

Chapter 1

Confucian Inspiration

Introduction

Confucianism is one out of three main philosophical inspirations of Li Zehou, along with Kantian philosophy and Marxism. There are two reasons why one might refer to this particular tradition in the context of discussing Li's aesthetics as a form of cognition. The first is to show how Confucianism addresses the aesthetic and what role it plays in this particular philosophical school. The second, and more important, reason is how the aesthetic in Confucianism is connected with cognition. In fact, Li inclines more toward the belief that in Confucius's philosophy the aesthetic should not be associated with cognition on the grounds of it being experienced as a form of emotion.¹ However, this claim, by being underlaid with the assumption that the emotional is excluded from cognition, is arguable not only in light of the most recent research in, for instance affective science,² but also within the Confucian doctrine itself.

It would be very difficult to imagine Li's philosophical project in its current shape without the contribution of Confucianism. It has to be admitted that Li's theory of subjectivity reflects more an amalgamation of Kantian and Marxist influences, but it is Confucianism that reveals itself in particular through the psychological intricacies of this philosophical construction.³ It can be said that to some extent Li assumes the Confucian way of thinking in his project. For this reason, it will also be shown how Li perceives Confucian views related to the aesthetic, as represented by Confucius. Focusing on Confucius instead of the whole Confucianism tradition or some other representatives of this particular school is justified by Li's

interest in Confucius as the first Chinese thinker who had proposed views clearly related to the aesthetic. In Confucianism, and generally in almost all other Chinese schools of thought, the human inner development and its manifestation of have never been of a religious or transcendent character. This area of human existence, according to Li, was accommodated by aesthetics, which was first directly discussed theoretically by Confucius. Li believes that the Confucian self-cultivation involved joy (*le* 樂), which crucially intersects it with the aesthetic.⁴

Another great achievement that Li ascribes to Confucius is showing the interrelation of ethics and aesthetics within his thought. According to Li, Confucius, although predominantly concerned with the matter of ethics, unlike some later Confucian philosophers, did not focus solely on ethical issues,⁵ and accordingly did not downplay the role of beauty in his system. Moreover, beauty in Confucianism is not a separate field of investigation but is involved in mutual complementation with *ren*—the moral ideal. This complementation subject to the ethical objective, as good, particularly represented in Confucianism as *ren*, is more fundamental. Li supports it with the following fragment from the *Analects* 3.3:

The Master said: “A man who is not good [*ren* 仁]—what has he to do with music?”⁶

Confucius seems to be very clear about the distribution of importance in his system, namely, by showing that good precedes beauty. It is also suggested what kind of beauty, expressed in this example by the musical medium, is regarded as valuable in the Confucian system—it has to comply with the ethical order. This interspersing of the ethical and aesthetic is very formative for Li’s own philosophical project, where humans by means of proper practice bring beauty into existence.

Beyond any doubt, the influence of Confucius on Li is of great importance. Concurrently, it should be noted, however, that despite the above-mentioned important Confucian influence it would be considerably difficult, imprecise, and incorrect to place Li among philosophers with not only strong Confucian identity but also heritage, such as Mou Zongsan (牟宗三) or Xiong Shili (熊十力). These thinkers evidently remained under the influence of earlier Confucian philosophers—classical Confucian or neo-Confucian—and continued to philosophize in a Confucian spirit. Li clearly evades this category of thinkers. Although he refers to Confucianism more than any other Chinese philosophical tradition, he employs it while

constructing his own philosophy and, accordingly, does not intend to convey the Confucian message. Li's profound inspiration from Confucian philosophy is merely a building block for his original project.

