Wang Guowei’s Application of Kant

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Abstract: Wang Guowei (1887-1927) was a late Qing scholar who assumed a pioneering role in introducing Western philosophy to China and is regarded as the founder of Chinese ideas about philosophical and literary-aesthetic modernity. His introduction and interpretation of Western ideas has not only inspired later scholars to become interested in European philosophy, but also represents a “showcase” of the “localness” of a cultural interpretation. This paper focuses on Kant’s influence on Wang Guowei, especially Wang’s use of Kant’s epistemological, ethical, and aesthetic theories to reconstruct important Chinese philosophical conceptions such as xing性, li理, ming命, ya雅, and what he referred to as Confucius’s meiyuzhuyi美育主義 (aesthetic educational-ism). The paper aims to enable readers to achieve a better grasp of the continuity and revolution that accompany the emergence of Chinese modernity as well as a better understanding of comparative culture (philosophy) in its “primitive” phase.

Keywords Wang Guowei; Kant; xing; li; ming; ya; aesthetic education-ism

1. INTRODUCTION

In Wang Guowei’s 王國維 (1887-1927) rather short period of passion for “Western learning” (西學), from 1901 to 1907, he paid significant attention to three German philosophers: Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). Among the three, Schopenhauer’s pessimistic philosophy is conventionally thought to have influenced him most profoundly, a belief which is supported by Wang’s own tragic death; he committed suicide in Kunming Lake at the Summer Palace on June 2, 1927.¹

Despite Wang’s complex indebtedness to Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Kant, in this paper I focus only on Kant’s influence. In the author’s “Preface” to the Jing’an Wenji 靜安文集 (Jing’an Collection), published in 1905, Wang wrote, “I started to study philosophy between 1901-1902, and I began to read Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason in the Spring of 1903. However, I had difficulty in understanding it, therefore I turned to Schopenhauer and loved his works…in the spring of 1905, I returned to Kant” (Wang 1983, Section III, 1). In 1907, in Sanshi Zixue 三位一体 (三自序 一), The First Author’s Note on Reaching Thirty Years of Age, Wang describes his experience of studying Kant in more detail. Wang tells us that he read Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason in both the Japanese and English translations. He was guided by his Japanese teacher Fujita Toyohachi 藤田豐八 (1869-1929), and stopped his study in this early period at the “Transcendental Analytic” (Transzendentale Analytik). He then turned to Schopenhauer’s The World as Will and Representation, finding the essay “Criticism of the Kantian Philosophy,” which appeared as the Appendix to Schopenhauer’s work, helpful in his understanding of Kant. Wang returned to Kant’s ethical and aesthetic works later in 1907 (Wang 1983, Section IV, 19-21; Yuan and Liu 1996, 22-46).

Most of Wang Guowei’s writing about Kant, as well as his other work on Western and Chinese philosophies, was published in the Journal of Educational World (Jiaoyu Shijie 教育
world), for which he served as the chief editor from 1904-1907. The Journal of Educational World was the first educational journal in China and was founded by Wang’s mentor Luo Zhengyu (1866-1940) in 1901. It played an important role in introducing the new learning (i.e., Western learning) to Chinese society, and helped to fuel the social and educational reformations at the beginning of 20th century. The journal ceased publishing in 1907.2

Wang’s works about Kant can be divided into three categories:3 One, translations and introductions (7); two, Wang’s own writings on Kant (5); and three, Wang’s use of Kant to interpret Chinese philosophy (5).6

The articles I analyze in this paper belong to the third category—the ones that use Kant’s theories to interpret traditional Chinese philosophical and aesthetic concepts and ideas. Wang is regarded as the founder of Chinese ideas of philosophical and literary-aesthetic modernity (Wen 1993,1-22; Liu 1996, 58-79; Liu 1998, 310-311; Zhang 1999, 91). Therefore, interpreting Kant’s influence on him, especially his use of Kant’s epistemological, ethical, and aesthetic theories to reconstruct the important Chinese philosophical and aesthetic concepts, such as xing性, li理, ming命, and ya雅, is essential to achieve a better grasp of the continuity and revolution that accompanied the emergence of Chinese modernity, as well as a better understanding of comparative philosophy in its “primitive” phase.

Wang Guowei’s unusual reading of Kant is defined by his unconscious motivation to reform culture in the turbulent years of Chinese history. On the one hand, he brings a new perspective to traditional Chinese philosophical and aesthetic concepts. On the other, his practical application of Kant’s theories implies a departure from Kant. I will divide my discussion into two main parts. First, I will discuss Wang Guowei’s use of Kant’s epistemological and ethical theories, then I will provide an overview and critique of his application of Kant’s aesthetic theories.

