

THE FORMAL BEAUTY OF FORMAL BEAUTY: ON WANG GUOWEI'S THEORY OF ANCIENT ELEGANCE*

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Abstract

As one of China's first modern philosophers, WANG Guowei 王國維 produced many noteworthy theories. This essay aims to thoroughly examine his aesthetic theory of ancient elegance, which he developed as a supplement to Kant's conceptions of the beautiful and the sublime. To accomplish this task, I have divided this essay into two sections. The first section introduces Wang's theory of ancient elegance, focusing on his distinction between "first forms" and "second forms." In the context of art, first forms refer to the meanings expressed, while second forms refer to the mediums of expression. The second section expands on the role of effort in the production of ancient elegance and explains the significance of this theory to aesthetic education. Unlike genius, the capacity to produce and perceive ancient elegance can be cultivated by anyone through training. This is significant for Wang, because art gives people consolation by providing them with the means to express their feelings and make their lives meaningful. To explicate the contemporary relevance of Wang's view of aesthetic.

Keywords: Wang Guowei 王國維; Kant; ancient elegance; aesthetic education; existential aesthetics

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1. Introduction

A renowned poet and literary critic, WANG Guowei 王國維 (1877–1927) was also one of China’s first modern philosophers. Unlike his peers, whose philosophical interests were primarily scientific or political, Wang was enraptured by “pure philosophy” (*chuncui zhexue* 純粹哲學), especially that of the aesthetic variety. It should therefore come as no surprise that he drew a great deal of inspiration from Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*. In this article, I aim to thoroughly analyze and [690] explain Wang’s theory of ancient elegance (*guya* 古雅), which he envisions as a supplement to Kant’s concepts of the beautiful and the sublime. Although this theory has already made several appearances in anglophone scholarship, these have either been cursory or tangential (e.g., K. Wang 2002: 51–53; He 2014: 67–71). Moreover, among Chinese scholars, Wang’s early philosophical and aesthetic writings, including his work on ancient elegance, tend to be downplayed in favor of his later works. As LIU Chengji 劉成紀 states,

China’s leading historians of aesthetics typically latch onto [Wang’s] theories of meaning states (*yijing* 意境) or worlds (*jingjie* 境界) without letting go, and the leading historians of literature uplift the innovative contributions of his research on Song 宋 and Yuan 元 drama. As for ancient elegance, it hangs in the space between them, seemingly out of place. In recent years, some researchers have tried to rationalize Wang Guowei’s theory of ancient elegance by returning to the context of Kant’s philosophy, but the results have been just as disappointing. (Liu 2020: 41)

All that said, I aim to fill these gaps by dedicating the entirety of this article to Wang’s theory of ancient elegance in order to flesh out its philosophical and aesthetic implications in detail.

To carry out this task, I have divided this essay into three sections. Following this introduction, Section 2 introduces Wang’s theory of ancient elegance, focusing on his distinction between “first forms” (*diyi zhi xingshi* 第一之形式) and “second forms” (*di’er zhi xingshi* 第二

之形式)。In the context of art, this distinction maps onto the conventional distinction between content and form: first forms are the matters or meanings expressed; second forms are the modes or mediums of expression. Although Wang never explains why these two aspects of art are “formal,” I argue that they become so when we subject them to reflective (as opposed to determinative) judgment. According to Wang, first forms exist both in nature and in art, in natural phenomena and in products of genius (*tiancai* 天才). Second forms, by contrast, exist only in art, because artistic mediums only appear as products of human effort (*renli* 人力). Based on this distinction, Wang defines the beautiful and the sublime as the aesthetic qualities of first forms and proposes ancient elegance as the aesthetic quality of second forms.

Section 3 expands on the role of effort in the production of ancient elegance and explains the significance of this theory to aesthetic education (*meiyu* 美育). Unlike the beautiful and the sublime, ancient elegance can be learned by anyone with training (*xiuyang* 修養). Specifically, people can learn to produce and perceive ancient elegance by studying and imitating the works of past masters. For Wang, this is significant because art consoles people, meaning a program of aesthetic education based on ancient elegance would give everyone a chance to receive artistic consolation. On the one hand, Wang’s interest in consolation (*weijie* 慰藉) is general, insofar as life itself is suffering. On the other hand, this interest is also particular, concerned with the specific issues plaguing late Qing 清 China, including widespread hopelessness and opium addiction. In the concluding statements of this article, I speculate on the contemporary relevance of [691] Wang’s program of aesthetic education based on ancient elegance by appealing to Hans Maes’ outline of “existential aesthetics,” which resonates in many ways with Wang’s own concerns.

2. First Forms and Second Forms

In his 1907 essay “The Place of Ancient Elegance in Aesthetics,” Wang reimagines the Chinese artistic tradition in Kantian terms. At this point in his intellectual career, Wang was beginning to have doubts about philosophy, due in large part to the persuasiveness of Kant’s rejection of dogmatic metaphysics. Although he would eventually give up on philosophy, in this essay, Wang situates himself in the framework of Kantianism and attempts to develop a fundamentally Chinese supplement to Kantian aesthetics. He begins the essay as follows:

“Art is the product of genius.” This is the conclusion reached by Kant and the century of scholars that succeeded him. Among the objects of the world, however, there are those that are neither genuine works of art nor mere works of utility, whose makers are certainly not geniuses, but which, when we look at them, seem no different than artworks produced by geniuses. There is no name for this [quality], so I shall call it “ancient elegance.” (G. Wang 2009: [14] 106)

