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Citation	2015 Autumn Conference of Korean Society for Philosophy East-West & 2015 The 5th International Conference of Dept. of Interdisciplinary Program in Studies of Arts BK21 Plus Group : 165 - 170
Issue Date	2015
DOI	
Self DOI	
URL	https://ir.lib.hiroshima-u.ac.jp/00045955
Right	
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The Birth of “Aesthetics” in Recent East Asia under the Perspective of Cultural Integration

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Abstract: With the dissemination of western culture among the eastern countries, aesthetics was gradually imported into East Asia. Starting from owning its own translated name to becoming an independent discipline, aesthetics finally grows and prospers in oriental nations.

Key Words: Aesthetics, East Asia, Integration, Establishment

1. Preface

Between the mid 15th and mid 17th century, the Europeans conducted an unprecedentedly worldwide voyage routes expedition. Later this era is named as The Age of Great Voyage by historians. Connected by the newly-explored maritime routes, the once remote and mysterious nations in East Asia took off their masks and nations located in Mainland China, the Japanese archipelago, and the Korean Peninsula became accessible.

In 1842, the Chinese ruling Qing government signed *Treaty of Nanking* with the United Kingdom. In 1853, the Japanese authority Edo Bakufu signed *Kanagawa Treaty* with the United States of America. In 1882, the Korean Joseon Dynasty signed *US-Korea Amity and Trade Treaty* with the United States of America. In this regard, three major nations in East Asia were forced or half-willing to join the global capitalism system constructed by the European and American powers.

More contact with the westerners prompted the intellectuals in these countries to observe and evaluate the western world. On one hand, they were keen to learning and introducing western science and culture; on the other hand, they proactively launched social reforms. With their endeavor, The Westernization Movement which featured “traditional Chinese values aided with modern Western ideology (東学為体、西学為用)” took place in China; the Meiji Restoration which was guided by “eastern morality and western art (東洋道德、西洋芸術)” happened in Japan; a steadfast reform carried out in “eastern way and western technology(東道西器)” emerged in Korea. Although these movements ended with different results, they all did reflect the encounter and integration between oriental and occidental culture in these nations. Under such a context, how was “aesthetics”, a part of “the eastward dissemination of western learning”, transmitted to East Asia and finally developed there? To answer this question, the thesis will detail the establishment of the translated name “美学”(“aesthetics”) and the birth of “aesthetics” discipline within the

Chinese-character cultures in China and Japan.

2. The Establishment of the Translated Name “美学”(“aesthetics”)

As is known to us all, the frequently-used word “美学”(“aesthetics”) nowadays does not belong to the tradition Chinese vocabulary. It is the equivalent Chinese expression of “aesthetics”, which was transformed from Latin “Aesthetica”. Latin “Aesthetica” originated from Greek Aisthetikos (meaning “esthetic, sensitive, sentient”), which was firstly used to differentiate logic and ethics by German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten(1714-62). In 1735, Alexander Baumgarten became the first to refer to this word in *Mediationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus* and he also published a book titled *Aesthetica* in 1750.

It was after the late 19th century that aesthetics was disseminated into east Asia. According to Xiong Yuezhi’s definition in *Society in Late Qing Dynasty and the Eastward Dissemination of Western Learning*ⁱ, like other western learning, “aesthetics” was firstly disseminated by western missionaries. Based on current data, in 1866, Wilhelm Lobscheid (1822-93), an English missionary, included “aesthetics” and translated it as “study of great beauty (佳美之理)” and “study of beauty appreciation (審美之理)” in accordance with the traditional Chinese expression habits in the dictionary *English and Chinese Dictionary* with the Punti and Mandarin Pronunciation--Part 1 that he compiled. Later in 1875, German missionary Ernst Faber (1839-99) mentioned painting and music in *Proposals on Being Civilized* and he used “美学” firstlyⁱⁱ. But seen from works by Yan Yongjing (顏永京,1838-98)ⁱⁱⁱ, etc. the translated version “美学” of “aesthetics” emerged but was not established firmly and disseminated extensively. Compared with “美学”, the translated version which adhered to traditional Chinese grammar was used more often by the men of letters at that time.

