Chinese Images in Rudolf Arnheim’s Art Psychology:
From“T’ai-chi tu” to Others

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Rudolf Arnheim’s Gestalt art theory examines visual perceptual forces and the phenomenon of “isomorphism” in psychological movement by exemplifying Chinese images as T’ai-chi tu. By raising these Chinese examples, he points out the similarities of western and Chinese aesthetic theories. He deploys Chinese thought, especially Taoism, to complement the deficiency of western thought. Taoist thought enlightened him to a new path to critically reflect the western traditions of dichotomies, which sharply divides perception from thinking, and art from science. Arnheim examines Chinese art from a perspective of western psychology, and also reflectson western theories taking Chinese culture as a mirror, in order to supplement western experience and construct a universal scientific aesthetic theory.

Keywords: Arnheim, art psychology, Chinese images, T’ai-chi tu

Introduction

Rudolf Arnhem was one of the most important theorists of art psychology in the 20th century. Taking Gestalt psychology as the most important theoretical background, and also based on phenomenology and physics, he raised the concept of “visual forces”, and claimed that the interaction among each pictorial parts constitutes human perception. He tried to explain the phenomenon of aesthetic perception in art practice from a scientific perspective. Arnheim had special interest on Chinese aesthetic thought, and exemplified many Chinese religious symbols and artistic works as T’ai-chi tu, calligraphy and painting in his arguments, including detailed analysis and casual comments.

Taking Arnheim’s analysis on T’ai-chi tu as a departing point, this article will introduce Arnheim’s research on Chinese artwork and aesthetic thought, draft the image of China presented in his work, and examine the theoretical backgrounds of the formulation of this image. The article focuses on the following questions: how do Chinese materials serve to supplement the insufficiency of western experience, and contribute both theoretically and practically to Arnheim’s arguments?

“Taking China as Examples”: From T’ai-chi tu to Others

Among the Chinese images cited in Arnheim’s argument, T’ai-chi tu is the most representative one. Arnheim discussed and analyzed T’ai-chi tu from different perspectives, and evaluated its visual expressive effects basing on his understanding of T’ai-chi tu’s connotation of Yin-Yang confrontation, integration and
The article “Perceptual Analysis of A Symbol of Interaction” performed the most detailed analysis on T’ai-chi tu’s configuration of visual forces. It first confirmed the existence of the basic visual perceptual models of humankind, which are transcultural, transnational and ahistorical. But this phenomenon cannot be successfully explained by Carl G. Jung’s paradoxical argumentation of hereditary mechanisms. In Arnheim’s opinion, the consistency of visual models is based on the universal perceiving of visual forces in human perception. The perceived configuration of visual forces is viewed correspondingly with the behavior of forces in life situations, and formulates the spontaneous perception of symbolic images. As an example, Arnheim closely analyzed the visual perception inspired by T’ai-chi tu. He argued that, as a symbolic image of “interaction”, T’ai-chi tu’s visual expression is better than other four alternative forms: mutual bombardment, circularity, network and hierarchic differentiation. These four conceptual patterns try to explain the perceived phenomenon of “interaction” through deductions, but only result in exhibitions of linear connections. They only predict the results of interaction, instead of depicting the very process of interaction. Such as languages, theories are naturally deficient in depicting the interaction of perceptual forces, because they are only capable of linear and chronological depiction. Perception as aesthetic reaction can simultaneously perceive the complex interaction among different parts of the pictorial whole, something rational deduction cannot manage. T’ai-chi tu employs a simple but perfect design of geometrical image, creates the further dynamic properties of visual forces, and inspires the configuration of forces in the brain field. In this way, T’ai-chi tu successfully symbolizes “interaction”, a type of configuration of perceptual forces.2

