

Review the Studies on Aesthetics Thoughts of Marx's *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* in China*

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Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 was regarded as the key text for studying Marx's aesthetics thoughts. It was translated into Chinese in 1956 and then attracted Chinese scholars' attention. In the past half century it was the main theory source of Chinese Marxism aesthetics. There were two large scale debates on aesthetics related to *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* in China. One was taken place in the late of 1950s to 1960s and the other was in 1980s. The main arguments concentrated on four issues in the Manuscripts of 1844: the relationship between practice and beauty, the meaning of the two standards and the law of beauty, whether estranged labour creates beauty or not, how to assess the Manuscripts.

Keywords: *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, practice, beauty, the law of beauty, Estranged Labour

Karl Marx's *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* was first published by the Institute of Marxism-Leninism in Moscow in the language of the original in 1932. Some sections of the manuscripts were translated into Chinese by Liu Ruoshui in 1935. Up till to 1956 the whole manuscripts was translated into Chinese by He Sijing and was published by Renmin Publish Press. In 1979, the Renmin Publish Press published the second Chinese version of the manuscripts that was translated by Liu Pikun based on Russian version and refer to German, Japanese and English versions. After revised by Zhu Guangqian and Xiongwei this Chinese edition of the manuscripts were becoming the authority translation version for Chinese people. Despite all this, there are still some revises in translation of the Manuscripts of 1844 in 1995.

The Manuscripts of 1844 is the first work in which Marx tried to systematically elaborate problems of political economy from the standpoint of his dialectical-materialist and communist views. However, Chinese scholars pay more attention to Marx's aesthetics thoughts in it. The Manuscripts of 1844 became the key text for studying Marx's aesthetics thoughts. In the large scale debate on aesthetics in the late of 1950s to 1960 and in the "aesthetics popular" in 1980s all the hot aesthetics questions were related to the Manuscripts of 1844. Around the aesthetics thoughts in the Manuscripts of 1844 the scholars published nearly two hundreds articles and ten books. Undoubtedly, the Manuscripts of 1844 is the theory source for Chinese Marxism aesthetics. To retrospect the history of studying aesthetics thoughts in the Manuscripts of 1844 is helpful for us to understand the Manuscripts and it is important for rethinking Marxism aesthetics study in today.

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The Relationship Between Practice and Beauty

In China, Professor Zhou Yang was the first scholar to concern the aesthetics thoughts of the Manuscripts of 1844. In his paper “We Need a New Aesthetics” which was published in 1937, he quoted the follow section from the Manuscripts of 1844 to argue that the sense of beauty is a product of human history activity:

Just as only music awakens in man the sense of music, and just as the most beautiful music has no sense for the unmusical ear—is [no] object for it, because my object can only be the confirmation of one of my essential powers, therefore can only exist for me insofar as my essential power exists for itself as a subjective capacity because the meaning of an object for me goes only so far as my sense goes (has only a meaning for a sense corresponding to that object)—for this reason the senses of the social man differ from those of the non-social man.¹

In 1944, Zhou compiled the book *Marxism and Literature and Art* that based on the materialism fundamental principle in the Manuscripts of 1844. In this book, he quoted two sections from the Manuscripts of 1844. One is about “law of beauty”, the other is “musical ear” (Zhou Yang, 1984). In 1947, Cai Yi published his book *New Aesthetics* and he quoted five sections from the Manuscripts of 1844. This book was regarded as the first Chinese Marxism aesthetics book (Cai Yi, 1982). Although there were few scholars to study the manuscript before 1949 there was a large scale debate on aesthetics was taken place in the late of 1950s to the beginning of 1960s. The main arguments concentrated on four issues in the Manuscripts of 1844.

From Marx’s idea of production and labour in the Manuscripts of 1844, researchers proposed that labour creates beauty and the sense of beauty comes out from social practice activity. The following paragraph in particular:

...for this reason the senses of the social man differ from those of the non-social man. Only through the objectively unfolded richness of man’s essential being is the richness of subjective human sensibility (a musical ear, an eye for beauty of form—in short, senses capable of human gratification, senses affirming themselves as essential powers of man) either cultivated or brought into being. For not only the five senses but also the so-called mental senses, the practical senses (will, love, etc.), in a word, human sense, the human nature of the senses, comes to be by virtue of its object, by virtue of humanized nature. The forming of the five senses is a labor of the entire history of the world down to the present. The sense caught up in crude practical need has only a restricted sense. For the starving man, it is not the human form of food that exists, but only its abstract existence as food. It could just as well be there in its crudest form, and it would be impossible to say wherein this feeding activity differs from that of animals. The care-burdened, poverty-stricken man has no sense for the finest play; the dealer in minerals sees only the commercial value but not the beauty and the specific character of the mineral: he has no mineralogical sense. Thus, the objectification of the human essence, both in its theoretical and practical aspects, is required to make man’s sense human, as well as to create the human sense corresponding to the entire wealth of human and natural substance.²

Scholars studied the issues of beauty and art activities from the perspective of labour practice rather than epistemology. They fund philosophical evidence to discuss the essence of beauty, the origin of art and the creation of the sense of beauty. The ideas of practice such as “the objectification of human nature”, “the humanization of nature”, “labour creates beauty” are the theoretical departure point for this group of scholars.

Li Zehou was the most achievement scholar on the issue of practice and beauty. In the debate with Zhu Guangqian about the issues of “sense of beauty, beauty and art”, Li Zehou based his arguments on the theory of the humanized nature and the idea of alienation that he found in the Manuscripts of 1844. According to his

¹ Karl Marx, *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx/Engels, Gesamtausgabe, Abt. 1, Bd. 3.2009.

² Karl Marx, *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx/Engels, Gesamtausgabe, Abt. 1, Bd. 3.2009.

understanding to Marx, social reality is not a natural consequence. Social reality results from labour and the objectification of human's essential power. Meanwhile, beauty is a product of the nature and humanization. It is the consequence of human practice on the nature. In the view of Li Zehou, sociality and objectivity are the two major features of beauty (Li Zehou, 1957, 1962).

Zhu Guangqian criticized the epistemological perspective of art and aesthetics. He stressed that human beings examine themselves in a world created by them. This "objectified" labour is the source of the sense of beauty. Labourers enjoy using their essential power while working and practicing. This enjoyment is a sense of beauty. Therefore, art originates from social labour (Zhu Guangqian, 1956, 1957, 1960).

Jiang Kongyang believes that "the law of beauty" results from labour. He proposes that "beauty is the objectification of man's essential power". Different from Li Zehou who understands practice to be the material production activity of human beings, Jiang regards the human essential power suggested by Marx includes many aspects, such as "seeing, listening, smelling, touching, thinking, intuitive, feeling, wish, activity love" and psychological structures and emotional feelings. The objectification of essential power is more than material practice, and includes all art and non-art activities. Both art and labour of production create beauty. Jiang extends material production to spiritual/intellectual production practice. He combines the thoughts of Zhu Guangqian and Li Zehou and expands the human essential power. Jiang improves the understanding of art and spiritual practices (Jiang Kongyang, 1980).

In short, despite different understandings of the concept of "practice" and subtle differences, most scholars tend to agree that labour produces beauty and practice creates beauty. This has come to be the practice aesthetics in the late of 20th century in China. The philosophical base of practice aesthetics comes from Marx's idea of materialism and his viewpoint of practice.

The Meaning of "Two Standards" and "the Laws of Beauty"

The studies of this issue stem from the section in the Manuscripts of 1844 as follow:

In creating a world of objects by his personal activity, in his work upon inorganic nature, man proves himself a conscious species-being, i.e., as a being that treats the species as his own essential being, or that treats itself as a species-being. Admittedly animals also produce. They build themselves nests, dwellings, like the bees, beavers, ants, etc. But an animal only produces what it immediately needs for itself or its young. It produces one-sidedly, whilst man produces universally. It produces only under the dominion of immediate physical need, whilst man produces even when he is free from physical need and only truly produces in freedom therefrom. An animal produces only itself, whilst man reproduces the whole of nature. An animal's product belongs immediately to its physical body, whilst man freely confronts his product. An animal forms only in accordance with the standard and the need of the species to which it belongs, whilst man knows how to produce in accordance with the standard of every species, and knows how to apply everywhere the inherent standard to the object. Man therefore also forms objects in accordance with the laws of beauty.³

This section draws out two issues: one is how to understand the meaning of "standard" and another is whether the "laws of beauty" is subjectivity or objectivity. About the meaning of inherent standard, there are two arguments. One is that the "inherent standard" belongs to object and it is objectivity. Lu Meilin is the representative of this idea. He argues this idea by comparative the meaning of the word "inherent" in different language such as Russian, Germany and English (Lu Meilin, 1997). The other is that the "inherent standard" is belonging to man in other words it is subjectivity. Ying Bicheng is the representative (Ying Bicheng, 1998).

