

Review of Research on Applied Ethics in China in the Last Thirty Years: With a Focus on Design Ethics

ZHOU QI^{[a],*}

^[a]Postdoctoral Researcher, College of Fine Arts, Shanghai University, Shanghai, China.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

In the 1960s and 1970s, study on applied ethics rose in the West. However, study of applied ethics in China started since the reform and opening up and it has gone through three different stages of development: the start from the end of 1970s to the end of 1980s, the development in the 1990s and the deepening in early 21st century. In the course of nearly three decades of development, research of applied ethics in China has made certain achievements, but it is not complete and has some prominent issues. This paper focuses on design ethics, has a brief review of the research of applied ethics in China in the last three decades, reflects the research results of applied ethics, and looks to its future development direction.

Key words: Applied ethics; Design ethics; Prospect

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INTRODUCTION

1960s, there has been research on the application of ethics in Western. And since China's reform and opening it appears the study of applied ethics. They have gone through several different stages of development in China: the start stage of 1970s to 1980s, the development of 1990s, and the deepening of the early twentieth century. In

thirty years of development, China's research of applied ethics has made some achievements, but the study is not perfect, and also has many problems. There exist some prominent issues. In this paper, the design ethics at the center of our research, we draw out the comprehensive review of China's three decades of research status of applied ethical issues, reflect on China's current research of applied ethics and then promote it forward.

1. THE DEVELOPMENT OF APPLIED ETHICS IN CHINA

Since the reform and opening up, research of western ethics including applied ethics has risen in China. Ethics is a discipline which conducts moral measurement of the field of social life, while applied ethics is an applied discipline which applies the basic principles of ethics to social life, so its basic characteristics are its application and interdiscipline. With the deepening of reform and opening up and economic and social development, a number of social conflicts hidden in the planned economy era have been increasingly exposed. Continuous development of society, the formation and development of the socialist market economy, the individual's life outlook and values differentiation and the transmutation of interesting relations among individuals, groups and the country have made all kinds of existing social problems gradually exposed. The individual pursuit of fairness, justice and human requirements provides the development of applied ethics with social soil and the environment. With the reform of the social system, problems of public service, legal education and the wealth gap and other issues have caused the Chinese scholars' thought about social problems involved in applied ethics. As scholar Gan Shaoping said:

In a sense, applied ethics is produced in the historical background of significant changes of Chinese social, political, economic and cultural values, and at the same time, the rise of applied ethics in return plays a positive role to push the

development of social values, social and political democrat ecology and Chinese moral philosophy itself. (Gan, 2006)

The in-depth development of reform and opening up and ideological emancipation of individuals as well as the increasing of foreign exchange has provided a favorable opportunity for the development of applied ethics. Social contradictions and conflicts overshadowed by a single interpersonal interest relation under the planned economy system are fully exposed. Interest relations and values are increasingly diversified, making the research field of ethics expanded (Zhao, 2008). With a variety of new social problems emerging, there are more demands for the study of ethics and they are more like demands of applied ethics. Research of ethics needs to explore social problems in all areas and contributes its efforts to solve these new problems and new contradictions, which also provides opportunities and motivation for the development of applied ethics. Specifically, the development stages of applied ethics in China include:

1.1 The Start of Research of Applied Ethics 1970s to 1980s

In the initial stage, Chinese scholars began to explore applied ethics from two perspectives. One was to start from the needs of Chinese economic and social development to conduct research by using the theoretical achievements of ethics and other disciplines. Another was to translate and introduce foreign books and papers on applied ethics to establish applied ethnic theory in line with China's national conditions. In this stage, we first developed various branches of ethics such as design ethics, economic ethics and environmental ethics and so on, and gradually established a number of research institutions of applied ethics.

1.2 The Development of Research of Applied Ethics 1990s

From the 1990s, applied ethics has entered a rapid development stage. With the in-depth study of research of theoretical issues launched by Chinese scholars, they have also conducted corresponding reflection and discussion on the core issues of applied ethics. With the in-depth development of research of applied ethics, specialized research institutions associated with applied ethics have also been established, especially ethical and application-related academic research institutions in universities. Various applied ethics-related conferences are also increased.

