosophy and aesthetics. This approach to aesthetic perception and experience offers an intuitive understanding of "wisdom," setting it apart as a critical line of thought in Chinese aesthetics[6].

2.2 The concept of aesthetic experience emphasizing the unity of body and mind and the integration of knowledge and action

In Chinese aesthetic education, the integration of body and mind is paramount, drawing heavily on Confucian and Taoist teachings. Confucianism emphasizes the physical involvement in aesthetic activities as essential for spiritual enhancement, advocating for a journey from sensory pleasure to profound spiritual insight through practices such as poetry, rituals, and music. Taoism complements this with the notion of skillful engagement in artistic pursuits, leading to self-forgetfulness and a state of selflessness, which is seen as a pathway to align with the Tao. Both traditions underscore the role of physical participation and the mastery of aesthetic skills as crucial for personal development and the realization of spiritual freedom or fulfillment. This holistic approach to aesthetics, blending the physical with the spiritual, is central to shaping character and achieving true personal fulfillment within the rich tapestry of Chinese aesthetic education[7].

The Neo-Confucianism of Wang Yangming during the Ming Dynasty also significantly influenced Chinese aesthetic education by promoting the principles of "innate knowing" and the "unity of knowledge and action." These concepts continue the Confucian legacy of moral character development through aesthetic education. Yangming's philosophy highlights the necessity of practical engagement and the experience in learning and teaching aesthetics, beyond mere theoretical study. It emphasizes that aesthetic consciousness and behavior should be simultaneous and inseparable, with the goal of transforming aesthetic intentions into a tangible expression of a beautiful lifestyle and character[8]. This approach distinguishes Chinese aesthetic education from Western perspectives by valuing "experience" and the practical application of knowledge.

2.3 A philosophy of character development that fosters individuals to become mature adults and people of high character

The core of Chinese aesthetic education lies in its unwavering commitment to developing a holistic personality, a theme deeply rooted in Confucian tradition as illustrated by rituals and principles cited in "Zhou Li" (The Rites of Zhou). These texts advocate for harmony between heaven and earth and an ordered society, mirrored in Confucius' and Mencius' teachings on poetry, rites, music, and the cultivation of moral character[9]. This ethos not only emphasizes aesthetic alignment with the universe's natural order but also promotes socialization through ritual practices, aiming to shape individuals into well-rounded "gentlemen" or "great persons" with both physical and mental unity.

Daoist and Buddhist influences further enrich this aesthetic tradition, with Zhuangzi advocating for a transcendence beyond conventional societal confines to achieve a state of "celestial joy," resonating with nature and the cosmos. Similarly, the Chan (Zen) school's profound sinicization during the Eastern Han dynasty introduced a focus on transcending worldly attachments through spiritual cultivation, emphasizing direct insight into one's nature as a path to enlightenment. Both traditions contribute to the multifaceted character of Chinese aesthetic education, underscoring a pursuit of harmony with the natural and spiritual worlds, beyond mere academic learning.

3 Feasible Approaches to Implementing Traditional Aesthetic Education in Chinese Universities

3.1 Cultivating aesthetics

To begin with, creating opportunities for students to engage intimately with beauty is crucial. Only through close, dense, and deep interaction with objects and works characteristic of Chinese aesthetics can one cultivate an appreciation for beauty and achieve aesthetic education. In designing aesthetic education curricula, methods for expanding the content and forms of teaching can be employed. On one hand, it is beneficial to move beyond the conventional pedagogical approaches of aesthetic education, which often rely on image displays and verbal instruction from teachers. Instead, we can create more opportunities for students to directly encounter beauty on different levels, providing them with tangible, touchable, and accessible materials, rather than insubstantial screen images or theoretical language detached from context.