³ Karl Marx, *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx/Engels, Gesamtausgabe, Abt. 1, Bd. 3.2009.

“The laws of beauty” is the hot question for scholars to study for a long time. There are four ideas of this issue. Cai Yi and Lu Meilin argue that “the laws of beauty” is purely objectivity and it is the inherent law of natural essence. Cai thinks that Marx discusses the aesthetics issues from the perspective of materialism epistemology, so “the laws of beauty” exist in objective things before people know this law (Cai Yi, 1982). Lu Meilin proposes that “the laws of beauty” refer to both the contents and forms of the objective things. The content of the objective things include the essence, quality and structure of the object and so on. The form of the object embraces the formation, image and feature of the object and so on. Therefore, even though some people do not feel the beauty of one thing the beauty still exists in the objective thing independent of the Man’s will.

The second view is that “the laws of beauty” is purely subjectivity and it is a standard of the man or subjectivity. The question of beauty is only to man and animals do not have any sense of beauty. Without the cognition of the subject there is no “the laws of beauty”. Lv Ying, Gao Ertai and some scholars support this views (Lv Ying, 1957; Gao Ertai, 1957). The third view is that “the laws of beauty” is the unity of objectivity and subjectivity in the sense of psychology. Zhu Guangqian is the representative.

Li Zehou, Jiang Kongyan and Liu Gangji are the representatives of the fourth view. They claim that the “laws of beauty” is a unity of subjective purposiveness and the objective regularity and it is the standard of social existence. Li Zehou argues that the laws of beauty based on the anthropological ontology with the core of the labor and practice (Li Zehou, 1980, 1984). Jiang Kongyang thinks that the “law of beauty” is the unity of subjectivity and objectivity in the sense of epistemology that based on the labor and practice. In the process of labor practice, the man can reform the world in terms of the laws of various things in the objective world and people’s purpose and will. In doing so, the man can not only change the external forms of the objective world but also realize the objectification of his essential powers and he can freely transform his essential powers into aesthetic objects. Jiang emphasizes the importance of the man’s subjectivity in “the laws of beauty” and claims the “laws of beauty” serves to the man’s purpose and will. It is the different of each person’s subjectivity that the man can create various aesthetic objects (Jiang Kongyang, 1994).

The Relationship Between Estranged Labor and Beauty

In the late of 1970s and the beginning of 1980s some scholars studied Marx’s estranged thoughts. The research concentrates on three aspects as follow: the concept of estrange, people to discuss the concept of estrange from humanity, class and the relationship between the nature and society; the significance of the concept of estrange. What is the station of the concept of estrange in Marx’s whole thoughts and whether Marxism is humanity or not. Can the estranged labor create beauty or not?

Some scholars claim that estranged labor can not create beauty. Cai Yi argues that we can not interpret the issue of beauty from the estranged labor. He argues that only under the condition of discard the private ownership the all people’s sense can be completely liberation and there is the labor of objectification of essential powers and that labor can create beauty. In the all societies before the communist society people’s labor in general are compulsive, external and estranged. In the estranged labor the worker can not feel his creativity and beauty. Qian Jin thinks that the theory of alienation is not belonging to Marx because in the Manuscripts of 1844 Marx did not explain the human nature with the ideas of social existence.

Unlike Cai Yi and Qian Jin, Jiang Kongyang argues that estranged labor can create beauty. But he thinks that the estranged labor differs from free labor and in the process of creating beauty it will be spoiled and

obstructed. His evidences come from a large amount of beautiful things that have been created by the estranged labor in the society with private ownership. According to Chen Wangheng, “objectification” and “the humanization of nature” have begun when human beings were first separated from the animal. And this is involved in all the historical activities of the human beings. It is not exclusive to the Communist society. “Estranged” labour can not bring the enjoyment of beauty, but it is still part of human labour as well as the objectified labour. It also creates social material wealth, civilization, and beauty. According to Zhu Liyuan, there is the dualism of the “estranged laobur”. In terms of quality, it is objectified labour which creates the value of use. In terms of quantity, it is alienated and abstract labour which creates value. As creators of use value, estranged labour is necessary for human life in all societies. Abstract labour reflects a particular society. Therefore, whether “estranged labour” can create beauty is a complex issue that requires dialectical analysis. Regarding the use value, estranged labour can also create beauty. This viewpoint has been accepted by more and more people (Zhu Liyuan, 1992).