Similar conditions could also be found in Japan. In 1870, Nishi Amane (西周,1829-97) initially introduced aesthetics in *Encyclopedia* (『百学連環』) and translated “aesthetics” as “On Great Interest (佳趣論)”. Later, he changed the translation into “study on elegance (美妙学)” in *Bimyō Setsu* (『美妙学説』) which was published in 1875. “美学” was firstly utilized as a translated name in 1883. Nakae Chōmin (中江兆名,1847-1901) translated *Esthetique* written by French philosopher Everon as *Everon Aesthetics*(『維氏美学』) in this year, which was the first official use of the translated version. Despite disagreement by people such as Mori Ōgai (森鷗外,1862-1922), due to the official background of *Everon Aesthetics*, the translated version “美学” was finally established and found widespread recognition and application.

No evidence can be found to illustrate whether Nakae Chōmin translated “aesthetics” under the influence of Ernst Faber. But there were sufficient evidence showing that Japan’s

translation of “aesthetics” influenced that of China. In 1905, Guan Yun(觀雲) published an article on *Xinmin Series Newspaper*(『新民叢刊』), in which he mentioned “The author aimed to analyze one of the articles in *Esthetique* written by French Everon. The word “aesthetics” in *Esthetique* was translated as *Everon Aesthetics* by Nakae Chōmin. The author thus discussed the study on poems to offer reference for the literature and art circle^{iv}. We can thus see that Chinese scholars had clear understanding of the origin of “美学”(aesthetics). Besides, we can find such evidence from Wang Guowei (王国維, 1877-1927). Wang was adept at Japanese and visited Japan twice. So he had close contact with Japanese scholars. He was devoted to the research on philosophy and aesthetics, in which he translated a large quantity of Japanese academic works, such as *Pedagogy* (『教育学』) by Tachibana Senzaburou(立花銚三郎), *Pedagogy Coursebook*(『教育学教科書』) by Makise Goichiro(牧瀨五一郎) and *General Philosophy*(『哲学概論』) by Kuwaki Genyoku (桑木巖翼). Based on On the Input of Newly Acquired Language, though Wang did not fully support the import of words like “美学” from Japan, he advocated using such a translated version. According to Wang, “now that Japanese scholars have reached consensus in translating this term, why not draw upon their translated version?”^v

3. The Birth of “Aesthetics” Discipline

As more scholars became enthusiastic about aesthetics study, Japanese universities opened aesthetics lecture gradually. The University of Tokyo started to render aesthetics lectures under the discipline of western philosophy in 1881, with the lecturer being Ernest Francisco Fenollosa (1853-1908) and Toyama Masakazu (外山正一, 1848-1900). In 1885, the lecture was upgraded to be an independent discipline, whose lecturers became George William Knox (1853-1912) and Ludwig Busses (1862-1907). Imperial Universities headed by The University of Tokyo officially established aesthetics as a major, symbolizing the birth of aesthetics discipline in East Asia.

China was behind Japan in this field and was affected obviously by the advancement of aesthetics discipline in Japan. Two people played a vital role in the preparatory stage of the establishment of aesthetics discipline in China. One was Zhang Zhidong (張之洞, 1837-1908), the leader of men of letters and the pioneer in publicizing western learning. He delivered *the Memorial to the Throne of Guideline for College Operation*(「奏定大学堂章程」) to the Qing government in 1904, which was approved and issued by the authority. The guideline stipulated that an aesthetics discipline should be established under the category of architecture in engineering. Another was the afore-mentioned Wang Guowei. He delivered *the Memorial to the Throne of Guideline for College Operation in Colleges of Confucian Classics and Liberal Arts*(「奏定經學科大學文學科大學章程書後」) to the Qing rulers in 1906, arguing that Zhang’s guideline was fundamentally wrong. Wang

championed the idea that except history, every discipline should be equipped with aesthetics courses in universities of liberal arts. *Proposals on Higher Education Schools of Liberal Arts in Jiangyin*(「江陰文科高等學校辦法草議」) put forward by Zhang Jian (張謇,1853-1926) officially responded to Wang's idea. But the Qing Dynasty was at the verge of downfall and failed to push and implement these guidelines and proposals. Actually, China founded aesthetics discipline after the founding the Republic of China. The most important founder at that time was Cai Yuanpei (蔡元培,1868-1940).