According to Kant, genius “is the innate mental predisposition *through which* nature gives the rule to art” (Kant 1987: 174). By this, Kant means that artistic genius lacks understanding, such that its governing principles can be neither articulated nor transmitted. A work of genius, therefore, is equivalent to an object of nature, insofar as it has no *determinate purpose* yet still has the *form of purposiveness*. As an antipode to the work of genius, Wang postulates the existence of a different sort of work, which is a product of neither genius nor utility. Such works are aesthetically pleasing, like products of genius, yet also imitable. Wang dubs this pleasing-yet-imitable quality “ancient elegance” (*guya*). This name may seem strange, since neither “ancient” nor “elegant” make *prima facie* sense as antonyms for “genius.” However, Wang’s reasons for choosing it shall become apparent as we delve deeper into his essay.

Before explaining the details of ancient elegance, Wang provides a brief overview of Kantian aesthetics. According to Wang, beauty (*mei* 美) is “what can be appreciated yet cannot be

utilized” (G. Wang 2009: [14] 106).¹ In Kant’s aesthetics, there are two distinct concepts of beauty: the beautiful (*youmei* 優美) and the sublime (*hongzhuang* 宏壯). As Wang states, [692]

The former [i.e., the beautiful] derives from how the form of the object has nothing to do with our benefit or harm. It makes us forget the concepts of benefit and harm and instead focus all of our mental energy on the object’s form. The everyday beauties of nature and art are of this kind. The latter [i.e., the sublime] derives from how the object’s form transcends the limits of our cognitive capacities. In other words, its form is not beneficial to us at all, since it makes us realize that our human efforts cannot contend with it. Therefore, our instinctual reaction is one of self-preservation, but then we overcome the concepts of benefit and harm in order to contemplate the object’s form. In nature, such objects include tall mountains, large rivers, gale-force winds and thunderstorms. In art, such objects include grand palaces, tragic sculptures, historical paintings, dramas and novels. (Wang 2009: [14] 107)

Kant’s influence is clearest in this passage’s emphasis on the disinterested contemplation of form, especially as it pertains to the beautiful. When it comes to the sublime, however, Wang, in his appeal to self-preservation and instinct, aligns himself more closely with Schopenhauer than Kant. This shift in the case of the sublime likely stems from two factors: (1) the faculty of reason is essential to Kant’s understanding of the sublime; and (2) Wang, under the influence of Schopenhauer, rejects Kant’s conception of reason. As Wang states in his 1904 essay “Explaining *Li* 理”:

What we call “reason” (*lixing* 理性) is nothing more than the faculty that creates concepts while also separating and combining them. Due to this faculty, our vocation far surpasses [that of] animals. As for [our] supersensible capacity, it is something we have never once experienced. (Wang 2009: [1] 23)

This interpretation of reason draws heavily on Schopenhauer’s critique of Kant in the appendix of *The World as Will and Representation*, which significantly influenced Wang’s understanding of Kantian philosophy (see Schopenhauer 2010: 441–565; see also Bonner 1986: 56–65).

¹ HE Jinli 何金俐 translates *ke'aiwan* 可愛玩 as “agreeable” and claims that Wang misunderstands Kant by conflating the agreeable with the beautiful (He 2014: 68–69). In my view, however, *ke'aiwan* should be translated as “able to be appreciated,” with Wang’s point being that aesthetic experience produces a kind of pleasure unrelated to utility. This concurs with Kant’s own claim that beauty entails “a liking devoid of all interest” (Kant 1987: 53).

After describing the beautiful and the sublime, Wang begins to develop his theory of ancient elegance, starting with the Kantian proposition that “all beauty is formal beauty” (Wang 2009: [14] 107). The core of Wang’s argument runs as follows:

The beautiful always lies in the symmetry, variation and harmony of form. As for the object of the sublime, even though Kant calls it formless, it is still a kind of formless form capable of arousing the sublime feeling, so we must call it a kind of form.² When it comes to the various arts, the beauty of architecture, sculpture and music obviously lies in their forms, but the beauty of painting and poetry also lies in the meaning of their content. Insofar as this sort of content is suited to arouse feelings of beauty, it may also be regarded as a kind of form. Śākyamuni and the Virgin Mary both have a solemn and well-rounded appearance, but we can also isolate the meaning of their content in order to feel boundless joy and generate [693] boundless reverence. The protagonists of dramas and novels, as well as the circumstances they undergo, are all content in the context of literature. When it comes to our feelings, however, this sort of content is also a form most suited to arouse feelings of beauty. Thus, besides our feelings, what belongs to the object of beauty is always form and never content. However, no formal beauty can be expressed except by means of another form. Only after passing through this second form does this beauty amplify its beauty. This second kind of form is what I call ancient elegance, and because this second form lacks the properties of both the beautiful and the sublime, it has independent value. Thus, ancient elegance can be called the formal beauty of formal beauty. (Wang 2009: [14] 107–108)

The first part of this passage is simple enough: all beauty, be it beautiful or sublime, is formal. The beautiful feeling follows when one appreciates the symmetry, variation and harmony of an object, and the sublime feeling results when these formal characteristics are beyond reach, which occurs in situations where the object’s magnitude or might dwarf those of the subject. The passage becomes more complicated with the introduction of content (*caizhi* 材質). In opposition to form (*xingshi* 形式), content pertains to meaning (*yiyi* 意義) and includes everything from personality traits to narrative beats. In the broadest terms, content refers to the *matter expressed*, while form refers to the *mode of expression*. However, after distinguishing content from form in this way, Wang declares content to be *a kind of form* to the extent that it arouses feelings of beauty. What

² “The beautiful in nature concerns the form of the object, which consists in [the object’s] being bounded. But the sublime can also be found in a formless object, insofar as we present *unboundedness*, either [as] in the object or because the object prompts us to present it, while yet we add to this unboundedness the thought of its totality” (Kant 1987: 98).

does this mean? What is this so-called “second form,” which Wang cryptically refers to as “the formal beauty of formal beauty” (*xingshi zhi mei zhi xingshi zhi mei* 形式之美之形式之美)?

