

Appreciation of Oldness

by Shao Fan

In Chinese culture, “oldness” resides in a rarefied realm, where it stands for the sublimation of beauty.

Ancient Greek art extolled youth, fitness, tension and abundance. The precepts of classical Chinese esthetics are, by contrast, of a stolid, solid antiquity, roughly-hewn, unadorned and solitary.

This esthetic as regards the “old” is informed by a deeply-layered, thoroughly developed culture, and further manifests the qualities of Chinese art and culture.

“Oldness” and “The Realm of Oldness” are the sole pursuits of my work. I refer to artistic practice, experience, and knowledge as “Appreciation of Oldness”. This kind of appreciation is plain and unadorned – it is years of wind erosion, rivers reaching the sea, summer yielding to autumn, the even plane after the perils have been braved, the onset of childlike innocence in the later years of life. It does not demand great skill and knowledge, but rather a quenching of the fiery spirit, a retreat into rusticity and infantile regression, a return to nature.

Ancient Chinese culture draws deeply on the air of antiquity, as it urges the accretion of light and dark. Respect for the “old” is present in all areas of society - in social life, cultural art and art appreciation - whether as a mélange of old jade, verdigris greening a copper artifact, tea leaching into and permeating a sand-fired earthenware teapot, or the tradition of Laoqiang opera. In calligraphic painting, in particular, it is believed that the skill of the calligrapher improves with age, urging that one is born inept, to become adept with age. Gardens, forests and old age are acclaimed as the optimal states of being.

In the culinary arts we find many examples of appreciation of the old – old soup, old vinegar, old tofu, and alcohol of considerable vintage. In the societal family, the elderly enjoy respect as emblems of wisdom and virtue. In the arts of chivalry, the eldest was the most skillful and the one who stood forth as a paragon of virtue. Such expressions as “knight” and “saint” likewise hold associations approximating to age. The Chinese words for God, Lao Tse, teacher, home, husband, wife, good fellow, Taoist priest, and proficiency all contain the character “old”. In other contexts, however, “old” has taken on the meaning of the smallest: “old girl” and “old lump” are terms of endearment for youngest sons and daughters. In many different contexts, “old” is used to convey a mood of reverence and a conviction that something is of the finest grade.

“Oldness” is a transcendence of time. In the *I Ching (Book of Changes)* – one of the Five Classics of Chinese Confucian texts – the sun and the moon alternately reincarnate to express the eternal constancy of change, which in my view lies at the heart of Chinese culture and art, and which further forms the repository of its unique values. Meditation, tea

and incense ceremonies, and the ritual blowing of the *shakuhachi* flute likewise recur in staged iterations, whose unceasing application ultimately ends in “oldness”.

One might aver that “old” is a special “Chinese-style” method of appreciating esthetics.

When I look to the future, it has already dwindled into the past.

The “here-and-now” exists at the most insubstantial level; the future and the past both lie in the same direction.

With “Appreciation of Oldness” I have sought to transcend time; and in doing so time has been negated and lost its meaning.

As far as I am concerned, all that is important is the means of achieving this condition.

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