

# Discourse Emergence Between Traditional Confucian School of Mind and Modern Aesthetic Education

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**Abstract:** Due to time differences and historical changes, there is a huge formal rupture between classical Chinese aesthetic education and modern Chinese aesthetic education, but it does not lose its internal continuity. The traditional Confucian philosophy of mind and nature, as a metaphysical ontological philosophy, is still a surviving cultural tradition that has been accumulated in the hearts of people, forming a unique aesthetic cultural psychological structure of mind and nature. This structure creates an inherent and effective connection between the traditional study of mind and nature and modern aesthetic education, providing the possibility for the discourse of traditional Confucian study of mind and nature and modern aesthetic education to occur.

## 1. Introduction

The study of the relationship between traditional Confucian philosophy of mind and nature and modern aesthetic education is of great significance for the inheritance and development of Chinese culture. In the context of globalization, cultural integration and conflict coexist. The traditional Confucian study of mind and nature not only contains rich moral and aesthetic values, but also provides profound cultural heritage for modern aesthetic education. In recent years, domestic scholars such as Chen Lai, Meng Peiyuan, Du Wei, etc. have conducted extensive research in this field and achieved many results. However, existing research has mostly focused on theoretical convergence points, lacking in-depth exploration of specific paths for combining educational practices, and paying less attention to how Confucian philosophy of mind and nature can help modern aesthetic education cope with multicultural challenges in the context of globalization. This study aims to address these shortcomings by innovatively exploring the intrinsic connection between Confucian philosophy of mind and nature and modern aesthetic education in terms of educational goals, aesthetic values, and practical paths, and systematically constructing a theoretical framework that integrates the two; Introduce cross-cultural comparative research methods to analyze the influence of Confucian philosophy of mind and nature in the field of international aesthetic education; Based on the contemporary social and cultural background, this paper proposes innovative strategies for integrating Confucian philosophy of mind and nature into modern

aesthetic education, providing theoretical support for cultivating new era talents with cultural confidence and global perspectives, and assisting the development of modern aesthetic education.

## 2. The aesthetic cultural psychological structure accumulated by the Confucian study of mind and nature

As an important component of traditional Chinese philosophy, the study of Confucian mind and nature has undergone thousands of years of development and inheritance, gradually accumulating as an important cornerstone of the unique aesthetic and cultural psychological structure of the Chinese nation. Its connotation is broad and profound, mainly reflected in the following aspects:

### 2.1. Moral subjectivity and moral rationality

The morality emphasized by Confucianism is not limited to the behavioral norms between people, but covers the interconnection between heaven and earth, human and self, and life and the way of heaven. From the concept of "moral nature" proposed by Mencius to the concept of "the nature of heaven and earth" expounded by NeoConfucian scholars in the Song and Ming dynasties, the Confucian theory of mind and nature clarifies the value of human beings and their lofty position in the universe. Mencius believed that everyone has the "four extremes" of heart, namely compassion, shame, concession, and right and wrong,

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which are the concrete manifestations of moral nature in human nature. Through introspection and cultivation, people can transform this potential moral consciousness into conscious behavioral norms, thereby achieving personal moral perfection and social harmony and order.<sup>[1]25-37</sup>

Confucianism attributes the root of moral rationality to the Way of Heaven, believing that the Way of Heaven has absoluteness, supremacy, and sacredness, which ensures the transcendence and rationality of the existence of moral rationality. This moral rationality is different from the purely speculative cognitive rationality, abstract rationality, and formal rationality in Western philosophy, but rather a concrete rationality and life rationality. It emerges from intuitive enlightenment with a transcendent, transcendent, and transcendent ontological cognition, guiding people to grasp the essence and laws of things in moral practice. However, this moral rationality also has certain limitations, as it may constrain the full development of cognitive rationality and emotional will, leading to a neglect of individual diversity and complexity. Therefore, in modern aesthetic education, we should not only draw on the value orientation of Confucian moral rationality, but also pay attention to cultivating individuals' multiple intelligences and innovative abilities, in order to achieve the coordinated development of morality and aesthetics.