In Kantian aesthetics, which primarily concerns natural beauty, form takes precedence over content. As Kant states,

A judgment of taste differs from a logical one in that a logical judgment subsumes a presentation under concepts of an object, whereas a judgment of taste does not subsume it under any concept at all. [...] Now since the concepts in a judgment constitute its content (what belongs to the cognition of the object), while a judgment of taste cannot be determined by concepts, its basis is only the subjective formal conditions of a judgment as such. (Kant 1987: 150–151)

According to Kant, when we judge an object “beautiful” or “sublime,” we do so without paying any mind to the object’s concepts. Instead, we contemplate the object’s formal characteristics and allow our cognitive faculties to engage in free play. Consequently, content plays no part in aesthetic judgment.³ As a formalist [694] himself, Wang agrees with this claim. However, his analysis of content and form differs from Kant’s. One major cause of this difference is the inconsistency in Wang’s uses of “content” and “form,” which he employs in two distinct senses. For the sake of our discussion, I shall call these two senses “conventional” and “technical.” To make sense of this distinction, let us examine Wang’s view of “meaningful” or content-based art, which includes the *representational* (e.g., painting and poetry) and excludes the *non-representational* or *purely formal* (e.g., architecture, sculpture, music).⁴

³ A counterexample to this claim appears in §16 of the *Critique of Judgement*, where Kant distinguishes free beauty (*pulchritudo vaga*) from dependent beauty (*pulchritudo adhaerens*). Unlike free beauty, which “does not presuppose a concept of what the object is [meant] to be,” dependent beauty “does presuppose such a concept, as well as the object’s perfection in terms of that concept” (Kant, 1987: 76). LUO Gang 羅鋼, in his own analysis of ancient elegance, claims that Wang’s view of content, as presented in the above passage, resembles Kant’s view of dependent beauty (Luo 2008: 66). This is problematic, as the meaning and consistency of Kant’s distinction between free beauty and dependent beauty are matters of dispute (see Scarre 1981, Janaway 1997, Wicks 1997, Budd 1998, Guyer 1999, Mallaband 2002). Since Wang makes no explicit references to this Kantian distinction in his claims about form and content, I have chosen to take a different approach.

⁴ The phrase “meaningful art” is based on the following passage from Wang’s essay: “The beauty of architecture, sculpture and music obviously lies in their forms, while the beauty of painting and poetry lies also in the meaning of their content” (Wang 2009: [14] 107).

Although Wang himself does not use this language, his discussion implies that all meaningful artworks have two main components: (1) their *ideational* conditions (e.g., characters, actions, feelings); and (2) their *material* conditions (e.g., oil on canvas, iambic pentameter, strings and woodwinds). These ideational and material conditions are what people conventionally refer to as the “content” and “form” of an artwork (i.e., what it is *about* and what it is *made with*). In Kantian philosophy, however, “content” and “form” do not refer to objects themselves, but instead designate our *judgments* of them. To be precise, whether our judgments of an object relate to content or form depends on whether they are *determinative* or *reflective*: we make determinative judgments when we attend to *concepts* for the sake of cognition; we make reflective judgments when we attend to *arrangements* in a state of pure contemplation. Scientific judgments are of the former sort, while aesthetic judgments (or judgments of taste) are of the latter sort. In both cases, however, “content” and “form” depend on the *subject* rather than the object: when we make determinative judgments, we regard the object *as* content; when we make reflective judgments, we regard the object *as* form.

If we combine the technical meanings of “content” and “form” (i.e., the determinative and reflective judgments of subjects) with their conventional meanings (i.e., the ideational and material conditions of objects), we end up with a fourfold division (see Figure 1). On the one hand, we have two kinds of content: *content proper*, or the concepts of art’s ideational conditions; and *contentified form*, or the concepts of art’s material conditions. On the other hand, we have two kinds of form: *formalized content*, or the arrangement of art’s ideational conditions; and *form proper*, or the arrangement of art’s material conditions. The relevance of these four conceptions of content and form depends on which conditions we judge and how we judge them. If we judge art’s ideational conditions determinatively, we arrive at content proper; if we judge them reflectively, we arrive at

formalized content. Likewise, if we judge art's material condition determinatively, we arrive at contentified form; and if we judge them reflectively, we arrive at form proper. Of these four divisions, only two are pertinent to our discussion: formalized content and form proper. This is because, in the Kantian aesthetic tradition, aesthetic judgments are always reflective. What I call "formalized content" is what Wang means by "first form." By contrast, what I call "form proper" is what he calls "second form," which is where he situates ancient elegance. [695]

