

## The Relationship Between Visual Aesthetic Features and Sociology in China Today

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Received 19 October 2017; accepted 10 December 2017  
Published online 26 January 2018

### Abstract

In order to study the relationship between the characteristics of visual aesthetics in China today and sociology, the importance of cultural symbols is discussed. The appearance of aesthetics is not entirely theoretical isolation. It is the result of “confrontation” with political ideology in the field of artistic self-discipline and aesthetic independence. Therefore, aesthetics are not only a framework system that is limited to aesthetic and experiential subjects, but also lies in the history of the exploration of modern Chinese aesthetics. From an external point of view, sociological vision and political ideological confrontation constitute the formation mechanism of visual aesthetics. From an inner point of view, the pedigree of aesthetics from the classical Chinese to the western modern constitutes the two major fulcrums of discipline construction. From sociological appeals to knowledge resources, visual aesthetics build a brand new Chinese aesthetics. In addition, it gained the legitimacy of its own existence and the value of history-oriented motivation.

**Key words:** Visual; Aesthetic characteristics; Sociology; Binary coding

Zhang, B. C. (2018). The Relationship Between Visual Aesthetic Features and Sociology in China Today. *Canadian Social Science*, 14(1), 46-51. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/css/article/view/10109>  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/10109>

### INTRODUCTION

In 1993, Macmillan Publishing Company again published Janet Wolfe’s *Aesthetics and the Sociology of Arts*

(Cranmer, Brann, & Bowman, 2014). Once again, this book of sociology of art has drawn the attention of the insiders. In particular, the author resists any sociological imperialism. Aesthetic discourse and practice are “self-discipline to society”. As a new discipline and academic hotspot, aesthetics emerged in the 1980s (Lee, Samdanis, & Gkioussou, 2014). It is accompanied by the rapid development of the wave of human knowledge. On the one hand, intellectuals have gained a certain right to speak. It is the result of a creative approach at the academic and theoretical level. On the other hand, the specific historical and cultural background and the historical values of the specific period are echoed. It has become an important academic discourse in the process of ideological liberation. Therefore, the emergence of the social and cultural environment and the internal requirements of discipline self-discipline jointly promotes the formation of the aesthetic discipline. The appearance of “aesthetic ideology” is the dominant representation of personal discourse, field ethics and political ethics. It has the inevitability of the times and the criticism of the political culture. The humanities and social sciences have gradually acquired their own “field ethics” and the legal value of independent existence. Literature and aesthetics get rid of political discourse, which highlights the independence of intellectuals.

Aesthetic practices also gradually get rid of the statutes of political instrumentalism and mechanical reflection. On the basis of rethinking of history and remolding human nature, the strengthening of the aesthetic dimension and the exploration of literary and artistic forms are realized. Literature and art, which belong to the theory and principles of politics, are replaced by a more extensive literary and artistic policy of “serving the people by literature and art and serving for socialism”, thus giving some space to literary and artistic creation, literary criticism and discipline construction. The colour of political ideology has gradually desalinated in the field

of literary and artistic activities and literature and art. The discourse of individual freedom and aesthetics is stronger in society (Solaroli, 2015). Therefore, the study of literature, aesthetics and art can be gradually returned to the base of aesthetics, so as to build a new subject of literature and art at the theoretical level. At the same time, the aesthetics of literature and art was inspired by the aesthetic resources of the classical Chinese period and the trend of modern humanism in the West. Thus, it has formed a form of aesthetic discipline, which has the unique national characteristics of China, and has the sense of the times and ideology. Therefore, the ideological appeal in the context of diachronic context constitutes the basis for the creation of the subject of literature and art. The internal self-discipline, pluralism and richness of the aesthetic discipline constitute the motive force of the development of the subject, and follow the inherent academic path of its own. From the external perspective, the view of sociology and the confrontation of political ideology constitute the formation mechanism of literature and art aesthetics. From the inner perspective, the genealogy of the aesthetic theory from the classical Chinese to the West constitutes the two major fulcrums of the discipline construction (Mangione, 2016; Kirillova, Fu, Lehto, & Cai, 2014; DeNora, 2016).

