

A Comparative Study on the Similarities and Differences in Design Aesthetics between China and Europe

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Abstract

Design aesthetics is a branch of aesthetics with influences such as culture and values, and has different characteristics in different regions. Our paper takes design aesthetics in China and Europe as an example. First of all, sort out the contexts of their development: Chinese design aesthetics embraces the notion of "harmony between man and nature", goes through different periods in its development process and still retains traditional charm while also incorporating contemporary elements today; European design aesthetics embodies the spirit of rationality and innovation, grows into a special developmental stage. At the same time, it also explores their commonalities in pursuing harmonious proportions and conveying emotions. Finally, the study points out that in the future, Chinese and European design aesthetics will achieve more integration through cultural exchanges while maintaining their own characteristics, and jointly promote the development of global design aesthetics.

Key words

Design, Design aesthetics, Aesthetics, Chinese and European, Comparative Study

1. Introduction

In today's society, designs that reflect regional aesthetics are increasingly gaining attention from people. Meanwhile, an increasing number of the public notice that the designs in China and Europe seem to have both similarities and differences. With the increasing culture exchanges, people's design aesthetics are becoming

more and more diverse [1]. Aesthetics, in simple terms, refers to people's overall perception and judgment of beauty[2]. For an academic perspective, aesthetics can also mean the non-utilitarian mental delight gained through sensory perception[3]. It is not merely a simple judgment of beauty and ugliness; it also involves factors such as cultures, personal experiences, and values. For instance, the aesthetic perception of colors varies across

different cultures. Red symbolizes joy and good luck for Chinese people, but in some Western cultures, it represents danger and a warning to the public, so it can be seen that aesthetics plays a very important role in people's evaluation of an object.

Design aesthetics is a branch of aesthetics. For designs, the beauty we perceive is rooted in proportions and their arrangement, along with color combinations and the expressive power of graphics[4]. This is usually based on the perceptions that visual elements bring to people, allowing them to experience the artistic nature of design aesthetics [5]. Design aesthetics refers to visual elements such as shape, balance, white space, color combination, and font layout[6]. Designers utilize these elements to evoke emotions in the audience, and the differences in aesthetic concepts resulting from different factors are what we call aesthetic disparities.

Aesthetic differences are ubiquitous, and they are the result of the combined effect of multiple factors, and they are a widespread aesthetic psychological phenomenon and practical behavior[7]. The factors causing aesthetic differences can be various, including different cultures, education, way of thinking, values, geographical environment, religious beliefs, and so on[8]. These factors have collectively shaped distinct aesthetic paradigms, leading to contrasting perceptions of beauty, art, and cultural expression between different regions. However, even though there are significant differences among these regions, they share certain commonalities in some fundamental aspects, such as the pursuit of harmonious proportions and the expression of emotions[9].

The topic of this article is "A Comparative Study on the Similarities and Differences in Design Aesthetics between China and Europe". In simple terms, Chinese people pay attention to the artistic conception and morality, while Europeans focus on reality and freedom. This article will be discussed in five parts: firstly, an introduction to Chinese design aesthetics, including its historical changes, current situation, and representative works. Secondly, an introduction to European design aesthetics, which also includes the same parts as Chinese design aesthetics. Thirdly, an analysis of the differences in aesthetics between China and Europe and the reasons for these differences, which include values, cultural differences, different educational backgrounds, and so on. Fourthly, an examination of the commonalities and

similarities of design aesthetics in China and Europe. Finally, an exploration of the future trends of design aesthetics and whether they will have an impact or integration. By studying the differences in design aesthetics between China and Europe, this paper hopes better to understand people's aesthetic preferences in different regions, especially when it comes to design. This will let this paper offer more useful advice for design work in various regions or around the world.

With the rapid changes in aesthetics, the influence of social media on aesthetics, as well as various cross-cultural and commercial exchanges around the world, it is now necessary to conduct research on aesthetic differences[10].