A Twofold Approach to Confucianism—General Interpretation

It also has to be mentioned that Li's interest in and inspiration from the Chinese philosophical tradition is not exclusively confined to the Confucian school. Li also values other schools in the Chinese philosophical tradition,⁷ in particular Zhuangzi's Daoism. From a more general perspective, his choice of Confucianism as the main Chinese philosophical inspiration can be viewed as resorting to a representative of almost the whole Chinese philosophical tradition in terms of sharing some common assumptions that constitute the foundations of traditional Chinese thought. Admittedly, Confucianism has been one of the most important schools of thought throughout Chinese history of philosophy. Apart from developing a clearly distinct doctrine, it also shares with other philosophical schools some general, fundamental elements.

These shared elements can be described as metaphysical and ethical intuitions. The text that encapsulates the formative philosophical intuitions that are present in most classical Chinese philosophy, as well as the philosophical schools that follow it, is the *Book of Changes*, or the *Yijing* (易經). This text can be perceived as not belonging to philosophy on account of its original intention, which was a divination manual. However, its impact on and role in Chinese philosophy cannot be denied. It constitutes an early layer of Chinese thought that contains the intuitions that founded philosophical development in classical and later philosophies in China.

The philosophical intuitions from the *Book of Changes* that pervade into later Chinese thought are often referred to as cosmology or cosmological thinking. There are several aspects that constitute Chinese cosmological thinking, but for the sake of this discussion, I will limit myself to introducing only the relevant ones. They concern the holistic worldview, status of dualities, and the dynamic model of the universe.

The *Book of Changes* was written down over centuries, approximately from 900 BCE until 500 BCE, yet these rough framing dates remain uncertain. However, what is important is that the text was composed over a long period of time and it can be subdivided into three main chronological strata: trigrams, hexagrams, and commentaries. The oldest layer, is composed of eight trigrams that are all possible combinations of three lines, continuous

and broken.⁸ The trigrams correspond with natural phenomena that are thought to depict everything that happens in the universe. Importantly, they do not map a description of the universe that constantly changes, similarly to natural phenomena. This shows that the Chinese thinking already included the intuition of a dynamic universe. Consequently, one cannot describe such a universe as a static entity but as a process.

The second chronological layer that followed is the sixty-four hexagrams, which present all possible combinations of the eight trigrams. They were allegedly compiled by a historical figure—King Wen from the Zhou dynasty in the twelfth century BCE.⁹ The hexagrams were accompanied by two types of commentaries—on the whole hexagram and on each line in it. Both types of commentaries bore a kind of moral advice introduced in situations. What is important here is that the behavior described in the situations is synchronized with the lines that illustrate the incessant changes in the universe. In this sense, human conduct is not set against the cosmological processes in the world but quite the contrary—it is paired with them, or, to be more exact, it is part of the processes that take place. This integration situates humans as integral part of nature that is influenced by the dynamic cosmos and tries to adjust to it with a prescribed conduct.

Finally, the hexagrams were followed by the final stratum of commentaries, some of which were allegedly written by Confucius, yet this authorship remains historically unclear.¹⁰ The commentaries vary in kind. The one that contains a prominent philosophical message is the *Great Commentary* (*Dazhuan* 大傳), alternatively referred to as the *Commentary on the Appended Phrases* (*Xicizhuan* 繫辭傳). This work in particular aims to describe moral correlates of what happens in nature, more generally speaking the cosmos, represented by the hexagrams and the relations between the lines that constitute them. It can be observed that the world is dynamic and that human actions require proper configuration that is expected to bring correct behavior, and, more importantly, proper existence in the world.

Altogether, Karyn L. Lai distinguishes seven features of cosmological thinking.¹¹ However, for the sake of bringing necessary context to our discussion on Confucianism, I briefly focus only on two of them: holistic conception of the world and dynamics consisting in change.

