

Li Zehou: Synthesizing Kongzi, Marx, and Kant



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1 Introduction

LI Zehou has been described as, “the most creative living Chinese philosopher as well as the most controversial” (Ding 2002: 246), and as “the most influential thinker in the Chinese mainland throughout the 1980s...the pacesetter of the intellectual agenda in humanities in China” (LIN Tongqi, quoted in Cheek 1999: 114; see also Lin 2003: 589). Born in Hunan in 1930, Li graduated from Peking University in 1954 and joined the Institute of Philosophy at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences the following year. Although his writings were first published in the 1950s, the upheaval and political instability of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) meant that he did not attain prominence until a series of works were published from 1979 onwards. He became an important public figure, and is credited with providing inspiration for the Chinese democracy movement of the 1980s. Partly as a result of his perceived associations with the reform movement, he left China in 1992 and moved to the United States, where he still resides. Li has the distinction of being one of only two Chinese thinkers to serve as Fellows of the International Institute of Philosophy (IIP) in Paris—FENG Youlan (馮友蘭) was the other.

Li has written more than 30 books and his work is wide-ranging. He has produced a three volume history of Chinese thought (Li 1979b, 1985a, 1987), a critical review of Kant’s philosophy (Li 1979a), critical discussions of Marxism (Li 1987), a commentary on the *Analects* (Li 2007), a popular study of art and beauty in the Chinese tradition (Li 1981), popular surveys of his own work (Li 1990), a scholarly study of aesthetics in the Chinese tradition (Li 1988), and many theoretical works in aesthetics (Li 1985b). Li remains active, and most recently has engaged with Michael Sandel on the place of justice in Chinese social thought (Li 2016). Several

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of his works dealing with aesthetics are available in English (Li 1994, 2006, 2010), and translations of other major works are being published (Li 2018a, 2018b, 2019, forthcoming).¹

2 Contextualizing Li's Thought: Articulating a Chinese Modernity

To better understand Li Zehou's work, it is helpful to locate it within the social and historical contexts to which Li was responding. Specifically, his work can be understood as a contribution to the struggle to establish the intellectual foundations of a Chinese modernity. As China transitioned away from the long-lived dynastic system that had ended early in the twentieth century, there was intense debate in China about what forms of social and political order should take its place. Marxism emerged as the governing ideology after the Communist revolution, but this did not settle the outstanding social questions. In the period of liberalization that followed Mao's death, intellectuals like Li Zehou emerged and found a new role. Instead of being tasked with providing justifications for state policy and the ruling ideology, they were free, to some extent, to explore new ideas that could inform policy and popular consciousness. Li Zehou duly became one of the most active and widely read of Chinese thinkers during the 1980s and 1990s, offering a humanistic vision for Chinese society that explored what makes human beings human beings.

Any proposed vision of a modern China had to address at least three, potentially conflicting, issues. These were: the place of tradition, especially Confucian thought, in twentieth-century China; the role of Western learning and culture; and the future of a Marxism with Chinese characteristics. Within the public debate about China's future path, which spanned many decades, some advocated the adoption of Western values and science as a cure for China's ills (HU Shi 胡適, 2013), and some Marxism (CHEN Xujing 陳序經 1990, 1995; CHEN Duxiu 陳獨秀 1993). Others sought to promote the standing of traditional Chinese culture, to the point that it might even provide solutions to problems of Western modernity (LIANG Shuming 梁漱溟 2001). What made Li Zehou's contribution distinctive was the willingness to draw from all these disparate frameworks, in an attempt to synthesize them into a unified system of thought.

Li draws most extensively from three intellectual sources—Marx, Kant, and classical Confucian thought—creatively adapting what he regards as the most valuable elements of each thinker or tradition. From Marx, he took the idea that the starting point for social analysis and philosophical theorizing is material and cultural, and not the individual. In Li's words, "ultimate reality is the social practice of material production, from which grows the production of symbols (language being the main part of this symbol production)" (Li 2006: 39). How people experience the

¹A detailed bibliography of Li's work can be found in Jana Rošker (2018).

world is largely determined by the social practices within which they exist. Li also develops a form of historicism: society, including ideas and technology, evolves over time, giving rise to new forms of social consciousness. Li paid particular attention to the early Marx (2007), and developed Marx's idea of the *humanization of nature* (*ziran de renhua* 自然的人化, Li 2006: 37). For Marx, humans were attached to nature, and humans were characterized by their development of tools to reproduce their means of existence within nature: "Man *lives* on nature—means that nature is his *body*, with which he must remain in continuous interchange if he is not to die" (Marx 2007: 31).

The *humanization of nature* refers to two processes. First, through primitive tools and later science and technology, humans mold the external world into a more hospitable environment. At the same time, and partly through a symbiotic relationship, the transformed external environment also molds the inner life of people, creating what Li called "Spiritual Civilization."

