

BOOK REVIEW

**Zhirong Zhu. *Philosophy of Chinese Art*, translated by
Chen Kaiju, Luo Na, Xue Ping**

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The philosophy of art is richly developed in ancient China. The historical record of art in ancient China provides a clear evidence of this beautification of arts through the literary works of pursuing the spiritual life through artistic means. The artistic tapestry in the Chinese traditional phenomenon also highlights the importance of a higher life state, which emphasizes the pursuit of an artistic state as an awareness of life through the Chinese philosophy of life.

The book *Philosophy of Chinese Art* by ZHU Zhirong embodies the perception of the artistic values, asserting that artistic life in the ancient Chinese context was supposed to be the best life one could try to reach. The book has six chapters, and each chapter is richly and profoundly devoted to the artistic values of attaining the spiritual life. The consistent claim of this volume lies in the ideal soul, which is embodied and aligned with the artistic state, union with heaven and earth's stylistic beings, moving beyond sensual life, and attaining "the soul of the self-actualized subject" (2). The study argues that the richness and profundity of art theories in ancient Chinese art were improved and enriched through the pre-Qin school of Confucianism and Taoism. Both schools of thought interpreted human life in the pursuit of artistic life as an aesthetic state of life, which Zhirong asserts was later formulated into art theories in the form of long-standing art traditions.

Zhirong's systematic construction of the philosophy of art is grounded in the ancient Chinese arts. His conception of these ancient artistic values as "Philosophy of Chinese Art" views philosophy of art as the acme and an organic part of philosophy of life. Throughout the volume, Zhirong's systematic thought conforms to the ancient Chinese philosophy that examines the aesthetic rules of art production, appreciating and emphasizing the importance of the subject's mind in the creative process (2-3). In short, the panoramic view of this book is in the form of systematically conceptualizing the ancient Chinese art, theoretically categorizing them into calligraphy, painting, poetry, literature, and music.

The introductory part of the volume delves deeper into the consideration of the philosophy of ancient Chinese art, adopting it as a research methodology, integrating with Western art theories as a framework for finding traditional Chinese art thinking, and validating its evidence. One may question here why this practice is necessary, as the philosophy of art in ancient China is as old as China itself. Zhirong's answer to these investigations lies, on the one hand, in a current philosophy of Chinese art that is

based on ancient philosophy as an independent system. On the other hand, the Western philosophy of art provides a frame of reference. As a result, the study of the philosophical ideas of Chinese art is not confined its limitations to certain boundaries, but rather such art and practice highlight the diversity, expounding its vastness across borders in the contemporary world. Again, despite the oldest legacy of art in China, Zhirong's emphasis does not neglect the need to learn from others, particularly from the West, because of his self-belief and confidence in maintaining the national spirit (6-7). Thus, this integrative practice allows the theory and practice to come alive, and Zhirong pursues the thoughts of different scholars for meaningful insights, not from perpetual life but rather as an aspiration unified with the heavenly and earthly stylistic patterns.

Zhirong's artistic creation begins with appreciation, and this is the very foundation of the ancient Chinese artistic spirit, as everyone has the potential to be creative in artistic conception. Thus, based on appreciation, artistic aspiration develops. To put it another way, based on appreciation, the potential of artistic talent serves for this artistic excellence. The study reviews the extensive literature of the Chinese artist, revealing the inborn talents, especially the essence of artistic talents of heaven and earth in the thinking mode, linguistic expression, people's conception, and personality.

Zhirong's thorough review of a plethora of Chinese scholars' perceptions argues that natural talent initially appears in the noumena of *qi* that comprise one's body. Secondly, as *caiqi* (talent per se) or *wenqi* (literary talent) in literary creativity. Zhirong argues that this innate ability is not produced in one's body because of biological heritage through the father to son, brother to brother, or sister, but rather it manifests in everybody uniquely and distinctively, demonstrating artistic creation. Some of the creative abilities, as born talents, are demonstrated in creative artistic works in undisturbed meditation, others in improvising poems (11-13). The innate talent in this way serves as a foundation of creative artistic expression in the form of music, literature, and in any artistic creation, which is not judged or forcefully imposed; rather, as already mentioned, it is an innate born ability found in the outstanding perception of artistic creation in anyone's work. To put it succinctly, the talent displayed in Chinese literature and art is a dazzling trait that, according to the noumenon of *qi*, resides in one with natural endowments provided at birth and training and nurturing acquired after birth, is exhibited through artistic endeavors (30). Zhirong's argument is further developed through artistic creativity, born talents and abilities, harmonizing the universe and mind. He argues it is harmony between the world and the artist, nature and the mind, the universe and the soul, reality and the ideal.