II. WANG GUOWEI’S APPLICATION OF KANT’S EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL THEORIES

Three articles will be discussed in this section: “Lun Xing论性” (3a, see note 6), “Shi Li释理” (3b, see note 6), and “Yuan Ming原命” (3c, see note 6). I will outline the main idea of each article and then summarize what I consider to be Wang’s most important contributions in regard to how Kant was read through the eyes of Chinese philosophers and how Wang Guowei’s Chinese sensibility plays a role in his “modern” interpretation of Kant.

“Lun Xing” (“On Human Nature” 1904):
In this essay, Wang maintains that every theory on human nature in both Chinese and Western philosophical history is in contradiction with itself since xing性 (human nature) is “beyond our knowledge.” What underlies this position? Wang starts by applying the distinction in types of knowledge as Kant defines them in The Critique of Pure Reason. Universal cognitions, which have the character of inner necessity, must at the same time be clear and certain in themselves, independently of experience; hence Kant calls them a priori cognitions. Those ideas that are merely derived from experience and not of necessity are cognized a posteriori, or empirically (Kant 1998, 127).

Wang summarizes the idea thusly in his article: “A priori knowledge is independent from all particular experiences and it shapes and constructs our experience. A posteriori knowledge derives from experience.”

“先天的知識如空間時間之形式及悟性之範疇，此不待經驗而生，而經驗之所由以成立者………後天的知識，乃經驗上之所教我者。” (Wang 1983, Section III, 2)
Wang continues:

A priori knowledge is the knowledge of form, not the knowledge of essence (material, matter) and human nature (xing) is the essence (material) of knowledge. However, human nature (xing) is not a posteriori knowledge either since the nature we define through experience is influenced by birth (heredity) and external environment, it is not natural itself. Therefore, human nature (xing) is beyond our knowledge.

先天中所能知者，知識之形式而不及於知識之材質，而性固一知識之材質也，若謂於後天中知之則所知者又非性，何則？吾人經驗上所知之性，其受遺傳與外部之影響者不少，則其非性之本來面目，固已久矣，故斷言之曰：性之為物，超乎吾人之知識外也。（Wang 1983, Section III, 2)

While Kant’s distinction of “a priori cognition independently of experience” (Kant 1998, 129) and experience as “a posteriori” aims to advocate a “transcendental” philosophy that synthesizes the rational and empirical types of knowledge, Wang Guowei applies this distinction itself as the foundation of his argument about xing. Wang defines a priori knowledge as the knowledge of pure form, while human nature is the material of knowledge, hence not a priori, and it is not a posteriori knowledge either because there are conditions not subject to experience. Thus, for Wang, human nature (xing) cannot be categorized as either a priori knowledge or a posteriori knowledge—it is simply “beyond our knowledge.” Following this logic, Wang concludes that every theory that attempts to theorize about human nature is self-contradictory.

Since xing is beyond our knowledge, however, we cannot help but intend to theorize about it. There are only two ways to theorize about it: either from transcendental theory or from experience. Interpreting xing through experience will end up in the good/evil dualism. Meanwhile, human beings wish to pursue knowledge and to construct a consistent analysis. Therefore, we also create theories of good nature, theories of evil nature, and absolutely transcendent monistic nature. Although theorizing xing from human experience is not discussing xing itself, yet it will avoid contradiction. Discussing xing through transcendental theory and pursuing a consistent analysis, one has freedom to make a theory but when he applies it to our experience, he has to justify himself, then he has to end up with the good/evil dualism. Therefore, every theory (of human nature) in human history will result in contradiction.

人性之超乎吾人之知識外既如斯矣，於是欲論人性者非馳於空想之域勢不得不從經驗上推論之。夫經驗上之所謂性固非性之本，然苟執經驗上之性以為性，則必先有善惡二元論起焉……故從經驗上立論，不得不盤旋於善惡二元論之胯下，然吾人之知識必求其說明之統一，而決不以此善惡二元論為滿足也，於是性善論、性惡論及超絕的一元論（即性無善無不善論及可以為善可以為不善論）接武而起。夫立於經驗之上以言性，雖所論者非真性，然尚不至於矛盾也。至超乎經驗之外而求其說明之統一，則雖反對之說，吾人得持其一，然不至自相矛盾不止，何則？超乎經驗之外，吾人固有言論之自由，然至欲說明經驗上之事實時，則又不得不自圓其說，而復反於二元論，故古今言性者之自相矛盾，必然之理也。（Wang 1983, Section III, 2-3)
To highlight the unique features of Wang’s approach, consider that Mencius emphasizes that human nature is good. This is a monistic theory. Mencius refuses to admit that sensuous desires also come from human nature. Experience cannot prove his monistic theory. Therefore, it eventually falls into the debate over good/evil dualism. Xunzi has the same problem. He differentiates between ordinary people and the sage. Where does the sage come from, then? Furthermore, in Xunzi’s thought, li is made by the sages for rectifying human desires, and therefore, li and yi can be considered as deriving from human desires. Therefore, there is a contradiction. The Song dynasty Neo-Confucian philosophers established their views of human nature from their different metaphysical perspectives. However, Wang comments that since most of them follow Mencius, none of them avoid the contradiction found in his approach. For example, they distinguish qizhi zhixing 氣質之性 (habitual nature) from tian di zhixing 天地之性 (instinctive [inborn] nature). Wang wonders how we could categorize habitual nature if we exclude instinctive nature from habitual nature, and hold that human nature is good? Again, if instinctive nature is included in habitual nature, where is habitual nature? In any case, Wang concludes that we inevitably end in dualism whenever we theorize about human nature. Wang holds that even Kant himself cannot avoid the same problem: Kant believes morality is derived rationally from the categorical imperative, but he also concludes that from the very beginning human nature is evil (Wang 1983, Section III, 2). Wang sees a contradiction in these two arguments, and claims that Kant understands human nature as evil without offering any further explanation. It seems to me that Wang’s reading of Kantian ethics (moral law, right action, good will, duty, etc.) is shaped by the shadow of Xunzi. Although Wang’s argument is based on his use of Kant’s distinctions between a priori and a posteriori knowledge, he develops his own argument (i.e., monastic theory vs. dualism) without further referring to Kant’s theory.

