

Confucian Philosophy Of Art: Aesthetic Norms In The Thought Of Xunzi [Hsün Tzu]

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Studies of classical Chinese aesthetics often focus on the contributions of Taoist and Buddhist thought, dismissing the Confucian interpretation of the arts as a matter of moral utilitarianism. Even Fung Yulan repeats this view of Confucian aesthetics. The fullest statement of the classic Confucian aesthetics was made by Xunzi, the great Confucian philosopher in the third century bce, in his essays on ceremonial ritual¹ and music². Fung's comment on these essays:

Thus music, for Hsün Tzu, functions as an instrument for moral education. This has been the prevailing Confucian view of music.³

While it may have become a later Confucian attitude toward music, it was neither Xunzi's attitude, nor that of Confucianists before him. There is a telling passage from the book of Mozi who purportedly was born the year of the Master K'ung's death, which reveals the attitude of at least some of the first-generation Confucianists of K'ung's home city of Lu:

Motse asked a Confucianist why Confucianists pursued music. He replied, "Music is pursued for music's sake." "You have not yet answered me. Suppose I asked, 'Why build houses?' and you answered, 'It is to keep off the cold in winter and the heat in summer.' Then you would have told me the reason for building houses. Now I am asking why pursue music. And you answer music is pursued for music's sake. This is comparable to: 'Why build houses?' 'Houses are built for houses' sakes."⁴

Early Confucianists had not subordinated art to morality, but rather appreciated music for its own sake. According to the Master K'ung this is one of the accomplishments of the "complete human being."⁵ Mo's subsequent polemic against Confucianism tends to reinforce this. In Mo's mind Confucian concern with ceremonial ritual, and Confucian patronage of music, served no useful purpose, wasted valuable resources, and absorbed time and energy which could have been invested in gainful employment. We might expect Mo to have exaggerated the Confucian attitude toward music for the sake of strengthening his own argument, except that he was writing at a time when Confucianism had gained considerable support –

otherwise why would he have engaged in such a spirited attack? – so that it is unlikely that he could have succeeded in presenting such a distortion of the Confucian position which would have represented a total reversal. It cannot be denied that there are several passages in Xunzi's writings which tend to support the traditional view which Fung repeats, and which might be used to support the thesis that there occurred a reversal in attitude during the intervening generations.⁶ In these he clearly states that music holds the greatest potential for governing people and, therefore, has relevance for the areas of moral behaviour and political governance. In this respect he seems to anticipate the Kantian analysis of aesthetics. In the *Critique of Judgment* Kant links aesthetics to morality, declaring that

taste is at bottom a faculty for judging of the sensible illustration of moral ideas. ... Hence it appears plain that the true propaedeutic for the foundation of taste is the development of moral ideas and the culture of moral feeling.⁷

There is an element of circularity in Kant's understanding of the relation between morality and aesthetics, and the same might be said of Xunzi. For Kant, involvement with art and natural beauty is useful preparation for moral development, whereas moral development is useful in development of aesthetic taste. Taken as a whole, however, Kant's third *Critique* tends to place greater weight on the side of morality, subordinating the aesthetic to the moral. This leads some commentators to charge that, despite his insistence upon the autonomy of the faculty of judgment, Kant is guilty of a moralization of aesthetic experience. Whether or not the charge is justified in Kant's case, the same charge cannot be levelled against Xunzi who does exactly the opposite, i.e., he subordinates the moral and political to the aesthetic. Norms for determining correct moral behaviour and political order are to be derived from aesthetic principles.

For Xunzi the central principle in both the aesthetic and the moral-political sphere is "harmony": *Hó Xúe* in the social sphere, *Hó Sheng* in the aesthetic. There are etymological grounds for suggesting that the Chinese term *Hó* and its English equivalent *Harmony* were employed at first in a musical sense, and only later used, by association, to refer to socio-political peace and order. This is the sequence Xunzi uses in employing the term, making use of the figure of a choral director and the choir engaged in creating musical harmony as a metaphor to refer to the relationship between political leadership and citizenry which eventuates in social harmony.