From an academic perspective, there are currently not many studies on the differences in design aesthetics. Therefore, this research can serve as a supplementary resource. From a practical perspective, this article enables everyone to better understand the existence of design aesthetic differences between China and Europe, as well as their characteristics[11]. Therefore, it can facilitate the creation of design products that are in line with global aesthetics.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Factors Influencing the Formation of Aesthetic Standards

The formation of aesthetic standards is a complex process, influenced by multiple factors such as geographical environment, ideology, religious beliefs, social and historical background, technological development, and so on[8]. These factors interact with each other, shaping unique aesthetic standards in different cultures.

According to the geographical environment perspective, "aesthetic preference is strongly informed by ecological adaptation: areas with stable climates tend to support complex decorative traditions, while resource-poor areas have simpler traditions" [6]. Geographically, Southeast Asia differs vastly from Scandinavia, particularly in climate: Scandinavia experiences severe cold and prolonged winters, while Southeast Asia maintains consistent warmth and high humidity. The soils of these areas are rich in minerals, so they have a variety of usable plants and animals. In addition, the

use of materials for construction varies widely between Southeast Asia and Northern Europe/Winter.

Northerners tend to use a minimalistic style in their building techniques, while Sartorialists from the South use a more elaborate approach to create beautiful, intricate structures using simple shapes and lines. Therefore, the aesthetic standard there often favors designs with dense patterns and numerous decorations.

If the geographical environment sets the material boundaries for aesthetic standards, then religious beliefs and ideological traditions endow them with the core spiritual connotations. Kant's theory of "non-utilitarian pleasure" secularized aesthetic judgment and separated beauty from divine revelation. Hegel's dialectics resolved the conflict between these two viewpoints during the Middle Ages by historicizing the two positions of "art as idolatry" and "art as the vehicle of the divine". In China, the "blank-leaving" technique in Chinese landscape painting is deeply influenced by the Taoist idea of "producing something from nothing." The sense of ritual in Confucianism that "worshipping the gods as if they were present" is directly transformed into the central-axis symmetric layout of traditional Chinese architecture[12].

However, from another perspective, aesthetic standards are not innate but rather the result of history. During the ancient Greek period (5th century BCE), the democratic system in Athens developed, and sculptors such as Phidias created the "Statue of Zeus". The "golden ratio" and idealized human figures in Greece became the eternal standards of European art for "symmetry" and "harmony". The Renaissance, from the 14th to the 16th century, combined ancient Greek rationality with Christian spirit, emphasizing "perspective" and "individual expression", completely changing the flat religious art of the Middle Ages. The Industrial Revolution from the 18th to the 19th century gave rise to "functionalism" aesthetics, such as the Bauhaus school advocating "form follows function", breaking away from traditional decorative art.

Similarly, Chinese aesthetics evolved through its own historical currents. During the Spring and Autumn and Warring States Periods in China (770- 221), there was a great diversity of thoughts among various schools. Confucius founded the Confucian school, and Laozi founded the Taoist school. The Confucian

school emphasized the beauty of "ritual and music", laying the foundation for China's art to pursue "harmony and balance"; the Taoist school, on the other hand, advocated "naturalness and non-action", influencing the "imagination" aesthetics of landscape paintings and garden art. In the Tang Dynasty (618-907), the "full and round" style of Tang Dynasty Buddhist art combined with local aesthetics, forming the standard of "plumpness as beauty", which influenced subsequent figure paintings and sculptures. In the Song Dynasty (960-1279), with the improvement of the imperial examination system and the dominance of the scholar-official class in culture, Song Dynasty literati paintings advocated 'elegance and simplicity' and 'blank space', reflecting the scholars' pursuit of the 'retreat' spirit, contrasting with the rich style of court paintings.