Since there were different T’ai-chi tu images in Chinese history, Arnheim selected the most easily geometrically constructed pattern for analysis (Fig. 1). The geometrical image constitutes a simple configuration of vectors, and, correspondingly, a clear perceptual effect. The circular external shape symbolizes the rotation of cosmos and time, and constitutes spatial connections by the configuration of centrifugal and centripetal vectors (Fig. 2). The circular internal shapes reflect the formal circularity, and contribute to intimate connections between parts and whole. The ordinary spatial arrangement of placing the bright part on the top and dark part at the bottom is consistent with the geographical conception of ancient China, and also a balanced psychological perception. Because of the concise shape, parts and whole have equal strength. It is in accordance with the Taoist opinion, in which neither the whole nor the parts in the structure of “Yin-Yang-the

Supreme One” has a dominant power. The two antagonistic parts of “magatama”, i.e. the identical curved tear-drop shapes combine to generate a rotating torque (Fig. 3). The two individual parts are complete within themselves, but also constitute a whole by complementing each other. Such a relationship generates ambiguity in perception, and thus two kinds of psychological oscillatory alternations. The first is oscillatory alternation among different priorities in perceiving the different organizations of the whole and the parts. The second is the oscillatory alternation between the individualities and completeness of each part, and their incompleteness as complements in the circle. The head and tail of “magatamas” possess respectively convexity and concavity, thus resulting in an unstable figure-and-ground situation of T’ai-chi tu. The oscillatory alternation between different parts, or among the whole and parts accords with the Taoist concept, which considers “being and not-being grow(ing) out of one another”. This shape is thus “the most effective way of perceptually symbolizing the interaction”. By arranging the perceptual and physical center of gravity (CG, Fig. 4) on the vertical, the gravitational weight is balanced and neutralized. This imbues the behavior of perceptual forces more initiative. T’ai-chi tu possesses thus further dynamic properties, and provides the “optimal, internally generated rotation …for the perceptual representatives of the yin and yang”. The image exhibits explicitly the structural coincidence between the interaction of perceptual forces and the described cosmos forces in Taoist philosophy.

However, in his article “Complementary from the Outside”, Arnheim pointed out T’ai-chi tu’s limitation in expression from another perspective. That is, T’ai-chi tu as a still image can only “enumerate the forces involved in the interaction”, instead of exhibiting the very interaction process itself. Such a process can naturally be brought about and shown in mobile images as film, not in immobile spaces, just as in the words. T’ai-chi tu as a symbolic image can only visually divide the forces in a surface, and the viewers’ attention alternates among the pictorial parts. But a process of interaction should simultaneously include all the involved forces. So, an immobile image cannot exhibit the interaction of inherent forces as expected. In other words, T’ai-chi tu’s conceptual description of interaction only shows mixed ingredients, instead of the process of interaction itself.

These two cited articles seem to contradict one other. The former emphases T’ai-chi tu’s further dynamic properties, while the latter claims that T’ai-chi tu cannot present the process of interaction. However, according to Arnheim’s opinion, the perceptual forces possessed by T’ai-chi tu only imply the interaction, rather than exhibiting the very process of interaction. The real process happens in viewers’ imagination. Such a correspondence of perceptual pattern and psychological mechanism is what the Gestalt psychologists called “isomorphism”. It is further proofed by the discussion in the following article.

In the article “What Became of Abstraction”, Arnheim criticized Mondrian’s paintings for failing to express the tragedy contained by omnipresent conflicts in the boundless nature. He exemplified the circular pattern of Chinese Yin-Yang, i.e. T’ai-chi tu, as an analogue with Mondrian’s abstract paintings. Both of them deploy simple forms to guide viewers to the analogies between the interplay of tensions generated by distances.

and special orientations, and the relationship of discords-and-concords in human experience. In Arnheim’s opinion, such visual symbols can convey meanings successfully, but lack the powerful spiritual forces an artwork should have. He points out that art should not only inspire viewers’ memory as a reminder, but also present directly and effectively the essential information. As a contrary example, he praised Kandinsky’s paintings. Although these paintings abandon naturalistic motives, they find innovative inspiration from the natural forms and colors. In these paintings, the pure abstract conception doesn’t dry up “the forces that activate life and the physical world with all their overwhelming complexity”. In this discussion, Arnheim’s understanding of T’ai-chi tu differentiates from that in Chinese cultural context. He make analog between T’ai-chi tu and artwork, in order to express his opinion on abstract art that abstract art should not sacrifice the artistic forces and its expressive potential for abstraction. However, in Chinese cultural context, T’ai-chi tu as an ancient symbol of religion and philosophy can hardly be included in the catalog of art. Its task is to inspire viewers’ imagination and thinking, rather than presenting the forces of pictorial form itself.