However, Li has little use for the Marxist notion of class as a category of social analysis; nor does revolution play an important role in his thinking. Indeed, Li is often regarded as a conservative thinker in this respect, offering a vision of how a modernizing China might transform without social conflict. As Lin Min points out (Lin 1992: 971), Li's ideas provided some of the philosophical basis for DENG Xiaoping's modernization program. Li's idea of an evolving national cultural identity, grounded in an ancient past and developing slowly as successive layers of cultural practice and meaning accumulate, could be seen in Deng's appeal to a national culturally-grounded 'Chinese' identity. It is a measure of the depth and complexity of Li's thought that, despite his interest in continuity, he fell from favor with the authorities because he was seen as siding too closely with the reformers.

Despite his great debt to Marx and Engels, Li believes that they, "failed to place sufficient emphasis on human beings' inner psychology" (Li 2018a, vii). Li turns to Kant to overcome this perceived deficiency in Marxist theory. From Kant, Li takes the ideas of a rational human subject, whose experiences are conditioned and directed through certain foundational cognitive structures and categories. But whereas Kant identified necessary and universal categories of experience that all rational human subjects rely upon to make sense of the sensible world, Li denies that these basic categories are 'synthetic a priori' (i.e., providing the structures that make possible conscious experience, while not themselves formed through experience). Basic concepts and categories might, for the individual subject, be necessary or universal, but their origin lies in social life and external forces of production. Li thus attempted to marry Kantian ideas with Marxist theory. He acknowledged the primacy of the social in determining human consciousness and thought, but he was also concerned with the structure of the rational human mind (which Li sometimes refers to as the "emotio-rational" structure of the mind). Through analysis of the latter, and unlike Marx, he sought to articulate an inner realm in which innovation and imagination could arise, and influence could flow in the opposite direction, from the individual into the world. In particular, Li develops Kant's notion of the rational will. Humans' ability to willfully override desire and even apparent self-interest, for the sake of moral conduct, is a distinctive 'suprabiological' (超生

理*chaoshengli*) feature of human nature, and distinguishes humans from animals. The ability to exert such rational control, even if reason is socially conditioned, motives Li's rejection of reductive evolutionary or sociobiological explanations of human behavior: "A human being is not merely a biological entity; to become a human being, necessarily means to possess an inner, conscious rational moral character" (Li 2016: 20; trans., Rošker 2020: 39).

Li differs from Kant, however, in his conception of a universal humanity or moral community. For Li, respect for humankind as a whole was not to be found in the reflective space of reasons; rather it was an awareness that emerged historically. As technology and social practices evolved and the range of human interactions and communities expanded, human thought and awareness developed the idea of common ground shared by all human beings (Li 2006: 87). In his work on aesthetics, Li echoes Kant in regarding the aesthetic as a distinct realm of human experience, separate from the intellect and practical matters, and an important site of human freedom. Li's work is thus an attempt to restore the status of the individual person—through his interest in subjectivity and the person as a sensuous being—in the face of orthodox Marxist claims that impersonal social and economic forces determined the structure of inner subjective life. While historical and material forces shape personal sensibility, they do not entirely determine it. That said, however, Li does not move from Kant to the individualism of liberalism. Understanding human beings as pursuers of private ends, such that "the whole society exists for the individual," is "unhistorical" (Li 2018a: 348). The understanding of people should include social and historical context.²

While Kant's framework provided a possible escape from the determinism of Marxism, the latter offered, according to Li, a corrective to the way in which Confucian thought had developed in the Chinese tradition. He used Marxist and Kantian thought to develop new interpretations of themes and terms from classical Chinese philosophy (discussed below), such as *the unity of humanity and the cosmos* (*tianren heyi* 天人合一) and the Confucian ideal of humaneness (*ren* 仁). Li traced the transformations in their meaning from ancient China to the New Confucians, and offered a Marxist critique of how they were developed by the Song and Ming Neo-Confucians and their later followers. (See Li's three volume history of Chinese thought). Li believed that seminal figures such as the Cheng brothers and ZHU Xi placed excessive focus on inner-directed self-cultivation and appeal to abstractions (Li 2019: 258–260). As a result, they paid insufficient attention to the role of the natural environment and the social world in conditioning and cultivating people. In this, Li draws heavily on the Marxist emphasis on science, and the need to develop technologies that were integrated with nature, thereby providing people with a higher standard of living—something that the 'unscientific' late Chinese dynastic period failed to do.

²Li finds similarities here between his and Kant's thought. He highlights the teleology in Kant's philosophy of history, and Kant's neglected account of the role of sense experience and human history in social progress (Li 2018a: 349–350)—a reading of Kant that Li finds shared with some Western scholars (Wood 1999: 245–248).