2.2 Theories Related to Aesthetics

Exploring aesthetics cannot be separated from the inspiration of classic theories. Numerous scholars have proposed relevant theories. Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714-1762), a German philosopher in the 18th century, is well-known for his significant contribution to aesthetics. He proposed that "aesthetics", as an independent discipline, is defined as the "science of perceptual cognition", which separated aesthetics from the subordination of philosophy and directly influenced the construction of the aesthetic system of Kant and other later aesthetic systems[13]. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), one of the most influential philosophers in history, presented profound ideas in aesthetics. He proposed the concept of "aesthetic disinterestedness", emphasizing that beauty is independent of utilitarianism and morality and is purely a subjective pleasure. In "Critique of Judgment"(1790), he systematically analyzed the four characteristics of beauty: these are disinterested pleasure, universal communicability, purposiveness without purpose, and necessary pleasure. These ideas established the autonomy of aesthetics and became an important cornerstone of later aesthetics. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) was the culmination of German classical philosophy. His core contribution to aesthetics was the theory that "beauty is the sensible manifestation of ideas". In his "Aesthetics Lecture Series", he divided the development of art into three stages: symbolic, classic, and romantic. He believed that art would eventually be

surpassed by philosophy. This system was the first to incorporate art into the development process of the absolute spirit, profoundly influencing later thinkers such as Marx and Croce, and laying the foundation for historical dialectics in art philosophy.

With the passage of time, the aesthetic standards in Western society have also changed. Their aesthetic theories have also been different from the ancient framework and taken on a completely new appearance. The theory of empathy was first proposed by German scholar Robert Vischer in his work "On the Optical Sense of Form" (1873) with the concept of "Einfühlung" (empathy). Later, it was developed into a systematic theory by his father, Friedrich Theodor Vischer, and Theodor Lipps. This theory holds that when people gaze at ancient Greek columns, they unconsciously project their upright or suppressed emotions into them, making the object a carrier of emotions. This aesthetic mode of the integration of subject and object not only explains why we feel "joy and sorrow" in natural scenes, but also becomes the theoretical foundation for expressionist art's "expressing emotions through form", completely changing the Western understanding of the essence of art. Gestalt psychology was founded by the German psychologist Max Wertheimer in 1912. Its core concept, "Gestalt" (configuration), reveals an important cognitive rule: humans always perceive the whole first, and then notice the local details[14]. This theory was later introduced into art studies by the aesthete Rudolf Arnheim. In his representative work "Art and Visual Perception", he proposed visual laws such as the "proximity law" and "closure law", which not only explain how people appreciate artworks but also provide an important theoretical basis for modern design and visual art creation. Psychoanalytic Aesthetics was founded by Sigmund Freud in his 1900 work "The Interpretation of Dreams". This theory, through concepts such as "the unconscious" and "libido", reveals the connections between artistic creation and childhood experiences, as well as the repression of desires. It provided the theoretical foundation for surrealism and completely transformed the interpretive paradigm of symbols, dreams, and sexual metaphors in modern art criticism.

After delving deeply into the history of Western aesthetic theories, it is now time to turn our attention to Chinese aesthetic theories, which have a profound

and long history of development. Chinese aesthetics has evolved through three defining phases: from moral instruction to social purpose, and finally to ecological harmony. Han Yu (Tang Dynasty, 8th century BC), a litterateur, first formalized the principle of "wen yi zai dao"(writing to convey Dao) in "Yuan Dao"(Tracing Dao to Its Source), binding artistic creation to Confucian virtue. This established "the unity of beauty and goodness" as a lasting ideal. Centuries later, aesthetician Wang Guowei's "Poetic Remarks" (1908) elevated "yi jing"(artistic conception) as the essence of poetry and painting, embodied in the phrase "yan you jin er yi wu qiong"(finite words, infinite meaning), it has become the highest level of art forms such as poetry and painting, and still shapes the implicit expression of Chinese art to this day. Since modern times, ideologist Liang Qichao's "Interest-Oriented Education" (1922) integrated aesthetics with the driving force of life, promoted the popularization of aesthetic education, and exerted an influence on modern educational concepts. Meanwhile, revolutionary Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art" (1942) put forward the "theory of typicality", emphasizing that art should shape images with social representativeness, which laid the aesthetic framework for socialist literature and art[12].