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## 1. THE CHALLENGE OF SOCIOLOGY TO AESTHETICS

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In the past 30 years, Anglo-American aesthetics have been dominated by analytic philosophy (especially Britain) in its linguistic, conceptual and logical analysis (DeNora, 2016). It ignores the aesthetic social historical relevance and rejects the artistic humanistic value. It embarked on a narrow path of pure study. In a long period of time, aesthetic ideas have been synonymous with the academic discourse of a lot of people's minds, which are lifeless, formalistic, disregard of social connections and applications. Therefore, radical critics and literary critics have consciously avoided the problem of traditional aesthetics, avoiding the use of "aesthetic" and related aesthetic terms. The ideological nature and function of the theory of aesthetics in connection with the specific social and historical conditions and the interests of special classes make many critics realize the aesthetics. Art sociology has a long history in Europe. It is an ideological method that focuses on exploring the nature and function of art in the connection with social reality. Since this century, there are two major trends in the development of sociology. An empirical scientific method is adopted. Art activities are reduced to the general social phenomenon, which belongs to the social sciences. Since this kind of research basically gave up the discussion of the special laws of art and shunned

the aesthetic problems of art, it did not constitute a substantive challenge to aesthetics. The other tendency is based on the theories of Marx and Engels. It understands the art and the history of art in the theoretical framework formed by the categories of "economic foundation" and "superstructure", "social existence" and "social awareness." Sociological theory directly criticizes or renovates some basic conceptual categories of traditional aesthetics, which becomes a trend that cannot be ignored in the field of literary criticism and aesthetics. It poses a real challenge to traditional aesthetics.

Traditional aesthetics refer to philosophical aesthetics since the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Pearce et al., 2016). Traditional aesthetics are constructed and applied as a branch of philosophy. It mainly concerns the nature and aesthetic judgment of art and aesthetic experience. In philosophy, these problems are separated from many moral and political issues. Of course, traditional aesthetics have nothing to do with particular social conditions and ideology. Philosophical aesthetics and sociology, political science were separated. Those abstract concepts in philosophical aesthetics lose their vivid social and humanistic connotations while pressing for "universality." The basic concepts and basic propositions of traditional aesthetics are also the products of a particular society, all of which are of ideological nature. That is to say, both as an aesthetic practice of "intellectual practice" and as the subject of its research, they all have undeniable social and historical properties. For this reason, sociology poses a challenge to traditional aesthetics. Sociology has a broad meaning. It goes beyond the discipline of general sociology. Sociology includes a variety of artistic approaches to the study in the social and historical context of the arts. Therefore, in addition to the academic subjects of sociology, the social history and methods of literature are introduced. In fact, many theories and methods such as phenomenology, discourse theory, cultural criticism, philosophical anthropology, psychological analysis and women's criticism are explored. Sociological research broke through the limitations of many previous methods of art sociology. It embodies some new trend in the development of sociology. The challenge is no longer entirely a critique of aesthetics by sociology in the traditional sense, but a challenge to aesthetics by postmodern culture and its theory on the issue of the general social connection of the arts. The increasingly vague boundaries of art and non-art in the post-modern cultural environment are not unrelated to the two-way infiltration of pan-aestheticism and pan-commercialization. In modern times, the artistic, aesthetic and artistic practices of art and the aesthetics, aesthetics and art practice of traditional aesthetics have experienced serious disagreements.

## 2. THE CLASSICAL MODERN FORM OF VISUAL DUALISM

As far as cultural science is concerned, the issue of the dual division of language and image begins with Cassirer explicitly (Leder & Nadal, 2014). In the 1920s, in the study of its symbolic philosophy, it was found that reconciliation of “the directness of the visual” and “the indirectness of the thought” has not been achieved (Cassirer, 2000). The focus is on the contrast and relationship between the apparent features of the discourse and the immediate visual features of the perception. In order to understand the innovativeness and importance of this hypothesis at the time it was proposed, there is a need to study the main theories of symbolic research in contemporary sociology. During the same period, Mead, the founder of the symbolic interaction theory, took a dominant position in giving media to his ideas in his social theory. One of his iconic statements is:

Of all the acts I know, an individual is the object of his own language only, and in the sense of reflexive pronouns, an individual constitutes an individual only when it becomes its own object. This fact gave the extremely important position of communication.