Fig.1 Fourfold Division of Content and Form

		Conditions	
		Ideational	Material
Judgment	Determinative	Content Proper	Contentified Form
	Reflective	Formalized Content First Forms Beautiful/Sublime	Form Proper Second Forms Ancient Elegance

According to Wang, second forms never appear in the natural world, but occur exclusively in works of art:

Art must either take on some form inherent in nature, or make some new form of its own and use this second form to express [the first forms of nature]. That is, while the [first] forms are the same, each expression of them is different. Each performance of the same tune is different, and original sculptures or paintings differ greatly from their imitations. (Wang 2009: [14] 108)

Wang's point is relatively simple: *art uses mediums to express content*. Despite its simplicity, however, this point is problematic, as it seems inapplicable to sculpture and music, which Wang previously distinguished from poetry and painting as nonrepresentational. In the above passage, Wang compares imitations of the same original painting with different performances of the same tune. Assuming these examples are indeed comparable, we can generalize them as follows: such artworks use different second forms to express the selfsame first form. In other words, their ideational conditions are identical, even though their material conditions are distinct. This claim makes sense with respect to painting: even if two paintings depict the same representational content (e.g., characters, actions, settings, feelings), they necessarily make use of different physical resources by virtue of being two. Music, however, is non-representational and therefore lacks representational content. Based on this understanding of music, one might imagine that it has no first forms. Wang sidesteps this issue by referring to *tunes* as the first forms shared across discrete musical performances. Underlying this declaration is the implicit assumption that art's ideational conditions can be something other than representational content, namely *nonrepresentational content*. This may seem oxymoronic, especially since Wang himself initially aligned content with meaning. It becomes less so, however, if [696] we generalize content as ideational rather than representational. Adopting this view allows us to expand the distinction between first and second forms to include all genres of art, not just representational art.

Although this view of content as ideational does play a role in Wang's discussion, if only an implicit one, it is *not* his main point. His true aim is to determine the place of ancient elegance in aesthetics. Therefore, after briefly mentioning how painters, sculptors and musicians are all able to use different second forms to express the same first form, he attempts to elucidate the place of ancient elegance by focusing on two poetic couplets. One is by the Tang 唐 dynasty poet DU Fu

杜甫 (712–770), the other is by the Song dynasty lyricist YAN Jidao 晏幾道 (1038–1110) (cited in Wang 2009: [14] 108):

Late at night I hold the candle again,
We face each other as if in a dream.

夜闌更秉燭，相對如夢寐。

Tonight I grasp the silver lamp once more,
Still fearing our meeting is a dream.

今宵剩把銀釭照，猶恐相逢是夢中。

Of these lines, Wang states, “Their first forms are the same. However, the former [lines] are gentle, while the latter are piercing. This is the difference between their second forms. All art is like this, hence the so-called distinction between elegance and vulgarity” (Wang 2009: [14] 108). From this statement, we can draw at least three conclusions. First, the distinction between elegance (*ya* 雅) and vulgarity (*su* 俗) applies to all genres of art, representational or not. Second, this distinction only concerns an artwork’s material conditions or second formal properties, all of which derive from its medium rather than its content. Lastly, elegance and vulgarity, as general designations of aesthetic quality, can be used alongside other descriptive terms: just as landscapes can be lush or barren, poetic descriptions can be gentle (*wenhou* 溫厚) or piercing (*kelu* 刻露).

Before moving on, I want to take a moment to clarify the meaning of “*ya* 雅.” In English, this term is commonly translated as “elegance,” and Wang himself, insofar as he aligns *guya* with the material conditions of art, seems to identify it with those aspects of art considered “elegant” in Western aesthetic contexts. That said, one might still ask: how does the concept of *ya* relate to the concept of elegance as it is generally understood in Western traditions of thought? Regarding the latter, Tamara Albertini provides a detailed overview of elegance as a philosophical and rhetorical concept. According to her research, elegance, or *elegantia*, was initially a rhetorical ideal associated with “language purity” (*Sprachreinheit*), specifically with Hellenism (ἑλληνισμός, *hellenismós*) in ancient Greece and Latinity (*latinitas*) in ancient Rome (Albertini 1994: 991–992).

In antiquity, *elegantia* involved idiomatic correctness and descriptive accuracy: one's choice of words should evoke past uses of language while also aptly describing the objects or circumstances at hand. The *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, for instance, associates *elegantia* with Latinity and explanation (*explanatio*), which Albertini claims correspond to the stylistic qualities of Hellenism and clarity (σαφήνεια, *saphêneia*) advocated by Theophrastus (Albertini 1994: 993–994). These rhetorical attributes of *elegantia* fostered its status as *eloquentia sacra*, allowing words to function as signs of divine truths. However, with the rise of Christianity and the decline of paganism, truth and elegance became separated. [697] For many medieval Christian philosophers, including Augustine, *elegantia*, as the “linguistic clothing” (*sprachliche Einkleidung*) of thought, was believed to be antithetical to clarity (Albertini 1994: 995). This view of *elegantia* persisted into the Renaissance in the works of thinkers like Erasmus, though it was increasingly challenged by authors wanting to apply ancient rhetorical values to modern vernacular languages. During the Enlightenment, the principles of reason came to serve as the foundations of language, and rhetoricians began to emphasize the reducibility of all languages to general grammatical rules. *Elegantia*, by contrast, was demoted to the status of good manners and *éloquence royale* (Albertini 1994: 1002). This demotion is reflected in present-day conceptions of elegance, a designation often reserved for superficial ornaments or charms.