To put it another way, Kant’s theories of knowledge, understanding, reasoning, and experience offer Wang a new way of looking at the topic of human nature in both cultures. Yet Wang’s argument is that all the theories about human nature in both cultures and throughout the history of philosophy are self-contradictory, since xing or human nature does not belong to either type of knowledge as understood by Kant. Philosophers (including Kant), Wang claims, fail to recognize that they apply theory to something beyond our knowledge. Therefore, Wang’s conclusion is that human nature cannot be theoretically explicated, and discussing xing cannot help us to understand ourselves better or guide our self-cultivation. It may seem to us that this kind of deconstructive discussion does not solve any problem at all.

As an enthusiast of new learning at a particular moment in history, however, Wang is more excited about finding a new philosophical language or structure to discuss an issue than discovering or constructing something concrete (in this case, a theory of human nature). While Wang’s article is inspiring in that it helps us rethink the issue of human nature through a historical and comparative perspective, it is also an example of methodological play and practice. Actually, many articles in his Jing'an Collection, written between 1904-1907, follow the same pattern. We can also see Wang’s method of using Kant for this kind of methodological exploration in “Shi Li” and “Yuan Ming.”

“Shi Li” (“Analysis of Li” 1904) compares the Chinese conception of li 理 with its counterparts in Western philosophy. Wang’s understanding and interpretation of li is clearly inspired by his reading of Kant’s theories of “pure reason” and “practical reason.” But again, how much have Kant’s ideas been modified by Wang? Wang begins with the idea that li has two kinds of meaning, liyou 理由 (reason) and lixing 理性 (rationality). If we examine the etymological origin of the Chinese li and its Western counterparts, we can see that it shares
connotations with the Western philosophical ideas of logos (Greek), ratio (Latin), Ver- nunft (German), raison (French), and reason (English). Wang concludes that Western and Chinese traditions interpret li as having both metaphysical and ethical meanings. However, unlike Kant, Wang Guowei does not intend to apply this understanding of li to either theoretical or practical principles. Instead, he emphasizes, “li is only one of the functions of our mind and the things that we can analyze, that is all.” (“然則所謂理者，不過謂吾心分析之作用及物之可分析者而已矣。”) (Wang 1983, Section III, 12).

Although Wang defines li as the unique mental quality that distinguishes the human being from other creatures in the world, he denies or discourages metaphysical and especially ethical interpretations of li, writing:

> The distinct knowledge derived from our sensibility, understanding and conceptual knowledge belongs only to human beings. Therefore, we attribute metaphysical truth and ethical good to our rationality. However, one does not know that rationality is only the function of our understanding that creates concepts and defines the relationship between conceptions, which have nothing to do with ethical values. The misunderstanding of li is because it is a general conception.

> 惟理性之能力為動物之所無而人類之所獨有故世人遂以形而上學之所以真與倫理學之所以善盡歸諸理之屬性，不知理性者，不過吾人知力之作用，以造概念以定概念之關係，除為行為之手段外，毫無關於倫理上之價值，其所以有此誤解者，由理之一字乃一普遍之概念故。 (Wang 1983, Section III, 25)

As we can see, this discussion could be viewed as a revolution in the conventional understanding of li, which was established by the Song-Ming (Lixue) school of philosophers and developed by their followers. Over time, the Li school of philosophers developed some rather robust socio-ethical principles such as that the so-called tianli 天理 (heavenly principle) can only be gained by eradicating humans’ natural desires (renyu 人慾). That Wang Guowei’s calls for the reduction of the psychological, metaphysical, and ethical reasoning about li in Confucian tradition comes at the beginning of the 20th century is significant. On the one hand, Wang’s warning is deconstructive in the sense that many people had become victims of the dogmatic and irrational application of Confucian teaching (in this case of li) in Chinese society. On the other hand, it is constructive since Wang Guowei’s emphasis on the pure mental quality/character of li is “scientific” and “objective,” and thus insightful and meaningful for enlightening the benighted.