Cai Yuanpei, a successful candidate in the highest imperial examinations in late Qing Dynasty, studied psychology, philosophy and aesthetics in University of Leipzig in Germany. After the founding of the Republic of China, he served as the Minister of Education and later president of Peking University. In 1912, soon after he took office, he published *Suggestions on Education Policies*(「對於教育方針之意見」), which underscored the point to treat aesthetics education as the basis of national education^{vi}. Later, during his term of office as the president of Peking University, he delivered a famous speech titled “Replace Religion with Aesthetics Education”, which laid an important theoretical foundation for the establishment of aesthetics discipline. Finally Peking University officially opened aesthetics discipline in October 1921 and Cai himself taught aesthetics.

4. Conclusion

Based on the collected historical materials, we can not only understand the input and development of aesthetics, but also comprehend the major dissemination paths and methods of recent western culture. No major gap is found in terms of the time when aesthetics went into nations in East Asia, particularly between that of China and Japan. However, due to the success of the Meiji Restoration and a series of historical and social factors, Japan ultimately became an important medium for China to import and absorb excellent western culture in recent history. Moreover, cultural exchange within East Asia was never of one direction. Countries in East Asia conducted mutual exchanges and cultivated innovation and development through communication and integration.

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Notes:

ⁱ Xiong Yuezhi(1994).Society in Late Qing Dynasty and the Eastward Dissemination of Western Learning. Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Publishing House,pp.7-15. Xiong classified the dissemination of western learning in late Qing dynasty into 4 stages: stage one (1811-1842), western learning was disseminated by western missionaries who were expert in Chinese and aimed at publicizing religion. Stage two (1843-1860), Chinese intellectuals began to translate western works. The major form was that the foreign scholars spoke and the Chinese scholars recorded what they said. Stage three (1860-1900), the Qing government set up translation institutions such as “School of Combined Learning” and “Translation Department of Kiangnan Arsenal”, which translated a large volume of works regarding western science and technology. Stage four (1900-1911) western learning mainly came from Japanese instead of English, French and German. In other words, China started to translate western works in Japanese and shifted its focus from science and technology to spiritual culture such as thoughts and academic research.

ⁱⁱ Cited from Huang Xingtao(2001). The Word“Aesthetics” and the Earliest Dissemination of Western Aesthetics in China .*Chinese Literature and History*,1. “Six fields are useful to save the nation, Confucian Classics, literature, to study the nature of things, astronomical almanac, geography, painting and music.” He remarked after “painting and music” in brackets that “the two belong to aesthetics. So they are similar.” Cited from Huang Xingtao The Word“Aesthetics” and the Earliest Dissemination of Western Aesthetics in China Chinese Literature and History, 2001 Volume 1.

ⁱⁱⁱ Yan Yongjing(1889).*Mental Philosophy*. Shanghai: Textbook Series Committee,p.13. He translated it as “study on brightness and beauty” in the book. The original sentences were as follows“The study which pursues brightness and beauty is much newer than other studies. So the researchers were quite rare.”

^{iv} Guan Yun (1905). On Poetics by Everon.*Xinmin Series Newspaper*,22,p.45.

^v Wang Guowei.on the Input of Newly Acquired Language. In: Fu Jie(1997).*Collections of Articles on Study by Wang Guowei*.Beijing:China Social Sciences Publishing House,p.387.

^{vi} Cai Yuanpei(1983).*Collection of Essays on Aesthetics by Cai Yuan Pei*.Beijing:Peking University Press,p.5.

Excerpted as follows:Nationalism, utilitarianism and moral education belong to political education. Worldview and aesthetics education also belong to political education. But these two surpass the boundary of political education.” “These five aspects should be considered jointly if we hope to better current education.” “According to psychology, militarism can be compared as will; utilitarianism knowledge; moral education both will and emotion; aesthetics education emotion; while worldview the combination of will, knowledge and emotion. According to the educators, militarism or nationalism refers to physical education; utilitarianism intellectual education; citizen morality and aesthetics education can be compared as moral education; worldview the combination of physical, intellectual and moral education.”