

# Chapter 1

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## The Cosmological Background

### ENERGY AND PROPENSITY

The notion that *qi* 氣 or “configurative energy” animates the world is among the most common assumptions in Warring States literature.<sup>1</sup> The language of *qi* serves as a sort of metaphysical vernacular throughout the period’s literature, and the *Mencius* is no exception. By exploring the notion of *qi* one reconstructs the worldview from which Mencius thought and wrote.<sup>2</sup> The *Zuozhuan* teaches that *qi* in its various phases and permutations give rise to a variety of qualities: the “five flavors,” the “five colors,” the “five modes of music,” and when out of balance, the “six illnesses.”<sup>3</sup> As the qualities of taste, sight, and sound, *qi* represents the transactions between an organism and its environment. As the measure of health and spirit, *qi* represents the animating energies of the living body: the vitality derived from environing conditions that cause physical growth and sustain life.<sup>4</sup> *Qi* concentrates in living things as a kind of vital fluid, and in the natural world as a kind of vapor; it constitutes both the emotional and the meteorological environment of life as the prevailing “atmosphere” or “weather.”<sup>5</sup>

As a metaphysical notion *qi* 氣 presents a challenge: it defies any sharp distinction between form and matter or being and modality. *Qi* is not the inert material of a thing, for it is presented as hylozoistic and dynamic, and it is identified with a variety of qualities. These qualities,

however, do not correspond to the essential attributes of any discrete, ontologically primary subject. The qualities of *qi* can be designated as phases of *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽, but these designations do not belong to any primary being as an essential feature. *Yin* and *yang* do not operate as formal properties. As Nathan Sivin observes:

*Yin* 陰 is always defined with respect to *yang* 陽, and vice versa. An old man is *yin* with respect to a young man, but *yang* with respect to a woman. The idea that *yin* or *yang* is a property—for instance, that all men are always *yang*, or conversely that *yang* is masculine—is not a Chinese idea. A relationship, if not stated, is always implied.<sup>6</sup>

*Yin* and *yang* express qualities that arise from relations between things (*wu* 物), and things are always dynamically configured. The way things internally relate to one another gives rise to *yin* and *yang*. As the *Daodejing* says:

The ten thousand things shoulder *yin* 陰 and embrace *yang* 陽; they are a blending of configurative energy into harmonies [*he* 和].<sup>7</sup>

Achievements of equilibrium or harmony (*he* 和) describe the blending of things into relations that configure *qi* and consummate in qualitative relationships designated *yin* or *yang*. Such relational states entail neither ontologically primary subjects nor the essential attributes thereof. Such states entail only the continuity of transforming *qi*. Zhuangzi also understands the transformation (*hua* 化) of correlative, qualitative states as resolving into the incessant reconfiguration of *qi*. He presents this understanding in the form of a common saying: “Throughout all the world is the continuity [*yi* 一] of configurative energy [*qi*].”<sup>8</sup>

*Qi* 氣 is understood to express a wide range of qualities at various levels; biological, emotional, meteorological, spiritual, and so on, according to how it is harnessed, blocked, released, or lost in dynamic configurations. In a world animated by *qi*, things spontaneously manifest a particular quality or character by virtue of their relational configurations. The spontaneous nature of qualitative experience in this cosmology is an aspect of the form/function dynamics it entails. There

is no primary distinction to be made between form and function in a *qi* cosmology; qualities are discharged and undergone spontaneously by virtue of dispositions that are always both formal and functional. As Judith Farquhar observes:

*Qi* 氣 is both structural and functional, a unification of material and temporal forms that loses all coherence when reduced to one or the other “aspect.”<sup>9</sup>

As things are dynamically configured and reconfigured, material/temporal formations become modally disposed to discharge or undergo qualitative experience immediately. Any standard form/matter or being/modality distinction breaks down.

As we entertain a Warring States cosmology, other familiar notions also begin to dissolve. Without the presence of discrete, primary subjects or formal attributes, standard models of causality become difficult to conceptualize. There is nothing that clearly corresponds to efficient or final causality in the functioning of configurative energy. In the *Zhuangzi*, Ziqi is asked to discuss the “pipes of heaven” and he relates the following:

The world emits a configurative energy [*qi* 氣] that we’ll call a “wind.” If only it would not blow, but it does, and the myriad apertures begin to howl. Have you alone not heard their drawn out sounds?

Ziqi then describes the contours of the earth, which like “nostrils,” “mouths” and “ears,” are configured to give rise to perceptible qualities, the metaphor being various sounds. He continues:

The myriad sounds produced by the blowing are all distinct, for all the blowing does is elicit from the apertures themselves [*ziji* 自己] their own natural inclinations [*ziqu* 自取]. Who would be the initiator of this?<sup>10</sup>

According to Ziqi, everything derives by virtue of its “shape” a spontaneous propensity towards certain qualities in the incessant blow of *qi*. There is no antecedent force that determines the advent of these qualities in any given configuration, and there is nothing apart from the

inclination of the configuration itself that determines the qualities of its own expression. Neither efficient nor final causality is implicated in the “blow” of *qi*.