“Yuan Ming” (“On the Origin of Ming” 1906) considers ming, which might be the third most important philosophical term in Chinese history (after xing and li). Ming is usually connected with tian 天, as in tianming 天命, the command of tian. For example, the newly excavated early Chinese bamboo manuscript Xingzimingchu 性自命出, from the Guodian tombs, which was published in 1998 and generally agreed among Confucian historians to be dated to the 4th-3rd century BCE, makes use of the concept of ming and claims that xing, human nature, actually arises from ming—xingzimingchu 性自命出, and that ming descends from tian—mingzitianjiang 命自天降 (Ding 2000, 3). The use of the expression mingzitianjiang immediately reminds one of the very first sentence of the Zhongyong, which says, “天命之謂性” (i.e., “What tian commands [tianming] is called xing”). Therefore, “What tian commands” has always been an intriguing question in the Chinese philosophical tradition, since the understanding of the relationship between tian and ren 人 (humanity) differs among philosophers. Chinese philosophers tended either to view tian as holding the absolute power over human beings, which resulted in fatalism, or denying its absolute power, which
resulted in nonfatalism. According to Wang, neither of those two theories has philosophical significance; since no Chinese philosopher holds a determinist perspective when looking at ming, few of them offer any discussion of free will. Yet, inspired by Kant’s moral philosophy, Wang focuses on the concepts of determinism and free will, and comments that the tension between determinism and free will has been an important philosophical topic in Western (Kantian) philosophy, and should receive some attention from Chinese scholars as well.

Kant claims that, “The concept of freedom is the stone of stumbling for all empiricists, but at the same time the key to the loftiest practical principles for critical moralists, who perceive by its means that they must necessarily proceed by a rational method” (Kant 1997, 7). Wang Guowei understands that Kant tries to blend theoretical and practical reason when dealing with the issue of free will. Kant’s concept of the categorical imperative is his application of pure practical reason as a fundamental principle of our moral duties. Kant argues that morality implies rationality, and rationality implies free will. Thus, Kant claims, “freedom and unconditional practical law reciprocally imply each other” (Kant 1997, 26). Despite this understanding, Wang focuses more on the conception of zeren 責任 (duties, responsibilities) than on free will. Not only does he claim that Schopenhauer’s theory of denial of the will to live is only an empty exercise, but he also holds the following:

Thus, if we maintain that our actions are necessarily determinable and thus not free, where does the understanding of zeren (duties, responsibilities) come from? I would say: each action must have its external and inherent reasons. If those reasons do not exist at present, they must have existed in the past; if they do not exist in our consciousness, they must exist in our unconsciousness. Therefore, those reasons must have their reasons (to exist) and we are determined by those reasons, and we cannot choose. For example, some of the reasons certainly are due to education or the influence of the society. One lives in such a society and is educated by this kind of education, even though one has some other reasoning to determine, those reasons will still often make one not to realize that the current action is not necessary to reach the life goal. It is like one has full freedom but at the same time he has the feelings/understanding of duties, responsibilities or remorse. Those feelings, as some kind of psychological force, will sufficiently determine why one will act in a certain way in the future. They are the practical values of the feeling/understanding of duties and responsibilities. Therefore, the feeling/understanding of duties and responsibilities can only influence later actions but it is unable to determine the freedom of action before it happens. I believe that the tension between these two theories (determinism and free will) could be connected with the conception of ming. Therefore, I made my comments here and wish people to know that the idea of duty and responsibility has its practical values and its (ethical) value does not have to refer to free will.
Although Wang Guowei appreciates Kant's (and Schopenhauer's) discussion on free will, he believes that free will is not a transcendental necessity, since one should understand that responsibility (to society, nation, etc.) has practical value in understanding and establishing our ming. Wang Guowei introduces the concepts of determinism and free will to his Chinese readers in order to bring a new perspective on the traditional conception of ming. However, his goal is quite different from Kant's in constructing the pure rational foundations for morality. Wang's conclusion is that we should understand that it is our ming to take responsibility for our society because as relational beings our ming cannot be separated from the context in which we live (our family, community). Apparently, Wang's unconscious cultural sensibility plays a role in his understanding and interpretation of Kant. Wang seems very cautious about valorizing the individual, while doing so is crucial to both Kant and Schopenhauer's ethical theories. Wang's argument in this essay is a good example of how he applies the new concepts of Western learning to promote traditional Confucian relational values.

