

Chinese Philosophy in France through Aesthetics and the Arts**

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Abstract

This paper will first show how Chinese philosophy was discovered by a very large audience in France via aesthetics, through the best-known works of a diasporic Chinese figure, François Cheng 程抱一, and then how Chinese philosophy was put into practice in France by another diasporic Chinese figure, Hsiung Ping-ming 熊秉明. The paper will explicate the role of aesthetics and the arts relative to philosophy. It will analyze different types of methodologies with reference to the Western path chosen by François Cheng, one nevertheless different from that of Western scholars, and to the Chinese path chosen by Hsiung Ping-ming, which remains specific to the latter, compared to that of other Chinese scholars.

Keywords: Chinese aesthetics, François Cheng 程抱一, Hsiung Ping-ming 熊秉明, practical philosophy, artistic experience

Manuscript received: October 3, 2012; revision completed: March 2, 2013; manuscript approved: May 20, 2013.

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- ** Part of the basis of this paper was presented, in Chinese, at the 2010 ISCP International Conference at Wuhan University centered on the theme “The Development of Chinese Philosophy in the last 30 Years: Retrospect and Prospect,” under the title “Chinese Philosophy, Aesthetics, and Art in Europe and in China since the Seventies. A Methodological Approach” (近三十年來歐洲中哲研究之美學方法論評析). Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

1. Introduction

The evolution and impact of Chinese philosophy in twentieth-century Europe owe a great deal to two major figures of the Chinese diaspora in France: François Cheng (Cheng Baoyi 程抱一, 1929-), responsible for the diffusion of Chinese philosophical thought to a broad European audience, and Hsiung Ping-ming 熊秉明 (1922-2002) who was significant, through his teaching and influence on young Chinese artists, in the area of practical philosophy. While François Cheng's achievement lies in his capital contribution to the opening of Western philosophy to Chinese thought, Hsiung's contribution lies in his renewal of Chinese philosophy through a practical approach that took Western philosophy into account. Both figures testify to the fruitful nature of interaction with Western philosophy and the Western way of life, and its potential for renewal.

But before turning to examine this issue, it is important to remember the contributions of earlier Chinese philosophers, such as Hu Shi 胡適 (1891-1962), Liang Shuming 梁漱溟 (1893-1988) and Feng Youlan 馮友蘭 (1895-1990), who were raised in both Chinese and Western schools of thought. They considered it possible to speak of something that could be termed "Chinese philosophy." That is to say, their generation considered the main currents of Chinese thought as constituting a system that might justifiably be referred to as a "philosophy." Of course, in their task, they chose to use a Western methodological approach, beginning with "logic" and "rigorous" corollaries. The succeeding generation of Chinese philosophers, especially those living abroad, did their best to have this "philosophy" recognized. How did they strive to achieve this aim? How has Chinese philosophy with its specificities come to be recognized and appreciated since the 1970s and the 1980s by a Western audience, rather than by a handful of specialists or a few European thinkers? What kind of methodology did they practice? This paper attempts to examine certain contributions made by aesthetics and the arts in the field of Chinese philosophy in the second part of the twentieth century, chiefly after the 1970s when

diasporic Chinese scholars began to have a huge audience in Europe, and more particularly in France.

First, we can now state that it is thanks to aesthetics and art theory that Chinese philosophy has finally been recognized by a wider Western audience in the last 30 years. Indeed, from the late 1970s onward, Westerners began to understand the specificity of Chinese philosophy, and started to turn towards it en masse through their reading of Western books on the subject of aesthetics—initially through Lin Yutang's 林語堂 books in America, then François Cheng's in Europe,¹ which were exclusively focused on aesthetics. This fact can perhaps be explained by saying that what characterizes the Chinese conception, as opposed to Western philosophy, is the relationship to the world and to everyday life. In order to express this relationship to the world, what better than art, the correlation between the theory and practice of art, defining an aesthetics, in the broad sense? In this task, the Chinese diaspora played a major part, which has not yet been studied sufficiently.²

Second, with regard to aesthetics, even though aesthetics and the arts apparently only occupy a secondary place in Western philosophy, it is a fact that modern philosophy, and especially modern hermeneutics, and most recently the neurosciences, have positioned aesthetics and the arts at the center of their preoccupations and have made them the main object of their investigations. This is probably no accident.³

1 Especially Lin Yutang's and François Cheng's best-sellers: *The Importance of Living* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock. A John Day Book, 1937; repr., New York: William Morrow, 1965), and *L'Écriture poétique chinoise* (Paris: Seuil, 1977), respectively.

2 Research on the Chinese diaspora in France and Europe is mainly focused on its economic role and migration; see, for instance, Gregor Benton and Franck Pieke, eds., *The Chinese in Europe* (London: Macmillan, 1998); Carine Pina-Guerrassimoff, ed., *Migrations Sociétés* (special issue on *Les nouveaux migrants chinois en Europe*), 15, no. 89 (2003), pp. 21-28; Véronique Poisson and Gao Yun, *Le trafic et l'exploitation des immigrants chinois en France* (Geneva: ILO, 2005); Emmanuel Ma Mung, *La Diaspora chinoise: Géographie d'une mutation* (Paris: Ophrys, 2000).