In place of efficient and final causality, there is an alternative notion of causality suggested in a *qi* 氣 cosmology. However elusive the notion, sensitive scholars consistently detect its presence. It is suggested in what Herbert Fingarette labels “magic” in the *Analects*.<sup>11</sup> Fingarette senses, even in the *Analects*, the presence of a causal reasoning that differs considerably from standard Western models. It is also suggested in what Tu Wei-ming calls the “continuous interaction” of *tian* 天 and *ren* 人 in the early Confucian tradition.<sup>12</sup> *Qi* causality is also suggested whenever the word “organic” is used to distinguish a Chinese mode of thinking from dominant Western modes.<sup>13</sup> The term “organic” calls attention to the interrelatedness of things, highlighting the absence of discrete objects in linear, causal relations in absolute space and time. If causality is not linear in this sense, then what is causality in the Chinese tradition?

The notion of causality operative in classical Chinese thought is difficult to articulate in the familiar terminology of cause and effect. Attempts to describe how Chinese causality differs from linear causality employ the language of “configuration,” “resonance,” and “propensity.” Léon Vandermeersch, writing on the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing*), describes the Chinese notion of causality in the following language:

From one event to another, the relation revealed by the science of divination [in the *Book of Changes*] is not presented as a chain of intermediate causes and effects, but as a change in a diagrammatic configuration.<sup>14</sup>

Carine Defoort suggests that, for the Chinese,

Events were not seen as caused by one powerful and preceding event but as woven in a network of inter-dependent nodes, a colossal pattern in which things reacted upon each other by a kind of mysterious resonance rather than mechanical impulsion.<sup>15</sup>

François Jullien has perhaps developed the Chinese notion of causality most fully.<sup>16</sup> He focuses on a single character, *shi* 勢, which in

various contexts admits translation as “position,” “power,” “circumstances,” and “propensity.” Apart from its use in early militarist texts and its eventual adoption by Legalist thinkers,<sup>17</sup> *shi* never became a highly developed philosophical topic in the tradition. The explanation for this, according to Jullien, is that “the intuition of [*shi*] is common enough in China that it fails to give rise to any abstract reflection,” since “to the Chinese, the idea of *shi* seems self-evident.”<sup>18</sup> Jullien penetrates an elusive subject matter, one he describes as “difficult to capture in discourse: namely, the kind of potential that originates not in human initiative but instead results from the very disposition of things.”<sup>19</sup>

This elusive kind of potential that Jullien locates involves notions of natural efficacy and tendency that rely on neither efficient nor final causality. Instead, *shi* 勢 represents the propensity of a situation or event to ripen into efficacy completely of itself. The notion of propensity is contrary to that of making something happen through any external form of causal force. Mencius himself relates an old adage of the Qi people, illustrating the notion:

One might be clever, but it's better to make use of propensity [*shi* 勢]. One might have a garden hoe, but it is better to wait for the season to arrive.<sup>20</sup>

Propensity (*shi* 勢) refers to the causal force that circumstances themselves implicate. It is the spontaneous efficacy of a given state or condition of things that relies on no discrete causal agent or principle. Jullien specifically presents the “logic” of *shi* as an alternative to the “extrinsic relatedness” of mechanistic causality and commensurate with the Chinese “indifference to any notion of a *telos*, [or] final end for things.”<sup>21</sup> Rather than rely on regressive, causal analysis or the projection of teleological ends, Chinese thinkers interpret reality in terms commensurate with Ziqi’s howling apertures: as configurative dispositions that sponsor the spontaneous emergence of events with qualitative character.

The notion of “disposition” involves both configurative arrangement and spontaneous efficacy, notions that are consistent with a *qi* 氣 cosmology. That spontaneous efficacy arises according to the manner in which things are arranged is consistent with the idea that configurative energy disperses in always-qualitative concentrations throughout its field of deployment. In a world charged with configurative energy,

every shift of position is a change in disposition and has an immediate, qualitative effect. In the *Mencius* this is reflected even in vernacular contexts.<sup>22</sup>

Causality in the Warring States period refers to the dynamic whereby concentrations of *qi* 氣, shored up in fluent configurations, punctuate as qualitative events. A qualitative event, in this respect, can be thought of as a process in which a quality (*de* 德), engendered within the field of becoming (*dao* 道), “takes shape” (*xing* 形) within its enviroing conditions, and culminates (*cheng* 成) through the force or propensity (*shi* 勢) that these conditions implicate. The formula is presented in the *Daodejing*:

A process of becoming engenders them, a quality rears them, things shape them, and the propensity of circumstances completes them.<sup>23</sup>

Events occur by virtue of the limits implicit in the conditions that sponsor their emergence. Emergence is a process of taking on shape, and shape entails a pervasive quality (*de* 德) that rears a trajectory towards completion (*cheng* 成). Understood discursively, this consummatory instance is itself among the conditions that define the next phase of formation. The process described here is seamless.

### SHAPE AND SPONTANEITY

Admittedly, the cosmological assumptions of the Warring States period are not easy to reconstruct. Extending this discussion to other texts, however, can grant further insight into the assumptions that underwrite the vocabulary of shape and configurative energy in the world of Mencius. The *Book of Changes* is particularly helpful.