Language here is absolutely the main form of self-objectification, which in turn reinforces the critical significance of language to sociology. Other ways of self-objectification and objective conditions that make it possible for oneself to be objectified and understood by society are not mentioned. This was a typical research method at the time. Mead’s time completely witnessed the “use of words to absorb images. This state lasted for a long time and was not challenged for quite a long time. With some notable exceptions (such as Roland Barthes’ semiotics), independent social visual studies were not produced until the 1980s. Visual sociology did not emerge until the 1990s. The important position of Cartesianism in modern Western philosophy ensured the opposition between words and images. In contrast to the Greek and Christian intellectual traditions, this perspective is skeptical of images and tends to discourse in epistemology. Contemporary visual culture researchers say that if images are understood as containing thought entities, they are in a naive and non-critical way. This binary classification of human life is made up of institutionalized factors that McLuhan calls the Gutenberg galaxy. The discernment of modern critical rationality and its thematic distinction between social and political use are all linked to the dominance of “the time of conversation,” not to the perceptual age. It leads to a culture of critical discourse, not to the critique, appreciation, or negation of video. Social science, even after its emergence, becomes part of the discourse critique of a broad range of cultural fields.

Subsequently, it became part of the cultural critique. As a result of their epistemological and political ambitions resulting from the myths of the Enlightenment in Europe, sociologists initially focused on the hidden structures, latent functions, in-depth performances, and discourse forms of social life. These are the main sociological analyses of real views against superficial impressions. This is consistent with the division of knowledge and opinion.

Quantitative interpretation and manipulation of social facts are superior to interpretation and understanding of social facts. When interpretative methods seem to be essential and cultural phenomena are themes, sociologists give text a dominant position and text is a cultural model. If visual studies were fully established, it focused mainly on the limited pictorial representations of art and symbols. The main descriptive and explanatory category is “reflection.” From a scientific point of view, these visual aesthetic entities of individuals and groups typically “reflect” the motives and structures of power and “mirrored” their conditions. In other words, visual entities are mostly passive products. The main concern with visual entities is mainly why the image is created, what creates the image, not how the image itself is produced. In addition, visual media can never be perfectly reproduced, and they are essentially imitative. Most influential thinkers from Plato to Hegel clearly believe that visual behavior is inadequate compared to verbal behavior. The social meaning of visual and sensations is still not recognized. In the sense of theory and experience, it is considered to be secondary. In particular, influenced by Hegel and Marx, Hegel regarded art as the “subform of thinking”. Marx critically regarded as the material medium of commodity fetishism. Therefore, the social sciences in twentieth Century had made very little progress in excluding prejudice (Zuev & Picard, 2015). Even some of its main expressions were also used as tools for “rational uptake of images”.

In sociology, if the visual surface is taken into account, most of the visual surface is used as a dependent variable. For social scientists, the visual mask has little intrinsic value, which shows a superficial connotation. The visible outer shell of the society is secondary, superstructure or substructure, rather than intrinsically. Therefore, it is “true”. This social realism has its advantages. Of course, there is also a blind spot. One of its main limitations is to replace the perceived “expressive quality” with “universal quality”, which in turn “negates the individual subjectivity of our perception.” Western philosophical traditions have always provided information for the social sciences. Its abstract theory and its linguistic expression are considered as important tools against direct information and aesthetic input. The binary relation of the classical method is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
**The Binary Relation of the Classical Method**

Visuality	Linguality
Concrete	Abstract
Expressive	Cognitive
Immediate	Mediated
Non-linear	Linear
Analogical	Logical
Imitative	Analytical
Sensual	Noetic
Ineffable	Articulated
Phenomenal	Noumenal