1.3 The Deepening of Research of Applied Ethics Early 21st century

With the in-depth study of applied ethics, theory of applied ethics has rapidly developed in China. Branches of applied ethics have been gradually improved and formed a subject group. A number of domestic universities also carry out graduate education of applied ethics. The number of monographs and journal articles related to applied ethics are also increasing year by year. More

importantly, scholars began to put the research results of applied ethics into social practice.

In the last three decades, the study of ethics in China has made great achievements. This is related to social historical environment that ethical culture has been occupying an important position in traditional Chinese culture, that is, China's ethical culture attached importance to the theoretical analysis and solution of practical issues and this is what rich historical heritage has provided for the development of ethics. On the other hand, it is also the result to solve new problems and contradictions emerging in Chinese social life after the reform and opening up. In order to solve these new problems, scholars use existing knowledge and experience in applied ethics to analyze the social situation in China so as to find new theoretical problems and to solve new problems. This is the process of applying theory to practice.

2. THE CURRENT SITUATION OF APPLIED ETHICS REFLECTED IN DESIGN ETHICS

The history of mankind is the development history of design in a sense. Design creates the world where human beings live. Therefore, life history is the history of creation. Design has also undergone a long process of evolution, and humans continue to get more material and spiritual wealth suitable for human development and build lifestyles fitting their own development from design. Design serves human beings, and it is inseparable from the development of human society. The development of design from nothing to bud, from small to large and from simple to complex gets a more reasonable application in practice thanks to the series of close contact with humans, and this application is inseparable from ethics. In this sense, the history of design is also the history of applied ethics. Therefore, design ethics is an important and indispensable part of applied ethics.

Design ethics essentially is to comprehensively consider the relationship between individuals, nature and society, concern about the long-term development of society, achieve the core goals of design from the aspects of practice, aesthetics, economy and morality and apply the theory of applied ethics into practice to achieve balance and synergy between individuals, between individuals and nature and between individuals and society. American scholar Victor Papanek in his book *Design for the Real World* put forward three questions: First, design should serve the majority of the people rather than just a few wealthy countries. Second, design should not only serve healthy people, but also takes people with disabilities into account. Third, design should seriously consider the use of the limited resources of the earth (Gao, 2013). From these issues he mentioned, we can see that, design ethics as a theoretical and practical direction for

the development of design in the 21st century has met the situation that modern design comprehensively deals with the problems of the complex relationship between design and human society. It is also the actual theoretical instruction of the timeliness and the rationality of design. We can say that in modern society, design ethics reflects the good and harmonious spirit of humanism between ethics and human beings.

In the last three decades, applied ethics in China has developed significantly. Design ethic has also been fully developed. Among monographs about design ethics, there is a better known one *Summary of Chinese Design Theory*. This book is very valuable in the field of design theory, which compiles the contents of the 765 entries in Chinese design theory. Its time span covers from the Qin Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty and it is an important book in design theory. The book shows the creative philosophy and design wisdom in ancient China; to a large extent, it constitutes the theoretical basis of Chinese design and provides the appropriate historical experience and cultural resources for contemporary Chinese designers in their design practice at a theoretical level. The book has a great value and significance in the disciplinary construction of design philosophy, design history and design theory. This book presents some preliminary achievements of traditional Chinese design ethics, but in general, the theoretical study of design ethics in China is behind the development of design practice and its theoretical study is also behind that in the Western countries.

Since 2000, Chinese scholars have fully recognized the importance of research on design and social problems, especially the important value of design and ethical research. In Issue 6 in 2003 of *Art Observation*, with the subject of "Design Ethics: From man-machine fit to interpersonal harmony" a series of discussions were launched, making design ethics gradually valued by scholars. Its significance lies in scholar's reflection of the current situation of design ethics and its existing problems and at the same time it evokes the moral conscience of designers and conducts a new cultural observation of contemporary design. The purpose of the discussion is to find a globally common design ethics and code of ethics. It is also a deep concern about and an in-depth study of design ethics in the design community. In 2007, National Design Ethics Educational Forum took the theme of "design ethical education in majors of art and design in universities and colleges" to start discussions of large-scale and in-depth thinking for design ethics and culture. All these activities reflect the emphasis of design ethical issues from our academic circles and design industry. More than sixty design colleges and units across the country participated in the "2007 National Design Ethics Educational Forum". Forum focuses on four issues of the connotation of design ethics, design ethics and professional ethics, design ethics in different cultural background and the educational problems of

