On Li Yu’s Aesthetic Thought of How to Create the Second Nature—Based upon “Borrowing Scenes” in Casual Expressions of Idle Feeling

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Keywords: Li Yu, “Casual Expressions of Idle Feeling”, Borrowing scenes, Create the second nature.

Abstract. This paper discusses and analyzes Li Yu’s thought of life aesthetics about how to create the second nature by means of borrowing the natural scenes, natural things and living birds from the natural world. All of these demonstrate Li Yu’s extraordinary talent in innovation through his specific artistic practice and also in his aesthetic proposition of "natural self-presentation", which is supposed to be beneficial for people in the construction of the harmonious society and can be used for our reference for our present society.

Introduction

One of the most important spiritual qualities in Li Yu's aesthetic thoughts is “seeking originality and novelty”, which is reflected in the dynamic innovation and personalized design in almost every aspect of the house and window construction. The window is the place Li Yu pays a great attention to in building the house, since it helps extend indoor space by connecting indoor and outdoor together. Through the contact outdoor scene and indoor people are integrated as a whole.

In China's construction, the window pays an important role in the house design, since it reflects a kind of cosmic life consciousness of the ancient Chinese people, who, though living in the house, also hope to be able to appreciate the external world, to observe the universe, to get close to nature, to grasp the dynamic change of the living world. To the Chinese ancients, there was something that existed between heaven and earth which is called "qi" of life, the harmony of the universe between the heaven and earth. Only through the void part of the building, can "qi" of life come into the house and bring health and harmony to people, so people don't feel lonely, because they are connected with and melted into the universe. Different from the western architecture which is often packed one integrated mass, this kind "Qi of life” consciousness makes the Chinese architecture pay great attention to the window construction and design to fulfill the desire of living in harmony with the universe.

Li Yu is a talent in developing window lattices, which is designed not only to have certain aesthetic quality themselves, more importantly, to “lead” the outdoor natural scenery into the room, thereby expanding the aesthetic space of the room, making people in the room not feel lonely because connection with the outside dynamic world. Li Yu incisively and vividly describes and illustrates the function of the window lattices in House First of his Casual Expressions of Idle Feeling. In his book, besides discussing the artistic principle of window column design and various window column patterns in detail, Li Yu also emphatically discusses the important aesthetic significance of "borrowing scenes" in order to create the second nature and fulfill the change the aesthetic function between outdoor and indoor. This paper is to discuss and analyze how Li Yu manages to create the second nature by means of borrowing the natural scenes, natural things and living birds from the natural world.
A Practical Analysis

Creating the Second Nature by Borrowing Natural Scenery

Li Yu used to reside at the lakeside of the West Lake and wanted to buy a boat with nothing different from others except in window called "bianmian". Li Yu's "bianmian", in fact, is two fan-shaped ship windows that are very easy to produce. First make the window frame shaped like a folding-fan, seal all sides of the window with the board, only leaving an empty space in the middle. The sealed sides should be covered by grey cloth in case of leaking light and have the fan-shaped empty window space surrounded by wooden frame with the curved upper and lower sides and straight left and right sides. Nothing is decorated on the boat but two “fan-shaped” windows on its left and right side, from which good views can be caught and enjoyed by the people sitting in the boat.

Though easy to make, the aesthetic effect of Fan-shaped Window can never be underestimated. Rowing on the lake or river, all the things on the shore can naturally come into the boat through the fan windows, including the mountains, lakes, temples, clouds, bamboo, trees, woodcutter, shepherd boy, drunken old men and women, horses, making a natural moving picture. With the oar up and down, the scenery will be constantly changing; even with the boat fastened still, wind blowing the lake shakes the water, also brings about different views. Thus, thousands of different living landscape sceneries can be thoroughly appreciated by the people in the boat with the boat moving forward, through the ship’s “fan-shaped window". In the far distance was seen the glittering surface of a lake surrounded by the distant hills, both of which add radiance and beauty to each other. A panoramic view of the shimmering waves and the lake shore presents itself into the eyes of the people sitting by the fan-shaped window, leaving a deep impression on them.