Just as singers unite their voices under the direction of the conductor, so good and evil are evoked in response to forceful leadership.⁸

It is true that Xunzi invests ceremonial ritual and music with more than metaphoric power when relating them to the moral and political spheres. They are capable of being employed directly in efforts to improve moral behaviour and to institute good government. In the case of music there is also the danger that the wrong kind – that which is “licentious” or “seductive” – can have the opposite effect of fostering immoral behaviour.⁹ It cannot be denied, therefore, that Xunzi does acknowledge the influence which the arts are capable of exercising for both good and ill in moral behaviour and socio-political order, that he claims that the “Sage-Kings” recognized this relationship and concerned themselves with the establishment of correct canons for musical composition and the choreography of ceremonial ritual, and that he recommends that they who would institute good government should enforce those traditional canons.

One of the most obvious purposes in writing the essays on ceremonial ritual and music was to provide a conclusive answer to the old Mohist charges which had been raised against Confucian artistic patronage. In the *Essay on Music* there is an explicit point-by-point refutation of the Mohist attack on music, punctuated by the recurrent refrain: “And yet the Master Mo criticizes it – Why?” Although the refutation is not as explicit in the *Essay on Ceremonial Ritual*, nonetheless it is quite clear that this is what was intended. In answer to the Mohist charge that music and ceremonial ritual had no utilitarian value in either the moral or the political spheres, and that the great emphasis which Confucianism placed on them lacked foundation and therefore was wasteful and immoral, Xunzi enumerated the moral and social benefits of music and ceremony, thereby providing justification on Mo’s own terms for their serious cultivation by Confucianists. Xunzi’s two essays were not written for the primary purpose of articulating the Confucian interpretation of music and ceremony, but rather to defend Confucianism’s great interest in, and patronage of, the arts in the face of Mohist criticism which continued to annoy and embarrass Confucianists several generations later.

Although, in the process of making his defense, Xunzi stresses the moral and political utility of the arts, at no point does he suggest that the arts exist primarily to be used as instruments of moral control and political governance. The arts, for him, fulfill a more fundamental role in human life, finding their origin in the normal functioning of human psycho-physiological organisms, providing a means for the expression and nurturing of basic human emotions, and thereby permitting humans to distinguish themselves from other animals through the creation of human civilization.

The *Essay on Ceremony* begins with the statement that humans are born with desires which require satisfaction, and that ceremonial rituals have been instituted to provide means for that satisfaction. The *Essay on Music* opens with a similar statement. At times humans cannot avoid experiencing an inner sense of joy; joy

demands an act of rejoicing; to be effective it must be expressed through bodily movement and vocal sound; music – both in dance and in song – provides a fit vehicle for the full expression of joy. The arts are seen to be a natural response to the human need for giving objective expression to subjective feelings and emotions, constituting more refined modes of expression than those used by the animals. They are not only more refined, but modally distinctive. Art media are uniquely human and represent the transformation of “in-born nature” into “acquired nature” which is the result of human activity which struggles against a natural, heaven-given, nature and triumphs over it. The word for that activity is the same as the word for “acquired nature”: a compound character which includes the simpler *wei*, or “doing for a purpose” (the kind of activity the Taoists counselled against) and the radical *ren*. This is human activity with a purpose, and the purpose is the rectification of human nature. Although language used to describe the process is that of morality¹⁰, the images used are artistic¹¹. This ability on the part of humans to correct inborn nature and create a unique human order gives us a special status ontologically.¹² The “government” which humans have created as the result of their own purposive activity in rectifying in-born nature and utilizing celestial order and terrestrial resources goes far beyond political ordering and economic regulation to incorporate the artistic and cultural. A better translation might be “the human has his civilization.” In addition to stressing the moral principle of “obligation”¹³ Xun places great emphasis on the aesthetic principle of “ceremony”¹⁴, in which the meaning is not so much appropriateness of behaviour in social situations as much as the importance of disciplined and aesthetically-ordered dramatic and artistic expression of human emotion and social cohesion. “Ceremonial rituals are a means of satisfaction,” he declares¹⁵, and then proceeds to discuss the ways through which human artistic creativity has come to satisfy in orderly and aesthetic fashion the desires of the five senses, ranging from the culinary arts which “satisfy the mouth,” to architecture and interior decorating which “satisfy the body.” It is through ritual that the Triad of Heaven, Earth, and Humanity is brought to full completion and “heaven and earth join in harmony,” “the root and the branch are put in proper order; beginning and end are justified.” Ceremonial ritual is viewed as the “highest achievement of the Way of humanity,” regulating the expression of human emotion through aesthetic form. Music is the special art form which gives expression to joy. When joy is channelled through music, the “complete unity” is achieved, and “harmony” is induced. Music and ceremonial ritual go hand in hand to create the fabric of human civilization.¹⁶ Through the institution of government, the regulation of economic activity, and the creation of ritual, art, and music, humans triumph over in-born nature which is ego-centrally oriented and, therefore a-social and in-human. The resultant re-creation of human nature produces human civilization. In a highly significant passage Xun claims that the appearance of civilization