The opinions in these three articles on T’ai-chi tu can be summarized respectively as following: 1, T’ai-chi tu evokes the configuration of visual perceptual forces; 2, T’ai-chi tu doesn’t exhibit the process of behavior; 3, T’ai-chi tu reminds and inspires viewers’ imagination and remembering through its abstract “artistic” form, and by this way, connects the forces of pictorial shape and the forces of behaviors in life experience. This syllogistic conclusion can be seen as a miniature of Arnheim’s opinion on perceptual forces. Based on Gestalt psychology, Arnheim realizes that a structural system of image contains interaction of forces, which corresponds structurally with the inner thinking process. The isolated parts in artwork cannot express the properties, which they possess as complements in the whole. The “forces” of parts should be read in dynamic structural system.

Arnheim’s emphasis on “forces” is also showed in that he only praised the images as T’ai-chi tu, which contain the function of perceptual forces, but criticized other opposite examples from Chinese culture. For example, the T’ai-chi tu (Fig. 5) drawn by Chou Tun-yi in the eleventh century A.D. (the Song dynasty) also hints at the rotation of Yin and Yang in alternation. But it visually divides each component in left or right, and thus fails to generate simultaneously the visual effects of conflicting and mutual bombardment. While the image of the five elements shows the interaction in which “earth is overcome by wood, wood by metal, metal by

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fire, fire by water, water by earth”. It tries to depict a complex psychological and physiological phenomenon in a linear connection, but turns out to be clumsy because of the lack of visual forces. On the contrary, Arnheim praised Chinese calligraphy as a vivid exemplar of visual forces. For example, the three strokes of Chinese character “山” (mountain) refers not only to peaks, but also their rising. Such a dynamic expression attains the identification and distinction of a design and makes the reference livelier. He points out that, different from the relatively simple models and cognitive patterns of Roman alphabet, the more complex shaped Chinese ideographs offer more difficult challenges in pattern recognition. Arnheim compares also Chinese calligraphy and the traditional western narrative. The classic western narrative differentiates great, mediate and slim modes in composition, while, in Chinese calligraphy, different purposes are served by “the block-letter like simplicity of the kaisho style, the more softly rounded gyo sho, and the fluid and spontaneous cursive of the sosho”. 

Meanwhile, Arnheim examined the reasons of generation of visual forces by analyzing closely the components in artistic structures, and raised many Chinese examples in his examination. For instances, Arnheim twice cited a story told by Chuang Tsu about an experienced cook. The master craftsman has carved oxen for nineteen years, but never need to sharpen his cleaver, since he studied the natural subdivision of the ox so thoroughly that the parts fell off almost by themselves with just the slightest tap. Using this story, Arnheim emphasized the inner structures of things, and the importance of differentiating parts from the whole. When analyzing the depth made by overlapping, Arnheim exemplified Chinese landscape paintings, which build space by superposition of mountain peaks or clouds. To elaborate the interplay of plane and depth, Arnheim analyzed the spatial arrangement of the classic Chinese painting Silk Beaters (Fig. 6). 

![Silk Beaters](image)

Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

He pointed out that, in artistic practice, any pictorial composition of three-dimensional space has intermediate spatiality between two extreme conceptions, i.e. a total flat projective plane and a fully three-dimensional stage. But any spatiality is also related with both of these two orientations. Artworks constitute their own styles by different tendencies, and “derive its meaning precisely from the interplay of both

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view”. Taking *Silk Beaters* as an example, he analyzed its two kinds of spatial arrangements, i.e. the three-dimensional one and the flat one. In the three-dimensional space, the four women’s placing, directions and color tones of the pieces of cloth contribute to the spatial contribution. The placing of the four forms a triangle, with three of them facing one another, and an outsider. The two dark robes and the two light ones occupy the diagonals, and form respectively the lateral line and the depth dimension. While in the projective pattern of plane, the group of the four is subdivided into two symmetric pairs, with two flanking the table and the other two overlapping it. Similar to the sequence of four lunar phases, the four women’s faces are shown as full face, obliqueness, profile and the almost hidden one, and establish thus “a linear zigzag connection”. The interplay of the two spatial patterns of projective plane and three-dimensional arrangement produces the dynamic artistic shape and attributed meaning of *Silk Beaters*.16

