

Jingjie 境界

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SUMMARY

Jingjie 境界, also known as *yijing* 意境 or *jing* 境, is an ambiguous, abstract term which refers roughly to a state of free and unlimited imagination and comprehension attained through aesthetic activity.

The term is found in Tang dynasty discussions on poetry and painting where its meaning varies with the context in which it is found but is still quite narrow in scope. In the Song dynasty, under the influence of Chan Buddhism, the term becomes at once more profound and abstract, with a strong emphasis on the role of enlightenment in aesthetic activity. By the Qing dynasty the term and its variants are common critical categories, with the stress on enlightenment still very much in evidence, but with an added focus on a total aesthetic understanding.

Wang Guowei of the late Qing made *jingjie* and the related *yijing* central critical categories in his theory of aesthetics, attempting a systematic definition which emphasized the mutual interrelationship between the subjective and objective elements in aesthetic activity. Wang's conception of the perfect creative state (*jingjie*) stresses the poet's freedom from subjective ties and a selfless accordance with nature which in turn allow the imagination full rein to produce a limitless aesthetic effect or artistic world.

Modern critics have attempted to clarify *jingjie*'s parameters more closely than their traditional predecessors. Recent definitions include the metaphysical theory, the intuitive imagination theory and the theory of aesthetic levels, all of which seek to

broaden the understanding of this complex concept of aesthetic activity.

KEY WORDS

jingjie

Jiaoran

Sikong Tu

Liu Yuxi

Yan Yu

Zheng Xie

yijing

Wenjing mifulun

Shipin

Chan

Yuan Mei

Wang Guowei



Also known as *yijing* 境 ('meaning' or 'poetic state', Rickett 1977:26) or *jing* 境, ('state', *ibid*), *jingjie* refers to a common classical Chinese aesthetic category. The meaning of this frequently applied critical concept is abstract and indistinct, having potentially different implications when used in different contexts and for which it is virtually impossible to find a Western terminological equivalent. If contemporary concepts are used to define it, then it can approximately be understood as a state attained through aesthetic activity which is extremely flexible and which arouses an unlimited imaginative power and faculty of understanding.

The use of *jingjie* or *jing* as an aesthetic category took shape in the Tang dynasty (618-906) when it was often applied in poetic criticism and painting theory, but each usage had a particular individual emphasis. Sometimes the emphasis was on physical phenomena (the shape and appearance of things in the natural world), for example Jiaoran's 皎然 (fl. c.760) "selecting a state" in poetry (Rickett: 25), or Sikong Tu's (837-908) "world and state in accord", or "deeply penetrate its state" (*Wenjing mifulun*). Sometimes emphasis was placed on the rich sentiments embodied within poetry as with, for example, Liu Yuxi's 劉禹錫 (772-842) "a state [that] comes into being from beyond outward phenomena"; and sometimes it was used to indicate a certain kind of style, for example being one of the "genuine states" (Rickett: 25) in Sikong Tu's *Shiping* 司空圖: 詩品. At that time the scope of *jingjie*'s or *jing*'s connotations was still quite narrow. After the Song dynasty (960-1279) the

usage of *jingjie* was significantly influenced by Chan (Zen) Buddhism, being frequently ambiguous and mysterious in sense, yet placing greater stress on the aesthetic comprehension of the perfection and openness of the artistic world under criticism. For example, in Yan Yu's 嚴羽 (fl. 1180-1235) theory of poetry he discusses the search for enlightenment, whereby one realizes that the image within poetry is much more penetratingly "crystal-like in clarity and more delicately-wrought" (*linglong*) (Rickett: 14, 42-43) than physical phenomena in natural life, with no trace of human crafting being evident: Yan Yu's "antelopes hanging by their horns leaving no trace below". The artistic world to which one is enlightened approximates to *jingjie*, (although Yan Yu never directly employs the term *jingjie*).

By the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) *yijing* or *jingjie* became familiar critical terms, still used in the context of striving for "enlightenment", but focusing even more on a total aesthetic understanding. For example, Yuan Mei 袁枚 (1716-1798) talks of "antelopes hanging by their horns; an (unglazed pottery) (ephemeral) elephant crossing a river", saying that poets "cannot but know this kind of *jingjie*" (*Suiyuan shihua* 隨園詩話). Wei Yuan 魏源 states that, "In dealing with the abstruse, one must approach the bland; through writings one is enlightened to the *jingjie*" (*Zhandao zashi* 棧道雜詩). Zheng Xie 鄭燮, discussing painting, also says, "There are difficulties to be found in the arrangement of hills or valleys or in the rendering of small flowers and grasses; there is facility to be found in wide-ranging creations or sweeping strokes; what is crucial is one's *yijing*" (*Ti huazhu liushijiu ze* 題畫竹六十九則). Although each of these and other such examples have a different emphasis, all pay attention to artistic wholeness and the aesthetic efficacy which might arouse spiritual or mental understanding.