In the Chinese tradition, *ya* is also conceived in terms of royalty. According to Michael Hunter, in the *Shijing* 詩經 or *Classic of Poetry*, *ya* refers to two groupings of poems: the Lesser Court Odes (*xiaoya* 小雅), which “take us into the world of Zhou [周] dynasty elites with their banquets, military campaigns, songs of praise for virtuous leaders, and admonishments by (would-be) advisers;” and the Greater Court Odes (*daya* 大雅), the focus of which “is the Zhou royal house and its triumph over the Shang 商 dynasty” (Hunter 2021: 3). Within the Ruist or Confucian canon,

these court odes are often contrasted with the music of Zheng 鄭, which is considered licentious and barbaric (e.g., *Lunyu* 論語 or *Analects* 17.18; see Ames and Rosemont 1998: 208). By contrast, the court odes were traditionally deemed “proper” or “correct” (*zheng* 正), insofar as they were thought to promote social harmony and virtuous conduct.⁵ According to some scholars, including Wang himself, these odes were set to music during rituals of court as a way to “entertain guests” (*lebin* 樂賓), which could include anyone from the vassals of dukes to foreign rulers to surrogate ancestors (Wang 2009: [8] 42; see also Kern 2000). Besides referring to court odes as a genre of poetry, *ya* also designates the courtly quality of these odes and can be used to describe any object or action of aesthetic value. Xunzi 荀子 uses this sense of *ya* during one of his own discussions of ritual: “If your countenance, bearing, movements, and stride accord with ritual, they will be graceful [*ya*]. If they do not accord with ritual, they will be barbaric, obtuse, perverse, vulgar, and unruly” (Hutton 2014: 10).

These descriptions of *elegantia* and *ya* suggest several similarities between them. Most significantly, both are aesthetic virtues that adopt the cultural past as a model: just as *elegantia* involves Hellenism and Latinity, *ya* entails reverence for the values of the Zhou. Additionally, despite their aesthetic character and their roots in specific pasts, neither of these virtues was historically regarded as relative. Rather, they were each guided by a particular sense of correctness. In ancient Greece and Rome, *elegantia* meant aptly using idiomatic expressions to accurately describe the world. [698] In ancient China, *yǎ* referred to a genre of music that was conducive to harmony and virtuosity. In both cases, the surfaces or adornments of expression were cultivated to

⁵ The Song dynasty scholar ZHU Xi 朱熹 glosses the *ya* of *Analects* 17.18 as “proper” (*zheng*) (Zhu 2015: 265–266). Ancient scholarship supports this. For example, the Western Han scholar YANG Xiong 揚雄 describes court songs as “moderate and proper” (*zhongzheng* 中正) (Yang 2013: 26–27). Likewise, the Eastern Han scholar BAN Gu 班固 describes them as “ancient and proper” (*guzheng* 古正) (Chen 2019: 96).

get at something deeper. However, while the former gave precedence to *factual* correctness (i.e., descriptive accuracy), the latter focused on *behavioral* correctness (i.e., ritual propriety). And unlike Europe, which underwent a dramatic shift from paganism to Christianity following the collapse of the Roman Empire, China remained a deeply Ruist nation up until the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911.⁶ This latter difference could explain why *ya*, unlike *elegantia*, never devolved into something like *éloquence royale*. It could also explain why Wang regards the concept of ancient elegance as worthy of standing alongside the Kantian concepts of the beautiful and the sublime: in the Chinese tradition, “elegance” was never decoupled from “correctness,” meaning the surfaces were never separated from the depths. With these aspects of *ya* clarified, let us return to Wang’s essay.

After assigning ancient elegance to the mediums or “second forms” of art, Wang brings this concept into direct comparison with the beautiful and the sublime. In art (as opposed to nature), “the beautiful and the sublime must join together with ancient elegance before they can manifest their inherent value” (Wang 2009: [14] 108). That is to say, the beauty of the natural world, which serves as the content (i.e., first form) of meaningful art, can only be artistically expressed by way of mediums (i.e., second forms). According to Wang, “the more the essence of the beautiful and the sublime is revealed, the more the essence of ancient elegance is concealed” (Wang 2009: [14] 108). One reason ancient elegance is significant, therefore, is because it makes possible the expression of the beautiful and the sublime in art. Besides having conditional value, however, ancient elegance also has independent value (*duli zhi jiazhi* 獨立之價值), even when the content of an artwork is neither beautiful nor sublime:

⁶ This claim is not meant to discount the influence of other traditions, such as Daoism and Buddhism, on China’s sociopolitical structure. Unlike paganism, however, Ruism persevered in China as a prominent ideological framework, at least until the modern period, by incorporating and adapting competing ideas. In this respect, Ruism is comparable to Christianity, which rose to prominence throughout Europe by borrowing ideas from various pagan traditions.

When observed with the naked eye, thatched roofs, earthen steps and nature's mundane scenes appear entirely incapable of joining the ranks of the beautiful or the sublime. However, once they pass through the hands of an artist (such as a painter or a poet), we discover an indescribable liking. That this liking is acquired from second forms rather than first forms is undoubtable. (Wang 2009: [14] 108)

In other words, if a great work of art depicts an ordinarily uninspiring aspect of the natural world, then its greatness must lie in the elegance of its second form, since its first form is neither beautiful nor sublime. In Wang's eyes, many Chinese artworks fit this description, as do many of the traditional descriptors used to evaluate art throughout Chinese history, such as "spirit-like" (*shen* 神) or "resonant" (*yun* 韻). Such descriptors, he claims, refer to ancient elegance rather than "first-formal [699] beauty" (i.e., the beautiful and the sublime). His point in making this claim is not to discount the beautiful or the sublime, which he continues to hold in high esteem, but to show that ancient elegance is esteemed just as highly by future generations.