In the first fragment from the *Great Commentary* we can read:

As Heaven is high and noble and Earth is low and humble, so it is that Qian [Pure Yang, hexagram 1] and Kun [Pure Yin, hexagram 2] are defined. . . . The high and the low being

thereby set out, the exalted and the mean have their places accordingly. . . . There are norms for action and repose, which are determined by whether hardness or softness is involved.¹²

The hexagrams from the passage denote the foundations of the world. We are confronted with a metaphysical universe composed of two opposite elements: *yang* (陽) and *yin* (陰). These elements exhaust the metaphysical universe, leaving no place for anything transcendent in relation to them. *Yin* and *yang* are not different substances, and together they form *qi* (氣), the “substance” of the whole universe.¹³ For this reason, their opposition is complementary, not contradictory. They should be understood more in terms of aspects of *qi* that concurrently are the forces thanks to which the world is incessantly dynamic.

Further on, in the same fragment, we read:

Those with regular tendencies gather according to kind, and things divide up according to group; so it is that good fortune and misfortune occur.¹⁴

This description is first of all of metaphysical character, but it should be noted that it concurrently applies to humans, who do not transcend the metaphysical laws of the universe. The cosmos is not only nature in the sense of background to human activity, as humans are an integral part of it and live in a dynamic world of changes. In this way, human actions are also part of the changes and they should constantly synchronize with the rest of the cosmos.

It is also stated that compliance with the cosmos is measured in terms of fortune or misfortune. Thus, valuation of human behavior, growing from the cosmic order, is provided. This shows the connection of the metaphysical and ethical orders, which, although not developed in a purely philosophical manner in the commentary, are clearly present as a potential form.

Considering that the whole universe is dynamic in nature, humans have to continuously adjust to the incessant processes of change. This requires an identification of the stage of change, or, from the perspective of the subject, where she/he is located in that process. Adequate, synchronized behavior also relies on making predictions with regard to what is the character of the future change—in nature, but also among humans. Therefore, it is impossible to act blindly according to principles, but only in response to the situation one finds oneself in.

To sum up, the *Book of Changes* contains intuitions of metaphysical and ethical nature. The hexagrams constitute the amalgamation of iconic and abstract representations of the situations that emerge in the process of changes in the world, conceptualized as the cosmos of multiple dynamic relations. The cosmos is the whole metaphysical universe. There is nothing that transcends the cosmos and everything is ordered and explainable within it. It is characterized by incessant transformations that also embrace humans, who as part of the dynamic whole have to accommodate the actions that are intertwined with the rest of the world, both human and nonhuman. It should also be observed that within this cosmological model there is no conflict between humans and nature, as they complement each other and should remain in harmonious relation.

These intuitions are present in Confucianism, especially in the sphere of human relations. As regards the social layer, Confucianism views the individual as part of the whole. Humans and the universe form a unity and they are involved in incessant interaction. On this view, Confucians build their specific system, where the self-cultivation of humans is viewed in terms of inner virtue transformation, and appropriate interactions with other humans in family and society. These interactions are also incessantly dynamic, and humans, through their behavior, have to constantly adapt to the situations. The social sphere is one of possible reflections of the holistic world view from the *Book of Changes* in the sense that it is part of the dense tissue subject to transformation. Therefore, the activity of humans is not only aimed at achieving social harmony. In fact, social harmony constitutes an integral part of cosmic harmony. As can be seen by the development of Chinese philosophy, the paradigm invites many different concretions, Confucian ethics being one of them.

Viewed from this angle, Confucianism serves as a pretty comprehensive epitome of the fundamental assumptions that determine the Chinese philosophical characteristics, in spite of the particular systems that are built upon them in many different schools.

A Twofold Approach to Confucianism— Particular Interpretation

However, these protophilosophical intuitions, in spite of being present and developed in Li's philosophy, are only of secondary benefit for him in turning to Confucianism. What matters much more for Li's aesthetics goes

beyond the universal assumptions and is the particular development of the philosophical system erected on them. On a general level, Li admits that he values Confucius most of all classical Chinese philosophers because he was the first thinker to focus his philosophical attention exclusively on being (*you* 有)¹⁵—roughly speaking, what exists and is related to the existence of humans,¹⁶ who are necessarily embedded in living in society and the natural world understood as the cosmos from the *Book of Changes*. This exclusive focus on being contrasts Confucians with some influential schools of their time that took a serious interest in experience-transcendent reality. A most representative of them was Laozi's metaphysically oriented Daoism, which mainly investigated nonbeing *wu* (無), by which the gravity of philosophical interest was shifted toward the other part of the ontic universe. Another example is Mohism, which stood in opposition to Confucianism. Although not extensively discussing transcendence, it assumed transcendent entities conceived in a quasi-religious fashion.