Thus, at a time when Maoist voluntarism was still prominent in the public imagination, Li sought to promote a more scientific method for a modernizing nation. In his *History of Classical Chinese Thought*, Li explores how Confucian ideas, specifically those of the Neo-Confucians, informed Mao Zedong's version of Marxism. Influenced by Song-Ming Neo-Confucian fascination with inner cultivation, Mao embraced a naïve confidence that human will alone could achieve revolutionary change. He believed that Chinese peasants could rise up and transform their society through strength of will. This led Mao to issue a misguided call for the peasants to develop backyard steel-producing furnaces to help meet the country's need for steel, which lacked sufficient regard for the technological challenges of producing high-quality steel (Li Zhisui 李志绥 2011: 272–278). In his opposition to Maoism, Li's thought can thus be perceived as reformist and anti-establishment, resisting the surge of national fervor and political circumstances that allowed little freedom for skeptical critical analysis.

Understanding Li's work as an attempt to articulate a Chinese modernity—one that integrated traditional Chinese culture and Confucian learning, China's recent Marxist past, and Western learning and philosophy—prepares the reader for an encounter with the details of Li's thought. We turn first to his work on aesthetics.

3 Li Zehou's Aesthetics

Li is well known, particularly in the Anglophone world, for his work on aesthetics. His aesthetic theory developed over several decades (see, for example, Li 1980b, 1994, 2010), and is not confined to discussions of art, but instead aims at a comprehensive explanation of the role of the sensuous and affective in human life. Moral beauty—as the refining of inner nature and finding accord with external nature—is the highest human end. Li thus belongs to that line of Chinese thought that treats aesthetics as being at the heart of society and education (Samei 2010: *x*). Aesthetics is central to traditional Chinese thought because, according to Li, it is a “one world” (*yigeshijie* 一個世界) tradition (Li 2016: 1069). In the Abrahamic tradition, human purpose is linked to metaphysical dualism, an other-worldly transcendental realm and a human nature that is originally flawed; but the Chinese tradition celebrates this life and views humans as integral to nature. The moral aspiration of the tradition has always been to create a great harmony on earth, not to facilitate private salvation.

To develop this traditional theme, Li again draws on Marxist themes, particularly the connection between beauty and society. Li regards aesthetics as a discipline that must respond to social and historical change while also confronting issues beyond art and literature. But Li rejects the crudest form of Marxist aesthetics. Unlike Mao Zedong, for example, Li rejects the demand that all art promote social goals such as the interests of a social class or revolutionary change.³ Instead, aesthetics must

³ See Mao Zedong's “Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art” (Mao 1980).

theorize the relationship between humans and productive forces. Aesthetics thus reflects how culture shapes personal sensibility. It should explain, for example, how and why many people's experience of the aesthetic is as domesticated consumers, concerned with, "the color of the wallpaper, the grouping of the furniture, and even the form of a small cup or lampshade" (Li 2006: 35). Thus, in keeping with how aesthetics has been approached in the Chinese tradition generally, Li's conception of aesthetics is very broad and addresses, "The material and spiritual civilization of humanity as a whole" (Li 2006: 36).

For the sake of simplicity, Li's account of beauty can be divided into two components, an account of what makes an object beautiful (which Li calls "the root of beauty"), and an explanation of aesthetic experience (the feelings and attitudes involved in encounters with beauty). Here, 'object' is to be understood broadly, to include events and states of affairs as well as physical objects such as paintings. To be beautiful an object must possess certain objective characteristics, and must be perceived by someone who is able to appreciate it: there is no beauty without people, and beauty is encountered in the sensuous realm. Such an account of beauty contrasts with claims that it is found in the intellectual realm, in things such as elegant mathematic formulae.

Li intends his view to contrast with two other, more familiar accounts of what makes objects beautiful, which Li calls "objectivism" and "subjectivism" (Li 2006: 51). Objectivism includes formalism—the claim that beauty resides in a-temporal features of the object, such as proportion or symmetry. Another objectivist account claims that beauty derives from the spirit or idea made manifest by an object, as in the case of religious iconography. Subjectivist accounts explain beauty through a person's experience of it rather than objective properties of the object. Feelings, imagination, or attitudes create beauty. Both objectivist and subjectivist explanations of beauty face problems. If beauty is objective then, all things being equal, why don't people have the same response to the same object? And if beauty is merely subjective, then why do people take themselves to be responding to objective features of the object when they experience beauty?

Li offers a creative response to the problems facing both accounts, with a theory that incorporates elements of both approaches. His theory explains how beauty has a root in objective properties; why some properties but not others arouse feelings of beauty; and how the aesthetic attitude involved in the experience of beauty arises.