Throughout the modern era, this basic classification has been preserved intact in the social sciences. The classical understanding of materiality, the gift of anthropology, and the symbolism of totem in sociology have not been preserved. The unstable relations between language and image are still a pair of real antagonistic tensions. This tension can heuristically appear as two tables. The two tables are composed of opposing intellectual rhetoric. These opposing intellectual rhetoric enabled social sciences to be organized according to the main categories of ideas and methodologies (as shown in Table 1 and Table 2). They are instructive but still simplistic. In the sense of shock, they both reveal the unfeasibility of the schemata of past perspectives and reveal the recent successful means of visual research discourse. The latter seeks to issue all categories of social science and to rearrange our understanding of these categories. The implied strength of these artificial divisions is that, in the absence of conflict, it is transformed into a more rigorous division of scientific work and knowledge competition. Therefore, in the development of modern sociology, visual phenomenon has become a “neglected field”. The only visual phenomenon that deserves the attention of academic research is the elegant culture of the sacred product. Even so, sociology has also largely reduced visual problems to descriptions of art history. These problems are often confused with and confused with the narrow-minded, harmonious and time-bound style. Pansovski and Gombrich’s seminal study of the history of art is an advanced form of this classic modern approach. It is based on grasping the image through narration. This research caused controversy for half a century. Cultural sociologists have discovered that it is absolutely necessary to go beyond the historical foundation of the arts in order to effectively study visual phenomena. Until now, sociologists have realized that in the past two or three centuries, the institutional framework of aesthetic experience has never changed. The scale and form of those situations, which are marked as Western cultures as the production of aesthetic experience, are staggering and rigid. Emison and Smith, a cultural anthropologist, pointed out the limitations of modern western methods on visual research, and emphasized that no matter how

complex the visual history of art history is, they cannot meet the requirements of sociology. The visual aspects of the world may be more than the Gombrich envisaged. Many scholars equate visual research with the study of various images of image two-dimensional visualization data. In fact, there are many forms of visual data besides photos, advertisements and TV shows. Objects and buildings carry visual implications like images. Rather than just researching images, visual research is a study of what is visible and observable. The binary relation of the classical method is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
**The Binary Relation of the Classical Method**

Picture	Text
Material	Immaterial
Necessary physical properties	Arbitrary system of signs
Surface qualities	Deep references
Imagery	Narrative
Predominantly connotative	Predominantly denotative
Predominantly aesthetic	Predominantly informative
Reflecting feelings	Constituting thoughts
Paradigmatic condensation	Syntagmatic flow
Synchronic	Diachronic
Phenomenology	Structuralism

### 3. THE CONSTRUCTION OF VISUAL AESTHETIC FEATURES IN CHINA TODAY

For the cultural modernization and enlightenment in the 1980s, the construction of subjectivity, the demonstration of freedom, the appreciation of aesthetic experience and the reform of aesthetic thinking have the meaning of continuing the aesthetic modernity. Aesthetic modernity arises from the barren experience scenes of rational centralism and subjectivity. It completes perceptual transcendence and free expression with the pursuit of spiritual peace and survival value. Aesthetic modernity, together with the enlightenment words of human beings, has found a space for legal existence in the cultural context of China. For example, the emergence of avant-garde literature and the rise of “new aesthetic principles” have allotted the conversion from traditional to modern theories from the perspectives of subjectivity of existence and aesthetic noumenon. Practical aesthetics also has the historical function of modernization and modernity, thus strengthening the enlightenment context of human learning.

First of all, the theoretical aesthetics and logical construction of practical aesthetics embody the modern concept of discipline and the spirit of instrumental rationality. In Li Zehou’s practical aesthetics system, its theoretical starting point focuses primarily on the manufacture and use of tools and the transformation of natural material production activities. Then through