is necessary to bring the cosmos as a whole to completion.

Only when nature and conscious activity combine does the true sage emerge and perform the task of unifying the world. When Heaven and Earth combine, everything is born. When *yin* and *yang* interact, changes are produced. When nature and conscious activity are united, the world becomes well-ordered. Heaven can give birth to, but cannot nurture creatures. Earth can nourish creatures, but cannot govern humans. All creatures of the universe, all humans, must await the sage before they can achieve their proper status.¹⁷

The image of a sage is not that of a law-giver who imposes political structure and a moral code, but that of an artist who works with the raw materials provided by Heaven, Earth, and the human animal, struggling against and overcoming their resistance to the formative process, refining and transforming them, until their full potential has been fully realized through the creative process and manifest in human civilization.

If artistic creativity and appreciation play such a dominant role in Xunzi's thought, we should expect to find mention in his writing of some basic aesthetic norms to be applied both in artistic creativity and in aesthetic judgment. At least four such norms can be identified in the two essays:

- (1) Adequate expression or embodiment of emotion which has transformative power
- (2) Simplicity in expression, yet proper embellishment of form (the proper balancing of form and content)
- (3) Harmonious ordering of elements resulting in the creation of beauty
- (4) Establishment of correct distancing, and evocation of proper audience response

(1) In both essays Xunzi opens with the statement that the art forms have their origin in the need for satisfactory expression of desires and emotions. Ceremonial rituals make use of a wide variety of the arts in what we would designate a multimedia art form or event. All five senses are appealed to, and the desires which are associated with each of them are satisfied, not in an indiscriminate way, but in such a fashion as to nourish and educate the taste involved. Food is presented, including meats from both grain-fed and grass-fed animals, and dishes prepared from both wheat and millet flours, blended with the five basic flavours, thereby satisfying the desires of the mouth. Odours of spices, flowers, and other plants are employed, thereby satisfying the desires of the nose. Carving and inlay, embroidery and clothing

patterns are presented, thereby satisfying the desires of the eye. Bells, drums, strings, and woodwinds are sounded, thereby satisfying the desires of the ear. Finally the temple architecture, with its spacious rooms and secluded halls, together with the furnishings – soft mats, couches, benches, armrests, cushions, satisfy the desires of the body.¹⁸ In similar fashion music, incorporating dance as well as instrumental and vocal, satisfies the need to give full expression to feelings of joy, but through forms which nourish and educate the inner emotions.¹⁹

In his *Essay on Study* Xunzi describes the superior person as one who

makes his eye unwilling to see what is not right; ... his ear unwilling to hear what is not right; ... until he obtains what he most desires – the five colours his eyes love, the five sounds his ears love, the five tastes his mouth loves ...²⁰

This is the result of nourishing and educating the desires, and developing a highly sophisticated taste. The satisfaction of hunger has been transformed into the aesthetic appreciation of the combination of flavours, odours, and visual sensations which together constitute gourmet cuisine. In his *Essay on Ritual* he offers an analytic description of correct funeral procedures which can serve as a guide line for aesthetic taste in general.