3 Hermeneutics for its part has been transformed by Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricœur into a fundamental philosophy through poetry, generic artwork, and the role of fiction, respectively. In this context, the art field has always been the privileged object of study and interpretation

2. The Western Path

During the 1970s in France, and shortly after in Europe, the structuralist school of thought emerged and spread. This new scientific tool originated in linguistics and was extended to all fields of the humanities, social sciences, arts, and literature. Previous to this, it would have been unconceivable for ordinary Westerners to analyze Chinese artwork, whether poetic or pictorial, because they did not have the mind tools for it (at that time cultural studies were not on the agenda and only emerged later). In such a context, François Cheng's books were completely innovative. He used semiology, which is a linguistic analysis of poetic and visual signs, to scrutinize Chinese poetry and paintings. His belief in a "language of art" and his explanations of the Chinese "language of art" through semiology, made it possible to establish a real dialogue between non-Chinese-readers—together with all those who appreciated Chinese art without understanding it—and Chinese poetic and pictorial artworks. Not only did his methodology draw a huge audience, but it also gave rise to a large number of scholarly studies, some being more influential than others.

But François Cheng is not only a scholar, a brilliant professor who taught Chinese poetry, prose, and art theory at the Paris Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales (INALCO) for many years. In later life he also became a poet and novelist writing in French and was the first person of Asian origin to be elected to the Académie Française. Although he chose the Western path, becoming French through its language, the topics he dealt with remained connected to China.

for hermeneutics. In the field of the neurosciences, neurobiologist and physiologist Jean-Pierre Changeux co-authored *Ce qui nous fait penser: La nature et la règle* with Paul Ricoeur (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1998), and since then, seems to have privileged the study of neuroaesthetics. This term, also used by Semir Zeki, was created because such researchers suggested the existence of a neuronal basis to the idea of beauty. Thus they intend to assess traditional questions in research on aesthetics by applying experimental methods drawn from the neurosciences. Changeux is now re-questioning the arts, artistic practice and aesthetic emotion from the standpoint of neuroscience, his main concern being music.

His books, *L'Écriture poétique chinoise* (1977)⁴ and *Vide et Plein, le langage pictural chinois* (1979),⁵ have had a tremendous influence on Western audiences. He insists on the possibility of studying Chinese writing, painting and poetry adopting a linguistic, structuralist, and hence “scientific” approach, in order to explain the functioning of Chinese poetry and painting to Westerners. However in so doing, this method is not grounded in practice. Yet it is not completely unrelated to the Chinese way of creating when for instance, using poetic examples, it suggests visually, “in between” the words, the possibilities of Chinese aesthetics. François Cheng was the first writer to decide to translate the meaning of a Chinese poem not as a whole, but by translating each character individually with a word, and by lining each of the words up in the same order as the Chinese characters. He thus gives a rough translation that allows the reader to imagine all the possible meanings of the poem. Further, he presents the Chinese characters along with this kind of “translation.” He was also the first scholar in the Western world to demonstrate the importance of “emptiness” in a Chinese painting, at the philosophical, formal and spiritual level. Hence, François Cheng created a new form of methodology that has been increasingly widely used in studies of Chinese philosophy. He was the first author to reverse the point of view, that is, to speak from the Chinese standpoint, and to shed light on the neglected part of a painting: that which is seen but not painted. His approach opened the door for his followers, such as Jean-François Billeter or François Jullien.

Unquestionably, the methodology of studies in Chinese aesthetics and philosophy in recent decades has been influenced by François Cheng. This methodology has three key characteristics: it is comparative, it is founded on theory

4 François Cheng, *L'Écriture poétique chinoise* (Paris: Seuil, 1977); English translation by Donald A. Riggs and Jerome P. Seaton, *Chinese Poetic Writing: With an Anthology of T'ang Poetry (Studies in Chinese Literature and Society)* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).

5 François Cheng, *Vide et Plein, le langage pictural chinois* (Paris: Seuil, 1979); English translation by Michael H. Kohn, *Empty and Full: The Language of Chinese Painting* (Boston: Shambhala, 1994).

rather than practice, and its tools are borrowed from Western systems of thought. François Jullien, who is generally considered the most prominent contemporary specialist of Chinese philosophy in the Western world, came to prominence not because of his pure philosophical works, but on account of his brief essay on aesthetics, *Éloge de la fadeur* (hereafter *In Praise of Blandness*) written in 1991,⁶ which concerns not only paintings, but also literature and Chinese thought. His readers then began to consider his other books on Chinese philosophy. His great opponent, Jean-François Billeter, likewise, began to acquire a wide audience with his book *L'Art chinois de l'écriture* (hereafter *The Chinese Art of Writing*), written in 1989.⁷ Unlike François Cheng, however, Billeter is first and foremost a philosopher and a specialist on Zhuangzi.

What is interesting in these two books, *In Praise of Blandness* and *The Chinese Art of Writing*, is that both use a similar methodology. Not only do they compare Chinese and Western forms of art quite systematically, but they also in fact articulate a shared belief: Chinese philosophy can be explained to a Western audience through aesthetics, using Western philosophical concepts in a rather abstract manner. This “abstract manner” simply means that theirs is not a practical approach, but one which involves a conceptualized vision. This aim has been completely fulfilled in their works: both authors, especially Jullien, have considerably contributed to the initiation of Westerners into Chinese aesthetics, following the path pioneered by François Cheng. Although Jullien and Billeter occupy opposing positions, their comparative methods are actually similar—both focus on texts and do not really take history into account.⁸ Jullien makes use of Chinese thought to prove the

6 François Jullien, *Éloge de la fadeur* (Paris: Philippe Picquier, 1991); English translation by Paula M. Varsano, *In Praise of Blandness: Proceeding from Chinese Thought and Aesthetics* (Chicago: MIT Press, 1993).