natural humanization, the relationship between the subject and the outside world is completed. Through the way of rational accumulation, the hierarchical structure of the body's spiritual cultural structure is realized. The "process - social structure" constitutes the basis of objectivity and materiality. The "cultural-psychological structure" is mainly focused on the subjectivity and subjectivity of the mind. Finally, the sensibility is able to overflow the category of rationality, thus completing the construction of its own aesthetic discourse. The value of "emotion noumenon" and "new sensibility" have been strengthened. The aesthetic context of individualization and subjectivity has been enhanced. It has realized the further transformation of practical aesthetics. Zhou Laixiang's harmonious aesthetics also highlights the systematicness and logic. In his view, the essence of beauty and the value of beauty cannot be based solely on the external objects of the object, or the spirit and mind of the subject, but the combination of the two. In their "relationship", a harmonious sense of beauty is found. There are three relationships between the body and the world in practice. They are material relationship, cognition relation and aesthetic relationship. Aesthetic relationship is a new and higher sense of emotional freedom value. On the basis of the aesthetic relationship, the harmonious aesthetics is produced. Harmony includes harmony in form, harmony in content, harmony between form and content, and harmony between aesthetic objects and aesthetic subjects. With a dialectical and comprehensive attitude, it eliminates the sharp opposition between different factors, thus completing the transcendence of the dichotomy. Harmonious unity with many factors of aesthetics constructs the subject's freedom of existence. Aesthetic ways of thinking, characterization, and academic frameworks have also been updated and refined. In fact, in practice aesthetics, there are also a large number of modern enlightenment concepts of rationalization and science and technology. For example, the starting point and the logical relationship of "natural personification" are affirming the spirit of rationality. Accumulation is essentially the accumulation of theory and the function of group culture. The rational construction of the subject and the Enlightenment of knowledge are permeated through the process of practical aesthetics.

Second, the subjective essence of aesthetics also has the characteristics of modern enlightenment. In the period of "Cultural Revolution" and highly disciplined politics, the subjectivity is an existential legitimacy. People just passively accept the enlightenment and inculcation of political ideology. Aesthetics has also become a tool for "ideological and political education" and "socialist cultural positions." Marxism has also become a political philosophy of class struggle. The emergence and development of aesthetics have realized the establishment of the dual dimension of subjectivity. They

are the integration of group subjectivity and individual subjectivity, the integration of rational spirit and emotional spirit. The establishment of subjectivity discourse not only made discipline acquire the value of self-discipline, but also made the "human" as the main body able to freely choose and practice freely, and complete the enlightenment process from "immature" to "mature" with its own initiative. Through "the objectification of human's essential power", it not only affirms the existent value of group subject and historical subject, but also "accumulates" in the spiritual mind of a single subject, so as to obtain its own value. The construction of subjectivity includes the self-confirmation and self-actualization of the rational level and the construction of the main body to participate in the historical process. In addition, it has also become the theoretical basis for the independent, free-form and artistic activities of literature and aesthetics. The aestheticism based on sentiment once again provides the impetus for the complete development of the subject. The great significance and value of individual existence will become increasingly prominent and important in the development of the times. Both Li Zehou's subjective practice philosophy and Liu Zaifu's literary subject theory all try to find the starting point of theory from Hegelian and Kant's subjective forms and concepts, and then find the freedom of human existence in Marx's view of practice. They integrate the rational, moral and collective dimensions of reality and the social sense. At the same time, it can maintain the historical legitimacy of the subject's transcendental, perceptual and aesthetic experience at the level of literature, art and aesthetics. This also gives the future development of aesthetics more open academic space.

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## CONCLUSION

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Under the Marxist view of practice, the enhancement of aesthetic features, the open discipline and the aesthetic pursuit of freedom are completed. It not only affects the entire social and cultural trends, but also presents an open nature of the combination of reason and sensibility. The importance of aesthetic characteristics for the qualitative analysis of sociology is emphasized. It is used in the framework of cultural analysis. In particular, the framework of graphic or discursive plays an important role in technological change. It is in a more complex world. Due to the specific pedigree of knowledge, some mainstream sociological concepts still fail to fully reconcile language and visualities, and are not even enough to recognize this issue and its impact on sociology. Therefore, many of these intellectual frameworks fail to explain this fact. Modern aesthetics pay attention to reality, personality and freedom. These subject qualities and values will have a profound and long-lasting impact on the future aesthetic system. At the same time, it will

also provide the necessary theoretical resources for the current aesthetic culture research.

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