The *Book of Changes* is constructed around two hexagrams that symbolize the two salient traits of reality: the “generative” (*qian* 乾) and the “receptive” (*kun* 坤). The “generative” is identified with the incipience and continued novelty of a process as it “takes shape,” as well as the seamless continuity among various phases of the process itself:

Great indeed is the sublimity of the “generative,” to which all things owe their beginning [*shi* 始] and which interconnects

*tian* 天. Clouds move along and the rain spreads, and various things flow in shape [*shunxing* 順形].<sup>24</sup>

The “receptive” represents the boundless potential for transformation; it cooperates with the “generative” in bringing about the conditions for momentarily definite, yet ever transforming shapes. In the *Words of Wen* (*Wenyan*) commentary on the second hexagram, we read:

The “receptive” is most pliant, but when considered in agitation [*dong* 動] it becomes firm [*gang* 剛]. It is in equilibrium [*jing* 靜], and owing to unique qualities [*de* 德] it manifests definite trends [*fang* 方].<sup>25</sup>

“Qualities,” as an aspect of the “receptive,” delimit events by focusing them within the limitless continuity of the “generative,” and reflect that which is determinate about them. Qualities (*de* 德) initiate and direct the trajectories of discursive events and remain, through various phases of development, their defining characteristics. Hall and Ames describe *de* as a “focus” that gathers momentum around itself in a “field.”<sup>26</sup> Any particular “focus” becomes definite by construing an entire field from the time and location it sustains. Owing to agitation (*dong* 動), also an aspect of the “receptive,” the “focusing” that makes things definite is always discursive. The “generative” aspect of reality lends endless potential for novelty and growth. In the *Great Commentary* (*Dazhuan*) of the *Book of Changes*, as in the *Daodejing*,<sup>27</sup> this process of growth, exhibiting both agitation and equilibrium, is described as opening and closing a gate:

[The early sages] called the closing of the gate the receptive, and the opening of the gate the generative.<sup>28</sup>

The passage continues by defining what it means to “endure through alteration” (*tongbian* 通變) in those terms:

The alternation between closing and opening they called “alteration” [*bian* 變]. The coming-and-going without limit [from one alteration, on to the next] they called “enduring through.”

The notion of “alteration” (*bian* 變) in the *Great Commentary* can be further understood as transformations in shape:

Transforming [hua 化] while cutting a shape [cai 裁] is called “alteration.”<sup>29</sup>

“Enduring through” (*tong* 通), in the same passage, refers to the continuity exhibited by shapes-in-process as they move through alteration:

That there is extension [*tui* 推] while traveling along [*xing* 行] is called ‘enduring through’ [*tong* 通].

The notion of “enduring through alteration” (*tongbian* 通變) in the *Great Commentary* reflects both the boundless novelty of an emergent process as well as the actual “shapes” attained in that process: both the limitless potential for growth and the delimiting constraint of shape are accounted for. The world of the Chinese thinker is one in which “taking shape” and “enduring through alternation” happen endlessly. These processes are simply called “events” (*shi* 事).

We learn more about this cosmology by considering the manner in which Zhuangzi makes sense of his wife’s death. At first he says he did not understand his loss. Eventually he peers back into her beginnings (*shi* 始) and uses this insight to make sense of her demise. He finds that there was a time before the configurative energy, shape, and life-span (*sheng* 生) of his wife emerged from an amorphous (*za* 雜) state, prior to her existence.<sup>30</sup> Her existence, he comes to realize, was simply an alteration (*bian* 變) from some state that precluded her into that configurative energy (*qi* 氣), shape (*xing* 形) and life-span (*sheng* 生) that was *her*. Her death is understood as a seamless return to that “formless” state from which she had emerged.<sup>31</sup> Understanding this, Zhuangzi ceases mourning and begins to celebrate her memory. Zhuangzi considers his wife not as a discrete entity now annihilated, but rather as a process that literally “took shape” over the course of a life span (*sheng*), and now consummated, makes for a memorable experience.

Throughout the *Zhuangzi*, life is viewed as alteration (*bian* 變): it is a “taking shape” from some previous phase while death is the perfectly natural transformation into something else. Things do not emerge from sheer nothingness nor disappear into sheer nothingness. There is no substantial generation or corruption. Life and death are simply alterations in functional arrangements of configurative energy, phases in the endless transformation from one shape into another.



Given the fact that no shape is immutable in this cosmology, shape must be considered not as the fixed “nature” of a thing but rather as the momentary consummation of an ongoing process—one that is, in itself, the dynamic starting point for the next phase of transformation. Shape, then, is something that indicates a “disposition” rather than a fixed “nature.” By virtue of causal propensity (*sbi* 勢), the “disposition” of any configuration issues spontaneously into features that both define and reconfigure the trajectory of its discursive formation.

We must give careful consideration to the notion of “spontaneity” that is being developed here, as it will often be appealed to in the coming discussion of the *Mencius*. “Spontaneity” does not mean “randomness,” “haphazardness,” or “unpredictability.” The “spontaneous” qualities that arise from the propensity of a particular disposition do not emerge randomly; rather, they express the history and continuity of the discursive formation of that disposition.