3.1 *The Root of Beauty*

Li first seeks to explain how beauty comes into being. He argues that the root of beauty is *humanized nature* (e.g., Li 2006: 53): human practice and its effects on the world result in certain objects becoming able to move us aesthetically. Li writes,

We cannot seek after the origin or essence of beauty merely from the mind or psychology or merely from the natural properties of matter, but should follow Marx's directions of the view of practice, of *humanized nature*. To put it in the abstract language of classical

philosophy, beauty is the unity of truth and goodness, that is, the unity of regularity and purposiveness, and manifests social utilitarian content...Any beauty must possess perceptual natural form. Without form (image), no beauty is possible. This form is nothing more than the humanized nature. (Li 1980b: 17, quoted in 2006: 55)

Beauty arises when objects or practices unify two important elements. The first is understanding and control of the natural world and the laws that govern it (“regularity”). The second is human striving and goal-directed practice, which improve the world for humans (“purposiveness”). When humans marry the laws of nature with human purpose in a form that can be perceived, then beauty arises. Such forms represent *humanized nature*, since they are the point at which human striving (purposiveness) has come to terms with natural order (regularity). Without this union, either humans would have remained in a primitive state, viewing nature as magical and beyond human control, or their practices would have been in tension with nature and tended to collapse. Beautiful things thus came into existence over time as humans developed tools that enabled adaptation to the natural world and the directing of it, bringing about practices that brought human benefit. Li’s approach to aesthetics is thus consistent with Marx’s guiding ideal of human self-creation through productive activity. Non-alienated labor, able to work creatively with the materials of the natural world, is aesthetic activity.⁴

Examples of beauty as humanized nature include high-speed trains, skyscrapers, and great bridges (Li 2006: 64). In the case of trains, for example, they and the experiences involving them are beautiful because they integrate awareness of and response to the laws of nature (the physics of building tunnels, aerodynamics, transmission of energy, etc.) with human goals (transporting many people quickly and safely over long-distances, etc).

It might be asked: why should this kind of practice and its objects be thought of as beautiful? Li’s reply is twofold, both of which highlight the complex nature of beauty. First, the sensuous form is not merely a perceptual appearance, such as the sleek and dynamic train; it is also a manifestation of the rational. The object (the train) is also an embodiment of accumulated reason, and humanity’s capacity to understand and direct the world. Such objects represent human practical reason at its productive best. Li calls this process ‘sedimentation’ (積澱 *jidian*), whereby “The rational deposits itself into the sensuous” (Li 1979a: 415, Li 2006: 57). Successive layers of human practice are built upon earlier ones over time, refining or replacing them, and conditioning how people conceptualize and feel towards the world.

Second, the object is beautiful because it is the embodiment of the most substantial notion of human freedom—the ability to successfully adapt to the world and establish stable social practices that promote human well-being. In doing so, humans liberate themselves from natural necessity and make the natural environment amenable to human ends. Li offers the *Zhuangzi*’s story of Cook Ding as an example of

⁴Marx also appeals to beauty as a practical ideal: “...[M]an knows how to produce in accordance with the standard of every species and knows how to apply everywhere the inherent standard to the object. Man therefore also forms objects in accordance with the laws of beauty” (Marx 2007: 32).

such cultivated freedom (Li 2006: 58). Beauty emerges only after struggle and the achievement of practical mastery—both in human history and in individual lives. Further, in so far as beauty is understood in terms of freedom, then beauty does not simply refer to the object produced (the train), but also refers to the more abstract activity of setting and achieving material goals (crossing a mountain range, and building a transport system that realizes this).

Note that while the origin of beauty here is something objective—those objects or practices that integrate the natural world and human purpose, and produce social benefit—what constitutes a beautiful object is historically situated. It evolves over time as understanding of the natural world and the laws governing it deepens, and as human needs and interests evolve.⁵ Humans' use of tools and technology develop, and ever more complex patterns of laws and regularity are revealed, to which humans then respond with new technologies. In the past, those in agricultural societies enjoyed the process of growing vegetables, but in contemporary urban communities most people are able only to appreciate the colors and tastes of vegetables; the practices integral to their production no longer arouse an aesthetic response (Li 2006: 65). Similarly, the high-speed trains of today might seem crude and limited in 100 years, while what is beautiful in the future might include forms that we could not find beautiful today. This might include environmentally friendly forms of life. Also, what is recognized as beautiful can also vary between societies or traditions, as human needs and practices vary in different geographical and cultural areas. This variation will have limits though, in so far as some needs are rooted in universal human biology.

3.2 *Aesthetic Sensibility*

In addition to explaining the root of beauty, or what it is that humans find beautiful, Li also provides an account of the aesthetic attitude, and what leads the human subject to experience beauty. To understand this second inquiry, consider how something might be objectively beautiful but not appreciated as such. What must the (human) subject be like such that it can experience beauty? Li is responding here to other accounts of aesthetic experience that he considers inadequate. These include the theory of psychic distance (Bullough 1912), which holds that beauty arises when people focus solely on the sensual experiences deriving from objects, 'distancing' them from the concerns of the self that might otherwise distort or prevent the aesthetic experience. Li also rejects the claim that the experience of beauty is solely the projection of emotions by the subject onto the object.