Following this declaration of the independent value of ancient elegance, Wang turns his attention to the Kantian notion of judgment (*panduan* 判斷). Since ancient elegance only exists in art, the kind of judgment we apply to it differs from that we apply to first-formal beauty:

While the latter is *a priori*, the former is *a posteriori* and empirical. That judgments of the beautiful and the sublime are *a priori* judgments has gone virtually undisputed since Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. Since these judgments are *a priori*, they are universal and necessary. Simply put, what one artist sees as beautiful, all artists must see as beautiful.⁷ This is why Kant, in his aesthetics, presupposes a common sense. Judgments of ancient elegance, however, are not like this. Instead, they depend on divergences over time and on people's differing judgments. When we judge something to be anciently elegant, we judge it so from our place in the present. Ancient relics are no less elegant than modern creations. Moreover, even if an ancient work of literature is extremely clumsy, we cannot but regard it as anciently elegant when we read it. In the eyes of the ancients, however, it was not at all like this. Thus, judgments of ancient elegance are *a posteriori* and empirical, and are therefore also particular and contingent. This is because the way the ancients expressed first forms differs greatly from the way we express them today. And this is why, after we behold their relics, we unconsciously feel the presence of a lost age. (Wang 2009: [14] 109–110)

⁷ "[A judgment of taste] does not say that everyone *will* agree with [this] judgment, but that [they] *ought* to" (Kant 1987: 89).

Of all the passages in Wang's essay, this may be the most significant, at least from a comparative perspective. According to Wang, the concept of ancient elegance, which supposedly pervades the Chinese tradition, contrasts with Kant's conceptions of first-formal beauty in almost every respect. Furthermore, despite being *a posteriori* (*houtian* 後天), empirical (*jingyan* 經驗), particular (*tebie* 特別) and contingent (*ouran* 偶然), ancient elegance still has independent aesthetic value. Like the beautiful and the sublime, ancient elegance possesses the property common to all types of beauty: it can be appreciated yet cannot be utilized. Moreover, even though Wang regards the beautiful and the sublime as higher forms of artistic expression, accessible only to geniuses, he believes ancient elegance possesses properties akin to those of first-formal beauty, which make it worthwhile in its own right:

While the form of the beautiful pacifies (*heping* 和平) people's hearts, the form of ancient elegance gives them respite (*xiuxi* 休息). It may thus be called a lower level of the beautiful. While the form of the sublime arouses a feeling of reverence (*qinyang* 欽仰) in people by means of a force that cannot be resisted, the form of ancient elegance arouses a kind of amazement (*jingya* 驚訝) by [700] means of what is unfamiliar to vulgar ears and eyes. This amazement is the incipient beginning of the feeling of reverence, so we cannot but call ancient elegance a lower level of the sublime as well. Thus, the value of ancient elegance may be said to lie between those of the beautiful and the sublime, combining both of their qualities. (Wang 2009: [14] 111)

Even if ancient elegance lacks the intensity of the beautiful and the sublime, it offers a more tangible aesthetic experience, which does not require genius to access. For this reason, the creation and appreciation of ancient elegance can be taught to and learned by anyone.

3. Effort, Education and Existence

Beyond his philosophical motivation to contribute to Kantian aesthetics, Wang also had practical reasons for developing his theory of ancient elegance. Since the beautiful and the sublime are dependent on the "spirit-like evocations" (*shenxing* 神興) of genius, they are virtually out of reach

for most people. By contrast, ancient elegance grants everyone access to the benefits of aesthetic experience, including the less-than-geniuses among us:

Since the quality of ancient elegance does not exist in nature, and since its judgments are only derived from experience, the aspect of ancient elegance in art does not require genius, but can be brought about through human effort. As long as our personalities are genuinely lofty and our learning is genuinely broad, our creations can still be anciently elegant, even if we lack artistic genius. As for contemplating art, even if we cannot describe its beautiful or sublime aspects, we can still describe its ancient elegance. (Wang 2009: [14] 110)

What distinguishes ancient elegance from first-formal beauty is its basis in human effort (*renli*). With training (*xiuyang*), anyone can learn to create and/or contemplate ancient elegance. This is significant for at least two reasons.

First, ancient elegance, though less profound than first-formal beauty, is equally desirable.

Wang demonstrates this point by means of examples:

As for KUANG Heng 匡衡 and LIU Xiang 劉向 of the Western Han, as well as CUI Yuan 崔瑗 and CAI Yong 蔡邕 of the Eastern Capital, the beautiful and the sublime in their writings are far inferior to those in the writings of JIA Yi 賈誼, MA Rong 馬融, BAN Gu 班固 and ZHANG Heng 張衡. However, we crave the former no less than the latter because of ancient elegance. Likewise, the essays of ZENG Gong 曾鞏 are not necessarily as skillful as those of SU Shi 蘇軾 and WANG Anshi 王安石, and the lyrics of JIANG Kui 姜夔 are far inferior to those of OUYANG Xiu 歐陽脩 and QIN Guan 秦觀. However, later generations crave them because they are elegant. (Wang 2009: [14] 109)

According to this passage, ancient elegance is not only just as desirable as first-formal beauty, but also just as enduring. This may seem to contradict Wang's definition [701] of ancient elegance as *a posteriori*, empirical, particular and contingent. However, these characteristics do not preclude the endurance of ancient elegance, but merely determine its cause. That is, ancient elegance endures because it carries the stamp of bygone places and times.