Taking a step closer to Mencius, let us consider a botanical example. The young oak tree that stands near the baseball field will not “spontaneously” become a giraffe. There are certain “spontaneous” things, however, that we can expect from this oak tree: the turning of its leaves in autumn, the habit of its branches to reach for sunlight, the thickening of its bark, and so on. One might take such “spontaneous” behaviors to illustrate this oak tree’s “formal” definition, essential “nature,” or “final cause.” To do so would be reasonable, but it would be to entirely miss the thrust of Warring States thought. The “spontaneous” behavior of this oak tree, from the perspective of the Warring States thinker, signals the seamless continuity of its emergence, not its “nature” or “final cause.” This oak tree is “disposed” to do such things by virtue of its history. In twenty years time, depending on conditions as yet undetermined, this oak tree might be flourishing magnificently in a form all its own, lying on its side providing shelter to a rat snake, or exhausting its fibers providing warmth to someone’s living room. In transaction with conditions, it may develop the “disposition” to perform these or any number of functions “spontaneously” so long as these functions retain continuity with its previous form and function. For the Warring States thinker, these potential scenarios are not “actualized” on account of something immutably “fixed.” It is instead the continuity of transactional formation within determinate conditions that enable forms to evolve and functions to be discharged “spontaneously” according to situations as they become configured.

This idea will be developed in pages to come. “Spontaneity” will be understood as the unmediated discharge of a function configured in a dynamic disposition. In the next chapter, I will discuss the Mencian notion of “heart-mind” or “feeling” (*xin* 心) along these lines. Dispositions themselves arise from conditions (*ming* 命), such that they “take shape” discursively in transaction with conditions as they are met. This is the theme of the newly discovered *Dispositions Arise from Conditions* document. This idea will be further developed, and in chapters four and five I will treat the Mencian notion of “human disposition” (*renxing* 人性) along these lines. For Mencius, dispositions can be cultivated in such a way that they issue spontaneously into appropriate (*yi* 義) feelings and behaviors. This will be discussed presently.

### DISPOSITION AND SPONTANEITY

A. C. Graham was the first to suggest the relevance of a notion of spontaneity to Chinese ethics generally: “Chinese ethical thinking starts from the spontaneity of inclination and the value of wisdom.”<sup>32</sup> Graham proceeds to discuss spontaneity in Chinese ethics in terms of a “quasi-syllogism” under which spontaneous approaches might be evaluated in practice. As Graham is well aware, however, spontaneity precludes such discursive reasoning altogether. He writes:

No thinker in this tradition objectivises the spontaneous in man, as morally neutral inclination to be utilized or checked in the service of ends chosen independently. . . .

He then asks himself frankly:

Is it a limitation of Chinese thought that it overlooked the approach which seems natural to ourselves? It may be profitable to ask the questions from the opposite direction. How did I as a Westerner get trapped into pretending that I can fully objectivise the spontaneous in myself, shrink myself into a point of rational Ego pursuing ends independent of my spontaneous goals, observing unmoved even my own emotions? What have I gained from following a line of thought which first detached supposedly rational ends from the goals of inclination, then failed to discover any rational grounds for them?<sup>33</sup>

If the young oak tree by the baseball field could speak, it might pose the same questions to those strange onlookers who ascribe its spontaneous behavior to its “species,” “nature,” or teleological “end.”

Graham is keen to point out that spontaneity in ethics is a theme across the spectrum of thinkers and schools in classical China. The notion of spontaneity will be used in chapter three to distinguish the Mencian approach to ethics from the more technical Mohist approach. There is some ground to cover, however, before we are clear about how the Mencian notion of “disposition” works to refute the Mohist by appeal to spontaneity.

From the standpoint of Warring States cosmology, the notion of disposition (*xing* 性) is similar to that of “shape” (*xing* 形) in that each addresses the formal aspects of a *qi* 氣 configuration. Each sponsors a concentration of configurative energy. Each is a dynamic state or condition that facilitates a spontaneous transaction in the world. And each, in turn, expresses the “quality” or “character” (*de* 德) of the things they individuate. Also, given the assumptions of a *qi* cosmology, both are process-oriented notions. Zhuangzi’s wife took on shape over the course of a life (*sheng* 生), and as Graham points out, the notion of life span (*sheng* 生) is closely connected to that of disposition (*xing* 性), the two terms being in some cases interchangeable.<sup>34</sup>

However, a disposition is not identical to a course of life. Graham traces the distinction between *xing* 性 and *sheng* 生 and determines that, by the time of the *Spring and Autumn Annals of Master Lü* (*Lüshichun-qiu*), the disposition of a thing is considered “its *proper* course of development during its process of *sheng*.”<sup>35</sup> *Qi* 氣 is linked to the normative dimension of a disposition at this stage in the tradition. In a manner that has continued to inform Chinese understandings of health and illness, the *Zuozhuan* describes the human disposition (*xing*) as a *qi* configuration, a functional disposition that one loses (*shi* 失) if the harmony it facilitates is upset:

In excess, [sensory qualities] confuse and disorder, and people lose their dispositions [*xing* 性].<sup>36</sup>

Here, a disposition is presumed to condition the flow of configurative energies that account for vitality. *Xing* 性 is a configuration that sponsors in some desirable way the flow of these energies. As the passage suggests, transactional perturbations can alter a disposition. Any

alteration of state or condition is understood to be an immediate alteration of energy. The result is qualitative and spontaneous; in this case, it is the difference between a state of health and a state of illness.