The ceremonial ritual provides beautiful apparel, but not to the extent of enthrallment; it provides for rustic mourning garments, but not to the extent of neglectful carelessness; it provides music and consolation, but not to the extent of licentiousness and sentimentality; it provides for weeping and sorrow, but not to the extent of extreme wailing and self-flagellation. This is the Middle Way of ceremonial ritual.²¹

Through the ritual grief is objectified within a carefully controlled artistic form, catharsis is achieved through a process which might be described as sublimation.

This first aesthetic norm mandates an artistic form capable of embodying desire and emotion in a controlled, yet satisfying, manner, aimed toward emotional sublimation and development of refined aesthetic taste. It establishes a sliding scale for measurement of aesthetic value which, at lowest point, would condemn or reject works of art as possessing negative aesthetic value that are licentious, i.e., that appeal to, or serve to enhance, base desires and emotions, and which would appraise works at ever-increasing degrees of aesthetic value in accordance with how successful they are in sublimation of desire and emotion, thereby distancing the appreciator from the original situation of subjectivity so that attention is directed away from the raw desire or emotion and toward the object of art itself.

(2) The second norm is stated simply and briefly in two brief passages from the *Essay on Ritual*:

All rituals originate in rustic simplicity, develop into elegant forms, and finally achieve expression of joy and happiness. At their best human emotions embodied in them and beauty of form are both fully expressed. At the next to best level either emotions or the sense of formal beauty will dominate. At the lowest level the emotions revert to a primitive state of expression.²²

A ritual is embellished excessively when the beauty of form is emphasized, but the emotional content is minimized. A ritual is over-simplified when its formal beauty is minimized and its emotional content is emphasized. A ritual attains the true mean when its formal beauty and emotional content are related as the outer and inner sides of the same reality; when tangible actions and inner emotions are integrated and revolve around each other.²³

This second norm requires at the very least a balance of form and content, and as an ideal a perfect integration of form and content. It ascribes diminishing degrees of aesthetic value insofar as the work of art overemphasizes either form or content to the detriment of the other.

(3) As the second norm is concerned with integration of objective form and subjective content, so the third norm is concerned with the integration of the constituent elements. It is through the harmonizing of disparate, and often conflicting, elements that beauty is created. This norm is stated most directly in section 12 of the *Essay on Ritual*.

Rituals trim that which is too long, and extend that which is too short; cut back that which is excessive, and increase that which is insufficient. ... Beauty and ugliness, rejoicing and weeping, peace of mind and sorrow, are opposites; yet rituals integrate them and make use of them: at the right time each is brought forth and utilized.

Of all the art forms, music is the one in which the principle of harmonization is most evident. In the *Essay on Music* he writes:

For music at the same time both discriminates and unites in order to establish harmony; it compares and distinguishes in order to embellish its measures; it is performed harmoniously in order to achieve formal beauty,

directing all its elements in a single direction, and thereby controlling all changes.²⁴

It is in dance that perfect integration is most noticeably achieved.

How can one understand the spirit of the dance? Eyes cannot see, ears cannot hear. Yet with all the posturings and movements, all the steps and changes of pace are ordered; nothing is lacking in proper restraint. When all the power of muscle and bone is brought into play; when all is matched exactly to the rhythm of the drums and the bells, there is not the slightest awkwardness or discord. *There* is the spirit of the dance in all its manifold fullness and intensity.²⁵

This third norm enjoins the artist to take the elements with which he is working and, in the words of Xunzi, "shorten or extend, deepen or make shallow, add to or diminish, and thus be made to fit the situation ... in a state of harmonization."²⁶ Applied as a principle of aesthetic judgment it requires an analysis of the degree of integration of elements including a proper tension in the relating of oppositions.