Second, ancient elegance, more than any other activity, promotes consolation (*weijie*) by giving people the means to express themselves and make their lives meaningful. For Wang, artistic consolation is invaluable, because life itself is suffering. Beyond this general value, however,

artistic consolation can also function as a remedy for particular experiences of suffering, such as that endured by the Chinese people during the late Qing period due to sociopolitical unrest and widespread opium addiction. In many of his philosophical essays, such as “Removing the Poison” (1906) and “A Study of Human Addictions” (1907), Wang recommends aesthetic education (*meiyu*) as a means to promote artistic consolation (see Dufresne, forthcoming). “The Place of Ancient Elegance in Aesthetics” is no exception:

With respect to practice, the capacity for ancient elegance can be attained through training. Thus, it can serve as a universal bridge to aesthetic education. Even those whose wisdom is less than average and who are unable to create beautiful or sublime things can nonetheless attain the creative power of ancient elegance through training. And even those who are unable to describe the value of the beautiful or the sublime can nonetheless grasp their origins in ancient elegance. Some may even gain a sense of immediate consolation in creations of ancient elegance. As for the value of ancient elegance, from an aesthetic viewpoint, it is genuinely incapable of reaching the beautiful or the sublime. When it comes to educating the masses, however, even though its limits are greater, its effects are more evident. (Wang 2009: [14] 111)

Although Wang does not explain what this program of aesthetic education based on ancient elegance would look like, we can infer that it would involve studying and imitating the works of past masters. This is supported by his critique of the painter WANG Hui 王翬: “When he copied the ancients, his works were excellent; when he tried to manage on one’s own, they were lacking” (Wang 2009: [14] 110; see also Fong, Chang, and Hearn 2008). While some people may be incapable of producing beautiful or sublime works, they can still learn how to imitate the works of their predecessors and/or identify the aesthetic qualities associated with different artistic traditions. For many, this is all that is needed for the achievement of artistic consolation. If we teach people how to *recognize* the aesthetic qualities that circumscribe the material conditions of specific artistic traditions, we give them access to feelings of lost ages, which can strengthen their connection to the past. If we teach them how to *reproduce* these qualities, we situate them within these traditions, thereby providing them with a sense of historical continuity. Having received this training, people

would be equipped to express themselves and make their lives meaningful, some by developing their own unique styles, others by simply employing the techniques passed down to them.

In her own discussion of Wang's contemporary significance, HE Jinli praises the existential concerns of his philosophical and aesthetic theories. As she states, "WANG Guowei paid special attention to the issues of the 'human world,' human life [702] and the meaning of life's existence. [...] His philosophy is not a castles-in-the-sky philosophy, but a solution for real human and social issues" (He 2015: 149). In view of his existential concerns, HE Jinli dubs Wang a "practical aesthetician" (*shijian de shenmei zhuyi zhe* 實踐的審美主義者), since he developed his aesthetic theories in an effort to console the world (He 2015: 145). Following this line of reasoning, I want to elaborate on the contemporary relevance of Wang's program of aesthetic education based on ancient elegance by relating it to a budding subfield of aesthetic philosophy, which Hans Maes calls "existential aesthetics."

According to Maes, "existential aesthetics refers to philosophical work that investigates the various ways in which art and certain kinds of aesthetic practice or aesthetic experience can be of existential importance to people," which boil down to two: "(1) they can deeply and profoundly affect (the course or quality of) a person's life; (2) they can be existentially illuminating in addressing certain existential questions" (Maes 2022: 265–266). As for the second way, Maes claims that it can be broken down into "further subgroupings based on the specific existential questions that are being addressed, for example, how to face our own mortality or how to deal with the loss of meaning and the feeling of absurdity" (Maes 2022: 269). Wang's view of art, with its emphasis on consolation, presents another possible subgrouping: art as a means of giving and receiving consolation for general and particular experiences of suffering.

As we discussed previously, Wang treats art as consolatory in two different respects: (1) it consoles people *in general* for the suffering inherent to existence; and (2) it consoles people whose *particular* circumstances cause them to suffer in specific ways, as the people of late Qing China suffered from hopelessness and opium addiction. Maes touches on these two dimensions of suffering near the end of his article. As he states with respect to black aesthetics, “All human beings face existential questions in virtue of being human. But there is no denying that racial conditions inflect the general existential considerations of despair, joy, meaningfulness, and absurdity” (Maes 2022: 271). Although Maes frames this statement in terms of race, it can be applied to any mode of particularized suffering, be it rooted in gender, ethnicity, religion, class, nationality, family or some other aspect of one’s individual experience. Furthermore, in the context of existential aesthetics, the artistic expression of particularized suffering is not meant as a tool for sociopolitical change—even if it could be put to this end—but is simply a form of consolatory expression. The Afro-pessimist scholar Frank B. Wilderson III supports this view, describing the aim of black aesthetics as follows: “‘Live in the cul-de-sac’ and explore your own reality, regardless of whether other people think it’s too dark or hopeless” (Copeland et al. 2020: 270). Framed as such, black aesthetics becomes an instance of existential aesthetics centered on the various conditions and experiences characteristic of blackness. However, particularized suffering comes in all shapes and sizes. In general, therefore, we may regard existential aesthetics as a philosophical outlook that, with respect the creation and appreciation of art, prioritizes expression over instrumentalization.