Health is a state that involves the spontaneous discharge of bodily functions that preserve the optimal vitality and integrity of an ongoing process. When the body is healthily disposed, a person feels great and can enjoy any number of things. If one is feeling ill, one cannot restore a healthy disposition by simply behaving as if one feels great—as if such behaviors themselves will somehow restore one’s health. Mencius thinks of the moral disposition in a similar manner. Just as a healthy bodily disposition affords one certain vital energies, the cultivation of a healthy moral disposition concentrates what Mencius calls “flood-like configurative energies” (*haoranzhiqi* 浩然之氣). He explains how such experience is had:

It is born of accumulated appropriateness [*yi* 義]. It cannot be had by anyone through sporadic appropriateness.<sup>37</sup>

The kind of moral disposition that Mencius advocates cultivating can be termed “habitual.” Cultivating habit, in this sense, does not mean establishing a set of routines; instead, habit is the developed proclivity to transact with the world on a spontaneous level. Morality is not a series of randomly discharged acts; it is rather the integration of productive habits into one’s person. Productive habits are important to cultivate since they condition the manner in which an organism spontaneously acts upon and undergoes experience in the world. Habit conditions impulse, and as a mode of being is indistinguishable from the proclivities that arise from the propensity of a disposition (*xing* 性).

As Mencius suggests, genuine moral impulse has little to do with the sporadic performance of good deeds based on their stipulated goodness. Mencius subordinates any morality based on doctrines (*yan* 言) that stipulate what is appropriate and advocates in their place a morality based on the spontaneous prompts of feeling (*xin* 心). Feeling represents the structural/functional interface of an integrated disposition. The Mencian project is one of preserving the incipient disposition to feel the world in a certain way and of gradually shaping a better-integrated disposition by cultivating that initial disposition into productive habits of feeling. Forging such a disposition is likened to forging a path. As Mencius instructs Gaozi:

If it is used, a trail through the mountains becomes a well-trammeled path in no time. If it is not used, it becomes choked with grass just as quickly. Right now your feelings [*xin* 心] are choked with grass.<sup>38</sup>

To cultivate a moral disposition is to make moral behavior habitual and hence spontaneous. One's disposition then becomes inseparable from one's very identity (*fen* 分) as a person. According to Mencius, the identity of the exemplary person is composed of virtues cultivated into habits rooted in feeling. The more deeply integrated identity is with one's integral feeling, the less likely one is to radically alter one's personality when circumstances shift. Mencius explains:

What exemplary persons make their disposition [*xing* 性] does not increase if their activities become important in the world, nor diminish if they are relegated to live in poverty and obscurity. The reason is that their identity becomes established [*fending* 分定]. What exemplary persons cultivate as their disposition are the associated humanity [*ren* 仁], appropriateness [*yi* 義], ritual propriety [*li* 禮], and wisdom [*zhi* 知] that are rooted in their feeling [*xin* 心].<sup>39</sup>

Mencius continues by describing the physical manifestations of one's disposition, indicating that the creation of identity implicates the whole person:

This disposition generates a complexion as a matter of course, visible in the face, manifest in posture, and reaching throughout the body.<sup>40</sup>

There is a symbiotic relationship in the *Mencius* between one's bodily shape (*xing* 形) and one's disposition (*xing* 性) as a person. Hence, Mencius implicates the former in the cultivation of the latter:

One is disposed towards bodily shape and complexion by *tian* 天, but only by becoming a sage is one able to go anywhere [*jian* 踐] with that shape.<sup>41</sup>

A related idea is expressed in the *Zhongyong*:

What *tian* 天 conditions is a disposition [*xing* 性]. To further [*shuai* 率] one's disposition is called the 'most productive course' [*dao* 道].<sup>42</sup>

These two passages are similar both conceptually and linguistically. In the above translations, the choice of "further" for *shuai* 率 and "going somewhere" for *jian* 踐 is intended to highlight this similarity. *Shuai* means to "follow" but it also means to "lead." It means both here, just as *jian* means both to "follow" as well as to "tread forward."<sup>43</sup> The idea in both passages is that some initial "shape" or "disposition" is given, but one must "move it forward" in some way by doing the most one can with it; this results in the "most productive course" (*dao* 道).<sup>44</sup> These notions will be further considered in pages to come.

