

Laozi's Aesthetic Education Philosophy on Self-Education

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Abstract: The article deduces the concept of self-education that had been advocated by Laozi, the founder of Taoism, in his philosophy on aesthetic education. From the perspective of his philosophical thoughts, this article analyzes the inspiration and inheritance of “aesthetic” in the Chinese traditional culture based on the concept of self-education, discusses the similarities between the concept of self-education and beauty, as well as explores the internal relationship between self-education and aesthetic feeling so that the enlightenment and value of the concept of self-education in aesthetic education can be reflected and learnt.

Keywords: Laozi; Self-education; Aesthetic feeling; Value

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1. Introduction

Laozi is the founder of Taoism. His philosophies have simple dialectic connotations, which reflect the spiritual core of the Taoists' “internal seeking” and “self-education” concepts in his thought on aesthetic education. Laozi's aesthetic education philosophy of self-education has similar theoretical commonalities with the current aesthetic feeling as an experience rather than a cognition. The concept of self-education also conforms to the nature of many aesthetic feelings in the basic principles of aesthetics. Exploring Laozi's aesthetic education philosophy from the implication of his philosophical thoughts is an opportunity to look for a new perspective and direction in the practice of aesthetic education.

2. Rational thinking in Laozi's concept of self-education

Aesthetic education is an education to cultivate people's aesthetic ability, aesthetic mind, and aesthetic taste to form a sound personality and improve the overall quality. The exploration of aesthetic education in Chinese traditional culture has never ceased. The exploration of Laozi's aesthetic education should begin with his philosophical thinking of beauty. Stated in Chapter 10 by Laozi, “Can you eliminate the metaphysical mirror without defects?” In Laozi's view, washing and purifying one's own heart, disregarding subjective consciousness and inner prejudices, as well as attaining real peace and security are the foundation of people's internal search and the cultivation of human nature. Only by purifying one's own heart can one realize the existence of “Tao.” It can be appreciated that Laozi's philosophical reflection is to seek internally, in which more emphasis is placed on people's own reflection on the inner self-seeking and value-seeking behavior. In the history of Chinese aesthetics, many aesthetic thoughts have been influenced by Laozi's philosophy of “eliminating metaphysics.” For example, Lu Ji had stated in *Wen Fu*: “He stands in the center, observing in darkness.” It shows that in order to produce excellent and vivid literary creation, it is necessary to maintain an ethereal and pure heart. Liu Xie had stated in “*Wen Xin Diao Long – Shen Si*”: “Based on Tao Jun's literary thoughts, the most important things are emptiness and

stillness...the spirit of bathing in the snow.” Through the dialogue and quotation of Zhuangzi’s journey to the North, this article explains the importance of inner emptiness and honesty in observing the emergence of aesthetics and beauty, as well as accentuates that one should first seek from the inside in the shaping of beauty, literary, and artistic creation while beginning from a pure and non-miscellaneous mentality. In that way, it is possible to appreciate the occurrence and experience of beauty from Laozi’s thought of “eliminating metaphysics” from the restraint and discovery of oneself. This is the philosophical basis of Laozi’s aesthetic education concept of “self-education.” It had been stated in Chapter 56 by Laozi, “Those who know do not speak.” He believes that relying on language to educate people would lead to confusion. It can be understood that the use of too much language will dispel people’s own feelings of beauty or even harmful to their experience of beauty. Laozi does not advocate excessive pursuit of sensory pleasure and artistic extravagance. “Seeing colors, hearing sounds, and tasting are all based on human nature. If you want to indulge in lust without having moderation, you will rob the human nature and hurt the source. Therefore, we should turn a blind eye to colors, keep our ears away from sounds, and taste without knowing taste ^[1].” In Laozi’s view, people’s senses and perceptual experiences are inherent of the human nature. Any pursuit of sensibility should be moderate. Once excessive indulged without any control, people’s feelings of beauty would be dispelled. Therefore, Laozi had advocated, “teaching without words and self-education ^[2].” The essence of beauty in “eliminating metaphysics” should be explored along with experiencing beauty, creating beauty, and internalizing aesthetic experience in order to achieve self-education with a peaceful and quiet heart rather than external aesthetic education in the manner of indoctrination, which includes excessive language education, gorgeous art education, and ignorance of experiences.