Confucius was focused on the existing world in many aspects, which, considering the holistic nature of reality, naturally included the social sphere as well as the study of the human mindset and the way in which these two are interrelated. As Li remarks, Confucius was probably the earliest Chinese thinker to have paid attention to the complex role that emotions play in humans. Li believes that emotion is situated in the center of Confucian philosophy.¹⁷ In fact, he regards emotion as the key to understanding the overall Confucian moral, but also more generally, philosophical message. It can also be clearly seen that in his discussion of Confucian ethics, emotion is a composite of the human psyche and it can be molded under the influence of rationalization. This desired calibration of emotions is not seen by Li as a mechanism exclusively particular of Confucian philosophy—it actually is a most important process in Li's own conceptualization of the Marxist humanization of nature, which takes place in the history of the human species. But it is not only the ethical side of Confucianism that largely relies on emotions. They are equally important for understanding Confucian aesthetics, and, which is not difficult to expect, emotions are the linking point between good and beauty.

The most important aspect of Confucian philosophy that needs to be considered first for the sake of my interpretation of Li's aesthetics is practice. It should be viewed in two aspects: its external character in human interactions and the impact it exerts on the human being as a psychological subject. In order to view this issue in a systematic way, I will depart from the categorization of Confucianism as an ethical system. As mentioned

above, Confucius was primarily concerned with interactions of humans with other humans and the world. His interest was almost entirely directed at the world of humans, with regard to both their individual and social identities. Considering this, on philosophical ground, his investigations almost naturally find development within the categories of ethics, where the aesthetic plays an important role, and, what is characteristic of Confucianism and some other Chinese philosophy schools, its natural extension—political philosophy.¹⁸

Ethical Foundation of Aesthetics

From the perspective of normative ethics categorization, the system developed by Confucius should be classified as a variety of virtue ethics. Normative ethics is mainly concerned with the principles “that govern the issues of how we should live and what we morally ought to do.”¹⁹ Thus, it is primarily concerned with how ethical valuation can be distributed with regard to the agent’s actions and the ways in which they can be justified. Within normative ethics, we usually distinguish between the three types: deontological ethics (or deontology), consequentialism, and virtue ethics. As regards deontology, it is a normative theory that mostly concentrates on the principles that should be followed in order to attain an ethical goal. Consequentialism mainly consists in assessing the moral rightness of acts according to the consequences they produce (or are expected to produce).²⁰ In comparison with deontology, consequentialism shifts importance from principles to aims.

Comparatively speaking, virtue ethics in terms of behavioral repertoire is closer to consequentialism because its objective does not consist in what particular action should be taken (although it may initially appear to be the case, for instance in Confucianism). However, it also essentially differs from consequentialism in that the ethical goal is not identified as a consequence of the action taken.

Rosalind Hursthouse and Glen Pettigrove describe virtue ethics in contrast with consequentialism and deontology as “the one which emphasizes the virtues or moral character.”²¹ Therefore, it can be said that virtue ethics aims at constituting particular, regarded as good, character traits in a moral agent. It can be noticed that virtue ethics is substantially different from the other two types of normative ethics in that it is less external; the point of ethical gravity is shifted on the agent. The most important consideration is what moral personality she/he is, rather than whether her/his actions agree with some standards or lead to the desired moral goals that are understood

as results of actions. To put virtue ethics into a more behaviorally oriented wording, we can understand virtues functionally, as stable dispositions that ensure a considerably permanent behavioral repertoire that testifies to the good moral personality of the agent. In this sense, the behavior confirms and builds the moral personhood equipped with proper character traits.