Mencius employs the terminology of disposition to distinguish the Confucian attitude towards human development from other competing attitudes. His contemporary, Zhuangzi, is also concerned with the implications of shape and spontaneity in a *qi* 氣 cosmology. Zhuangzi bypasses the notion of disposition (*xing* 性), however. *Xing* 性 appears nowhere in the "Inner Chapters" of *Zhuangzi*; neither is it in *Daodejing*. Rather than focus on developing a moral disposition, these texts focus instead on the inherent uniqueness of the shape (*xing* 形) of things. From the standpoint of a *qi* cosmology, both the notion of shape (*xing* 形) and that of disposition (*xing* 性) can be understood as affective states in a world charged with configurative energy. Reading the *Parity of Things* (*Qiwulun* 齊物論) chapter of the *Zhuangzi* side-by-side with the *Mencius* suggests the functional similarity of these terms.

### ZHUANGZI AND SHAPE

Zhuangzi responds directly to a Mencian line of thinking in the *Parity of Things*. He agrees that lived configurations issue directly into spontaneous feelings (*xin* 心). He writes, "With the transformation of shape [*xing* 形], feelings transform naturally."<sup>45</sup> Zhuangzi does not, however, as Mencius does, advocate developing one's shape into a putatively moral disposition (*xing* 性) by reinforcing certain habits of feeling; he advocates instead the abandonment of this project. His rationale is this:

If the idea is to follow one's integral feeling [*xin* 心] as a guide, then who is without such a guide? Why must it be only those who understand the on-going development of things and choose for themselves what to feel that have such a guide? Even the dull-witted have one.<sup>46</sup>

Zhuangzi considers the conventionally "wise" no better than the purportedly "dull-witted." These are, Zhuangzi would maintain, not absolute distinctions. He maintains that given the continuity and parity of all things, no lived configuration in the world grants one exclusive access to moral feeling.

According to Zhuangzi, the error of the Confucian sages is that they seek to "rectify the shape [*xing* 形] of everything with their bowing and scraping to ritual forms and music."<sup>47</sup> And this encapsulates the Mencian project: Mencius wishes to "shape" a qualitatively human disposition (*xing* 性) through Confucian practice, Confucian education, and the extension of Confucian moral feeling. For Zhuangzi, however, it is wrongheaded to distinguish such human achievement from human failure when even "human shape" (*renzhixing* 人之形) in the span of "ten-thousand transformations" is not necessarily preferable to other forms of existence.<sup>48</sup> Zhuangzi asks the empty skull if it would like its "shape" restored to a living, human status, and the answer is unequivocal: "Never!"<sup>49</sup> For Zhuangzi, each and every configuration of existence is utterly unique and self-justified. There is no absolute standard by which the worth of various forms can be measured.

This explains why Zhuangzi's dialogues are populated with grotesque creatures, twisted trees, and disfigured criminals. Zhuangzi is keen to assert that these seemingly inferior or undesirable states of existence are all of commensurate importance and capable of contributing unique worth to the totality. Each shape is possessed of an inherent, distinct "quality" (*de* 德) irrespective of any perceived worthlessness. The images Zhuangzi uses to render his point are perfectly suited to frustrate the Mencian project. Mencius sometimes employs woodworking metaphors in speaking of moral development and refuses to surrender the "plumb-line" (*shengmo* 繩墨).<sup>50</sup> Zhuangzi, in turn, exalts a tree so gnarled that it "cannot center a plumb-line [*shengmo*]."<sup>51</sup> The twisted tree is celebrated as useless to the carpenter, useless, that is, to anyone for whom trees represent something to develop.

In rejecting the idea of developing one's shape (*xing* 形) into a thus termed "moral" disposition (*xing* 性), Zhuangzi in effect downplays the importance of shape and elevates the notion of "quality" or "unique character" (*de* 德) in its place. This is most clearly expressed in the *Character Satisfies the Tally* (*Dechongfu* 德充符) chapter.<sup>52</sup> The image that provides the title for this chapter appears in the *Daodejing* as well, where it is related to the impartiality of *dao* 道:

The sage holds the left half of the tally yet does not exact her due from others. A person of character [*de* 德] is in charge of the tally. A person without character is looking to collect on it. The course of *tian* 天 is impartial; it invariably benefits all people.<sup>53</sup>

Contributing the uniqueness of character is compared to "holding a tally" but not collecting on it. In other words, the contribution of uniqueness involves no debt or restitution. This does not mean, however, that there is nothing of value exchanged. Character "satisfies the tally" by contributing its worth irrespective of the standard implied in any external obligation to do so. Uniqueness is self-justified; the insistent particularity of each thing must be taken at face value. There is no derivative, objectified standard that governs the exchange of such values: uniqueness of character "satisfies the tally."

The implications are clear in the *Character Satisfies the Tally* chapter, wherein a parade of mutilated figures, each of whom would not be expected to have much worth by community standards,<sup>54</sup> win people over by the force of their character and thereby make their unique contributions. Despite the bodily shape he is stuck with, one "lame hunchback without lips" manages to alter Duke Ling's standards of judgment by the force of his unique character. Zhuangzi comments:

Thus, to the extent that one's unique character [*de* 德] stands out, one's shape [*xing* 形] is disregarded. When people notice what is usually forgotten, and forget what is usually noticed, this is genuine forgetting.<sup>55</sup>

What is "forgotten" here is shape itself: that which invites Confucians to evaluate a properly "human" deportment. Zhuangzi identifies such standards with provincial distinctions, all of which form a seamless continuity (*yi* 一) one to the next.