III. Wang Guowei's Application of Kant's Aesthetic Theories

Two of Wang Guowei's articles will be discussed in this section: “Guya zhi zai Meixue shang zhi Weizhi” (古雅之在美學上之位置) (“The Position of Guya in Aesthetic Thinking,” 3d, see note 6) and "Kongzi zhi Meiyuzhuyi" (孔子之美育主義) (“Confucius' Aesthetic Educational-ism,” 3e, see note 6). I will use these essays to discuss how Wang's aesthetic thinking was influenced by Kant.

"The Position of Guya" was written in 1907. In this essay, Wang creates the aesthetic term guya 古雅 to mean classical elegance. Wang's neologism occurs under the inspiration of Kant's aesthetic thinking. Kant discusses two important aesthetic terms in his own work—the beautiful (youmei 優美) and the sublime (hongzhuang 宏壯). Wang Guowei maintains that between these two aesthetic understandings is a third that Kant does not discuss, i.e., guya—classical elegance.

Ya 雅, elegance, has been one of the most important aesthetic terms in Chinese literary and artistic appreciation. Classical Confucian texts are known for emphasizing the importance of elegance in rituals and music in the educational system. This tradition can be traced back to the Zhou dynasty (11th to 3rd century BCE). While the Zhou court emphasized the political and educational importance of dance and music, the Liuwu 六舞 (Six Major Dances [or Dance and Music of Six Dynasties]) had already been developed. The Liuwu were used as instruction manuals for court ritual music, which is called yayue 雅樂—literally, “elegant music.” As is well known, the Shijing 詩經 (Classic of Poetry) has two types of ritual and sacrificial songs, which are called daya 大雅 (major Odes) and xiaoya 小雅 (minor Odes), respectively. These Odes consist mainly of the hymns or eulogies used to praise the founders of the Zhou dynasty or to be sung in sacrificial ceremonies or at court banquets. Traditionally, the political and educational role of ya (elegance) poetry is emphasized, as it is defined in the "Preface" of the Shijing: “Ya means correct. They tell the causes of why the royal government decays or flourishes.” (Shijing 1991, 36).

The aesthetic principle of ya is well expressed by a sentence in the Analects: “Pleasing without being excessive, mourning without being injurious.” (Lunyu 樂而不淫，哀而不傷)
Wang Guowei builds on the traditional aesthetic conception of ya to create the new aesthetic term guya (classical elegance). Guya, according to Wang, is "something between the beautiful (youmei) and the sublime (hongzhuang)" (Wang 1983, Section IV, 27). Despite its relationship to the beautiful and the sublime, guya has a unique and "independent aesthetic value" (Wang 1983, Section IV, 24).

Wang Guowei understands both the beautiful and the sublime to belong to the first or the immediate form of beauty; guya—classical elegance—belongs to the secondary form, yet is expressive of the first type. It is beauty of the first form that cannot exist in nature but only in art (Wang 1983, Section IV, 24).

For Wang, guya as the secondary form of beauty either reflects certain intrinsic forms of beauty or creates a new form to express them. Therefore, the first form has the secondary form and its value, but not vice versa. The first form (the beautiful and the sublime) is more intense and explicit, while the secondary form is more subtle and implicit. Ordinary things are turned into art by the hands of a painter and poet. They are beautiful because they carry the secondary form, guya—which is also necessary for achieving the first forms, the beautiful and the sublime. Therefore:

*Classical elegance* is acquired and empirical, the beautiful and the sublime are innate and *a priori*, therefore universal and necessary. Furthermore, the judgment of guya changes throughout time. What we view as classical today is only because we view it from the standpoint of the present time. The works from ancient times are all more elegant than today's works; although ancient literature was not good, the reader of today would still consider it as elegant. Therefore, the judgment of classical elegance is acquired, empirical, particular and circumstantial.

Kant claims that "beautiful art is the art of genius" (2000, 186). However, in the work of guya, Wang Guowei maintains, this is not always the case:

Since it does not exist in nature, and its judgment is derived from experience, therefore, the work of classical elegance is not necessarily created by genius. It could be achieved through practice and refinement.

Should we consider, then, that the value of classical elegance is less important than the beautiful and the sublime? "No," Wang Guowei argues:

Agreeable but not useful is the quality for all kinds of art which applies to the form of the beautiful and the sublime, as well as classical elegance. The form of the beautiful makes the heart peaceful; the form of classical elegance makes the heart rest, therefore, the latter could be considered as the low level of the beauty. The form of the sublime often arouses feelings of awe through its irresistible magnitude; and the form of classical elegance arouses admiration and amazement through its extraor-
ordinary and unworldly image. Amazement is the start of admiration. Therefore you also can say that classical elegance is the lower type of the sublime. Hence, the position of classical elegance is in between the beautiful and the sublime and bears the qualities of both. As for the practical aspect of it, since the classical elegance can be acquired and cultivated therefore it could be a “ferry bridge” (i.e., a vehicle for) for aesthetic education. Therefore, though the aesthetic value of classical elegance cannot compare with the beautiful and the sublime, it is effective and efficient for its educational value for the common people.