It was Wang Guowei 王國維 (1877-1927) of the late Qing who genuinely attempted to upgrade *yijing* to a central

aesthetic concept. He considered *yijing* to be the organically-formed interrelationship between *yi* and *jing* which concerns the very nature of literature and which also at the basic level determines literature's aesthetic quality and effect. *Yi* refers to all kinds of subjective factors, including emotions, imagination, understanding, interest, etc., of which emotions are the most important, permeating all other factors and having a penetrative, connective and guiding function. *Jing* refers to the image or scene, etc. of artistic creativity, and is the prop and concrete manifestation of *yi*. The two mutually intermingle, merging into a unified whole, to form an aesthetic world, i.e. *yijing* or *jingjie*. If the two are not in absolute harmony, whether it be that *yi* supercedes *jing* or vice versa, then it is impossible to achieve the highest aesthetic effect.

Wang Guowei's *jingjie* incorporates the common traditional critical ideas of "the intermingling of feelings and scene" and "having both form and spirit", but makes even higher demands, being an artistic world which is much broader and more profound than the artistic image itself. Wang Guowei also proposed two different categories of *yijing*, based on the handling of the relationship between the subjective and objective in creation. The first are the "personal" and "impersonal" states (Rickett: 40), which refer to subjective factors in a creative work (i.e. emotions, etc.) which are manifest or hidden, strong or weak. Wang Guowei had a preference for an integrated state achieved through the mutual intermingling of subjective and objective factors to the point where they are almost impossible to distinguish or separate, i.e., the "impersonal state". The second refers to the "creative state" and the "descriptive state" (ibid). Of these two Wang Guowei said, "This is the basis of distinction between the idealists and the realists. However, it is difficult to make a differentiation between the two because the state which the great poets create must accord with what is natural, and the state which they simply describe must approach the ideal"

(Rickett: 40).

Wang Guowei believed that the conditions for forming a perfect state (*jingjie*) was to be "in accord with nature", i.e., a poet during creation must be able to free himself from all ties to worldly fame, etc. and enter into aesthetic speculation with an attitude of self-oblivion and thereby observe things and the self, so that the poet himself becomes part of nature and creation is "in accord with nature". As for "approaching the ideal", this refers to fully bringing into play creative forces within a free, unbridled creative state, imbuing objects of description with transcendence and universality, producing a limitless aesthetic effect, i.e., "the meaning beyond words, the sound beyond strings". Thus, it is only through being both "in accord with nature" and "approaching the ideal" that the perfect creative state can be achieved, forming that artistic world which is so very capable of eliciting imagination and comprehension.

To modern critical eyes, although Wang Guowei's analysis of *jingjie* was quite theoretical and in a comparatively systematic way elucidated the connotations attached to it in traditional literary discussions, yet as a critical concept its definition still remains unclear. Up until today many scholars and critics have attempted, from many different angles, to analyse the nucleus of *jingjie*'s connotations and put great effort into producing a comparatively clear definition based on aesthetic theory. A comparatively representative example of this is the "metaphysical significance" theory which, from the angle of stimulus and response, considers that "*jingjie*" transcends concrete and limited physical phenomena, events and scenes, to enter limitless time and space, or what is known as "the brain embraces the whole cosmos, the mind reaches back through the ages", thereby attaining a kind of philosophical rapport for, and comprehension of, all life, history and the cosmos. Thus *jingjie* is the category of imagery most rich in metaphysical meaning; *jingjie* can give one metaphysical

consolation through aesthetic stimulus and response.

Another kind is the "intuitive imagination" theory which considers *jingjie* to be an independent universe which transcends the surface appearance of reality and which is created through intuition and imagination by the poet or reader. The poet or reader, through fixed attentive observation and without analysis or reliance on erudition achieves a condition of intoxication in which natural taste and state of mind are mutually interchangeable. There is also the theory of "aesthetic levels", which considers that the creation or appreciation of *jingjie* in general has three mutually connected and progressive levels: the surface level is tainted by direct perception by the senses and accompanying superficiality, mostly manifested as all kinds of composite feelings which go through artistic processing to form scenes; next is the deep level *jingjie* which refers to the accumulated meanings inherent in a work, including ideology, feelings, reason and cultivation, which pass through the surface *jingjie* and inevitably achieve a deep layer of accumulated meaning which goes beyond the surface of words whereby the aesthetic experience of direct perception through the senses turns towards a comparatively deep understanding. There is also the level of the *jing* beyond the *jing* which, through artistic associations, imagination and other special functions as well as connotations, hints, symbols and other effects, leads to a kind of re-creation which has endless associations, and where words are limited but the meaning is limitless. There are many other explications of the traditional critical concept of *jingjie* by recent scholars, all of whom have striven to clarify its connotations and thereby clearly define it, but in reality most go beyond the scope of traditional usages to provide new explanations.

Works Cited and Recommended

Rickett, Adele Austin. *Wang Kuo-wei's Jen-chien Tz'u-hua: A Study of Literary Criticism*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 1977.