The projects of Zhuangzi and Mencius differ in priority, but each share cosmological assumptions rooted in notions of "shape" and con-



figurative energy. Zhuangzi encourages one to think beyond the configurative limits of shape (*xing* 形) and ride through existence “with only *qi* 氣 as one’s chariot.”<sup>56</sup> Mencius advocates shaping a disposition (*xing* 性) that configures the emergence of a morally nourishing “flood-like” *qi*. There are cosmological assumptions that unite these thinkers within the overall context of Warring States thought. Establishing such a context by means of overview is an important preliminary step in understanding the *Mencius*.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF CHINESE COSMOLOGY

In his 1935 article “Exposition on the Unique Kind of Basic Spirit in Chinese Culture,” Tang Junyi provides an overview of Chinese thinking that both summarizes and corroborates the assumptions here proposed. Tang Junyi identifies seven characteristic views that he feels underlie all Chinese thinking. Each of these views has some bearing on the matters considered in this chapter, and they assist in establishing parameters for our interpretation of the *Mencius*. The seven views are: that there is no substratum (*wudingti* 無定體), that everything is two-way (*wuwangbufu* 無往不復), that having/not having and agitation/equilibrium are each united (*heyowudongjing* 合有無動靜), that one/many is inseparable (*yiduobufen* 一多不分), that determinism does not apply (*feidingming* 非定命), that process is incessant (*shengshengbuyi* 生生不已), and that dispositions issue directly from the course of *tian* 天 (*xingjitiandao* 性即天道).<sup>57</sup>

If we take seriously the view that there is no substratum (*wudingti* 無定體), a host of substantive concepts are immediately disqualified from interpretive service. We are not entering a world of discrete things with simple location in space and time. The world of configurative energy is not populated with ontologically primary “things” but rather with events, states of becoming that resolve not into static substances, but into transformational processes. Bodies and forms are not fixed entities; they are dynamic *states* that configure an ever transforming energy. Bodies convey the history of a functional transaction with the world, and this transaction is, in turn, formative. Hence, as Tang Junyi confirms, in the Chinese view, “function manifests form and form issues into function.”<sup>58</sup>

This leads to the view that everything is two-way (*wuwangbufu* 無往不復), which entails both the reciprocal nature of processional

development and the nonlinearity of the Chinese notion of causality. In the absence of discrete substances, form and quality are truly inseparable. Forms take shape within matrices that leave room for the unique, qualitative expression of those forms to present themselves. As qualities emerge in the transaction between an organism and its environment, those qualities are not simply located but rather consequent of the reciprocal shaping of events. The mutual shaping of events precludes the notion of accidental qualities, simply located. Tang Junyi cites the *Daodejing*, which, in stating that “reversal is the movement of the *dao* 道,”<sup>59</sup> suggests that qualities phase into their contrary states on a continuum “shouldered” by the configuration of events.<sup>60</sup> To say that everything entails its opposite is to suggest that events emerge together and shape one another’s qualitative dimensions.

This, in turn, leads to the view that having and not having are united (*heyowwu* 合有無). The cooperation of having (*you* 有) and not having (*wu* 無) is an aspect of form/function dynamics. Function (*yong* 用) is an operational limit enabled by what formation affords, yet this is also a consequence of what it lacks. In the *Daodejing*, it is what is not inside the jar (*wu*) that makes the form it has (*you*) potent and functional (*yong*).<sup>61</sup> Zhuangzi echoes this in suggesting that all positions entail function only in relation to space unoccupied:

One needs only space enough to plant one’s feet, but if one were to dig away all the space that those feet did not occupy, to the depths of the Yellow Springs, would the space still have function [*yong* 用] for the person?<sup>62</sup>

Function requires space and time with which to operate. Space and time, however, only describe a potential afforded when forms function in relation to one another. Ever emergent forms interlace in delimiting their regions of functional operation and leave no gaps. Apart from form and function there is no spatial relation, and apart from formation and functioning, no temporal relation. The Newtonian model, wherein space and time are empty and bodies are full, is inverted in the Chinese world: space and time are full, and bodies continually empty into their successors.

This coalesces with the view that agitation and equilibrium are united (*hedongjing* 合動靜). The dynamics of form and function involve adjustment to the emergent conditions under which shape is taken.

Shape is always reshaping, and form is always reforming. The temporal sensitivity of the *Book of Changes* and its prognosticative function validate that, in the Chinese world, experience is regularly viewed as unbalanced and in need of adjustment. The pairing of the generative (*qian* 乾) and receptive (*kun* 坤) underscores the notion that adjusted emergence entails both novelty and continuity. The novel perturbations that challenge equilibrium call for the seamless, novel reconstitution of form. The botanical imagery so ubiquitous in the *Mencius* reflects Mencius' own sensitivity to the lack of absolute discreteness between older and newer forms in the emergence of adjusted development. Growth is the balance of form and function, continually undergoing adjustment. When something grows, the history of the equilibrium (*jing* 靜) maintained over the course of that growth is the same as the agitation (*dong* 動) that occasions those adjustments.