Assessments of the Manuscripts of 1844

There are different evaluations of the Manuscripts of 1844. One regarded it as Marx’s immature work when he was young and Marx himself had given up the ideas in the Manuscripts of 1844 in the late of Marx. Another view believes that it is the prime work of Marx’s philosophical thinking and after the Manuscripts of 1844 Marx’s works went downhill. The third opinion is mild, regarding the Manuscripts of 1844 as the basis for Marxism which continues to Marx’s later works.

Zhu Guangqian, Ma Qi and Lu Meilin regard Marx’s thinking to be consistent and highly value in the Manuscripts of 1844. Zhu is convinced that the Manuscripts of 1844 occupies an important position in Marxism and Marx’s later works such as *The Capital* is actually a continuation from it. Marxism aesthetics consisting the Manuscripts of 1844 and Marx’s other writings were grander and more complete than any other system of aesthetics by those before him in history such as Plato, Aristotle to Kant, and Hegel. Ma Qi points out that the Manuscripts of 1844 is mutually related with the enrichment and further development of Marxism. The basic principles have been laid down in the Manuscripts of 1844. Although many ideas require further theoretical research and elaboration with the development of the practice, it is “the birthplace and secret of Marxism”. Lu Meiling points out that the Manuscripts of 1844 marks the emergence of Marxism aesthetics which declares the end of the old aesthetics and the beginning of the new one. Jiang Kongyang considers “Marx’s worldview and Marxism aesthetics were born and bred and shaped in the Manuscripts of 1844.” Because Marx took the stand of materialism and employed dialectical methods,

Seeing man and nature as objectified labour relations, Marx employs labour practice to explain the birth and formation of human beings, to explain the history of nature and society and to explain the creation and law of beauty. He elevated the aesthetics research to a new phase, the phase of dialectical materialism and historical materialism. (Jiang Kongyang, 1994)

The majority of scholars approved the Manuscripts of 1844 agreed with this appraisal.

The Manuscripts of 1844 is not highly valued by others who think it was Marx’s early work and it is immature. Cai Yi argues that Fuerbach’s humanism traverses throughout the Manuscripts of 1844 and Marx did not reach the height of historical materialism. He thinks Marx did not really break away from Fuerbach and the Manuscripts of 1844 can not be used to explain the essence of beauty. Yang Bing regards the Manuscripts of

1844 as only fragmentary data and reading notes. To a large extent it “recorded” others’ writings. Marx only made some casual comments when copying rather than attempt a thorough examination of any issue.

Still other scholars hold that the Manuscripts of 1844 is consistent with Marx’s later works in terms of the basic direction, thinking and viewpoints. There are partial changes and major development and innovation in Marx’s later life, but without fundamental contradictions regarding his view of the world. We should neither overstate it, as it is deeply informed by Feuerbach. Nor should we belittle it. Rather we should take a dialectical attitude towards the Manuscript, like Zhu Liyuan.

Brief Summary

First, all the previous studies on the Manuscripts of 1844 did not get away from the influence of the thinking of binary. Especially put materialism opposite to idealism. Under the influence of the mainstream political ideology in China, the critique of idealism was overdone. Anything associated with idealism was considered as wrong. Anything associated with materialism was regarded to be correct. This opposite of materialism and idealism critically shaped the research and development of the aesthetics thoughts in the Manuscripts of 1844 in China.

Second, the former researches mainly focused on the understanding of some particular paragraphs and words of the text rather than the understanding of Marxism as a whole. Therefore, it is difficult to make progress without reading other works by Marx. Today when we study the Manuscripts of 1844, we should find its relevance in the contemporary social reality. For example, some specific questions such as “the estranged labour and beauty” should be put in the context of the estranged human beings brought by modernization and globalization. This will attract further exploration of the issue. The cross-disciplinary method can be employed. In order to better our understanding of Marx, some research achievements from other disciplines can be our reference.

Finally, there was little discussion on the issue of humanism in the Manuscripts of 1844. This was closely related to the ideological limitation in China at that time. In fact, Marxism and humanism are intimately interwoven.

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