## 2.2. Organic wholeness of existence

Confucianism's understanding of human nature and humanity breaks through the limitations of the predetermined analytical objects in Western philosophy, emphasizing the establishment of the foundation of human existence through holism in the dynamic and diachronic process of generation. Confucianism believes that the human heart, nature, and emotions are a complete and complete unity, possessing an organic unity with all things. This holistic concept has profoundly influenced the Chinese way of thinking and aesthetic taste, making people pay attention to the internal relations and essential characteristics of things as a whole when observing things, rather than focusing on the detailed analysis of parts.

Confucianism emphasizes the unity of sensibility and rationality, as well as the fundamental unity of ontology, spirit, and material. It believes that human beings are whole with the fundamental unity of nature, nature, and temperament. This viewpoint reflects the comprehensive and profound understanding of human nature by Confucianism, and also provides important theoretical inspiration for modern aesthetic education. In modern aesthetic education practice, we should focus on cultivating students' overall thinking ability and comprehensive literacy, guiding them to understand and appreciate art works from multiple

perspectives and levels, thereby enhancing their aesthetic perception and creativity. At the same time, through appropriate education and cultivation, people can transcend the differentiated state of reality, allowing the original unity of knowledge, emotion, body, and mind to be fully manifested at the conscious level, achieving the unity of mind, nature, destiny, and heaven. This unity not only contributes to the harmonious development of individuals' physical and mental health, but also provides a solid psychological foundation for the harmony and stability of society.

## 2.3. Inner transcendence

The transcendence in Confucian theory of mind and nature has distinct Chinese characteristics and is fundamentally different from the transcendence in Western religious discourse. The transcendence of Confucianism is based on the premise of affirming the limited existence of human beings, emphasizing the inherent characteristic of transcendence. Confucius' proposition of 'learning from the bottom and reaching the top, understanding the mandate of heaven, and revering the mandate of heaven', and Mencius' exposition of 'wholeheartedly understanding and comprehending heaven, flowing with heaven and earth from top to bottom', both deeply reflect the inherent transcendent ideological connotation of Confucianism. Through moral cultivation and self-improvement, people can break through the constraints of their own limitations, achieve the lofty realm of unity with heaven and earth, and realize the sublimation and perfection of their personality.<sup>[2]12-23</sup>

The inherent transcendence endows people with the spiritual drive to pursue excellence and progress, inspiring them to constantly explore and innovate in the fields of morality and aesthetics. In modern aesthetic education, we can draw on the Confucian concept of inner transcendence, cultivate students' self-transcendence consciousness and innovative spirit, guide them to establish lofty life goals and lofty aesthetic ideals, and thus pursue higher realms and values in artistic creation and aesthetic appreciation. At the same time, Confucianism's internal transcendence also emphasizes unity with the internal, believing that the Tao of Heaven, nature, and destiny are interconnected, and that the Tao of Heaven and humanity are mutually interconnected without essential differences. This idea provides important theoretical support for modern aesthetic education, enabling us to focus on cultivating students' inner qualities and spiritual realm in education and teaching, and achieve the harmonious unity of external beauty and internal beauty.

### **3. The discourse between traditional Confucian philosophy of mind and nature and modern aesthetic education**

In the context of globalization and multicultural integration, the dialogue between traditional Confucian philosophy of mind and nature and modern aesthetic education has become possible. The two exhibit profound intrinsic connections in terms of educational goals, aesthetic values, and practical paths, providing unique theoretical resources and practical wisdom for the development of modern aesthetic education.