design ethics. It has invited renowned scholars in the current design world to conduct in-depth discussion on current design ethics and design educational problems from different aspects of contemporary design such as urban issues, consumer issues and communication issues. At the meeting, scholars analyze design ethics from different angles, point out problems and difficulties faced in design and propose thinking to solve these problems. *Declaration in Hangzhou - the Initiative for Reflection of Design Ethics* published the forum calls for reflection of design for future's sake and to assume responsibility for the reflection of ethics and the reconstruction of values in the name of design. The forum and the declaration, to some extent, reflect the importance and necessity of design ethics and design ethical education. The requirement of design ethics is to find a way suitable for human survival and development to design products and to protect the ecological environment for human survival and development. In this regard, the proposal of sustainable development and eco-design and other theories is also useful for the reflection of China's design ethical problems.

3. THE EXISTING PROBLEMS AND FUTURE PROSPECTS OF APPLIED ETHICS IN CHINA

The achievements in the development of applied ethics in the last 30 years are closely related to the spread of Chinese philosophy. "Philosophy has become a major just like other majors; philosophers become a type of experts and the difference from physicists or biologists generally is as follows: No one actually needs him (philosopher)." (Gan, 2006) From the disciplinary sense, the disciplinary development of philosophy promotes the development of applied ethics. The research object and research scope of applied ethics which includes design ethics is a profound problem of modern society to be clarified.

In 2000, the First National Conference on Applied Ethics was held in China. Since then, the annual conference of the National Applied Ethics has become an academic exchange conference for scholars in the field. While scholars explore the research object and scope of applied ethics, they also actively think of the corresponding social practice and social application problems and think about some practical problems of applied ethics in the context of research results achieved at present. For example, the setting of applied ethics and other branch disciplines including design theory remains unclear, and scholars still have disagreements on the classification of subjects. There are also disagreements on some basic theories and concept definitions. Some scholars believe that: "Applied ethics is not a real discipline and it does not have a complete theory or system; it is just a loose applied discipline group lack

of strict logical structure.” “Applied ethics is a simple and brutal measurement tool produced in the context of impatient and impetuous academic mood, reflecting lazy, anxious and avoiding anything in-depth state of mind and emotion of the worrying, fearing and annoying post-modern people.” (Idib.) These academic disagreement about applied ethics, just like disputes of egoism and altruism, individualism and collectivism, and other ethical sayings and ethical principles existing in history, remain open. Egoism, individualism and even liberalism all emphasize the priority of personal or individual interests and values (Xiao, 2007). Altruism and collectivism are questions of preferred choice when interests are in a conflict. China’s applied ethical theory is under the deep influence of the West, and the development is not yet mature. As a very practical applied social discipline, the essential purpose of the development of applied ethics is to guide social practice rather than copying the Western theory to apply to Chinese social conditions. If we just follow the Western theory, it is difficult for China’s applied ethical theory to break through in practical conditions. In fact, China’s social situation and historical context provide a good cultural soil for the development of applied ethics. The rapid development of society and economy after the reform and opening up has provided a good social environment for the development China’s applied ethics. All these are conducive to the innovative development of applied ethics to achieve its localized studies so as to better solve some new social issues emerging in the high-speed economic and social development, such as using

design ethical research to effectively regulate issues of design professionals’ ethics and design orientation. Meanwhile, the disciplinary system of applied ethics is still not perfect. Take design ethic as an example. It is a branch of applied ethics, reflecting ethical practice of applied ethics in the development of China’s design industry. However, a single study of design ethic is still not enough, and it is separated from the theoretical basis of the development of ethics and the social reality of the practice development of design. The development of design ethics and applied ethics are inseparable, and the development of applied ethics and ethics and social practical development including design is inseparable. Therefore, in-depth study of the theory and practice of applied ethics including design ethics and construction of its complete disciplinary system have important theoretical and practical significance for the disciplinary development of applied ethics and social progress.

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