In order to explain the diversity of centric systems produced by the interplay between centric and eccentric principles in artistic structures, Arnheim cited and analyzed a Chinese statue of Kuan-Yin (Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva) from the Sung dynasty. The statue has a general centric compositional structure. From the figure center, i.e. the navel, radii expend in various directions, upward, downward, forward and rightward. Such a composition corresponds with the work’s subject, that the Bodhisattva’s power and energy radiates to the surrounded word. However, within this basic centric system, there is an eccentric system, i.e. the head of the figure, which interacts with the primary system. From the head radiates the vectors of the arms and torso, thus the head operates a visual center of the figure, a secondary center in a subsystem. There are also eccentric systems outside the confines of the statue. The first one is in vertical dimension. There are both the force of terrestrial weight expressed by the downward trends of the figure, and also the upward visual forces to overcome the gravity. The latter is expressed for example by the raised right leg, about to climb. The whole statue possesses then the force of rise from base to the sky as a monument. Secondly, when the statue turns sideways, it leans rightward, and is thus differentiated from its frontal symmetry. This deflection contains also the interaction of centric and eccentric trends, since the force generated by the impulse of the figure is centric, while the attraction from outside is eccentric.17

In these analyses on T’ai-chi tu and other visual forms, Arnheim deployed the concepts as “field”, “vector”, “force” and “gravitation” from modern physics to analyze the forces of art and the perception of human mind. This shows the influence of modern science and the ideological trend of scientism on Arnheim’s research.18 His work contributes to the development of scientific aesthetics, which concerns the integral unity of human behavior under the background of decline of metaphysic thoughts and methodologies.19 Arnheim’s psychological exploration of inner structures of Chinese arts offers a special perspective to interpret Chinese aesthetics.

**“Taking China as Inspiration”: Yin-Yang Interaction and the Taoist Thought**

Arnheim’s interest on China lays not only in interpreting Chinese examples from western theoretical perspectives, but also in looking for the similarities and correspondence of western and Chinese art theories. He

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mentioned that Hsieh Ho’s Six Principles formulated in the fifth century, during the Tang Dynasty, was the most influential in Chinese traditional aesthetic thoughts. He interpreted the first principle “ch’iyun sheng tung” as referring to “the breath of life and the resonance of the spirit”, contains the meaning of movement, change and generation. This principle corresponds thus internally with visual forces. In another article, he introduced Wilhelm Worringer’s innovative but being ignored contention in his dissertation, that abstraction is the pictorial correspondence of the “spiritual withdrawal from the irrational confusion of life”. And this idea is based on Hsieh Ho’s first canon of “ch’iyun sheng tung”.

Arnheim presented some artistic examples to prove the spiritual similarities of Chinese and western art in their inner structures of change and interaction. He mentioned that the charm of the empty space in both Hellenistic and Chinese paintings lies in their ability of changing passive reception to initiative imagination, and enabling the viewers to do part of the work. Chinese landscape art is also similar to the western in their attitude on man-made landscape. In Christianity, the evaluation of landscape depend largely on the question whether to regard the nature as a creation of God. Human is to create order as a child of nature, an executor of natural divine order. Only orders that look natural are desirable, while man-made geometrical forms are “dangerous impoverishment” of the real order, are considered as betrayal of God. He exemplified that the debate on the “English garden” was done in the name of nature. The craftsman should make the man-made order of landscape implicitly, instead of explicitly. The visitors are also identified as the “prodigal son” of nature, rather than its master, and should humbly reaccept the natural order by his return. Arnheim claimed that, besides of some basic differences, such an attitude to nature appears also in Taoism and “its later modification of the fifteenth century Japanese Zen gardens”. However, though Japanese Zen was influenced by some elements of Chinese Taoism, Arnheim’s consideration of Japanese Zen art as a modification of Taoism is still problematic.