#### **3.1. Traditional Confucian morality has no direction, but modern aesthetics is not utilitarian**

The concept of 'no waiting' as a symmetry of 'waiting' was first proposed by Zhuangzi. Zhuangzi believed that entering a state of "selflessness," "uselessness," "anonymity," and "no waiting" for objects can achieve the transcendence of "ultimate human" and "divine human." Mencius integrated the meaning of "no waiting" into moral cultivation, pointing out that people have two types of desires: "seeking those who are outside" and "seeking those who are within themselves." The improvement of morality does not rely on external conditions, but rather points to the elevation of the inner spiritual realm. Confucianism emphasizes that morality has no waiting for nature, that is, the shaping and improvement of the moral realm do not require external utilitarian drive, but should return to the original heart and self prove and self recognize. The core of this kind of morality without direction lies in the improvement of the personality realm, which is inherently related to the non-utilitarian nature of modern aesthetics.<sup>[3]33-41</sup>

The non-utilitarian nature of modern aesthetics originates from Kant's aesthetics. Kant believed that aesthetic emotions have no interest, and beauty is a pleasurable object without any interest relationship. The aesthetic subject needs to abandon the desire to possess physical properties in order to become a true aesthetic person. Form is the core element that triggers beauty, and beauty is related to the form of things rather than their essence. Although aesthetic activities are essentially non-utilitarian, as human practical activities, they inevitably contain the utilitarian nature of the subject. Aesthetic non-utilitarianism emphasizes transcending practical utilitarianism, rather than denying the intrinsic utilitarianism of aesthetics. It is an experiential activity based on practical utilitarianism and transcending utilitarianism.

Both Confucian morality without direction and modern aesthetics without utilitarianism have the function of transcending secular utilitarian purposes. Both liberate and elevate human instincts and emotions through the inherent transcendence and universality of aesthetics, shaping and elevating the realm of personality, forming a complete personality and noble

character. Unlike Kant's separation of beauty and goodness, Confucianism advocates for the unity of beauty and goodness in the boundless nature of the mind. Goodness, as an external moral norm, can be internalized as an internal moral law within the individual, leading to a tendency towards individual emotional desires, achieving the harmony of sensibility and rationality, enhancing the subject's personality, and achieving the state of ultimate goodness and beauty. This provides useful inspiration for modern aesthetic education, helping it to transcend the dilemma of separating beauty and goodness, and achieve the organic integration of the two.

#### **3.2. Traditional Confucian values align with the emotional dimensions of modern aesthetic education and sensory education**

Modern aesthetic education emphasizes sensory education, with the core of cultivating individuals' sensory abilities and aesthetic perception. The term "aesthetic education" coined by Schiller originally means sensory education. He advocates for the restoration of human sensory nature through aesthetic education and the harmonious development of sensibility and rationality, in response to the long-term suppression of sensibility by reason and the sluggish sensory ability of modern people. The Confucian cultivation of heart, nature, and emotions is highly compatible with modern aesthetic education in terms of emotional cultivation, providing valuable ideological resources for modern aesthetic education.

In the 1980s, Meng Peiyuan proposed the concept of "emotional Confucianism", believing that "human beings are the existence of emotions" and "Confucian philosophy is the philosophy of emotions".<sup>[4]</sup> Confucianism emphasizes the cultivation of ethics and morality in the cultivation of human nature and emotions, while also emphasizing the genuine emotions and feelings that are rooted in the essence of life. The emotion of the unity of morality and aesthetics advocated by it is based on the sincerity and comfort of emotions, and the inevitability of the law is affirmed. It advocates that rationality is also reasonable, and that natural principles and human emotions cannot be separated. This viewpoint is consistent with the concept of modern aesthetic education that emphasizes the coordinated development of sensibility and rationality, and the shaping of a sound personality. Modern aesthetic education aims to cultivate students' sensory perception, aesthetic creativity, and emotional expression abilities, enabling them to feel and appreciate the diversity and richness of the world with an open mind. The Confucian concept of the unity of morality and aesthetics in cultivating the mind, nature, and emotions provides a unique perspective for modern aesthetic education, which helps to cultivate students' moral emotions and humanistic spirit in aesthetic education, achieving the dual goals of aesthetics and education.