At this point, we can probably already notice that developing stable dispositions cannot be confined only to concentrating on building good character traits. Character traits should certainly be understood as constituting a certain mindset, but at the same time they are dispositions to “notice, feel, value, desire, choose act and react.”²² What can be noticed is that, although the moral goal of virtue ethics consists in achieving a certain moral mindset, the moral agent cannot close herself/himself in one’s mind and refrain from extending her/his virtue in behavior. For instance, virtues cannot be achieved by self-reflection or a conceptual analysis of the value of good. It can be said that the virtuous mindset needs necessary confirmation or manifestation in practice.

Practice is indispensable for virtue ethics. Apart from the need to confirm or manifest virtues for the completeness of a moral personality, the need for practical extension of virtue can be even more important on the grounds of ontological dependence. Character traits may not be inherent or firmly and permanently established in the moral subject, and it is the moral practice that is necessary to keep them alive or to develop to a full potential. Such is the case of the Confucian virtue *ren*. In many fragments of the *Analects*, Confucius states that some persons are moral, that is, possess virtue, based on their conduct.²³ Statements of this kind are possible thanks to the assumption that practice is extension of virtue but also that practice ontologically “nourishes” the virtue.

Apart from extending virtue in practice, it is also important to ensure that the results of actions comply with the intentions, and therefore the moral agent also needs to take into consideration the particular circumstances in which the moral agent’s action occurs. Virtue can be regarded as the central concept of virtue ethics, but because of practical extension, it requires an essential complement—practical wisdom. Character traits are necessary to act in a good way, but at the same time having good intentions rooted in them provides no guarantee that actions are always the correct extension. The moral agent can act with morally good intentions but the actions may prove to be shortcomings. For instance, assuming that being courageous is a virtue, we can imagine a situation in which a courageous act goes too far, as a result of which it is not moral at all. The agent when departing

from good intentions concurrently needs to know how to implement them in a successful way.

Hursthouse and Pettigrove provide an example to illustrate the issue of practical wisdom. Children who possess good character traits are usually considered nice but at the same time not morally virtuous. Despite the fact that children may have good intentions, they often cannot effectively put them into practice.²⁴ On this example, we can see that the way from a good mindset to a good action is not straight. Being practically wise is tantamount to knowing what should be done in a specific, rather than general, situation. This shows that virtue ethics is strongly context-sensitive, for which reason it requires practical wisdom that would help in adjusting actions adequately to particular situations. Practical wisdom cannot be obtained from virtue; it gradually emerges during the process of implementing good intentions into actions. Virtue ethics is essentially different from deontology, where acting in accordance with principles downplays particular circumstances.

If referred to the above typology, the most natural category for Confucian ethics is virtue ethics. The Confucian counterpart of the objective virtue is *ren* (仁),²⁵ a particular form of sensitivity, which testifies to one's being a cultivated person, a genuine human being, or ethically speaking, one's being good. It is important to note that one's *ren* understood as ethical virtue requires special behavioral conditioning by means of the prescribed propriety (*li* 禮) in order to become advanced along the moral path as an exemplary person (*junzi* 君子) or someone even more advanced—a sage (*sheng* 聖). In other words, appropriate human practice, guided by practical wisdom, is essential in one's being well-disposed in different social interactions, but, first and foremost, it constitutes one's usually conceived "internal" sensitivity.