From the other angle, another scene of the boat will present itself for the pedestrians on the shore still through the ship’s fan-shaped window. On the background of the waves, people in a boat are drinking to the poem, talking and laughing with their heads swaying. Then the tourists in the boat unconsciously act as the connoisseur of the scenery for others, integrating themselves into the whole landscape and becoming the aesthetic object for the pedestrians on the shore. This kind of dynamic, two-way borrow scenery aesthetic investigation, is indeed Li Yu's wonderful original opinion. Through the simply constructed boat “fan-shaped window”, the scenery outside the boat intakes in the boat, and everything in the boat shoots out. There is infinity in the finite.

Another example for Li Yu creative aesthetic thoughts of seeking second nature. Li Yu also applies his principle of making the ship’s Fan-shaped Window to the house. In front of the Fubai Corridor, there is a hill which has all the things in high mountains, including, precipitous cliff, turbulent waterfall, dense forest, tall bamboo, tweeting birds, thatched cottage, and slab bridge. A sculptor makes a statue of a straw-cloak angler with a fishing rod in hand, and names it Li Weng, Li Yu’s honorific title, which, as the name suggests, means a straw-cloak angler. Li Yu thinks there must be for him a stone to sit on that is surrounded by water, and also a house to for him to relax. As the small hill is rich in many beautiful things, Li Yu was deeply attracted by its beautiful views, sometimes he was not even willing to close the window. Then an idea came across his mind. He let lad buy some papers, and cut a piece of paper and pasted it at the up and down, and left and right sides of the window, which serves as the framework of the painting, with the real scenery of the hill serving as the content of the painting. Thus, all of them help produce a real picture on the wall of hall. When people sit in front of the window, they can’t help thinking that they are appreciating a painting, but this painting is made of real hill, water and birds. Li Yu calls it “wuxin painting”. “wuxin” here refers to “not deliberately, not intentionally”, and “wuxin painting” implies that the painting is not drawn by people but by nature.

Li Yu says that "the heart is not far away." (He makes a comment that “If we have a moment of idleness and a pair of wise eyes to appreciate beauty, we don’t need to tram over mountains and wade through rivers to look for it, because everything that passes in front of us is a picture, and the sounds that enters our ears is are source materials of poetry.”) Li Yu says that viewing from the inside of window, people can regard all passers-by, even old woman or old man with walking stick, not to
mention young beauty, as famous paintings. For example, an old woman or a white-haired old man walking with a stick which is the essential elements of Picture to Celebrities, thus constitute a picture of celebrities; a young woman a picture of Beauty; groups of children playing a painting of a Hundred Playing Boys. Even herds of cows and flocks of sheep eating grass together, groups of chickens and dogs are important materials for painters and poets, thus can from beautiful pictures. Accordingly, the second nature by borrowing natural scenery through the fan-shaped lattice window designed by Li Yu can also be used as the valuable imaginary resources for literati. With the help of the "bianmian", people seem to assimilate themselves with natural sceneries, the life consciousness permeates in the profound universe spirit, here and now, the world's right and wrong, honor and disgrace, all become illusory disappearing, only to leave a disburdened and clear mind in the natural surroundings.

Creating the Second Nature by Borrowing Natural Things

Li Yu is also excellent in making use of natural materials to create the second nature. Plum Window, which is regarded by Li Yu as the most wonderful window design that he has ever been made, can be thought of as a typical example.