7 Jean-François Billeter, *L'Art chinois de l'écriture* (Geneva: Skira, 1989); English translation, *The Chinese Art of Writing* (New York: Skira/Rizzoli, 1999).

8 See criticism by sinologist Jean-Marie Simonet in his review of Billeter's book, “Calligraphie chinoise et idéologie,” in *Arts Asiatiques* 46 (1991): 152-157, <http://www.refdoc.fr/Detailnotice?cpsidt=6146328&traduire=fr>. See also Danielle Elisseeff's review of Jullien's

prestige of Western (i.e., Greek) philosophy, while Billeter applies a psychoanalytic methodology in his investigation, from a Western perspective, of the Chinese practice of calligraphy. In his book, it is probably his own interpretation of Chinese calligraphy that he presents, but what it certainly is not is “Chinese calligraphy” as a system or traditional practice. Even if François Cheng uses Western tools of thought such as semiology, or the study of language, for instance speaking of “projection,”⁹ his analyses of Chinese poetry and paintings are in themselves poetical, and enable one to visualize the Chinese poetic world. Billeter’s method, on the other hand, remains at a distance from the studied object.

Billeter has been severely criticized by another sinologist, Jean-Marie Simonet,¹⁰ who considers him dishonest because he fails to take history into account and presents calligraphy in terms of practice rather than through works of art and commentaries. While it is true that Billeter does not explain calligraphy from an art history perspective, his aim is not historical but aesthetic. Furthermore, his approach is only “practical” from a psychoanalytic standpoint. Paradoxically, Simonet does not criticize Billeter’s fundamental psychoanalytic methodology, as evinced in the latter’s references, in connection with Chinese calligraphy, to the “lived body” and “projection” in the act of writing.¹¹ Here, Billeter leans on the work of the French

Éloge de la fadeur, in which she criticises Jullien’s ignorance of art history, *Études chinoises* 11.2 (Fall 1992): 165-167.

9 François Cheng, *L’Écriture poétique chinoise*, pp. 20-21.

10 Jean-Marie Simonet, “Calligraphie chinoise et idéologie,” *Arts Asiatiques* 46: 152-157.

11 The “lived body” [*corps propre*] is an expression borrowed from the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, referring to an entity that lives its own life, and that does not depend on perceptions or on representations. M. Merleau-Ponty, in the *Phenomenology of Perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), considers the “lived body” not as the body (*corps*) or as a thing or a biological organism, which is why the term points to the body’s subjectivity. It is the identity of the self that precedes the intellectual identity of the *cogito*, the “I think.” Before thinking about oneself with the tool of thought, one already has the feeling of being the self. The “lived body” is the “self” at the most primordial level, one that realizes itself through its power and sensorial possibilities; it is the “I can.” The “lived body” is to be apprehended through a dual mode: as a physical thing, as material matter on the one hand, and, on the other, as what I feel in it and about it. In the

psychoanalyst Mahmoud Sami-Ali. However, this kind of analysis is particularly inappropriate to Chinese calligraphy, not only because it is anachronistic, but also because what it refers to cannot be found in calligraphic practice itself, whether in traditional calligraphy or its contemporary practice. Calligraphy is not merely a practice for the self; it is also a social practice, too. It is not an individualistic art, as is imagined in Europe. Although Billeter compares the practice of calligraphy to that of music in Europe, he still considers, in his last preface written in 2005, that calligraphy appears to be difficult for Westerners to comprehend because of certain misunderstandings; but in fact, even this is not accurate, because Chinese calligraphy is now largely practiced by Westerners, especially since the 1990s. Billeter asserts this art seems to remain highly mysterious, and he relates this “mystery” to a kind of idealization of Chinese writing that has ideological and political implications. For Billeter, except in Zhuangzi, Chinese thought has been unable to break free from what he calls its autocratic iron collar of “imperial despotism,” of which, according to Billeter, calligraphy is merely an expression.

In *In Praise of Blandness*, as in his other books, Jullien uses a comparative method, whose reference is Western philosophy. Jullien has often explained his method: instead of comparing, as Martin Heidegger did, Western European philosophy, especially the acme of this thought which is Socratic Greece, to the pre-Socratic world, Jullien prefers to use Chinese thought. He starts from the viewpoint that the Chinese tradition was constituted over ten centuries BCE and was transmitted with remarkable continuity until the twentieth century. Accordingly, he

Western—and more particularly the French—psychosomatic conception, the body embodies the ego’s real life. The corporeal body therefore is an expression of the life of the spirit: it is the very essence of the expressivity of the body.