Besides artworks, Arnheim also found similarities in the attitudes of art creation and appreciation in western and Chinese cultures. When introducing Gestalt structure of art, Arnheim claimed that, Gestalt structure is contained even in blind people’s initiative contemplation and innovative understanding of meaning and visual forces. Gestalt structure is absent only in one situation when the viewers lack passion. The geometric form perceived by a simple glance won’t have any Gestalt structure. The task of Gestalt structure of unifying the complex world and the dynamic mind can only be “attained by the blend of freedom and disciplined concentration”. Arnheim mentioned that, ancient Chinese artistic critics often cited Chuang-tzu’s story about a painter who opened his clothes when painting, in order to demonstrate such an immersed state. By pointing out the similarities between Chinese and western artistic theories and spirit, Arnheim helped readers to understand his notion of visual forces.

Arnheim even made analogies of the dissimilar terms of Chinese art and western ideas. For example, he mentioned the necessity of building a pyramid of science. Its peak should be sharp enough, and its base “will

vanish inevitably in a fog of stimulating ignorance” like the mountain peaks being dissolved in empty space in Chinese brush paintings. These show that, Chinese art and ideas contributed to Arnheim’s comments by providing methodologies and thinking tools, and broadened his scope of critical thinking and artistic imagination.

In his study on Chinese aesthetic thoughts, Arnheim mentioned repeatedly Taoism and Yin-Yang conceptions, especially the words of Chuang Tsu. In comparison to this, he rarely mentioned Confucianism and Buddhism, and had included Confucianism into a bigger catalog of Taoism. This exhibits his emphasize on Taoism in the acceptance of Chinese thoughts, though he has noticed the interrelationship between Confucianism and Taoism. Just as Jung, Taoism became one of the basements of Arnheim’s thoughts.

But, why did Arnheim stress Taoism in his experience on Chinese art? How did Arnheim notice Taoism? How did Taoism contribute to Arnheim’s research, and what was the effect? The answers can be found in the examination of three points: the background of Arnheim’s studies, the position of Gestalt school in western theoretical veins and the interests on Taoism in the western countries at the beginning of 20th century.

If replacing Arnheim’s comparative study of Western and Chinese arts in a bigger background of western theories’ development, one can find a general vein of interrelationship among Taoism, phenomenology and Gestalt psychology. In the last half of 19th century, the rapid change in western societies generated the spread of skeptical mood. This mood influenced theory production, contributed to the decline of western metaphysic tradition from Plato and the generation of new theoretical trends. It was exactly in the same period that the interest of the West on Chinese culture shifted it focus from previous Confucianism to Taoism. For instance, in France, the study of Taoism has flourished since the late 19th century. Conversely, very little research or translated books on Confucianism could be found in bookstores. Philosophical and literary scholarship had paid attention to the implicit relationship between the renewal of western theoretical patterns and the popularity of Taoism in the same period. By exemplifying many related studies, Hongzhang Wang claims that, in the late 19th century and early 20th century, Taoist and Buddhist philosophy aided the decline of the western metaphysic tradition. They functioned as catalyst and ferment in the generation of many new theoretical trends, including phenomenology, which represents the general turn of western philosophy. Scholars have also recognized the connection between Arnheim’s aesthetic theory and phenomenology. The latter provided methodology for psychological studies, including those of the Gestalt school, and became thus one of the theoretical backgrounds of Arnheim’s research. Arnheim’s Gestalt psychological research deployed phenomenological methodology in two aspects: emphasis on direct experience and recognition of the whole. Firstly, correspondingly to phenomenology, Arnheim’s research did not set any previously suggested hypothesis and then proceed to verify them. Instead, Arnheim developed his theories based on his observations and experiences. This approach allowed him to explore the underlying principles of art and perception without being constrained by preconceived notions.

theoretical premise. Instead, direct experience was regarded as the research object. All the presented materials were to be observed and sorted out. Secondly, phenomenology emphasized the whole rather than a chemical way of identifying elements. A focus on the whole was also one of the cores of Arnheim’s aesthetic thoughts and the Gestalt school. Both Gestalt school and phenomenology considered that the whole has decisive influence on the parts, and possesses the properties which each isolated parts would not have. Arnheim emphasized thus that the examination on “forces” of art should be done inside the dynamic structure of the whole.