3. Discussion

3.1 Chinese Design Aesthetics

Chinese graphic design is marked by the interaction between established cultural tradition and fast-moving technology. Although global aesthetics continue to affect visual cultures, there is a response, or shifting toward cultural reinvention, addressing traditional visual language—ink wash, symbolic imagery, and calligraphic rhythms—through a new lens of digital and commercial relevance. E-commerce and mobile interfaces serve as primary domains where user experience drives design as much as visuals and subtly integrates cultural nudges.

The history of graphic design in China is likewise paradigmatic of broader social and political changes. The practice began in wood block printing and imperial aesthetics and transitioned into the collectivist visual culture of the second half of the 20th century. Economic reform introduced international styles, lifestyle

design, and design driven by the market, all of which led to diverse styles not observed pre-reform. Recently, “Guochao” or national trend movements have emerged, signaling cultural confidence and displacing forms of cultural heritage to modern craft[12].

Significant present-day approaches involve culturally relevant design, digital-first minimalism, and experimental hybrid aesthetics. Often the designer will utilize indirect references to culture—for example, the position of classical gardens as informing layout systems or celadon and vermilion as national colors [15]. Captivating results can be found in the branding of sites like Alipay and Taobao.

The graphic design of modern-day China is developing its own distinctive style through merging its traditional cultural history with minimalism to create a uniquely rich art form. The combination of these two elements comes together to enhance the current stories of the culture. It is not just an aspect to add to the design; it was created based on these two elements working together. For example, refined use of white space, a meaningful and simple colour palette using auspicious red hues contrasted with soothing blue hues, and a combination of modern typography with calligraphy or seal carving as part of the design. The end result creates a refined aesthetic that combines poetic sensibility and strong visual impact, therefore allowing for local and global appreciation.

3.2 European Design Aesthetics

The design approach of Europe is typically characterized as clean, functional, and communicative. It helps customers take in and understand the message quickly using an organizational layout of spaces, a clear typeface or fonts, and suitable color palettes. It can usually be seen in posters, logos, branding identity, packaging for products, and editorial design.

Over the years, European design has been inspired by several styles and movements, such as Swiss simplicity that utilizes grids and clean functional types, and Scandinavian minimalism that utilizes light colors and organic feelings[16]. Some of the more popular themes currently include (but are not limited to): Sustainable Design, Strong Typography, and Agile Branding. An example of this would be Sustainable Design using textures; using papers made of recycled materials, nat-

ural colour choices such as green and brown, as well as Forms that are organically shaped. Within Europe, this new sustainable design has grown in popularity in recent years due to stricter environmental legislation and a cultural shift towards Sustainability[17]. Furthermore, sustainable design is now integrated into everyday design elements, including Cosmetics Packaging, Logos for Eco-Friendly Companies, and Public Service Announcements (posters) aimed at raising environmental awareness.

For example, the Identity for the Munich Olympic Games created by Otl Aicher was produced in 1972. There was a strict grid, a limited colour scheme, and utilising new and original pictograms that were easily understood and universally used throughout the world. It was also a key work in the systematic processing of graphic design and inclusion, which are still influential today.

A further example would be the branding of the Guardian newspaper (UK). It has utilized the 'Guardian' Egyptian typeface in Sans Serif for its redesigned brand. The redesign includes the use of a harmonious colour palette and has a flexible layout. The redesigned brand represents the combination of tradition and modernity through both print and digital media forms by providing visual cohesion within and between them.

These examples demonstrate how rationality and creativity function in European graphic design. Aicher's concepts emphasized clarity and structure, while The Guardian's identity showed how typography and layout add brand recognition and improve legibility. The design concepts that both projects represent are European-based in origin, focusing heavily on functional, elegant, and human-centered user experience and communication designs. In recent years, there has been a growing emphasis on inclusivity, digital minimalism, and expressive simplicity through design. Additionally, over the past five years, design has gone from being primarily focused on commercial purposes to also including social and ecological responsibility[18].