In psychoanalysis, the self or identity is not considered to be something innate, and self-unity is never something determined. Identity must go through the imagination to constitute itself. But in fact, for Mahmoud Sami-Ali, to whom Billeter constantly refers in his book, the imagination is synonymous with “projection.” See Mahmoud Sami-Ali, “Introduction à la psychosomatique” (Paris: CIPS), <http://cips.free.fr/Intropsy.htm>, and *De la projection, une étude psychanalytique* (Paris: Seuil, 2003).

holds that Chinese thought constitutes a homogenous block of reflection comparable to that of the Western tradition.¹² But actually, as far as the West is concerned, he only mentions the Western European tradition, and as for China, he focuses on the analysis of literati texts. Although Jullien's aim in *In Praise of Blandness* is explicitly to "make blandness an experience," his analysis in fact remains abstract, founded on the study of commentaries, and not on the literati experience of art itself. This perhaps is the reason why his explanation of literati paintings is generally inaccurate, since it is not founded on the transmission of the practice of painting.¹³ But we also can consider that his misinterpretations of Chinese paintings are not essential to his study, because painting in Western Europe does not have the meaning it had in traditional China, and his book is intended not for the Chinese but rather a Western audience. As Jullien's reference is Western Europe, traditional China remains clearly no more than a means. Hence, with his approach in *In Praise of Blandness*, Jullien explains that traditional Chinese thought is relevant to immanence, but does not conceive of transcendence; and therefore, he states in later books, the Chinese cannot think of freedom and human rights—a position which has been highly criticized and contradicted.¹⁴

Nonetheless, we can say that both François Cheng and Billeter, as well as Jullien, develop a point of view on Chinese aesthetics founded on the belief that what comes first is the *logos*. That is, the study of language, taken as a tool of scientific analysis, is the best model with which to scrutinize Chinese art and aesthetics. Of course, this does not mean they believe Chinese writing (*wen*) comes from the *logos*, but they use the *logos* to study Chinese thought, whether through semiology, psycho-analysis, or comparative logic.

12 See Frédéric Keck, "Une querelle sinologique et ses implications: À propos du *Contre François Jullien* de Jean-François Billeter," *Esprit* 2009.2: 61-82.

13 For instance, of Wang Meng's 王蒙 paintings, he asserts: "The relief surges convulsively before our eyes like a molten mass" ("*le relief déferle convulsivement sous nos yeux comme une masse en fusion*") (pp. 135-137). This is not the vision transmitted by Chinese literati painters. Such misinterpretations can be found concerning almost all the paintings he analyzes.

14 See Keck, p. 67.

Moreover, Cheng, Billeter and Jullien share a common analytical method: all three found their investigation of Chinese philosophy on the study of texts. They hold that texts give us privileged access to China. Admittedly, this means theirs is a traditional Chinese approach, that is, one based on philology. But in this, they fail to consider the texts in the context of their own complex evolution, and therefore lump them together as a whole, reflecting a homogenous Chinese identity, baptized in the “Chinese tradition.” They do not consider these texts as practices that can help us understand other non-textual practices, which can be contradictory and which each reflect their own system of thought.

These considerations lead one to ask whether there is not another way to study Chinese aesthetics. The examples of Joël Thoraval, in anthropology, or of Anne Cheng 程艾藍 in philosophy, but not in aesthetics, are worth mentioning in this regard. In the field of art history, the focus is centered either on social problems, or on purely artistic and technical concerns, and hence neither on artistic practice nor on aesthetics. Therefore, studies on the history of Chinese art will be left aside. On the other hand, in the aesthetics field, an anthropological approach implies a distance between the observer and the studied field.¹⁵ Consequently, this cannot be a better method.

Nevertheless, another kind of approach to Chinese philosophy is possible, through the arts and aesthetics. This is the path that has been shown to us by another

15 Ethnographers and anthropologists speak of “participative observation”: this expression means an ethnographer participates in the society he or she studies. But although an anthropologist examining a society or a human group participates in it, he or she does not do so all the time, and when this is the case, it is only under certain circumstances, in a limited lapse of time, and under certain specific conditions he or she has personally set. It is true, however, that the anthropologist actually participates in this society only up to a point (for instance, Maurice Godelier explains that, when he was initiated by the society he studied in Papua, his hosts did not put a bone into his nose, because he was a Westerner; thus, they treated him differently). Ethnographers are invited into the society they study, but most often, they eventually leave it, and do not really belong to it. This does not mean anthropologists cannot get to know the societies they study, but they need to complete all their observations with long-term research and investigations.

great figure of the Chinese diaspora in France, the Chinese-French artist and philosopher, Hsiung Ping-ming.

3. The Chinese Path

Hsiung Ping-ming is at once a Chinese Confucian literatus, a French artist theorizing on the arts, and the author of a considerable artistic and theoretical body of work. From an artistic standpoint, he belongs to the generation of diasporic Chinese artists who studied in France, such as Zao Wou-ki 趙無極 (1921-2013), Chu Teh-chun 朱德群 (1920-), and Wu Guanzhong 吳冠中 (1919-2010); he has attained a comparable level of achievement, specifically in the field of sculpture. From a theoretical point of view, his writings in Chinese *On Rodin* (1983) have notably contributed to shaping the new generation of Chinese artists and to making them aware concretely, that is, through his own artistic experience, of Western perceptions. From a philosophical point of view, his magnum opus—in Chinese as well—which also belongs to the literati tradition while opening it up to Western thought, concerns the *Theoretical Systems of Chinese Calligraphy* 中國書法理論體系 (1984). This book was remarkably successful, offering a new reading, which could be described as “modern,” of the theoretical tradition of the Chinese art of writing—something that had been globally rejected from the May 4th Movement of 1919 up to the beginning of the 1980s.