⁵ Compare Li's historicist account of beauty with Marx's insistence in final pages of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* that certain art forms are possible only during certain historical moments or social formations. "Is the conception of nature and of social relations which underlies Greek imagination and therefore Greek (art) possible when there are self-acting mules, railways, locomotives and electric telegraphs?" (Marx 2000: 128).

Li's account is based on his theory of sedimentation and an explanation of the human subject through the existence of *cultural-psychological formations* (*wenhua-xinli jiegou* 文化心理結構) (Li 2019: xii, Li 2010: x, Li 2018a: 328). This is the idea that external social practices and forces ('culture') condition or 'mold' (*taoye* 陶冶) how people experience the world (their 'psychology'). This includes concepts and feelings. The "cultural" includes material life (tools, practices, etc) and social entities (ideals and norms)—i.e., all those aspects of the external social and material world that find representation in human consciousness (as concepts, emotions, personal attitudes and so forth). Thus the particular form and features of the social world structure how people think about their world and what they value. This includes their aesthetic sensibility, which Li calls the "aesthetic psychological construction" (Li 2006: 89). This is the part of people's inner lives that is sensitive to aesthetic concerns, and includes relevant desires, feelings, and habits of perception. As society evolves, so does the cultural-psychological formation of people and also their aesthetic sensibility.

This framework leads Li to make various claims about the nature of aesthetic experience. First, what is aesthetically appealing has a cultural grounding. As with the cultural-psychological formation, the formation of the aesthetic sensibility also takes place on different levels: human or species-wide, communal or cultural, and individual. Different traditions can thus have different aesthetic sensibilities due to local variations in both natural environment and social practices. In China, for example, Li claims that a "very long and highly developed neolithic agricultural society" and the influence of Confucian and Daoist ideas resulted in a preference for line over color, and implied meanings over explicit and unambiguous statements, while the imagination was more important to generating aesthetic experience than perception and mimesis, something made evident by the properties of Chinese painting (Li 2006: 90). Second, aesthetic experience acquires a veridical or reliable quality. As the product of social practices, aesthetic sensibility is rooted in an objective (or inter-subjective) external world in a way that purely subjective responses are not. It is "social and rational, but disinterested" (Li 2006: 93) and, compared with responses or emotions that arise from more selfish or private ends or concerns, judgments arising from it are more communally orientated. People whose lives are structured by shared social practices are likely to be moved by the same objects.

Furthermore, there is an increase in aesthetic sensibility and aesthetically-driven activity over time. As noted above, over time humans acquire increased ability to realize beauty in the world through technology; but they also become more able to appreciate it. The human senses become more refined over time, such that people are increasingly able to appreciate a wider range of sounds and music, visual arts and so on. Similarly, advancing practical skills make possible the creation of more complex forms of beauty. There has been an evolution from primitive cave paintings to the works of Picasso. In fact, there is a shift in the place of beauty in human life more generally. As humans achieve greater control of the external world and develop ever richer psychological and conceptual resources to recognize and enjoy beauty, so people become more concerned with beauty. It becomes central to human life. Li describes this increased importance of the aesthetic as the "sociality of

sensuousness” (Li 2006: 93). It constitutes a distinguishing characteristic of humans, and separates them from animals. Animals use their senses for utilitarian ends, such as finding food to survive. Humans, though also once in this state, have transcended it. They enjoy the senses for their own sakes. Beauty thus becomes a goal of human thought and action. This explains why people are increasingly concerned with the aesthetic details of their everyday lives, from clothing to wallpaper.

3.3 *Technology and Beauty: A Worrying Combination?*

The strong emphasis on technology central to Li’s conception of beauty might arouse concern, in so far that beauty here seems to consist in achieving control of the natural world and imposing human order upon it. This contrasts sharply with accounts of beauty that start from recognition of the intrinsic beauty of natural ecosystems, pristine nature, or grand mountain vistas. Of greater concern is that the natural world in Li’s account has value only instrumentally, for its contribution to human well-being when properly mastered. Some ecologically-minded ethicists have argued that nature has intrinsic value (Naess 1989), and that the correct attitude towards it is one of reverence. Such attitudes are thought to be important because they prevent the degradation of the natural world.

Li offers several responses to such charges. First, he is aware of the danger posed by unchecked technological growth and instrumental rationality to human sensuousness or aesthetic sensibility, and warns against allowing such alienation (Li 2006: 70). More importantly, Li argues that greater technological control might actually lead to enhanced interest in nature as an aesthetic object. In the past, humans were trapped in subsistence living. But as humans have escaped from debilitating labor with the help of technology, and secured themselves against most existential threats, so they have become more able to appreciate beauty. They can now regard the natural world as an aesthetic object, and are attracted to violent storms, wild deserts and desolate landscapes as sensuous forms. Accordingly, people might become more concerned with the preservation of the natural environment. This coming to appreciate ‘wild’ nature is, along with directing nature, also part of the process of “humanization of nature” (Li 2006: 72). Thus, Li argues, understanding the laws that govern the natural world and being able to modify it in accordance with human need is not a barrier to greater environmental concern but a prerequisite for it.