3.3 The Differences and Causes of Design Aesthetics between China and Europe

The aesthetic outlook of designs between Europe and China exposes varied and very interesting areas where they differ primarily due to their diverse cultures,

historical backgrounds, and social structures. There are many areas of daily life in which these differences can be identified, especially in user-interface design, website design, and consumer product design. The current trend toward novelty is also a movement toward digitization.

From a visual perspective, Chinese designs commonly feature a high level of mathematical complexity with vibrant colours, a sense of collective ownership and togetherness, etc. Many examples of these characteristics can be identified in popular Chinese websites and applications. Typically, their landing pages are composed of a multitude of rich graphics, with several colours, and have several active features (i.e., multiple animated icons and flashing banners). By creating a busy and active environment, they embody the cultural concept of "re nao" (live/active), which is regarded as a desirable state of excitement and warmth to be shared with others. As a result, this design approach provides users with a wealth of options and a visual feeling of wealth and abundance. Furthermore, Chinese designers typically incorporate a significant number of symbolic icons within their designs; for example, the colour red is used to express good fortune and wealth, while dragons are used to represent power and wealth. These symbols are immediately understood within the shared cultural context.

In contrast to Asian design that combines complexity with detailed ornamentation and colorful images of objects and settings, European Design tends toward simplicity, Minimalism, and an emphasis on Individualism in its expression of user experience (UX) through graphic design (UI) and other interfaces (including but not limited to websites).

Aesthetic Preferences between the two different Aesthetic Value Systems can be described by the Cultural History, Education Focus, and Economic Systems of the regions. Traditional Chinese Culture is culturally shaped by Confucius and emphasizes Collectivism, Social Harmony, and Hierarchical Relationships. The preference to use complex designs that utilise many design elements reflects a focus on a Society that is Interconnected, Interrelated, and considers a Fully Vibrant Design to Symbolise Prosperity and Warmth. The Renaissance and the Enlightenment were instrumental periods of development in European culture, and both fostered increased focus on individualism, rational thought,

and personal freedom. So it would seem that the Design Philosophy of these cultures would place the greatest emphasis on clarity, efficiency, and the individual user experience as their primary objectives.

Secondly, education systems in both regions significantly influence these preferences. A young age and a focus on knowledge acquisition through collective learning demonstrate examples of the comfort and capability with which students in China may cope with handling complex and abstract information through the understanding of their lived experiences. The educational systems in Europe tend to encourage the early development of critical thinking, personal expression, and analytical ability. These skills lead to students developing preferences for environments (digitally or otherwise) that promote logical and orderly use of information, which facilitates the ability to conduct analysis and make decisions based on the results of their own analyses.

Additionally, people cannot ignore the impact that complex economic models have on how students develop the skills necessary for the success and development of their futures. The development of mature capitalist markets in Europe has significantly accelerated the trend towards functional minimalism. Designs in a very competitive business landscape must be clear and quick to engage users with content [19]. Consequently, these demands create an additional impetus for simplicity and function; thus, minimalism is the primary benchmark for design in the Western market. Consequently, Western marketing favours functional minimalism, prioritising instant comprehension and efficiency in competitive markets. While China has a very modern, vibrant market economy, it also combines modern needs with a strong influence from its traditional cultures. The result is a distinct, ever-evolving fusion of both styles of creativity. As a result, the typical target audience for marketers in China is comprised of consumers interested in finding an equilibrium between cultural values associated with their heritage and those related to contemporary brands, styles, aesthetics, and products.

3.4 The Similarities in Design in China and Europe

Both traditions prioritise the unity of form and function, considering 'usability' a core criterion. Since the Industrial Revolution and the Bauhaus movement,

European modernism has embraced the principle that 'form follows function', emphasising that beauty should naturally emanate from an object's purpose and structure (Baxter, n.d.). Like many other cultures across the globe, ancient Chinese artisans used the concept of *qi wu zai dao* (objects representing principles) when creating their works of art. The *qi* (container) includes all that is created by mankind; the *dao* (principle) indicates the functional usage and deeper symbolic definitions of the items [5]. The focus on functional excellence is just as strong now within the realm of digital media as it was centuries ago—both modern Chinese and European designers utilize established information architectures, logical hierarchies, and seamless interactions.