Why then do we mention Hsiung’s philosophy? Firstly, because it is situated at the crossroads of two cultures and therefore is emblematic of modern and contemporary Chinese thought. Secondly, because he brings together practice and theory; Hsiung is the union of what, in the Western world, may appear as contraries, whereas in the Chinese literati tradition, both must co-exist. Moreover, his reflection concerns precisely the encounter between these apparent contradictions. Lastly, Hsiung declared himself a Confucian, at a period when Confucianism was particularly out of favor, and he is ultimately recognized as a theoretician and philosopher when

Confucianism starts to undergo a veritable Renaissance in the 1980s.¹⁶

As Hsiung is first and foremost an artist, why talk about his philosophy? Hsiung's thought presents the interest of not being founded on an abstract aesthetics, not only unlike all his predecessors, but also different from contemporary theoreticians, from Wang Guowei 王國維 (1877-1927) to Li Zehou 李澤厚 (1930-), and from Zhu Guangqian 朱光潛 (1897-1986) to Zong Baihua 宗白華 (1897-1986), whose theories developed along Western lines without a link to any kind of artistic practice. On the contrary, Hsiung's philosophy is based on his own artistic practice, which he himself theorized, and consequently he follows in the literati tradition. In other words, his philosophy is not purely speculative, but practical and active. It builds on the Chinese tradition, but does not ignore Western contributions. Unlike François Cheng who was first a theoretician and only later became a poet and a novelist, Hsiung grounded his philosophy on his artistic practice.

First, in the Chinese tradition, “art” does not belong with science and technology, as is the case in Europe; instead, art is related to self-development. The etymology of the Chinese word for “art” is “to plant,” “to cultivate.” Thus “art” in the sense of self-cultivation bears a moral meaning: “Concentrate your will on the Way ... and take pleasure in the arts,” urges Confucius (*Analects* VII.6). This is why artistic practice, which, since the Six Dynasties, has referred first of all to writing, painting, poetry and music, corresponds to a “philosophy” which, today, is considered relevant to Chinese identity.¹⁷

However, Hsiung does not oppose East and West, China and Europe, nor does he consider it necessary to compare them. As an artist and philosopher, he takes advantage of both traditions, the two sources that have nurtured him since his youth.

16 Anne Cheng has insightfully analysed this evolution in her 2009 Collège de France lecture course entitled *Histoire intellectuelle de la Chine* (Intellectual history of China), http://www.college-de-france.fr/media/his_int/UPL19849_cheng_res0809.pdf, pp. 773-776. Consequently, it seems fruitless to develop this point any further.

17 See Anne Cheng, “Les tribulations de la ‘philosophie chinoise’ en Chine,” in Anne Cheng, ed., *Penser en Chine aujourd’hui* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), pp. 159-184.

His thought developed during the 1980s and the 1990s, at a time when the main question in China focused on “Chineseness” (*zhonghuaxing* 中華性) and cultural identity.¹⁸ Debate on this question continues today. His books have regularly been republished in China and in Taiwan since the 2000s and his papers reprinted in collections of essays, with others still commenting on his thought.¹⁹

Although Hsiung settled in Europe and acquired French citizenship, his philosophy belongs to Chinese currents of thought and is addressed primarily to his Chinese compatriots. Even if he alternates between philosophy and art, he in fact leaves aesthetics aside. That is why his work cannot be compared to Zhu Guangqian’s or Zong Baihua’s, even though he refers to both. Unlike Zhu Guangqian who is considered in China the first great specialist in aesthetics and who advocates a kind of aesthetic idealism, Hsiung never tries to explain Western philosophic or artistic trends to the Chinese, nor is his aim to establish grandiose metaphysical theories. It is well-known that Zhu, who studied in Great Britain and France, has the merit of having presented the main trends in aesthetics to his compatriots. But he was severely criticized in the 1950s for promoting the autonomy of aesthetics, a position which implied a clear gap between the aesthetic sphere and life.²⁰

On the one hand, in his writing, Hsiung never separates art and philosophy; and on the other, it is just such a practical philosophy through art and its ethics that has always motivated him. He is therefore very different from Zhu Guangqian, who wanted to compensate for the deficiencies of modern aesthetics through the

18 See Zhang Yinde, “La ‘sinité’: L’identité chinoise en question,” in Anne Cheng, ed., *Penser en Chine aujourd’hui*, pp. 300-322.

19 See especially *The Complete Works of Hsiung Ping-ming* (*Xiong Bingming wenji* 熊秉明文集), 3 vols. (Shanghai: Wenhui chubanshe, 1999); *On Rodin. The Journal of Hsiung Ping-ming* (*Guanyu Luodan, Xiong Bingming riji zechao* 關於羅丹——熊秉明日記擇抄) (Tianjin: Jiaoyu chubanshe, 2002); *Theoretical Systems of Chinese Calligraphy* (*Zhongguo shufa lilun tixi* 中國書法理論體系) (Tianjin: Jiaoyu chubanshe, 2002).

20 See Peng Feng 彭鋒, “The Limits of Aesthetic Modernity in Zhu Guangqian’s Aesthetics,” *Beida Journal of Philosophy* (special issue on *Celebrating the 90th Anniversary of the Philosophy Department*), vol. 5 (2004.4), pp. 85-97.

contribution of the Chinese tradition, and also from Zong Baihua, who used modern Western aesthetics to re-interpret the Chinese tradition. In other words, Zong Baihua proposes a comparative aesthetics, unlike Hsiung, who is more concerned by art theory and cultural philosophy than by aesthetics. Hsiung, then, is mainly involved in artistic practice, which he considers compatible with philosophical reflection:

Formerly, I studied philosophy, which of course implies a quest for knowledge, and methods of reflection and, lastly, corresponds to a quest for meaning in life. If, in order to attain this objective, one has the feeling that it is in the arts that it can best be fulfilled, then the movement from philosophy to art does not seem so surprising. Have we not talked about the impossibility of drawing a clear line between philosophers and sculptors in Ancient Greece? However, I am Chinese, and my condition is not identical to that of Socrates. It is not often that the harmony between philosophy and art can be so ideal.²¹

In contrast with Schiller, he notes, he does not feel there is any contradiction between philosophical reflection and the creative imagination:

If we talk about what generates philosophy and art, as regards philosophy, it is the activity of curiosity, pursuit of the knowledge of one's desires; as regards art, it is the activity of expressing one's desires, of creating one's desires. In these two areas, the desires are indeed very different, and they can be in mutual opposition, but they also can collaborate. Because I want to know who I am, I need to express myself, I am also curious about this need for expression and about the forms stemming from this expression. The subconscious, memories, tendencies, feelings, awareness of one's fate... all kinds of complex elements emanate from my works, and I would like to know their meaning, to understand their development. Usually, an artist is not really able to analyze his own works with an unbiased eye, but there is no artist anywhere who does not want to know the meaning of his works. He at least hopes to observe them with an unbiased eye through another's objective criticism. This is why, from this viewpoint, maintaining that one is at once a philosopher and an artist corresponds to a natural need, and there is no conflict

21 Hsiung, "Hsiung Ping-ming on Sculpture" 熊秉明談雕刻, *The Concept of Exhibition (Zhanlanhui de guannian 展覽會的觀念)* (Taipei: Xiongshi tushu gongsi, 1985), pp. 45-46.

between philosophical analysis and artistic creation.²²

That is why Hsiung's analysis in the *Theoretical Systems of Chinese Calligraphy* is a philosophical work. Nor can Hsiung's philosophy be identified with that of Li Zehou, a representative neo-Confucian figure,²³ and author of *Mei de licheng* in 1981 (Translated into English as *The Path of Beauty* in 1983).²⁴ Li Zehou seriously opposed Zhu Guangqian's conceptions in the 1950s and promoted a kind of committed moral aesthetics. Li Zehou stands apart from almost all the Chinese "neo-Confucians," because he envisages Confucianism as a way of life rather than a system of thought. But his aesthetics remains based on the Western aesthetic model and is not founded on artistic practice.

As Hsiung does not describe himself as a "neo-Confucian," but as a Confucian, he applies a moral philosophy through the practice of "the arts" on the basis of the literati tradition. In other words, for him the "Classics" of the Chinese tradition are not a means of illustrating a discourse, as is the case with the neo-Confucians,²⁵ but are used in a practical way, both in his life and his work. Moreover, according to the archetypically Confucian conception that "art is like its author," an artwork is to be judged relative to the moral quality of its creator, whether this moral quality be true or simply thought to be true.

Hsiung Ping-ming, adopting the method of his philosophy professor and mentor Feng Youlan, is concerned not with history but only with philosophy.²⁶

22 Ibid., p. 48.

23 See Sylvia Chan, "Li Zehou and New Confucianism," in John Makeham, ed., *New Confucianism: A Critical Examination* (New York: Palgrave, 2003), pp. 105-130, especially "Li Zehou's Aesthetics," pp. 114-117. See also A. Cheng's Collège de France lecture course entitled *Histoire intellectuelle de la Chine*, pp. 781-783.

24 Li Zehou, *Mei de licheng* 美的歷程 (Peking: Wenwu chubanshe, 1981); English translation by Gong Lizeng, *The Path of Beauty: A Study of Chinese Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

25 See Zheng Jiadong, "De l'écriture d'une 'histoire de la philosophie chinoise': La pensée classique à l'épreuve de la modernité," *Extrême-Orient, Extrême-Occident* 27 (2005.10): 122.

26 Ibid., p. 125.

Feng thought that “the philosophy of a people is the greatest accomplishment of its culture.”²⁷ Through this process, Hsiung, unlike a great number of contemporary Chinese thinkers and Western sinologists, does not presuppose an “in-itself” cultural specificity of the Chinese tradition. If he points to calligraphy, which he considers “the kernel of the kernel of Chinese culture,”²⁸ it is not in order to build it up into a national fortress to be defended at all costs. Rather, his aim is the study and practice of an active philosophy, evolving in a visible and easily comprehensible way through the artistic form of Chinese writing, rooted in contemporary China:

To a greater or lesser degree, the kernel of a culture is its philosophy. The ultimate objective of traditional Chinese philosophers was not to build up a gigantic, elaborated and rigorous system of thought, but, after reflection leading to an understanding and an awakening, to come back and put it into practice in life. Indeed, I consider the first manifestation of the effective result of abstract thought in concrete life to be calligraphy.²⁹

Hsiung believes a culture expresses the spirit of a people, their ideals, their spatiotemporal conceptions, which form the basis of its “philosophy” of life. In some cultures, he says, it is religion that structures a specific way of thinking, and that constitutes the kernel of the culture. In China, he sees Chinese philosophy as the kernel of its culture, rather than religion. But why, then, is calligraphy the kernel of the kernel of Chinese culture? Hsiung answers that, as everyone agrees, Western philosophy is a rigorously constructed abstract system, while Chinese philosophy is concerned with putting itself into practice in human life. Accordingly, Chinese philosophy always tries to come back from the abstract to the concrete; and calligraphy allows this movement from abstract thought to the concrete world, since

27 Ibid.

28 Hsiung Ping-ming, “The Kernel of the Kernel of Chinese Culture” (Zhongguo wenhua hexin de hexin 中國文化核心的核心), *Lion Art (Xiongshi meishu 雄獅美術)* 288 (Spring 1995): 23-26, republished in *Watch Mona Lisa Watch (Kan Mengna Lisha kan 看蒙娜麗莎看)* (Kaohsiung: Jiechu wenhua chuban gongsi, 2000), pp. 142-146.