During a summer, a pomegranate tree and an orange tree were drowned by the continuing flood. Li Yu was attracted by their outside appearance with the crisscrossed and twisted branches, looking like old plum tree. Then a bright idea flashed into his mind, using it to make a plum window. He chose the straighter branches to make the upper and lower sides of the window frame, thus the external profile of window was ready. Li Yu is such a person to take all the matters into consideration, no matter big or trivial. Li Yu thought that if the frame were made by a whole piece of branch, the outward side would be definitely primitive and lovely, while the inward side was hard to stick to the wall because of twisted and rough surface, so he is tired to split the branch equally into two, and stuck the smooth side onto the wall. Li Yu then chose the branch whose one side was uneven and the other side slightly flat and smooth, and divided it into two plum-tree-like branches, one extends from top down to bottom, and the other from bottom up to top. The flat side was processed smoother by taking the bark and protuberance away with an axe, so that the branch could be pasted on the window. As for the uneven side, all the sparse branches and small tree stems and stalks should be kept in order to preserve its original appearance. Then, decorate them with red plums and green leaves made of the colorful paper, thus a blossoming plum tree window came into being. This is so-called famous "blossoming plum window". Because its texture is derived from natural withered branches, “blossoming plum window” has achieved the second nature of a kind of ecological whole harmonious beauty with some artificial traces.

The branches of the plum tree have gone through vicissitudes of life, old and strong, black and covered with wrinkles of years, which seems to have already died, but on which the tragic historical modeling is stretched here. At the top of such branches, so many fresh lives spring up suddenly, melodramatic and transparent." How thoroughly and clearly.

Creating the Second Nature by Borrowing Living Birds

Li Yu likes birds and wants to decorate his house with birds to create a surrounding of living the natural forest. He asked somebody to draw colorful trees permeated by clouds on the four walls of his living room. As he does not like to see birds raised in the cage, how to place the living birds on the painted trees becomes a problem. Li Yu decides to take parrot as an example.

It is known that a copper rack must be used to keep parrot at home. Li Yu tires to remove three sides from the copper rack, leaving only one bottom side for the parrot to rest and two pipes for the parrot peck millet and drink water. He first drills a small hole in the painted pine branch on the wall, and then insert part of the copper pipes into the wall, so that they would not shake when the parrot jumps on them. Pine trees are colored, and parrots are colored birds, when they are set against each other, a gorgeous painting presents itself in front of the guests. Once his friends came to visit Li Yu. They were appreciating the murals on the wall, when suddenly birds were beginning to move with the feathers under the leaves spreading, which made all the guests so surprised, and before they had come
back to their senses, the birds began to fly. Later they learnt the truth, and couldn’t help admiring Li Yu’s smartness.

Li Yu thinks that if the four walls are all parrots, it would appear too monotonous, to perfect his wall design, he decides to keep some other birds to go with parrots. To Li Yu’s mind the bird thrush is the best choice because she is excellent at singing. But the problem is, unlike the parrot, the thrush has to be raised in the cage, so Li Yu uses curled branches to make a bird cage, and strengthens sparse places with the wire network to make a cage branches neither too sparse nor too dense, in this way, the thrush which is put inside cannot fly off. Thus, birds are singing one after another, whose song brings life to everything painted on the wall. The flowers and trees seem to be dancing, the water in the painting seems to send out a clear and pleasant flowing sound, and even the still mountain appears to be moving. All the guests felt so astonished by what they had seen that they called it a wonder, so extraordinary that they thought there was nothing in the world that would appear queerer than this. They all praised Li Yu for his original thinking and supernatural workmanship.

Creating the Second Nature by Borrowing Bonsai Flowers

Li Yu is good at using natural scenery to decorate the bedroom, this makes its bedroom full of natural breath. In addition, bonsai flowers can be used to create sceneries.

Li Yu says that he does not like flowers grown in pot, birds kept in cage, fish in vat, and stone on pedestal on table because being confined in limited space, making people feel trapped and fettered. As discussed above, Li Yu likes thrush best among all kinds of birds, but he doesn’t like it being kept in cage. So, if any, the cage must be designed totally different from the traditional one to make the bird feel relaxed. Li Yu says that all of them can be applied in his fan-shaped window.