The evolution of both design traditions shows a parallel shift towards human-centred thinking. European design practice incorporates comprehensive 'Design Thinking' processes to ensure products align with users' habits and expectations. Meanwhile, China's internet industry has made 'user experience' a central concern in product design, balancing business demands with users' need for intuitive interaction. This represents a global transformation from focusing on the physical perfection of objects to serving people's cognitive needs and emotional satisfaction.

Aesthetic appreciation of simplicity and negative space is another area of common ground. While European minimalism advocates 'less is more', Chinese aesthetics value '*yi shao sheng duo*' (achieving more with less) and '*xu shi xiang sheng*' (the interplay of void and solid). The Chinese principle of '*ji bai dang hei*' (treating white space as inked space) is closely aligned with European minimalist approaches. Strategically utilizing negative space is an effective way to increase the visual hierarchy, create focus, and add a level of sophistication to both styles of design.

In our globally connected society today, both European and Eastern designers have begun to cross-pollinate their design languages. While European designers have begun to integrate Eastern designers' sense of subtlety and increased appreciation for the use of organic materials, the Eastern world has responded by taking a fresh look at their heritage and using that inspiration to create what is now referred to as the "New Chinese Style" which combines vast amounts of international style with a distinctly Eastern aesthetic [15]. This pattern

of 'global perspective, localised innovation' represents a shared direction that enriches worldwide design diversity.

4. Conclusion

This research aims to explore the similarities and differences in design aesthetics between Europe and China. Key findings are summarized as follows.

Design aesthetics is a subfield of aesthetics that represents the way people evaluate design based upon an individual's beliefs and values, cultural heritage, and other experiences. There are three major points regarding the evaluation of design. First, aesthetic concepts within these two regions are representative of how people perceive beauty overall. The two regions use aesthetic concepts in similar ways; however, they are distinctly different in how the meanings of aesthetic concepts differ. Chinese design aesthetics derive their aesthetic concepts from the history and tradition of China, whereas European aesthetics originate primarily from Christianity and modern Europe. Second, with respect to the visual characteristics of design, the two cultures find value in shapes, balance, and colour arrangements that cause an emotional reaction in the viewer. However, the two cultures exhibit certain fundamental differences with respect to these attributes; for example, red is a common colour in Chinese design that signifies good fortune and a sense of happiness, whereas red can sometimes be used as a warning or danger in European design. Third, the differences in design aesthetic concepts create opportunities for disparate forms of design, depending on the influences of culture, education, ways of thinking, and the physical environment. These factors create unique aesthetic models for each region, but despite these regional differences, there are certain core similarities between Sino-European design aesthetics. Design concepts range from the development of proportion to conveying emotion through the use of design. Also, as cultural exchanges increase, there will be increased diversity in both the design aesthetics of the two geographic locations, where both regions are starting to exhibit a tendency for the use of an ever-increasing variety of aesthetic ideals beyond what has traditionally been defined as the norm.

Promoting greater integration of Chinese and Euro-

pean design aesthetics to Better support the Future evolution of Graphic design. Designers can take advantage of the strengths of both design traditions. To illustrate this idea, a designer might create a hybrid artwork that combines Traditional Chinese culture's depth and quality with modern European qualities of straightforwardness and clarity through line use. In a globalised environment, designers have access to a plethora of different cultural aesthetics. Consequently, when designing imagery, such as colour and typography, designers should consider the cultural origins and aesthetic perceptions of their audience. Otherwise, a designer may produce work that will be subject to conflicting viewpoints regarding different aesthetic standards.

Furthermore, it is the responsibility of graphic designers to foster a broader understanding of different cultures and assist them in developing the competency to evaluate and combine aesthetic principles from diverse cultures, philosophies of education, and value systems into their graphic designs. By continually expanding their knowledge of other cultures, educational philosophies, and value systems, graphic designers will create exceptional graphic design aligned with modern trends and meet consumers' desire for aesthetically pleasing products within all geographic locations.

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