(4) Frequently Xunzi warns against music which is "licentious" or not properly "dignified". A typical passage from the *Essay on Music*:

Sound and music enter deeply into people and influence them quickly. When music is moderate and even, people react harmoniously and do not respond excessively. When music is orderly and dignified, people react peacefully and do not respond in a disorderly fashion. But when music is licentious and seductive, it is dangerous. Then people respond excessively. They lose their self-restraint and become disorderly.²⁷

He went so far as to propose that one of the imperial officials be made responsible for censoring musical compositions, banning such "licentious" music, and keeping strange, barbaric music from crowding out the elegant classical modes. This might be interpreted as a musical conservative who does not approve of music he does not understand, especially to music which leads to shocking behaviour on the part of those who fall under its spell. I believe that Xunzi is anticipating the early 20th century British aesthete, Edward Bullough, whose article published in the *British Journal of Psychology* in 1913, which was entitled "'Psychological Distance' as a Factor in Art and an Aesthetic Principle," has become a modern classic. What Xunzi objected to Bullough calls "under-distancing," a situation in which the subject who approaches a work of art becomes so emotionally involved that insufficient distance is maintained for a proper objective appreciation and response

to occur. The opposite situation is termed "over-distancing," where the art object is of such a nature that little involvement happens, and a proper act of appreciation and response cannot occur. In Bullough's words, "what is, therefore, both in appreciation and in production, most desirable, is the utmost decrease of distance without its disappearance."²⁸ Xunzi is struggling to enunciate such a principle when he writes that the superior person will not allow his ears to listen to licentious sounds, nor his eyes to look at seductive images, but that when correct music is played and heard, a proper response occurs which is embodied in peace and order. "There is a correspondence between singing and response."²⁹

Throughout the two essays there is a continual weaving in and out of moral and political concerns. I do not claim that Xunzi is writing about art by itself or for itself apart from other considerations. Art for him is inextricably bound up with the total life of the human being in society. My claim is that for Xunzi it is the forms of the world of art which are to be used in the creation of a moral and political order. This does not constitute a moralization of aesthetics, but rather an aestheticization of morality. Morality and politics, to be successful, must have a foundation in art, their norms derived from the norms of aesthetics.

Notes

1. *li*.
2. *yüe*.
3. *Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan, 1948) p. 150.
4. Chap. 48 ("King Meng").
5. *jeng ren* (*Lun Yu*, xiv:13).
6. *Essay on Ritual*, xix:1; *Essay on Music*; *Essay on Music*, xx:1, 2, 3.
7. J.H. Bernard, Tr. (New York & London: Hafner, 1968), p. 198.
8. *Essay on Ritual*, xix:2.
9. *Essay on Music*, xx:3.
10. "The original nature of humans today is evil, so that they have the need to place themselves under instruction by teachers and under laws in order to become upright." *Essay on Music*, xxiii:1.
11. "Crooked wood needs to be steamed and bent in order to be straightened ... Blunt metal needs to be ground and whetted in order to be sharpened." *ibid*.

12. "Heaven has its seasons; earth has its resources; humanity has its government. In this way the human is capable of forming a triad with the other two." *Essay on Ritual*, xix:13.
13. *i*.
14. *li*.
15. *Essay on Ritual*, xix:i.
16. "Music embodies an unchanging harmony, while rituals distinguish that which is different; and through the combination of rituals and music the human heart is totally integrated." *Essay on Music*, xx:3.
17. *Essay on Ritual*, xix:14.
18. *ibid.*, xix:1.
19. *Essay on Music*, xx:1.
20. 1:12, 13.
21. *Essay on Ritual*, xix:12.
22. *ibid.*, xix:6, 7.
23. *ibid.*, xix:8.
24. *Essay on Music*, xx:1.
25. *ibid.*, xx:4.
26. *ibid.*, xx:14.
27. *ibid.*, xx:2.
28. Reprinted in Melvin Rader (ed.), *A Modern Book of Esthetics* [5th edition] (New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 1979), p. 351.
29. *Essay on Music*, xx:3.