可爱的而不可利用者，一切美术品之公性也。优美与宏壮然，古雅亦然。优美之形式使人心和平，古雅之形式使人心休息，故亦可谓之低度之优美；宏壮之形式常以不可抵抗之势力唤起人钦仰之情，古雅之形式则以不习於世俗之耳目故，而唤起一种之惊訝，惊訝者，钦仰之情之初步，故虽谓古雅为低度之宏壮亦无不可也。故古雅之位置，可谓在优美与宏壮之间，而兼有此二者之性质也。至论其实践之方面，则以古雅之能力能由修養得之，故可为美术普及之津梁。虽中智以下之人，不能创造优美及宏壮之物者，亦得由修養而有古雅之创造力；又虽不能喻优美及宏壮之价值者，亦得於优美、宏壮中之古雅之原质，或於古雅之制作物中得其直接之慰藉，故古雅之价值，自美学上观之诚不能及优美及宏壮，然自其教育普及之效言之，则虽谓其范围较广，成效较著可也。 (Wang 1983, Section IV, 27)

The above-quoted text shows that Wang Guowei’s interpretation of Kant’s aesthetic theory is rather simplified (even shallow) and liberal. Wang uses “agreeable but not useful” to describe all kinds of art, and this represents his own simplified (mis)interpretation of Kant’s theory of beauty as “an object of satisfaction without any interest” (Kant 2000, 96). He seems to identify the agreeable with the beautiful, which is clearly divergent from Kant’s meaning (Kant 2000, 90-98).

Wang also seems to claim that sublimity is a form of the beautiful, which is also contrary to Kant’s distinction of the aesthetic forms. Kant defines the beautiful as “an object or a kind of representation through a satisfaction or dissatisfaction without any interest” (Kant 2000, 96). For Kant, while “the beautiful in nature is in calm contemplation,” the sublime is “absolutely great, and consequently also a relation to the law of reason to adopt this alone as the supreme measure of magnitude” (Kant 2000, 141). Thus, “the inner perception of the inadequacy of any sensible standard for the estimation of magnitude by reason corresponds with reason’s laws, and is a displeasure that arouses the feeling of our supersensible vocation in us, in accordance with which it is purposive and thus a pleasure to find every standard of sensibility inadequate for the ideas of the understanding” (Kant 2000, 141). In contrast, Wang Guowei simply reads the form of the sublime as being capable of “arous[ing] feelings of awe through its irresistible magnitude” (Wang 1983, Section IV, 27). He does not acknowledge, as Kant does, that it is “inadequacy of reason,” not sensibility, that is crucial for sublimity.

Wang Guowei is not (and does not intend to be) a faithful interpreter of Kant. Rather, he seeks to use Kant for his own purposes. He aims to name an art form for the purpose of educating common people. This is why he emphasizes the “acquired” and “cultivated” values of guya in contrast to the art of genius. This practical objective could be viewed as the continuing interest of Wang’s aesthetic educational-ism, which he shows more explicitly in an earlier article entitled “Kongzi zhi Meiyuzhuyi” (Confucius’ Aesthetic-Educational-ism).
Wang wrote "Kongzi zhi Meiyuzhuyi" in 1904. In this article, he actually applies three philosophers’ thoughts—Kant’s, Schopenhauer’s, and Schiller’s—to his interpretation of Confucius’s thinking, which he claims is "aesthetic-educational-ism." Wang views human-kind as consumed with “desiring personal interest,” whereas beauty is the pleasure of disinterest and the only way to end the suffering caused by desire. He laments,

What does one labor for day and night? For personal interest. Since one has life, one has desires, and desires seek for satisfaction. Therefore, (there arises) the distinction of gains and losses. Gains bring lust, losses bring grief. Everybody is the same... Avoiding suffering and seeking for enjoyment, loving gains and disliking loss, unwilling to yield and eager to win—everybody is the same, too. Those struggles are carried within and will cause suffering, and when they are brought out to society, they are crimes. Could anything in the world eliminate this idea of personal interest and obliterate the distinction of property to reduce the crimes of the world and to end the suffering of the human heart? Yes, that is beauty.

Wang’s reading of the truth of life as desire and suffering sounds pessimistic, which could be concluded as the influence of Buddhism and Schopenhauer. Yet Wang’s focus is different. He concentrates more on the “cure” for rather than the disease of suffering. In fact, in “The First Author’s Note on Reaching Thirty Years of Age,” Wang expresses his concern and claims that “The (haunting) problem of the universe and human life” drove him to search for answers in Western philosophy (Wang 1983, Section IV, 20). He finds that Kant’s theory of aesthetic judgment—the disinterested pleasure—不關利害之快樂—is the way to help one to rescue oneself and to transcend this world of interest (Wang 1997, 155).