3. Internal relationship between self-education and aesthetic feeling

Self-education is a concept in Laozi’s aesthetic education philosophy to seek internally as well as seek the occurrence and exploration of beauty from one’s own inner peace so as to realize the self-influence of an aesthetic mind and aesthetic taste. Laozi’s concept of self-education mainly describes the presentation and occurrence of aesthetic feeling. As the perceptual knowledge in human nature, beauty does not need to be deliberately sought from the outside nor can be described or guided by external preaching. Different people have different aesthetic feelings for things with the same nature. Therefore, aesthetic feeling has its own characteristics. There are many objective factors, such as different materials, educational background, and personality, that lead to different aesthetic feelings among individuals. Certainly, in order to produce aesthetic feelings, objective and real materials are needed to guide and associate with subjective aesthetic feelings. Similar to Laozi’s concept of self-education, Gadamer had stated in *Truth and Method*, “This is the unity of experience, which itself is the unity of meaning ^[3].” Both of them defined that beauty is an experience, a perception, and not a simple understanding. The value of Laozi’s concept of self-education will be discussed from several important aspects of aesthetic feeling. First of all, aesthetic feeling is non-utilitarian. The fundamental reason is that in aesthetic activities, people disregard the dichotomy of the subject and object, but rely on the unity of the subject and object ^[4]. As Kant had said, “One must have absolutely no preference for the existence of things.” Kant accurately described Laozi’s concept of self-education; that is, only with inner peace and by abandoning utilitarian preferences, beauty can be felt and experienced. Second, aesthetic feeling is creative as it is the image that is formed resulting from the intuition to beautiful things. Self-starting is the first element in the process of image creation. Third, beauty has the characteristic of transcendence. This does not only involve the transcendence of the dichotomy of the subject and object, but also of “self.” As Hegel had mentioned, “Aesthetics has a liberating nature ^[5].” In order to surpass oneself, one should start from oneself and surpass the spiritual self. Therefore, the transcendence of beauty still comes from one’s inner search. Finally, beauty has pleasure, which is based

on transcendence. This pleasure is the pleasure and satisfaction of the inner spirit; the pleasure obtained by internally seeking rather than the physical or material enjoyment brought by external utilitarianism and materials. This pleasure requires inner peace and seeking internally. On the whole, Laozi's aesthetic education philosophy of self-education emphasizes more on personal experience and perception rather than attaching the acquisition and cultivation of beauty to the preaching and exploration from the outside world, which is in line with the law of beauty. Laozi's concept of self-education is the summary of several properties in the current research on aesthetics, which is in line with the nature of aesthetic feeling. Laozi's concept of self-education is closely related to aesthetic feeling. In the shaping of human beauty, it can be appreciated that Laozi had claimed, at the beginning of his education, that aesthetic feelings are sought by returning to one's own self in order to feel and experience beauty as well as cultivate one's own aesthetic taste and ability. This is of research value and wisdom.

4. Enlightenment of the concept of self-education in aesthetic education

Laozi's concept of self-education is a new idea and perspective in aesthetic education. Based on the thought of Taoist philosophy, it is the self-experience of seeking and exploring internally, which provides a good reference value in the current aesthetic education. First of all, when learning about Laozi's aesthetic education philosophy of self-education, one should be aware that in the new era, more guidance should be provided in aesthetic education so that the educatee is able to start from themselves, observe their own experience and perception of beauty, as well as the self-education of beauty through self-thinking, self-experience, self-inspiration, and self-perception. Second, it is necessary to reflect that the practice of aesthetic education along with art education, as the carriers, should focus more on the experience rather than skills training. In art education, educators should guide students to realize self-experience and self-reflection by means of perceptual knowledge, such as vision, hearing, and touch, as well as through ways of guidance and encouragement. Perception and feeling of beauty experience should be realized from the inside instead of just learning artistic skills and expression methods while neglecting the experience of beauty and inner search. Third, in the process of aesthetic education, educators should relax and trust their students, change the education from "active education" to "self-education," give full play to the advantages and characteristics of Laozi's concept of self-education, improve students' aesthetic abilities based on their own experiences, as well as learn to self-reflect for the cultivation of aesthetic minds, realization of inner peace and tranquility, as well as the improvement of aesthetic taste. Finally, in the research and application of Laozi's aesthetic education philosophy of self-education, it is important to avoid being one-sided or extreme by insisting that there is no external beauty, or even break away from the objective material basis to pursue absolute aesthetic feelings. The methods of dialectical materialism and historical materialism should be used to analyze and deal with various philosophical thoughts in order to avoid from being confused. The great philosopher, Marx, once pointed out that "labor creates beauty." Labor first creates human beings; human beings then create things in line with the law of beauty through labor. In creating beauty and experiencing it, the dialectical unity of beauty should be viewed objectively and rationally. The value and utility of self-education should be continuously examined while being aware of the deficiency and historical limitation of the concept of self-education. By dialectically viewing the concept of self-education and taking its essence, only then can the concept of self-education play a positive role in promoting aesthetic education.

Chinese traditional culture is broad and profound, in which Chinese aesthetic has been inherited for a long time. In that way, the Chinese culture and art are profound and diverse. This is closely related to different philosophies in China and the West. Nevertheless, China and the West should strengthen their cultural exchanges and learn from each other for the continuous integration of the human society. China should learn from western aesthetic education ideas while the West should recognize the uniqueness and

inclusiveness of the Chinese aesthetics. Only in this way can the human society continue to promote beauty and aesthetic education.

Disclosure statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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