In tandem, it is essential to emphasize the cultivation of critical reflection on beauty. Mere observation can lead students to develop only a superficial and intuitive feeling and understanding of beautiful objects, actions, and thoughts, without engaging in dialectical thinking about beauty, which is necessary for profound resonance and contemplation. Indeed, while aesthetic education may place a greater emphasis on sensibility and intuition compared to other disciplines, it also requires students to possess certain capacities for critical reflection and critical thinking. This is beneficial for students to construct a more comprehensive knowledge system as well as a global perspective on worldviews and values. On a practical level, this capability to critically reflect on beauty can be fostered through the incorporation of educational activities such as art criticism, art discussion, and art reproduction in the curriculum.

3.2 Enhancement of experiential sessions

The avenues for experiencing and practicing Chinese aesthetic education are incredibly diverse, encompassing the beauty of humanities and arts through painting, calligraphy, dance, music, and pottery; the beauty of daily life as seen in tea ceremony, papercutting, embroidery, dyeing and weaving, cooking, and more; as well as the beauty of traditional customs manifested in festival rites, clothing, opera, drama, and so forth. These rich and varied subjects can all serve as teaching materials for the experiential practice of aesthetic education in universities, aiding students in building a profound understanding and experience of their national culture.

Practical implementation can begin with two approaches. First, art experience courses such as painting, drama, and dance experience classes, where students participate in the authentic process of artistic creation and form a comprehensive perception of specific art forms throughout the process. Second, art practice activities that involve students in on-campus and off-campus thematic events, such as exhibitions, visits, festivals, campus cultural art festivals, and exchange activities. Educational research suggests that physical experiences are characterized by their practicality, direct participation, and holistic nature. In these activities, the actively participating body acquires

information through the senses to form personal experiences. These experiences are further transformed into emotions and meanings through the body, and finally expressed through bodily skills[10].

3.3 Emphasis on personality cultivation, cultural identity, and identity

In traditional Chinese culture, aesthetic appreciation, creation, and experience transcend mere physicality, targeting the essence of humanity and the heart. This aligns aesthetic education with personality development, employing beauty to cultivate inner peace and societal harmony. It enables individuals to connect with the universe's life force, promoting empathy and coexistence. Furthermore, beauty facilitates transcendence and open-mindedness, offering solace and growth amidst adversity. Essentially, Chinese aesthetic education prioritizes the enrichment of the human spirit, cognitive expansion, and character building, molding individuals with societal grounding, noble virtues, and a deep sense of purpose.

General Secretary Xi Jinping has noted, "Cultural identity is the deepest level of identification, the root of national unity, and the soul of national harmony. Only when issues of cultural identity are resolved can there be solid identification with the great motherland, the Chinese nation, and the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics." In the context of university aesthetic education, it is only with a profound sense of cultural identity that cultural confidence and a sense of cultural belonging can be fostered, thereby helping students to establish their identity and a deep-rooted love and respect for their country and home. At the implementation level, the study and experience of Chinese aesthetics, comparative analysis of Chinese and foreign aesthetic thoughts, appreciation of Chinese classical literary and artistic works, and interviews with renowned Chinese artists are all effective means to help establish cultural identity.

4 Conclusion

Chinese aesthetic education, originating from traditional Chinese culture, stands distinct from Western education ideologies that are based on rational thinking. It places greater emphasis on sensibility, practical engagement, and the holistic development of body and mind. The venerable Chinese philosophical systems of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism have constructed the core content of Chinese cultural aesthetics from the dimensions of appreciation, experience, and education. These systems offer China and the world a value system infused with humanistic care and a perspective that embraces nature. Such a system deserves recognition and development within the educational frameworks of the new era.

Although the term "aesthetic education" was only coined in the 18th century, the concept of aesthetic education has existed in ancient China and has always played a significant role in education. Wang Guowei once stated, "Observing the teachings of Confucius, his instruction begins with aesthetic education and ends with aesthetic education. [11]" Against the backdrop of a complex international situation and the challenges faced by traditional Chinese culture, strengthening the teaching of traditional

Chinese aesthetic education and tapping into Chinese aesthetic resources are of great value. Such efforts can promote the charm of traditional Chinese culture in the new era, help university students establish a world view with greater humanistic value, and thereby achieve cultural and identity recognition.

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