Furthermore, this process of the humanization of nature is accompanied by a second process, in which the direction of influence runs the other way. Humans also adjust to nature, which Li calls the “naturalization of humans” (*ren de ziranhua* 人的自然化). In its simplest sense this is the idea that humans must respect the laws of nature as they look to make the natural environment more homely. Building homes on flood plains without regard to seasonal variations will result in insecurity. Humans’ adjustment to nature is more subtle than this, however. They also adjust the rhythms of their own lives to the rhythms found in nature. Chinese health arts

such as Qigong and Taiji, as well as other techniques such as yoga, are ways in which the rhythms of the human body are adjusted to the rhythms of the natural world (Li 2006: 138). This, along with the complementary humanization of nature, is necessary for the complete union of humans and nature (*tianren heyi* 天人合一). Li also glosses this traditional notion of unity in ecological terms, as “the integration of the embodied mind and the natural world” (Li 2019: 322). Li thus locates this traditional idea within a novel framework, which incorporates both China’s recent Marxist past and the traditional concern with aesthetics.

As his creative reinterpretation of *tianren heyi* suggests, Li’s aesthetic theory was crucial to another aspect of his work—locating traditional Chinese thought within a framework that contributed to the discussions about Chinese modernity. The two complementary processes central to his aesthetics, the humanization of nature and the naturalization of humans, along with other novel concepts, enabled Li to offer new perspectives on the tradition, and the figure of Kongzi in particular.

4 Li Zehou on the Chinese Tradition

One of Li’s notable achievements was the rehabilitation of Kongzi, at a time when the orthodox Marxist account rendered the name synonymous with feudalism and oppression (Li 1985a). He achieved this by offering two contrasting assessments of Kongzi, one critical and one appreciative. Thus, in a style representative of much of his work, he avoided direct denial of the orthodox view while adding to and contextualizing it—sublimating it—on the way to a more inclusive understanding. Li agreed that Kongzi, in seeking to defend and restore the Zhou ritual and social codes, advocated economic and political recommendations that were backward looking and regressive, “preferring a society with all people being equally poor over a society tending to polarization of wealth and power” (Li 1980a: 103). Ultimately, the dynamic historical changes opposed by Kongzi enabled the overthrow of the technologically and economically stagnant rites-based clan networks. In their wake, more advanced forms of economic and social organization emerged during the Qin and Han dynasties.

Such progress was not without tragedy, however, and Kongzi offered prescient criticisms of developments in his society. A stable and proto-democratic clan system, in which clan elders were able to focus on communal needs, was destroyed. Brutal wars of annexation followed in which these communal and humane qualities were lost. Li points out that a more balanced assessment of Kongzi should recognize that, “he was against ruthless oppression and exploitation and championed the cause of ancient clan rule with its comparative moderation, showing the democratic and communitarian] side of his thinking” (Li 1980a: 105).

Furthermore, utilizing elements of Marxist theory, Li showed how Kongzi presented a complex and influential philosophical system. Rooted in Chinese antiquity, this came to constitute the defining characteristics of the Chinese people, the definitive *cultural-psychological formation* of the tradition (Li 2019: 7). The Confucian

tradition emerged from existing social practices of primitive society and institutionalized certain aspects of that form of life, and Li emphasizes two features in particular: hierarchical clan-based social order and ritual.

The social order of pre-Confucian society was already constituted by networks of hierarchical clan ties. This included socially prescribed roles, which demanded deference to elders, and patrilineal lines of descent from father to son (Li 1980b: 100). This form of social life shaped the emotional sensibilities and attitudes of the people, such that sons were inclined to feel reverence towards, and obey, fathers.

Part of the genius of Kongzi, according to Li, was that he provided a rationale for the social system by recognizing that such commitments were grounded in biological human nature. Humans are biologically inclined to certain emotional responses, and most powerful of all is the emotional bond between parent and offspring. Children are inclined to feel love for parents, and grief at their death. The discussion of three years of mourning for parents in *Analects* 17.21 illustrates this psychological explanation of early Chinese social life, and Li describes it as “the most crucial passage in the text” (Li 2007: 305). In it, Kongzi’s follower Zai Wo expresses skepticism about the need for 3 years of mourning upon the death of a parent, and suggests that one year is sufficient. Kongzi advises Zai Wo to do as he sees fit, but notes that “when the *junzi* is in mourning, fine foods are not sweet to him, music brings no joy, living in luxury brings him no comfort; therefore, he does not indulge in these things” (17.21, trans. Eno 2015). Upon Zai Wo’s exit, Kongzi condemns him for ‘lacking benevolence’ (不仁 *buren*). This passage shows that established social norms are not the product of blind custom or unquestioned tradition; nor do they reflect a crude logic of repayment, with three years of mourning a return on three years of care received while an infant. Rather, mourning practices are a response to emotional need. The outward condition upon the death of a parent—being unable to enjoy ordinary life and pleasures—reflects a rich inner emotional life that is the ground of human bonds.