The ethics of Confucius and Mencius agree in assuming good human nature.²⁶ Mencius founds it on a special conception of the "four sprouts" (*siduan* 四端) that all humans are born with. There are two features of the four sprouts that are essential in this context. The first one is that the sprouts describe the functional aspects of the mind, showing its direct linkage with practice. Fragment 2A6 of the *Mencius* provides their corresponding features of behavior respectively: compassion (*ceyin* 惻隱), shame (*xiuwu* 羞惡), modesty (*cirang* 辭讓), and discrimination between right and wrong (*shifei* 是非). Whoever is deprived of them cannot be labeled a human.²⁷ The four sprouts are innate yet ontically dependent on their performative extension, which is most decisive in constituting human nature. In this way, practice does not only realize the potential, but it is a factor that introduces ethical (and in some sense generic) qualities in humans.²⁸

Even if one entertained the idea that we could become morally knowledgeable by an exquisite conceptual analysis of the sprouts, it would merely stop at the explanation of the potential, which in Confucianism is not tantamount to being moral. Even the “epistemic” discrimination between right and wrong (*shifei*) refers to making this differentiation in our actions. Such practical wisdom is unlikely to become formalized as a theory. In fact, it has been confirmed in many fragments that practice, understood as knowledge, is prior to speculative learning. For instance, in fragment 1.7 of the *Analects*, Confucius’s disciple Zixia describes a person of proper conduct in social relations to conclude:

Even if you said of such a person, “Oh, but he is not learned (*xue*),” I would still insist that it is precisely such qualities that make one worthy of being “learned.”²⁹

The evaluation of someone’s proper conduct and endowing her/him with the status of a knowledgeable person follows from the assumption that character traits and knowledge are manifested not only through practice but also *as* practice.³⁰

Another feature of the four sprouts is that they are associated with emotional sensitivity *ren*. In realizing them in practice, the moral agent does not apply some rules indifferently (otherwise, it would be a variety of deontology), but the moral agent’s actions are guided by sensitivity, which cannot emerge without action. It can be noticed that the emotional is necessarily entangled in practice, and does not merely constitute the internal equipment of the Confucian moral subject’s mindset.³¹

The above remarks have important implications concerning the status of practice in the Confucian ethical project. Human behavior is perceived as a faculty that can forge the human mind, most importantly regarding *ren*, the central character trait in Confucianism. What can be noticed concurrently is that the molding of the human mind in Confucian ethics requires the presupposition of mind plasticity as far as character traits are concerned.³²

Considering the nature of *ren* as described above, it can be inferred that the self-cultivation practice is not meant to achieve, and does not lead to, an “ethical robot” type of personality, characterized by impeccable conduct but leaving a moral subject who consciously and affectively participates in the community by means of her/his behavior. It can be said that the entrainment through practice constitutes the moral subject’s cognitive architecture in the rational, but at least equally importantly, emotional aspect.³³

In Confucianism, the prescribed practice is concrete not only in juxtaposition to the theoretical approach. The moral agent does not apply abstract rules but develops a pattern of behavior that is socially contextualized, proper to her/his position in a network of human relationships. The concreteness is founded on the fact that every human is involved in more than one type of relationship, such as family, friendship, or political ones. The moral agent's behavioral repertoire consists of several "moral roles" to realize as a family and society member. It can be said that such a particular lived existence is assumed to be the most fundamental. Thus, it is impossible to depart from constructing moral roles supervening on, for example, Sartre's existence preceding essence.³⁴ Furthermore, it can be stated that in Confucianism we proceed in a reverse direction compared with cogito-style approaches. For instance, Descartes in the Second Meditation places the subject in an "existential vacuum," thanks to which the subject mounts the level of abstraction that enables a question to be posed concerning her/his own existence.³⁵ The Cartesian subject is not only disembodied but logically prior to concrete existence. As such, it is virtually implausible in the Confucian context.³⁶

The subject's embodiment entails practical knowledge that emerges both through practice and as practice. On the surface, art may appear to be a "special" area of human activity, but one has to bear in mind the anthropological underpinning of artistic practice³⁷ that does not allow it to be clearly distinguished, or it at least overlaps the "common" with what could be described as artistic rites to a degree that cannot be ignored. These blurred characteristics are perpetuated in a deeper structure of Confucian self-cultivation in terms of functionality. Being engaged in artistic activity serves the same purpose to furnish one's *ren* personality. This explains why several fragments from the *Analects* discuss music along with ceremonies.³⁸ Although it can be argued that the aesthetic is still reserved for a more refined activity—in this case music—the functional similarity cannot be denied.³⁹

Confucius on Aesthetics

Similarly to ethical issues, Confucius does not approach aesthetics from an abstract level. He more inclines toward discussing what role art has in human life, specifically when it comes to cultivating *ren* in a Confucian person. However, this discussion does not stop at the level of art, or even philosophy of art; it reaches further, to the nature and function of the aesthetic.