In a macroscopic vein of western theories, both phenomenology and Gestalt psychology were response to the demand of reuniting subject and object after the decline of metaphysic tradition. This tradition has a thought pattern of emphasizing intelligence over emotion, scientific logic reasoning other intuitive perception, which has been seriously challenged since the 20th century. Scholars hoped to overcome the limitations of dichotomy, and re-elaborate art and aesthetics from a perspective of uniting the subject and object to a whole. Both Gestalt psychology and phenomenology adopted Taoist thought to reflect on the dualist pattern of subject-object division. Tuosim, phenomenology and Gestalt psychology had thus inner theoretical similarities in connecting conscious and unconscious, emotion and intelligence. They all examined the behavior of human mind from a perspective of the whole. These similarities enabled phenomenology and Gestalt psychology’s effective drawing on Taoism.

This influence of phenomenology partially explains Arnheim’s focus on Taoism in Chinese culture. In his text, Arnheim deployed Taoist arguments many times to complement the insufficient of western thought. Taoism offered him a new path to solve the problems faced by western theories. For example, his article “Beyond the double truth” discussed the relationship between scientific knowledge and religious faith. He regarded human’s mind is a part of cosmos, and pointed out that one of the resources of this opinion is Taoism. He cited Taoist thought to refute the contention, according to which “the world of the senses presents itself inevitably as a spectacle of disorder and irrationality”. The Pythagoreans believed that the realm of the heavens is regularly governed, but the world of mortals is full of unpredictable irrational disorder. However, by citing Sinologist Arthur Waley’s comments on the Tao Te King, Arnheim pointed out that, in comparison to the Pythagoreans, the early Chinese thinkers of Taoistic and Yin-Yang school in the same period already discovered that the world of the senses is pervaded with the interplay of cosmic forces. These forces control not only the rotational change of stars and seasons, but also “the smallest thing and action on earth”. Only a faulty behavior can cause disorder and conflict. While the newborn babies are nearest to Tao, their fumbling heavier represents “the law of all”. He also mentioned that, in comparison to western cosmogonies of dividing creator and creation, Chinese thoughts divided the world into two parts, the Yin and the Yang, which are both creator and creation. The two parts interact in a circular emblem. It can be said that, Taoism offered Arnheim inspirations and theoretical basis in his practice of reconnecting the previously sharply divided perception and intelligence, emotion and reason, art and science.

30 See Yao, Junxi: “Aesthetic meaning of Dong Zhongshu’s theory of ‘Heaven-Mankind-Interaction’: and a comparison with Arnheim’s theory of ‘Isomorphism’ (Dong Zhongshu’tianrenganying’shuo de meixueyiyi_jianyuArnheim’yizhitonggou’shuo de bijiaojianyu), Gansu Social Science (Gansu shehuikexue), 1999, 5:12.
The above-mentioned arguments exhibit one other key word “complementary” in Arnheim’s thoughts. The notion “complementary” stemmed from the research of quantum physicist Niels Bohr. Bohr defined complementary as two descriptions that are both needed for a complete account of the fact, but also precluded each other. Arnheim revised Bohr’s definition, and claimed that only opinions, not facts, can be contradictory. For example, intuition is complementary with reason, rather than being contradictory. Basing on this contention, Arnheim developed the concept of “complementary” to contain the meaning that, the parts of logic wholes or experiential wholes are simultaneously independent and complementary. They form the whole by interaction, which results in Gestalt. While, T’ai-chi tuis considered as a perfect exhibition of complementary. Arnheim argued that the Taoistcosmogonies of balanced and complementary two parts Yin-and-Yang expressed by T’ai-chi tu is “crucial for the science of our time”, it has research value to western scholars in different disciplines, including “symbolism psychiatrists, anthropologists, and philosophers”.

