

Michael Ranta

Report: The XVIIIth International Congress of Aesthetics – “Diversities in Aesthetics” (Peking University, Beijing, China, 9-13 August 2010)



Illustration 1: Opening ceremony of the congress

For about one century now, the international association of aesthetics has arranged 19 congresses all over the world, in Europe, Asia, and North and South Americas. The first congress took place in Berlin in 1913, the second one in Paris in 1937, while – interrupted by the Second World War and its aftermath – the following ones were held from 1956 onwards with four-year intervals.¹ These congresses were initiated by the *Comité International d'Esthétique* consisting of prominent, though self-appointed scholars within the field of aesthetics, such as Harold Osborne, Thomas Munro, Etienne Souriau and many others. However, in 1988, the *International Association for Aesthetics* (IAA) was established, having a formal constitution which

included membership for national societies and individual scholars and specified election procedures for IAA's officers and its executive committee.² Under the auspices of the IAA most of the congresses afterwards took place with three-year intervals – in Madrid (1992), Lahti, Finland (1995), Ljubljana, Slovenia (1998), Tokyo (2001), Rio de Janeiro (2003), and in Ankara (2007).

The most recent congress was held 9th to 13th August at Peking University in Beijing, China, organized by the IAA together with the university and Beijing Municipal Education Commission.³ Whereas the congress in Ankara had about 400 participants, as many as 1.000 active participants attended the five-day congress in Beijing, about 400 of them stemming from China itself (and there were about 200 additional Chi-



Illustration 2: Word Cloud 1

nese listeners). The attention and interest which the congress quite obviously received, not least within China, was certainly remarkable, and the fact that Yuan Guiren, the Chinese minister of education, gave one of the opening speeches might also be regarded as quite significant. Peking University, which has one of the best reputations in China (and indeed is ranked as nr. 47 on the QS University Ranking List)⁴, and its campus provided an excellent setting for the congress.

Ten main topics had been suggested:

1. The global and the local: Western and non-Western aesthetics;
2. The definition of art and the analysis of concepts of art;
3. Conflicts and interactions between cultural studies and aesthetics;
4. The relationship between aesthetics and philosophy, ethics, psychology, or anthropology, etc.;
5. The relationship between aesthetics and forms of art, such as music, painting, sculpture, architecture, calligraphy, movie, and design, etc.;
6. The relationship between aesthetics and nature/environment/ecology;
7. The relationship between aesthetics and economy, society, and politics;
8. Aesthetics and aesthetic education;
9. Aesthetics: historical traditions and modernization;
10. Aesthetics: information technology and the cyber-space.

The various presentations were, as usual, structured as plenary or panel sessions and (more or less cohe-



Illustration 3: Word Cloud 2

rent) thematic sections, with a great variety of topics, certainly doing justice to the congress headline "Diversities in Aesthetics". These included, for example, analytic as well as continental aesthetics/philosophy, art education, architecture and urban planning, music, cinema, environmental aesthetics, literary theory, neuroscience and psychology of art, contemporary art, Marxist aesthetics, calligraphy, history of aesthetics, and digital art. Notable was also the occurrence of numerous sections on dance aesthetics, which usually have not been as prominent in other congresses of aesthetics which I have attended so far. Illustrations 2-4 show so called "word clouds", which might reveal the emphasis put on certain issues presented during the congress. The size of a word in each of these visualizations is proportional to the number of times the word appears in the input text, in this case the most common nouns and predicates in the titles of all presentations. In cloud 2, I have filtered out "Aesthetics", "aesthetic", and "Art". In cloud 3, I've filtered out "Chinese", "China", and "Dance".



Illustration 4: Word Cloud 3

Due to the vast number of presentations held at numerous parallel sessions, it is obviously quite difficult to give an all-embracing outline of them. It would also seem to be somewhat unfair and arbitrary, I think, to pick out certain speakers, while at the same time ignoring other commendable presentations. It perhaps suffices to say that I personally found a great number of them utterly inspiring, touching upon important issues as well as giving new insights into the various domains of aesthetic research.

Not surprisingly, a great number of presentations of course dealt with Asian aesthetics, i.e. from Korea, Japan, India and, not least, China, itself. Several presentations attempted to elucidate differences as well as similarities between Western and Chinese aesthetics. One question that became apparent was in which way it might be reasonable to talk about a specific "Chinese aesthetics" rather than "aesthetics in China". As a matter of fact, since the 19th century aesthetic research in China has to a considerable extent been influenced by Western traditions, such as the works of Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Schopenhauer, Schiller and Nietzsche, just to mention a few philosophers whose works were translated into Chinese and became widely discussed in certain academic circles. Moreover, Marxist aesthetics was introduced as early as 1919 (when the Chinese "May Fourth" movement took place) and became especially prominent after the 1950's when the Communist party under Mao Zedong came to power. On the other hand, aesthetic discussions in China had occurred as early as the 3rd century BC onwards, influenced by Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist thinking. A detailed discussion of traditional Chinese aesthetics would unfortunately go beyond the scope of this report, but we may note that rather holistic views of nature and humankind were embraced and artistic practices attempted to resonate with nature as well as the social landscape. Generally speaking, much less emphasis is put on originality, individuality and the expression of personal feelings compared with Western aesthetical ideals.

While some of the Chinese main speakers' lectures were simultaneously translated into English (portable transmitting devices with earphones were available for this purpose), most of the Chinese presentations were not, thus being incomprehensible to most foreign par-

ticipants. For obvious reasons this was unfortunate, as – judging from the titles – a great number of them might have given non-Chinese listeners substantial and important insights into Chinese culture and artistic practices. However, there were numerous possibilities for informal meetings and inspiring discussions besides the actual lecture sessions.

In all these respects, the Beijing congress indeed met the high standards already set at the exceptionally well-arranged congresses in Tokyo 2001 and in Ankara 2007. All of the presentations are intended to be issued on a CD, while a selection of them will be published in book form. Hopefully, these publications will also include translations of (at least some of) the Chinese presentations into English. So, there is every reason to congratulate the congress organizers, most notably perhaps Gao Jianping, Peng Feng, Ye Lang, and Zhu Liangzhi, and all involved persons, not least the numerous helpful student volunteers, on this very successful gathering.

The next International Congress of Aesthetics will take place in Kraków, Poland in 2013.⁵

Endnotes

1. Venice 1956, Athens 1960, Amsterdam 1964, Uppsala 1968, Bucharest 1972, Darmstadt 1976, Dubrovnik 1980, Montreal 1984, Nottingham 1988.
2. Further information about the IAA can be obtained at its website: <http://www2.eur.nl/fw/hyper/IAA/>
3. Website of the congress: http://www.caae.pku.edu.cn/ica2010/List/List_426.html
4. <http://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings/2010/results>
5. I would like to thank Jos de Mul and Arnold Berleant, who both were participants at the congress, for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this report.

Illustrations

- Ill. 1: Opening ceremony of the congress, © M. Ranta.
 Ill. 2-4: Word Clouds, © M. Ranta.

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Title

Michael Ranta, Report: The XVIIIth International Congress of Aesthetics, in: *kunsttexte.de*, Nr. 2, 2010 (3 Seiten), www.kunsttexte.de.