The fan-shaped window is painted with as many natural things as possible, such as landscape figures, bamboos, flowers, birds and insects. Li Yu suggests a board should be placed outside the window on which bonsai flowers, coiled pine trees and picturesque stones can be placed to constitute a beautiful landscape for people to enjoy in the room. For example, when the orchids in the pot are in bloom, put them on the board outside the window, which can form an orchid fan; when the chrysanthemum in the water altar comes out, put it on the board outside the window, which can form a good chrysanthemum fan. Water can be changed every two or three days, or every day, or several times a day, depending on actual conditions. Li Yu thinks that the flower pot and water altar must be covered with gravels so as not to let the lower part of the flowerpot exposed to people’s eyes, so as to look more natural. Every family can afford this kind of window and everyone can make it. Li Yu is sure that people will feel delightful because it is wonderful to make them feel as if there were vitality in the dance every moment.

Discussion about Li Yu’s Aesthetic Thinking

Harmony between man and nature is the core of Li Yu’s Aesthetic Thinking. The Chinese have long viewed nature as an aesthetic object. Not only can nature provide human beings survival resources, but also the destination of human spirit and soul. People rely on nature, praise nature and get close to nature, protect and respect their living environment. So creating the second nature by integrating natural scenery, natural materials and living things with the house building together is a great aesthetic creation.

The analysis shows that Li Yu’s aesthetic thoughts are not separated from life, but perfectly integrated into it, showing us a world of beauty presented by Li Yu that extends from the mundane material life and is upgraded into the spiritual enjoyment. Li Yu’s aesthetic ideas built in the daily life also inherits the survival concept of ancient Chinese literati’s aesthetics. Confucius supports and appreciates the aesthetic enjoyment, ”In March, spring plough has completed. Five or six adults take their children to swim in the river and bathe in the warm sunshine; on their way back, they sing along against the dancing spring wind.” Li Yu is good at digging out the aesthetic connotation from his aesthetic experience in ordinary life that is in agreement with the aesthetic life style raised ancient
sages: fusing common individual life with the spiritual beauty. Li Yu’s aesthetic ideas is echoed from the beginning to the end in Idle Expression and Idle Feeling, the representative work of German philosopher Heidegger, who regards man and nature as a whole by arguing that human life cannot be divorced from nature.

Conclusion

The aesthetic thoughts in Li Yu's Casual Expressions of Idle Feeling are supposed to be beneficial for people in the construction of the harmonious society and can be used for our reference for our present society. How to appreciate the beauty in our daily life? How to construct spiritual civilization? This paper has discussed and analyzed Li Yu's thought of life aesthetics of how to create the second nature by means of borrowing the natural scenes, natural things and living birds from the natural world. The analysis demonstrates that Li Yu’s “borrowing scenery” has achieved the aesthetic ideal condition of "natural self-presentation" with the "re-creation" of the second nature through the means of clever layout of “fan-shaped window” designed to satisfy not only the aesthetic taste of those sitting in the boat, but can present a living picture to entertain people on the shore, “wuxin painting” with the real nature as the content for people sitting in the room to enjoy, “plum-window” with the plum-tree-like branches arranged from top down to bottom for one, and from bottom up to top for the other. All of these demonstrate Li Yu’s extraordinary talent in innovation through his specific artistic practice and also in his aesthetic proposition of "natural self-presentation". We can't help but admire Li Yu's pursuit of originality with flexibility to create “the second nature” by following the law of unity between man and nature. Li Yu’s aesthetic thoughts are just like pearls scattered in every field and aspect discussed in his Casual Expressions of Idle Feeling. What we now have to do is to pick them together and try to make a string for modern people to appreciate, to learn and to follow.

Acknowledgement

This article is the phased achievement of Chinese-Foreign Language Cooperative Education of Language Teaching Team, Undergraduate Teaching Quality and Teaching Reform Project of Guangdong 2017(2017SJJXTD01)

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