Li suggests that Confucian thought not only recognized the biologically-grounded nature of human response, but also the need to cultivate and mold these powerful motivations. Human susceptibility to the conceptual and emotional molding of the conscious mind is the grounds of Li’s discussion of human nature. Humans’ raw, biological nature is shared with animals, such as horses and dogs (cf. *Analects* 2.7). But the capacity to acquire cultural-psychological formations, thus integrating social life and inner personal consciousness, is distinctively human. It enables people to transcend their original natures and attain a higher, more cultivated state. It is the source of the difference between being merely *ren* (人 a biologically-defined person) and becoming *ren* (仁 benevolent). Li describes the Confucian virtue of benevolence (*ren*) thus:

Fundamentally, benevolence is a consciousness of one’s human nature - a nature that is fundamentally biological or animalistic (as expressed in the parent-child relation), and yet distinct from the animal (expressed in filiality). In this view, those emotions of our human nature are both the ultimate reality and the very essence of what it means to be human. This is the starting point of Kongzi’s humanism, and indeed of all Confucian humanitarianism, as well as its theory of human nature. (Li 2010: 40)

The key to developing benevolence was filial piety, the parent-child relationship. This was to be cultivated through ritualized practice, and formed the foundation for both the cultivated individual and a harmonious society: “This socialized relation [father-son] comes to be regarded as the ultimate human reality, the ultimate essence of what it means to be human” (Li 2010: 41). This sensibility, forged in the family, is then extended outwards: “The basic human emotion of filial affection is...expanded to become the essentially human sentiment that ‘all men are brothers’” (45). This psychology of communal caring became enshrined in, and perpetuated through, social practices and rituals and became the “motivating force behind the life and existence of Confucian officials and scholars throughout the ages” (43).⁶

The second prominent feature of primitive society absorbed by Confucian thought was the use of the rites and music. Li argues that primitive culture in China was characterized by “shamanistic song and dance centered on sacrificial ritual [that] consolidated, organized, and reinforced primitive communities, arousing and unifying human consciousness, intention and will” (Li 2010: 3). Rituals became central to the Chinese tradition because the practical social enactment of them has an effect on the imagination and categories of understanding (concepts) of the participants. Rituals generate normative rules and imaginative associations in the minds of participants, which then govern and order social interaction. This was an early illustration of how cultural-psychological formations arose: ritual practices are internalized as ideas in people’s minds, and these form an ordered structure through which the subject experiences the world. Crucially, these ideas also correspond to and sustain an ‘external’ practical social order, including everyday tasks and tool usage. For example, rituals focusing on crops and harvests generate the concept or image of a harvest, provide instruction in how to farm, and organize peoples’ daily activities and the community more broadly.

Rituals also ordered the emotions, causing people to experience the same emotions towards the same objects and social situations. This was one crucial aspect of the ideal of ‘harmony’. Rituals also provided a shared object of beauty, which further unified the community. What was beautiful about rituals was not only their intrinsic form, in the way that cave painting might be regarded as beautiful on account of its colors and shape; the ‘beauty’ was found in the emotions aroused among participants. “Fervid dancing and mystical ceremonies” stirred intense feelings, including joy, which fully engaged participants both physically and mentally. Fear and awe were also integral to rituals, and all were instrumental in creating social order in an often perilous and chaotic world. Through such intense experiences concepts were imbued with motivational force, while attitudes or emotions could be redirected and aligned with others in the group to create social stability. The Confucians inherited and upheld these beliefs about ritual and music.

⁶An illustration of how Li’s aesthetic theory ties in with his account of Confucian thought is his claim that the sincere concern for others, compassion for the masses and the shared experience of suffering later became the criterion for evaluating Chinese artists. Li cites, for example, the depth of fellow-feeling and humanitarian concern in Du Fu’s poetry (Li 2010: 43–44).

To summarize, Li highlights how ritual can mold mental concepts and emotional dispositions, as well as the inner psychological structure of benevolence. In doing so, he revealed how Confucian thought, which had been dismissed as feudal and backward, was a rational response to the world, one that grounded the moral nature of social relations in biological reality.

5 Li Zehou on Aesthetic Self-Cultivation

Li combined his work in aesthetics and Confucian thought to develop an account of the highest form of personal cultivation as a refined aesthetic sensibility. This view is summarized in *Analects* 8.8, “Be awakened by poetry, be established by ritual, be perfected in music.”⁷ Loosely echoing Kongzi’s autobiographical statement in 2.4, each part of this three-part developmental account of character involves an important dimension of aesthetic cultivation.