### 3.3. The Transcendence of Traditional Confucian Mindset and the Shaping of Modern Aesthetic Personality

In Western culture, the concept of "transcendence" is often related to the religious field, emphasizing the unique transcendence of God. The transcendence of the West revolves around the experience of the soul, characterized by detachment from the body, detachment from society, and detachment from the universe, pursuing the ultimate meaning of transcending time, space, and otherness. Chinese culture, influenced by the concept of "One World" and the tradition of witchcraft and history, emphasizes the continuity of historical processes and the holistic connection between humans, all things, and the universe. The transcendent goal in Confucian theory of mind and nature focuses on the improvement and enhancement of personality, which is highly consistent with the personality shaping goal of modern aesthetic education.<sup>[5]21-33</sup>

Personality, as the practical realization of human ethical values, is related to individuals themselves, as well as their relationships with others and society. The Confucian theory of aesthetic education of the mind and nature holds that the essence of human beings can be cultivated through goodness to achieve a beautiful personality, and this goal can be achieved through transcendence. Confucian traditional philosophy communicates personality with the aesthetic world, believing that personality is the external manifestation of moral cultivation, containing the possibility of free choice and moral realization that transcends life and death, regardless of interests. Its core lies in the transcendent aesthetic ontological experience of the unity of heaven and man, aiming to cultivate an aesthetic personality that is sincere and gentle. Through this personality shaping, individuals can not only reach the state of moral excellence, but also demonstrate noble sentiments and tastes in aesthetics, becoming complete individuals with both moral and aesthetic literacy.

From the perspective of existentialist philosophy, personality is the existence of human beings themselves. In the Confucian theory of mind and nature, the cultivation of personality is centered around inner transcendence. Confucius praised the ultimate beauty and goodness of the Way of Heaven, advocating that sages should emulate the Way of Heaven to educate the people; Mencius proposed that "those who give their all to their hearts know their nature; those who know their nature know heaven", emphasizing the realization of self-recognition and transcendence of morality through their nature, so as to provide the ultimate support for the spiritual world; The Neo-Confucian scholars of the Song and Ming dynasties integrated the Taoist theory of the Tao of Heaven and the Confucian theory of moral cultivation, elevating morality to the level of the natural Tao, highlighting the transcendent and ontological value of morality. From Confucius and Mencius to Neo Confucian scholars of the Song

and Ming dynasties, Confucianism has always centered its discussions on the relationship between morality and personality around the concept of inner transcendence. It believes that when humanity and the Way of Heaven are aligned, individuals can realize their own value and achieve the ideal state of unity between humanity and the Way of Heaven, thus becoming a model of personality with a transcendent level.

Modern aesthetic education is committed to improving people's quality of life and personal qualities. The "moral character" of Confucianism, Confucius, and Mencius is centered around truth and goodness, cultivating a beautiful personality and nurturing a subject life that is full of beauty, emotion, and enjoyment, which is highly compatible with the goals of modern aesthetic education. Modern aesthetic education emphasizes the cultivation of aesthetic literacy, focuses on sensory education, stimulates aesthetic consciousness through creative education, and pursues the artistic transformation of life and the shaping of ideal personality. The personality shaping theory in Confucianism provides a profound philosophical foundation and cultural connotation for modern aesthetic education, which helps cultivate modern citizens with noble moral sentiments, keen aesthetic perception, and innovative spirit in aesthetic education practice, and promotes social civilization progress and cultural prosperity and development.

## 4. Conclusion

The dialogue between traditional Confucian philosophy of mind and nature and modern aesthetic education provides unique theoretical support and practical paths for the development of modern aesthetic education. The moral subjectivity and rationality, organic wholeness of existence, and internal transcendence contained in the Confucian study of mind and nature are highly compatible with the aesthetic nonutilitarianism, sensory education, and personality shaping goals of modern aesthetic education. This study delves into the intrinsic connections between the two in terms of educational goals, aesthetic values, and practical paths, and systematically constructs a theoretical framework for their integration; Introduce cross-cultural comparative research and analyze the influence of Confucian philosophy of mind and nature in the field of international aesthetic education; Based on the contemporary social and cultural background, propose innovative strategies for integrating Confucian philosophy of mind and nature into modern aesthetic education. Future research can further explore specific educational practice paths that combine the two, as well as application strategies in different educational stages and disciplinary fields, strengthen international comparative research, and provide more comprehensive theoretical support for building a modern aesthetic education system with Chinese characteristics.

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