29 Hsiung, “Calligraphy and Chinese Culture” 書法和中國文化, *XXIst Century (Ershiyi shiji 二十一世紀)* 31 (1995.10): 103-108, republished in *Watch Mona Lisa Watch*, pp. 147-148.

it is nurtured by literature, an abstract manifestation of thought, and is expressed concretely with dots and strokes. It is present in the everyday life of all Chinese. That is why, according to Hsiung, it expresses the kernel of its kernel.

In other words, calligraphy is a means of practicing philosophy in China. This is what distinguishes Hsiung from Wang Guowei, whose objective was to re-evaluate Chinese philosophy from a Western perspective,³⁰ especially that of German idealistic thought, even though his perspective remains within that which marked twentieth-century China,³¹ that is, the Enlightenment philosophy which conceives of progress in history. As for his method, Hsiung also adopts the rigorous analysis and logic introduced by Feng Youlan.

With this process, Hsiung also stands well apart from the neo-Confucians, for whom Confucianism is also a religion.³² As the starting-point of his reflection is an artistic, and not a religious perspective, Hsiung establishes a parallel between the role of sculpture and architecture in the Western world, especially Europe, and that of calligraphy in China; all three, he states, embody a kind of patrimonialisation:

This kind of historical commemorative task that, in other cultures, is constantly assumed by sculpture (such as the Greek goddess of Victory) or by architecture (as in the Roman triumphal arch), is assumed in China by calligraphy. [...] The calligraphy we are talking about has obtained an eminent status equivalent to that of architecture, sculpture or painting [in other cultures].³³

Elsewhere, Hsiung explains that, for more than a century, the validity of Chinese characters has been challenged: calligraphy has been criticized, hunted out, destroyed,

30 See Wang Keping, "Wang Guowei's Aesthetic Thought in Perspective," in Cheng Chung-ying and Nicholas Bunnin, eds., *Contemporary Chinese Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p. 37.

31 See Zheng Jiadong, "De l'écriture d'une 'histoire de la philosophie chinoise,'" p. 138.

32 On this point, see Joël Thoraval, "Sur la transformation de la pensée néo-confucéenne en discours philosophique moderne: Réflexions sur quelques apories du néo-confucianisme contemporain," *Extrême-Orient, Extrême-Occident* 27 (2005.10): 92-93.

33 Hsiung, *Theoretical Systems of Chinese Calligraphy* (*Zhongguo shufa lilun tixi* 中國書法理論體系) (Hong Kong: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1984), p. 23.

especially during the Cultural Revolution, yet it was constantly used as a means of expression in the “big characters posters,” the well-known *dazibao* 大字報, and even by the greatest leaders. Nowadays, says Hsiung in the early 2000s, it is the occupation of retirees. Hsiung, regretting that there is not more research on calligraphy, and especially calligraphic theory, explains this in a paradoxical way as being due to this central position it occupies, which virtually implies a difficult and painful auto-analysis.³⁴ Nevertheless he notes that Chinese calligraphy attracts more and more Westerners, and poses the question of the universality of this art.³⁵ It was in order to answer this kind of question that he wrote *Theoretical Systems of Chinese Calligraphy*.

In this book that Hsiung had not intended, a priori, for a wider audience but only for initiates, he directly undertakes an examination of the theoretical texts on Chinese calligraphy and cites a number of quotations. In so doing, he brings the Chinese tradition within the reach of his contemporaries, whose minds have for several generations been shaped by Western systems of thought. Before the publication of Hsiung’s book, most people thought Chinese calligraphy could not constitute a “system of thought,” and only consisted of disparate elements, and considerations without any universal significance. Hsiung explains in his introduction:

The writings on calligraphic theory since its origin are not rare, but most of them are collections of quotations that have adopted the literary style of poetical anecdotes. As a result, they are composed of autonomous sentences, mentioning various impressions, one after another. Although they encompass remarkable opinions, they nevertheless seem disconnected and, when reading them, it is not easy to grasp the author’s central purpose. The aesthetics of calligraphy apparently does not correspond to a system, nor any general trend; although theoreticians criticize or reject each other, they are not distinguished by radical antagonisms, as if they are only opposed on minor points; actually, nothing of the sort is the case. It is not because some assert that these works on calligraphic theory do not formally

34 Hsiung, “The Kernel of the Kernel of Chinese Culture,” pp. 23-26, republished in *Watch Mona Lisa Watch*, pp. 142-146.

35 Hsiung, “Calligraphy and Chinese Culture,” republished in *Watch Mona Lisa Watch*, p. 153.

present a system that they do not possess one.³⁶

Hsiung consequently analyses and classifies the different stages (*bian*, “changes”) of Chinese calligraphy, of which he identifies six. Although his discussion is modeled on Hegelian thought,³⁷ actually, he presents this historical evolution from the viewpoint of the lessons he has drawn from his own artistic experience. Thus, he perpetuates the theory of Dong Qichang 董其昌 (1555-1636), who formulated the literati conception of art, in relation to the evolution of calligraphy, but without giving any profound explanation, and proposes to develop it,³⁸ from the perspective of his personal and artistic interpretation of this art. He asserts:

As soon as a philosopher picks up a brush, as he moistens it with ink in order to trace some large characters, his activity is not a matter of reasonable, cold, severe analysis, nor one of linguistic elocution, but mixes philosophical principles and emotional reflection that find expression in the free creation of formal space, descending from transcendental reflection to a walk in the countryside here below.³⁹

In other words, the moving brush is what links man engaged in concrete existence with the world of objective reason, via his emotions. Through his or her calligraphic activity, the writer *can* at once be artist *and* philosopher.