Confucius sees the unique role of art in the molding of human mind. Out of all possible ways in Confucianism, the involvement of the aesthetic is superior. In fragment 8.8 of the *Analects* Confucius says:

Find inspiration in the *Odes* [*shi* 詩], take your place through ritual [*li* 禮], and achieve perfection with music [*yue* 樂].⁴⁰

Li remarks that the *Odes*, albeit poetry, played a slightly different role in the time of Confucius. The work was mainly used for educational purposes, in order to learn about politics, religion, and history. However, the *Odes* is at the same time a collection of poetry pieces. By this, the content is absorbed in an artistic form, which adds the emotion-molding dimension.⁴¹

Considering the artistic dimension of poetry, one might pose a question as to why Confucius intends to single out the final part of the fragment—perfection with music—and treats music separately. Also, we should not dismiss the fact that propriety can also mold one's *ren*, and is therefore functionally similar to music. A possible answer offered by Li is that it is only music that can bring the development of a Confucian personality to completion, thanks to its power to both mold as well as inspire humans.⁴² In this respect, its difference from propriety and poetry is that music is most direct, in the sense of being unmediated, in influencing the human spirit/psyche. Being situated beyond mediation consists in bearing no traces of external rational standard. Propriety, mostly concentrated on morality, operates with overtly externally developed “behavioral models and standards,” whereas poetry, despite being art, is still entangled in language—the discourse also used as vehicle for wisdom. Music transcends these two in being disentangled from external rationality and as such can bring the Confucian personality to completion.⁴³

Li also refers to the *Analects* fragment 6.20, where he shows that Confucius refers to the same thing as in the previous fragment:⁴⁴

One who knows [*zhi* 知] it is not the equal of one who loves [*hao* 好] it, and one who loves it is not the equal of one who takes joy [*le* 樂] in it.⁴⁵

In comparison with how propriety or music influence humans, this fragment is more focused on how one learns to become the Confucian exemplary person (*junzi*). It can be seen that “loving,” which can also be understood in this context as the appreciation of what one does, is more valuable than

simply acquiring knowledge about it, but at the same time not as efficient as taking joy, which can suggest additional pleasurable engagement in what is done.⁴⁶ This comparison, apart from showing the subsequent steps on the Confucian perfection path, indicates what kind of psychological state accompanies as well as facilitates the highest stage of Confucian learning.

Experiencing the aesthetic, for instance, as in fragment 8.8, provided by art is essential in building a Confucian moral personality. The exemplary person is thus someone who not only advances along a moral but also aesthetic path. The aesthetic, especially when experiencing pieces of art, can evoke pleasure and emotions in the subject, which is positively valued by Confucius. There is an important thing to be noticed here, namely, that experiencing the aesthetic is not only a form of positive reinforcement that co-occurs in positive self-cultivation practice. Confucius acknowledges that music also can mold human emotions, thanks to which *ren* can be improved and manifested through being appropriately sensitive toward others. Such mental states can be labeled as cognitive due to the fact that being *ren* consists in what Confucians regard as proper recognition of a situation (which usually involves interacting with others).