Returning to Wang, his theory of ancient elegance offers us one approach to the expression of suffering: study and imitate the works of past masters. This applies to particularized suffering as much as it does to generalized suffering. On the one [703] hand, we can look to the annals of

history to find imitable expressions of generic existential suffering, since such expressions appear in most (if not all) of the world's artistic traditions. On the other hand, we can turn to the past to make sense of the unique characteristics of our own suffering. Wang's poetic oeuvre includes examples of both approaches to artistic consolation. Some of his most memorable expressions of generalized suffering appear in the following lyric poem (*cí* 詞), written to the tune of "Sand of the Washing Stream (Huanxisha 浣溪沙)":

The mountain temple, barely visible, backs on evening sunset.
Birds flying fail to reach half the mountain dusk.
Up above, the lonely chime stops the marching clouds.
Trying to climb the topmost peak to glimpse the white moon,
Abruptly I open a skyward eye to view the red dust—
Pity that this body is that humanity I see. (Yeh 1998: 519)

山寺微茫背夕曛，
鳥飛不到半山昏。
上方孤磬定行雲。
試上高峯窺皓月，
偶開天眼覩紅塵。
可憐身是眼中人。

According to YEH Chia-ying, this poem, which was most likely inspired by Schopenhauer's philosophy, conveys the pessimistic message that "all men are entangled in the dusty net of the world, drowning in the sea of desire, unable to extricate themselves" (Yeh 1998: 521). Given this poem's formal and stylistic roots in traditional Chinese poetry, we may understand it as an instance of imitating the past to deal with generalized suffering. As for particularized suffering, Wang's mournful response to the fall of the Qing dynasty finds expression in many of his post-revolutionary poems, such as "Lyric for Summer Palace (Yiheyuan Ci 頤和園詞)," which, according to CHOU Min-chih, "reminisces with fondness about the vision and triumphs of the Qing leadership, and records with profound sorrow the Qing setbacks and personal tragedies" (Chou 1989: 67). Moreover, when Wang wrote this poem, he "was not in the least concerned about whether the Qing dynasty or the republic would benefit China more," but was simply expressing "his moral and spiritual convictions" (Chou 1989: 68). Whether or not he preferred tradition to modernity, Wang recognized the inevitability of the former's collapse. That being said, "Lyric for

Summer Palace,” which reads as a gloried history of the late Qing period, can be understood as a work of self-consolation that gives expression to the particular characteristics of Wang’s *own* suffering as a Qing loyalist.

In Wang’s later essays on philosophical aesthetics, such as “The Place of Ancient Elegance in Aesthetics,” consolation is essential to the creation and appreciation of art. For this reason, he would doubtlessly agree with Maes’ view that artistic activities, such as moviegoing or painting, can be life-changing. As Maes states,

Existential feelings are the preintentional background feelings that structure experience as a whole. They are ways of finding ourselves in the world. A sudden shift in existential feeling—something that the activity of painting can bring about—tends to have a momentous impact on one’s overall take on reality. (Maes 2022: 268–269)

From Wang’s viewpoint, art is invaluable precisely because of the impact it can have on our sense of well-being. Indeed, if Wang had been able to frame his ideas in terms of existential aesthetics, he would likely have gone even further than Maes, at least when it comes to the link between artistic value and existential value. On this point, Maes makes the following statement: [704]

What is particularly interesting about works of art that are existentially illuminating is the intrinsic link there appears to be between existential value and artistic value. This is not so for works that are “merely” existentially impactful. (Maes 2022: 270)

For Maes, an artwork cannot be considered a masterpiece simply because it is meaningful to us, since our adoration of the work could be dependent on factors unrelated to the work itself, such as a fond memory. Wang would probably agree with this claim, given his formalist tendencies. However, unlike Maes, who only links artistic value and existential value in “existentially illuminating” works, Wang never *unlinks* them, because, in his view, *artistic value just is a kind of existential value*. He makes this point apparent in his 1904 essay “Critique of *A Dream of Red Mansions*”:

The value of art, which arises from the present-day world and from human life, is not an absolute value. Its materials are taken from human life, and its ideals are concerned with

the defectiveness and narrowness of human life, tending toward its conflicting aspects. Art like *this* only begins to have value in a world like *this* and for lives like *this*. Now, if there were people who, from the very beginning, had no birth or death, no bitterness or joy, and no worldly concerns, but only possessed eternal knowledge, then what we cherish as supreme art would for them appear as nothing but the chirping of crickets and cicadas. (Wang 2009: [1] 71–72)

When he wrote this passage, Wang was still drawn to Schopenhauer's metaphysical pessimism, which he soon came to reject as untenable. Despite this change of heart, however, he continued to uphold art as a remedy for suffering. While he initially equated artistic value with resignation or liberation, he later came to identify it with consolation. However, resignation and consolation are both existential values directed toward the alleviation of suffering, which suggests that Wang, despite his intellectual development, continued to regard artistic value as reducible to existential value. In his later philosophical writings, one of which has been the focus of this article, this view takes the following form: no consolation, no artistic value.

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