Finally, it may be said that, since the formal, spiritual, historical and anecdotal apprenticeship of calligraphy is also that of some of the most widely appreciated, and hence most widely accepted, norms of an entire society, calligraphy understandably becomes the ideal means of their expression. Whereas philosophy is a tool of thought, art is conceived of by Hsiung Ping-ming as a means of expressing and transmitting it in a way comprehensible to, and perceptible by all; and this explains its universal aspect. If we reverse this vision, such a conception leads to his choice of sculpture as a philosophical expression, with his works giving access to the human

36 Hsiung, *Theoretical Systems of Chinese Calligraphy*, p. 1.

37 Hsiung, “Concerning the Categories of *Theoretical Systems of Chinese Calligraphy*” 關於中國書法理論體系的分類, in *The Complete Works of Hsiung Ping-ming*, vol. 3, p. 160.

38 Hsiung, *Theoretical Systems of Chinese Calligraphy*, p. 1.

39 Hsiung, “Calligraphy and Chinese Culture,” *Watch Mona Lisa Watch*, p. 148.

qualities of their author. Such is the contribution of Chinese philosophy and its ethics of life, in the modern and the contemporary period.

4. Conclusion

The Chinese diaspora in France has been very much involved in the diffusion of Chinese philosophy since the latter part of the twentieth century. Its contribution was made through aesthetics and the arts, with the work of François Cheng and Hsiung Ping-ming, two major figures of the Chinese diaspora, who profoundly influenced later philosophers, in both the West and Asia, not only via the content of their work, but also via their specific and innovative methodologies. On the one hand, Chinese philosophy has, since the 1970s, been discovered by a wide Western audience in France, Europe and, more generally, the West thanks to the enormous success of François Cheng's writings and his unconventional approach to the theories of Chinese poetry and painting through structuralism and semiology envisioned as a study of the language of signs. On the other hand, and occupying an exactly opposite position, we have Hsiung Ping-ming, a philosopher who embodied in a positive way the traditional Chinese Confucianism attitude—at a time when it was rejected in China—through the practice of a non-Chinese art, that is, sculpture, and the theorization of “the arts” conceptualized in the literati tradition. While Cheng seems to look solely towards France, even entering into one of its most influential and honorific cultural spheres, the Académie Française, in 2002 while still bearing Chinese culture in his heart and in his works, Hsiung never lost sight of his desire to do something for his homeland. Although in France Hsiung was recognized as early as 1954 as one of the most prominent and promising young artists of his time, on par with Yves Klein, Tinguely and Tarkis,⁴⁰ he surprisingly chose to teach

40 See Yolaine Escande, “Perception et esthétique de l'espace à travers l'œuvre de Hsiung Ping-ming,” in Jean-Jacques Wunenburger and Valentina Tirloni, eds., *Esthétiques de l'espace, Occident et Orient* (Lyon: Mimesis, 2011), pp. 87-100.

at the INALCO in 1962. At the same time, he wrote papers in Chinese on Western contemporary art; out of his teaching of the Chinese language grew a body of poetical work, and out of his teaching of Chinese calligraphy grew his major book. Thus, he embodies an active and practical Chinese philosophy, transmitted through artistic experience, and transcending, in a typically Chinese way, what in the West would appear to be a contradiction between theory and practice. Both writers, then, have opened up paths of dialogue between cultures through their understanding of the artistic, aesthetic and philosophic issues at stake.

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法國的中國哲學

——在美學與藝術的視野下

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摘 要

本文主旨在於探討兩位重要的法籍華裔學者，法蘭西學院院士程抱一 (François Cheng, 1929-) 和二十世紀 60 年代即被法國藝評家譽為最具潛力的藝術家熊秉明 (Hsiung Ping-ming, 1922-2002)，對中國美學和藝術理論在西方哲學語脈下的論述、影響和發展，尤其是廣大讀者如何以閱讀中國美學或藝術理論作為理解中國思想的路徑。首先，本文指出程抱一在西方的主要貢獻，借重西方語言哲學、結構主義、精神分析等理論，解釋中國詩與畫的哲學含義，引起西方讀者對中國藝術、文化與思想的看重。本文並顯出程抱一和法語漢學家如 François Jullien (于連)、Jean-François Billeter (畢來德)、Jean-Marie Simonet 等的論述不同與共同之處。其次，本文指出熊秉明對引介中國哲學思想的主要貢獻，在於他不僅著重抽象的美學思考，同時更強調中國文人把藝術的實踐也視為是一種道德實踐的文化哲學特質。這點，與之前或當時的美學理論家，如王國維、朱光潛、宗白華、李澤厚等人，沿襲西方區分美學與藝術實踐的思想，作為思考中國藝術與美學的方法，截然不同。

關鍵詞：中國美學、程抱一、熊秉明、哲學實踐、藝術經驗

2012年10月3日收稿，2013年3月2日修訂完成，2013年5月20日通過刊登。

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