It can be said that, the demand of breaking through the western metaphysic tradition of dichotomist thought patterns was the inner impulse of Arnheim’s special interest on Chinese Taoism. Then, how did Chinese thoughts entered Arnheim’s research, and turned to the image of China appeared in his text? How will Arnheim’s path of comparative study enlighten other studies?

“Taking China as a Path”: A Detoured Image of China

The French philosopher Francois Jullien wrote a book Detour and Access, in which he used the word “detour” to refer to the path of exploring Europe from the outside, i.e. the heterogeneous Chinese culture, and also Chinese culture’s property of detoured expression. The word “detour” became then a key word when discussing Jullien’s thought and research method. While, Jullien’s and Arnheim’s researches have many similarities in thoughts and methodologies. In aspect of thoughts, they both pointed out the “forces” in images. Under the help of Taoist thought, Jullien used the concept “propensity” to elaborate the relationship of intertwining and comparison between, or among, different parts in art forms, and its effect of motion and tension. This opinion is in accordance with Arnheim’s analysis on T’ai-chi tu and other images. Jullien also pointed out that, the poses in playing Chinese calligraphy, music and boxing all exhibit the unity of human body’s outer movement and inner thinking practice. Chinese art copies the internal logic of nature by the interaction between virtual and actual, being and not-being. Such contentions were similar to Arnheim’s

elaboration on “isomorphism”. In aspect of methodology, both Jullien and Arnheim emphasized the perspective of the whole in art appreciation.\textsuperscript{43} Facing western theoretical predicaments, they both used Chinese ideas as a response to the West. Though taking different paths, they answered the same question: how do Chinese artistic images challenge the Western patterns of dichotomy? By taking Chinese arts and thoughts as object for comparison, their works both broke the dichotomies in European discourses, and examined the unexplored areas in European logic thinking.

It can be said that, Arnheim’s research path in relation to China was also “detoured”. This contained two aspects: firstly, Arnheim got his Chinese materials indirectly; secondly, China remained in his whole researches as a methodology, instead of a target.

Arnheim had never been to China. He attained his experience about China mainly in three ways: 1. By second-hand information and the art exhibitions in the West. For example, in article “Ancient Chinese Aesthetics and its Modernity”, he mentioned that his study on Chinese art canons was based on the western translation of Chinese authors’ second-hand introduction and explanation of the original work.\textsuperscript{44} In Art and Visual Perception, the copy of Silk Beaters he analyzed, is HuiTsung’s copy collected by Boston Museum of Fine Arts, not the original work of Zhang Xuan (the Tang Dynasty). These records exhibit the indirect way of Arnheim to get Chinese source materials. 2. Contact with Chinese researchers and students aboard. When introducing German Gestalt psychologist Wertheimer’s concept of “openness to the requirements of the situation”, Arnheim complemented several examples to support Wertheimer’s argument, one of them was the Taoist concept of non-willing (wu-wei) introduced by a Chinese student Gwan-Yuen Yi, which claimed that “man may bring himself into accord with the powers inherent in the cosmos and society”.\textsuperscript{45} This is a case of international communication practiced by a Chinese student in the West. 3. Researching Chinese culture through Japanese culture. Arnheim visited Japan during 1959-1960, and had thus living experience in Japanese culture. In his text, he used many times Japanese words to depict the images from China. For instance, he deployed “magatama” to call the curved tear-drop shapes in T’ai-chi tu,\textsuperscript{46} and used “Kaisho, Gyosho, Sosho” to name Chinese calligraphic styles.\textsuperscript{47} By these indirect paths, Arnheim built up a trans-national connection, and communicated spiritually with Chinese arts.

Although Arnheim was especially interested in Chinese aesthetics and art, and wrote even an article “Ancient Chinese Aesthetics and its modernity” to praise classic Chinese aesthetics, China remained as a resource for inspiration and evidence in his text, rather than a research object and aim. Then, why were Chinese examples useful for his art psychological discussion?