Wang believes that Western philosophy as a whole follows the tradition of applying aesthetics as an aid for moral education. He comments, “Western philosophers since Aristotle use aesthetics to assist moral education, which continues to Schiller” (Wang 1997, 155). Then he elaborates on Schiller’s theory and states that the aesthetic is the bridge between the material and moral worlds. The highest ideal lies in the 美丽之心 (beautiful soul); therefore, one cannot separate aesthetic education from moral education. Wang returns to the Confucian tradition to claim that Confucius’s teaching starts and ends with aesthetic education. This is shown in the Analects, where Confucius emphasizes the importance of poetry; it can also be seen in Xunzi’s discussion of music, and so forth. Wang laments, at the end of this article, that beauty has been ignored by Chinese society for a long time and, he argues, the educator should take responsibility for restoring Confucius’s aesthetic-educational-ism to the society.

We are not a society of fine arts. Everything is judged by its practical use. We have been ignoring beauty for a long time… therefore all the fine arts cannot reach their full development. Alas, beauty has been ignored for a long time. Nobody knows that the use of the useless is more superior than the use of the useful. The aesthetic taste is so lacking in our society that we are not surprised to see that people are seeking for their personal interests and have lost their way to return! The teaching of the
sage is definitely not what those narrow-minded Confucians are teaching, that is why I elaborate on Confucius’ aesthetic education to educate the educators.

我中國非美術之國也。一切學業，以利用之大宗旨貫註之⋯⋯美之為物，為世人所不顧久矣⋯⋯故一切美術，皆不能達完全之域。美之為物，為世所不顧久矣，庸讵知無用之用，有勝於有用之用者乎？所以我國人審美之趣味之缺乏如此，則其朝夕營營，逐一己之利害而不知返者，安足怪哉！安足怪哉！庸讵知吾國所尊為大聖者，其教育固異於彼賤儒之所為乎？故備舉孔子美育之說，且詮其所以然之理，世之言教育者，可以觀焉。(Wang 1997, 158)

In this rather short article, Wang Guowei not only synthesizes Kant’s, Schopenhauer’s, and Schiller's theories on aesthetic education in a very broad and free way, but he also connects Confucius's teachings by means of a free interpretation. However, his comments reveal that his understanding of Western aesthetics is heavily influenced by a Chinese cultural sensibility—the inseparability of the beautiful and the good (meishan tongyi guan 美善統一觀). We can see this by comparing Wang with Schiller. Schiller was inspired by the enlightenment thinking of Kant, and he believed that human history is evolving from the natural state to the spiritual (rational) one. Schiller’s aestheticism is based on his reflection on Western history, and he makes the aesthetic world the bridge to the material world, and the moral world a strategy to reestablish the natural human being as a rational one. In Western tradition, “progress” is the truth of life, but Schiller’s nostalgia for ancient Greece represents a new approach towards contemporary issues. Ancient Greece reminds Schiller of the unity of sensation and rationality, and prepares the way for progress. Wang Guowei, on the contrary, does not share this linear and progressive historical thinking. For him, the heart is naturally born for the beautiful and the good. His remark that Confucius’s teaching starts from and ends with aesthetics emphasizes his stress on circular returning. When Wang says that the highest ideal is the meilizhixin 美麗之心 (beautiful soul), his translation of “soul” for xin 心 implies that his understanding of this ideal is alien to the Western philosophers he mentions (Wang 1997, 157). The beautiful soul, for Wang, is neither about sensation’s victory over rationality nor sensation as the supplement and help to rationality. Rather, Wang eulogizes natural human feelings and considers the human heart as the beginning of the ideal human world. In short, a beautiful heart full of beautiful feelings is naturally moral. Wang’s “meiyuzhuyi” (aesthetic educational-ism) echoes the Analects’ call to “find inspiration by intoning the songs, learn where to stand from observing ritual propriety and find fulfillment in playing music” (Lunyu 1998, 122) and “set… sights on the way, sustain… with excellence, lean upon authoritative conduct, and sojourn in the arts” (Lunyu 1998, 112). Inspired by Western aesthetic ideas, Wang’s ideal for Chinese education reform nevertheless finds its root in the Confucian teaching of self-cultivation, which starts from and consummates itself in art.

IV. Conclusion

Unlike his contemporaries Liang Qichao 梁啓超 (1873-1929), Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858-1927), and Yan Fu 嚴復 (1854-1921), who were interested in introducing Western politics, social science, and other practical revolutions for the reestablishment of China as a great power, Wang Guowei was the first Chinese intellectual to introduce the “great metaphysics, sublime ethics and pure aesthetics” of the West (Wang 1983, Section IV, 21).