It is important that Confucius does not look for the pleasure and joy in participating in a transcendent world or entity. Humans can reach their full potential in the world in which they live as both individuals and society. Whereas it is quite intuitive that emotions form the mental content in individuals, Confucius also believed that they can become collectivized. This belief is based on the metaphysical intuitions common for almost all philosophical schools in China that the metaphysical universe is confined to one world and does not assume any transcendence. On this assumption, the sense of human existence cannot be exported to a variety of the Christian “heavenly” realm, for instance. Quite the opposite, human life seeks its fulfillment and sense in this very world and life that is actually lived by humans forming a community within which they interact with one another. This detachment from transcendental explanations in Chinese tradition redirects the meaning from religious transcendence to this-worldly aesthetics. Perhaps it would be going too far to say that this feature of Confucian philosophy has been a direct inspiration for Li’s philosophical project, but such foundations provide compatibility for integrating some Confucian views in his sedimentation theory.

Li believes that in Confucianism this anthropological approach to locating the sense of life is particularly realized as “a historical becoming, that cannot be achieved apart from a relationship to the collective.” The

relationships are described by Li as “the interpersonal solicitude that has its basis in the emotions.”⁴⁷ We can see that the emotions assume an explanatory function, but also, according to Li, they are regarded as substance that becomes humanized throughout history.⁴⁸ Thus, emotions are endowed with the ontic status of substance that becomes molded in time through human practice. This fact is very essential for Li’s further steps in his own philosophical construction, especially in his conception of psychological substance, of which subjectivity is composed.

As mentioned above, Confucius believed that emotions become collectivized. *Ren* as a type of sensitivity is essentially grounded in emotion. Importantly, it is no longer a “raw” emotion; *ren* undergoes the process of rationalization, as a result of which it is calibrated in order to, among other things, be implemented in human interaction, and reveals itself as the “communal emotions of interpersonal caring.”⁴⁹ In this way, the emotions are socialized. In his *History of Chinese Aesthetics*, Li connects the socialization to the role of art, which, apart from molding the human mind, is also part of social practice and uses music as an example.⁵⁰ On the technical side, we can say that performing music consists in collective practice. In this way, music allows emotions to be channeled into social circulation in their proper form.

An example can be taken from fragment 17.9 of the *Analects*:

The *Odes* [*shi* 詩] can be a source of inspiration [*xing* 興] and a basis for evaluation [*guan* 觀]: they can help you to come together with others [*qun* 群], as well as to properly express complaints [*yuan* 怨].⁵¹

Li explains, among other things, how this work, as a piece of poetry writing, can help properly express complaints or resentment. These emotions, although regarded as negative, should not be suppressed but expressed in their proper form. Art is naturally one of the possible ways in which it can be done.⁵²

Conclusion

Confucian aesthetics works in two ways. We can say that it works within and without. When it comes to the former, it is assumed that the aesthetic has the power to forge individual inner psychological faculties. Human emotions can be also calibrated in a more external and rationalizing way,

but experiencing the aesthetic is more direct and comprehensive, by which the moral development can be brought to completion.

As regards the latter, the aesthetic can bring humans together in a harmonious state.⁵³ Especially through the artistic medium, which encapsulates emotions in a proper form, humans can experience the aesthetic, which through evoking the mental states of aesthetic appreciation, puts humans in harmony with other humans, as well as the world.

Confucian aesthetics certainly shows the role of emotions, which do not only play an important part in aesthetic appreciation within art. Emotions constitute a substance that can be modified over time. The modification is achieved in a practical way. This psychological plasticity of humans is of great importance for Li, who departs in his philosophical construction from a very similar assumption.

Another very important aspect of Confucian aesthetics is that the aesthetic is not separated from the moral. These two aspects of Confucian philosophy are encapsulated in *ren*, which is moral sensitivity molded by the aesthetic. It is also where the aesthetic gains more importance than generating joy or pleasure to be cherished by the subject. The aesthetic gives the final and indispensable touch in calibrating emotions, by which it contributes to the subject's more natural functioning in relations with other humans and the world. This in fact results from correct and undistorted cognition of reality. In this sense, Confucian aesthetics is deeply integrated in cognitive activity. This extended function of aesthetics is utterly crucial for Li in building his own conception.