His argument lies in the artistic creativity in Tao, which reveals that artistic life is indeed the reflection of studying heaven and earth's stylistic patterns. So, the artist's adherence to the laws of nature allows art to achieve the pinnacle of perfection and produce unexpected outcomes. In this way, the study affirms that close collaboration and a high level of harmony between talents and the arts are crucial in this process.

Besides the above, Chinese art also emphasizes the integration of abilities and arts to enhance aesthetic value. And pursuing emotional pleasure through natural means is fundamental to the artistic soul. In this way, skills provide spiritual significance to art, making it less meaningful without them. Highly expressive skills

have aesthetic value. Artistry, particularly in conception and creation, may elevate objects beyond their physical worth and provide spiritual satisfaction for spectators. Thus, in Chinese arts, the relationship between "skill," "art," and "Tao" is considered important. Although skills are important in the arts, they are more about performing design concepts than achieving artistic aims (104). The idea behind skills and art unity is important to craft artistic creativity that originated from nature, integrating as an aesthetic awareness of life.

In the literary setting, plumbing meanings through writings, calligraphy, and visual arts, Zhirong further contends that Chinese artists should allow room for their thoughts and emotions in addition to mimicking nature to fully represent the unity of natural laws and their inner spirits. Artists can convey rich connotations of their works in confined language, through meaning and symbolism. Thus, throughout the creation process, both talent and art are essential for conceptualization and expression. The language of art refers to the linguistic symbols used for creative communication, including words, ink-brushed lines, poetry, sounds, and voices. The emotional origins of human life are reflected creatively, revealing a psychological power centered on emotions. It differs from common language in that it serves as both a tool for objectively representing an item and an aesthetic construct. The language of art not only serves as a carrier, but also has an ontological meaning. It may construct itself in the intrinsic layer of art and display it in an emotionally perceptible form. In this way, Zhirong believes that the language and life of art are inextricably linked (105-106). The language of art, in this way, represents the art of life in any language as a means of communication in life awareness, interconnecting with the Chinese philosophy of life.

Ancient Chinese art theory, which also emphasizes the rhythm and meter of an artwork as well as the unification of the rhythms of the subject and the object, is based on the awareness of life and views art as an organic life. The conception of rhythm is originally originated in *The Book of Music*, Kong Yinda (孔颖达574-648) refers to either the starting or ending piece of music (149). The rhythm in ancient times was referred to as fundamental laws, cosmic and nature beings, as an expression of life unfolding the images through music expressions. The art of the West integrates with the Chinese philosophy of life in the same vein as perceiving music as an art form. The West views music as the art of time, whereas China views it as the art of space (157, 177). This integration of the West and Chinese artistic creation also serves as one perspective that focuses on the time form of rhythm and meter in music and the space form of rhythm and meter in painting, while the other emphasizes the vitality of music rhythm and meter reflected in space and the vigor of painting rhythm and meter embodied in the time process. The study further reveals that the artistic works reflect life's ontology through rhythm, genre, style, taste, and inclination. Zhirong's emphasis at the end of the book lies in the ongoing maturity of the artwork, enriched with the traditional splendid legacy of Chinese art, which is dynamic, not stagnant (255). To put it another way, throughout Chinese history, art has embraced both tradition and foreign cultures to reflect the spiritual attitude of the Chinese people (296). The whole approach is embedded in the Chinese artistic experiences, enriched with worldly scholarly works,

keeping their own identity, exploring the diversity of work comprehension of life, integrating with heaven and earth.

This is an excellent work exploring the ancient Chinese art as a philosophy of life, as a foundation in reference to contemporary artwork, fulfilling the artistic state of life. The integration of thought development philosophy as art theoretically and in practice, exploring images, literary works, and music, is exceptional in this work. The book is written from a historical point of view, exploring the philosophy of art, and it is extensively explored in the images of art; however, nothing is brought in the pictorial form. There could have been thousands and thousands of pictures in ancient Chinese art that could have postulated the ideas of the artists and their perceptions of reflecting the imagery in literary settings. Second, the Indian, Japanese, and even African art is rich and profound in both theoretical and practical aspects, but the integration of Western art with ancient Chinese art is approached as a framework for evidence alongside contemporary art, which makes very little sense in this volume.

Despite these shortcomings, the book is a great source of inspiration for philosophers, historians, artists, craft researchers, and academics.

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