Wang Guowei's interpretation and application of Kant can be viewed as a “showcase” of the “adaptation” of Western philosophy and aesthetics. From a scholarly perspective, his
encounter with Kant is not a typical philosophical criticism, and his study is not systematic, either. Wang Guowei’s reading of Kant and his new interpretation of several important Chinese philosophical terms and aesthetic ideas might be simple, liberal, and less detailed than most philosophical commentary from today’s perspective, especially when we consider that comparative philosophical studies have been developing steadily over the last one hundred years. However, Wang’s interpretation and analysis is still inspiring and useful for its methodological significance and reflective character. Wang Guowei introduces many new Western philosophical terms into Chinese philosophical discourse: free will, reason, rationality, a priori knowledge, a posteriori knowledge, understanding, the beautiful, the sublime, etc. His reinterpretation of Chinese concepts in dialogue with these new Western ones gave his thought a “modern” character. His rational analysis of those conceptions has not only academic but also cultural significance since so many irrational events took place at the end of China’s imperial history.

Wang’s approach to the new learning might be different from that of the Chinese philosophers interested primarily in social and political thought, yet his deconstructive interpretation of xing, reduction of the ethical values of li, introduction of a new perspective from which to look at ming, and aesthetic educational-ism all share the same goal with his contemporaries: social change and cultural reformation.

REFERENCES
NOTES
1. I argued against the conventional reading of Wang Guowei’s debt to Schopenhauer in my article “The Third Kind of Tragedy: How Wang Guowei Departures from Schopenhauer” (He 2013).
2. Journal of the Educational World also included articles on educational system changes, details on school schedules, courses arrangement, class schedule, western pedagogy, education theory, and so forth.
3. This list references Professor Li Minghui’s categorizations in his article “Wang Guowei and Kant’s Philosophy” (Li 2009: 119). Also, Yuan and Liu 1996, 25–46; Chen 1988, 50–108.
5. a. “Hande Xiangzuan” (汗德像贊, “Eulogy of Kant”), a poem written by Wang for JEW (1903) no. 81, August. Later, it was included in the Sequel to Jing'an Collection. b. “Hande zhi Shishi Ji Zhushu” (汗德之事實及其著作, “The Facts about Kant and His Work”), JEW (1904) no.74, May, unsigned. c. “Hande zhi Lunliuxi ji Zongjiaolun” (汗德之倫理學及宗教論, “Kant’s Ethics and His Discussion on Religion”), JEW (1905) no.123, May, unsigned. d. “Lun Jinshi Jiaoyu Sixiang yu Zhexue zhi Guanxi” (論近世教育思想與哲學之關係, “The Relationship Between Recent Education Thought and Philosophy”), JEW (1904) no.128-129, July, unsigned. e. “Shubenhua zhi Zhexue ji Jiaoyu Xueshuo” (叔本華之哲學及教育學說, “Schopenhauer’s Philosophy and His Educational Thought”), JEW (1904) no.75 and 77, April (later, it was included in Jing'an Collection [see note 7]. This article interprets Schopenhauer as Kant’s successor and claims that Schopenhauer’s metaphysical, aesthetic and ethical theories are based on Kant’s epistemology).
6. a. “Lan Xing” (論性, “On Human Nature”), JEW (1904) no.70-72, January–February (later, it was included in the Jing’an Collection). b. “Shi Li” (释理, “Analysis of Li”), JEW (1904) no. 82, 83 and 86, July-September (later it was included in the Jing’an Collection). c. “Yuan Ming” (原命, “On the Origin of Ming”), JEW (1906) no.127, May (later, it was included in the Sequel to Jing’an Collection. d. “Guya zhi zai Meixue shang zhi Weizhi” (古雅之在美學上之位置, “The Position of the Idea of Guya in Aesthetics”), JEW (1907) no. 144, January (later, it was included in the Sequel to Jing’an Collection). e. “Kongzi zhi Meiyuzhuyi” (孔子之美育主義, “Confucius’s Aesthetic Educational-ism”), JEW (1904) no.69, February, unsigned.
7. This quote is from Wang Guowei’s Sanshi Zixiu“三十自序” (二 (“The Second Author’s Note on Reaching Thirty Years of Age”). “Sanshi Zixiu” was originally published in Jiayu Shiji (Journal of Educational World, [1907] 10, no.152, May). Later, it was included in Jingan Wenji Xubian (《靜安文集續編》(The Sequel of Jingan Collection), which was edited by one of Wang’s disciples, Zhao Wanzhi in 1934 after Wang’s death, and which later was included in Wang Guowei Yishu (教育世界 (Journal of Educational World, [1907] 10, no.152, May). Later, it was included in Jingan Wenji Xubian (《靜安文集續編》(The Sequel of Jingan Collection), which was edited by one of Wang’s disciples, Zhao Wanzhi in 1934 after Wang’s death, and which later was included in Wang Guowei Yishu (教育世界 (Journal of Educational World, [1907] 10, no.152, May). Later, it was included in Jingan Wenji Xubian (《靜安文集續編》(The Sequel of Jingan Collection), which was edited by one of Wang’s disciples, Zhao Wanzhi in 1934 after Wang’s death, and which later was included in Wang Guowei Yishu (教育世界 (Journal of Educational World, [1907] 10, no.152, May).