This brings us to the view that the one and the many are inseparable (*yiduobufen* 一多不分). In presenting this idea, Tang Junyi cites two passages in the *Daodejing*, the first stating, "one brings about two, two brings about three, and three brings about ten-thousand things," and the second, "the ten-thousand things attain one and thereby come about."<sup>63</sup> In articulating the view that there is no substratum, Tang Junyi appeals to the process corrective to substance ontology offered by Alfred North Whitehead.<sup>64</sup> In the present context, it is also Whitehead who serves us well. Whitehead expresses the unity of the one and the many in the following formula: "the many become one and are increased by one."<sup>65</sup> This account of creative advance, which for Whitehead is the "category of the ultimate," is consonant with the discursive process of "taking shape" in the Chinese world. Shape is a definite "one." All shapes, however, are temporary. Attaining "one" is a process of synthesis and integration: the "one" emerges from the coffers of the "many" and then returns to increase its bounty. Becoming "one" is an achievement of synthesis that entails some level of integration within the ongoing process (*dao* 道) of the ten thousand things. Mencius displays sensitivity to the dynamics of creative advance in the process of developing one's person (*shen* 身): "The ten-thousand things are here in us," he says, "there is no greater joy than inspecting one's person [*shen*] and finding it well-integrated [*cheng* 誠]."<sup>66</sup> The notion of integration will be further explored in chapters to come.

The stress on creative advance leads to the view that determinism does not apply (*feidingming* 非定命). The classical formulation of deter-

minism entails necessity and requires a linear, causal relationship, and such notions do not factor importantly in the mainstream Chinese tradition.<sup>67</sup> Determinism also entails that emergent events are dictated by conditions. The idea that events are “shaped” by environing conditions is an important component of Warring States cosmology. However, an analysis of the formal constraints upon emergence will never deliver a complete account of any occasion. Another description must take into account the self-creativity that marks that particular occasion as a novel unity of antecedent factors in the present moment. In a *qi* 氣 cosmology, the incessant “blow” of *qi* lends propensity (*shi* 勢) to configurations that ripen so-of-themselves (*ziran* 自然). This moment of self-creation implicates itself in all subsequent moments; hence, creativity in a Chinese world is cocreativity. The two-way relationships that characterize this world ensure that its future is an open prospect. The past does not become the future without the present, and the present is an instance of sheer self-expression. This is what gives the present its aura of unprecedance.

What renders all of these notions coherent is the view that process is incessant (*shengshengbuyi* 生生不已). Tang Junyi identifies this view as one that “Chinese thinkers have unceasingly maintained.”<sup>68</sup> Certainly, the case for imputing a process orientation to the *Mencius* is strengthened by the vast preponderance of process commitments evident elsewhere in the tradition. The *Zhuangzi* and the *Book of Changes* provide two dramatic examples of process thinking in Mencius’ immediate milieu. The process orientation in classical China is so pronounced, in fact, that the burden of proof most fairly lies with those who would introduce nonprocessional notions as interpretive categories. By my lights, in a world animated by configurative energies, in which “things” are always dynamic and “forms” are ever in formation, the reduction of reality to fixed essences or ends is not a very feasible option. What is determinate in a process-driven world must be accounted for in some other manner.

The notion of “disposition” (*xing* 性) accounts for the determinate structure of experience in a manner that does no violence to a process worldview. The seventh view that Tang Junyi considers, that dispositions issue directly from the course of *tian* 天 (*xingjitiandao* 性即天道), provides an account of structured emergence that is consistent with a process-oriented cosmology. By saying that dispositions issue directly from *tian*, attention is called to the embeddedness of form in a Chinese

world. When something “takes shape,” it textures the ongoing totality by sculpting out of its background conditions a unique, discursive inscape of concentrated energy (*qi* 氣).<sup>69</sup> This emergent form contributes something irreplaceable to the ongoing totality, while remaining indelibly woven into its environment. There is no slippage between forms, functions, and evolving conditions. As Tang Junyi puts it, “*tian* and dispositions match up.”<sup>70</sup>

The notion of disposition (*xing* 性) developed in these pages elides any metaphysical distinction between being and modality. Things are always already disposed; to *be* is to be disposed. Furthermore, a disposition is neither genetic nor teleological. Dispositions are proclivities made determinate by the inherited structures that brace their emergence, yet they are left open by virtue of the dynamics of self-expression, changes in conditions, and creative advance. Disposition, as A. C. Graham suggests, is a “spontaneous development in a certain direction rather than its origin or goal.”<sup>71</sup>

Recalling the *Zuozhuan* illustration, a “proper” disposition, normatively speaking, is one that maximizes the integrated functioning of the ongoing process that it represents, in this instance, the human body. The human body grows; its forms and functions develop while its structure adjusts to countless factors in its environment. Its growth is measured by the degree of integration it manages to pattern over the course of its emergence. To realize the optimal degree of integration is to enjoy a heightened state of vitality and energy (*qi* 氣). To lose that optimal disposition is to feel a life deteriorate. As Mencius extends these notions beyond the biological order into the human and moral order, the growth model takes on a whole new dimension.