The first reason is Arnheim’s positive assessment of ancient Chinese culture and spirits in general. On the one hand, Chinese artistic thought has universality, can be used as an outstanding example to demonstrate the universal artistic psychological phenomenon of humankind. On the other hand, as Arnheim pointed out, ancient Chinese aesthetics has it modernity, and can be used as guidance and reference in modern artistic practice. Both


these two points are exhibited in the example of T’ai-chi tu. The article “Analysis of a Symbol of Interaction” considers T’ai-chi tu as a representation of the simple images in early-developed human culture. As the most simple and clear image of the visual forces’ configuration, T’ai-chi tu is easy for a simple mind to understand and accept. Because of the universality of visual forces’ perception in psychological movement and life experience of humankind, T’ai-chi tu is still widely deployed in modern cultures’ symbolism and decoration.48 The article “Ancient Chinese Aesthetics and its modernity” also pointed out that Chinese aesthetics, especially Hsieh Ho’s Six Principles, i.e. the most important canons in traditional Chinese art theories, have not only historical values, but also vigour in modern times.49

Second, Chinese examples complement the deficiencies of western experience. For example, when he used T’ai-chi tu to exemplify the symbol of interaction, Arnheim explained that, Gestalt psychologists have used many images to demonstrate the influence of spatial structures on human perception, and verify the phenomenon of “isomorphism”. However, he pointed out the limitations of these pictorial examples, namely, “no concrete analysis of any but the most elementary visual properties (that is, upward and downward, angular and curved) has been presented to demonstrate the correspondences of expressive shape and significant life situations”.50 While T’ai-chi tu has both necessary simplicity and complexity, i.e. the simple visual design and central idea, and also the complex and dynamic changes. The image is thus more powerful than previous examples in Gestalt psychological research to demonstrate visual forces of “interaction”.

Third, China as a representative of distanced eastern cultures was used as an effective reference for western culture. By citing the arguments of anthropologist Marcel Mauss, Arnheim mentioned that Chinese society has rigid division of sexes in a wide scope, from the labors they can do to the goods they possess. However, unlike the German language, Chinese language has no gender distinction in its grammar. Basing on this, Arnheim refuted the contention that, language definitely reflect and formulate the cognitive patterns of humankind.51 Another example is that, Arnheim claimed that the central perspective in western paintings symbolizes “a hierarchical conception of human existence”. While Taoist and Buddhist paintings are oppositional. “The centerless continuum ….. shaped by isometric perspective” are contrasted to the paintings with central perspective.52 Some other examples in his text about China did not have any concrete connection with China. In other words, “China” or “Chinese” as an adjective can be changed into other eastern culture, and would not harm his argument. In these examples mentioned above, Arnheim deployed the same detoured path of using China for a comparative methodology as Jullien. The difference is that, Arnheim did not hope to return to Europe (or Greece) by the way of China like Jullien. Instead, he wanted to find universal laws in artistic visual perception of all humankind by a comparison between the West and China.

It needs to be pointed out that, as one of the most important theorists in 20th century, Arnheim lacked any experience about modern China. An example is that, he mentioned in his diary in 1975 that, in Chinese traffic lights, red color signifies “go” and green means “stop”. Though “the expression of the visual percept is the same”, the meaning is exactly different to western traffic lights because of varied cultural connotations of

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colors. This shows that, because of the lacked or inauthentic materials, Arnheim not only lacked knowledge about modern China, but also had exaggerated imagination about the cultural difference. All the Chinese arts he discussed are traditional ones, but he never added the label of “traditional”. The image of China in his work is a static and unchanged one, just like being hold in museum. Such an image takes the task of being an imagined “other” for comparison. Due to his lack of any contact with Chinese culture in living experience, the China since the 20th century, which has begun the process of cultural modernization and pluralization, was absent in his works.

Despite of this, Arnheim’s analysis on Chinese images from a perspective of Gestalt art psychology still has its irreplaceable value. Arnheim examined Chinese art from the perspective of western psychology, and also deployed Chinese culture to reflect western culture, and compensate the deficiencies of western aesthetic experience. As a result, he constructed a transnational, transcultural theoretical system of scientific aesthetics for a better understanding of the universal aesthetic practice of humankind. His methodological path of comparative art study can enlighten other transcultural studies.