Li claims that “Be awakened by poetry” refers to all literary forms, and by extension all sources of basic knowledge about the world—politics, history and so forth. Just as Kongzi urged his followers to read the *Book of Songs* (詩經) to develop a richer vocabulary with which to describe the world (17.9), here the goal is a more sophisticated conceptual grasp of the subtleties of the world around. Li describes this as “establishing the structure of the intellect and the will” or the “internalization of rationality” (Li 2010: 49). Importantly, the acquired ideas are not merely rational or intellectual; they include a motivating element since they are the product of a shared social history, one that assigns value to those particular ideas. Ideally, a learned person can appeal to and utilize these shared images and motifs in guiding the conduct of others, since they resonate with, and have an emotional impact on, others in that tradition. For example, Confucian poetry has featured recurrent, shared motifs that are believed to consistently move the reader, such as the benevolent person’s sadness at witnessing the suffering of others.

The phrase “Be established by ritual” expresses a different aspect of aesthetic cultivation. Ritual is important for three reasons. First, ‘ritual’ refers to passive training of character and the internalization of external regulations. This might include the learning of daily greeting for parents, which involves internalizing such conduct and forming a habit. Second, ritual here also refers to active practical mastery. The human subject meets the world in an immediate and direct way, and must learn to manipulate physical objects appropriately, by gaining an understanding of how these objects work and the laws that govern them. This category of rituals requires application and practice to master, and includes the six arts with its practical disciplines such as charioteering and archery. Ritual is thus a means to being practically effective in the world in general. It produces people who are able to work

⁷Li claims that *Analects* 7.6 conveys a similar position: “Set your intention upon the way, rely on its virtue, lean on benevolence, and wander in the arts.”

with and make use of objective laws of nature as well social norms and customs. Such a subject can serve in government, skillfully maintain good relations with others, and generally make a difference in the world. The connection of ritual with Li's emphasis on technology and the humanization of nature as the source of beauty is clear, but this view of ritual also grounds Li's criticism of the Neo-Confucians. Li believed that they placed too great an emphasis on inner spiritual cultivation, neglecting the need to attain a mastery of practical affairs and assuming social authority (*waiwang* 外王) would follow directly from 'sageliness within' (*neisheng* 內聖). The third function of ritual, discussed above, is the molding of incipient biologically-grounded emotional responses, which begins with the parent-child relationship. When refined by ritual, such feelings are constitutive of the Confucian ideal of benevolence (*ren*), and provide a reliable guide to action.

However, neither of these two processes of character development are the "ultimate perfection or supreme realization of the human personality." Such 'perfecting' requires music. Li writes, "If the self-cultivation of the gentleman does not include the study of [the rites] and music it is impossible for him to become a complete person (成*cheng*)" (Li 2010: 50). How does music achieve this? The simplest answer is that it cultivates an emotional responsiveness. One who is exposed to and taught to appreciate music has a fuller or richer range of emotional responses. *Analects* 11.26 illustrates how this form of personal cultivation is prized. Therein, Kongzi declares his delight with Zengxi's vision of the good life, "I would like, in the company of five or six young men and six or seven children, to cleanse ourselves in the Yi River, to revel in the cool breezes at the Altar for Rain and then return home singing."

The 'complete person' resides in and enjoys his emotions, and moreover, his practical responses to the world proceed via his emotional sensibilities and yet are reliable or 'on the mark'. Although a higher realm of human experience, the emotional realm is not separated from the intellectual and practical dimensions of human cultivation but is built upon the achievements of these other two realms. Li writes, "The aesthetic is purely sensuous but at the same time comprehends a history of rational sedimentation; it is natural but at the same time incorporates the accumulated achievements of society" (Li 2010: 50). Cultivated persons are thus the embodiment of the forces that Li identifies as driving social progress in general. Their rational sensibility reflects the sedimentation of traditional knowledge and social practices; they have mastered many practices and their emotional reactions are structured by them, and they find beauty therein. This highest state of cultivation is what Kongzi was referring to in *Analects* 2.4 when he declared that, at 70 he was able to "follow the desires of the heart without overstepping the bounds of the right."

The claim that the highest ideal in Confucian thought was the cultivation of a practical aesthetic sensibility, and that the Confucian tradition came to define the Chinese tradition, leads Li to identify Chinese culture as a *culture characterized by sensitivity to delight* (*legan wenhua* 樂感文化; sometimes translated as a 'culture of optimism') (Li 2019: 317–324). *Analects* 6.20 is one source of such a view: "To know something is not as good as to esteem it, and to esteem it is not as good as to

delight in it.”⁸ Li’s use of the term *le* is very broad, incorporating both cultural and affective elements. The categorization is intended to contrast with classifications of cultures as guilt cultures, shame cultures or cultures of concern⁹—the former is often ascribed to the ‘West’ and the latter two to China. Li rejects both of these two characterizations of Chinese culture. The phrase *legan wenhua* is intended to highlight how China lacked a transcendental religious or supernatural realm from which foundational meanings of human life could be drawn. Similarly, Li claims that the mode of rationality that came to dominate in China was robustly pragmatic—there was little interest in speculative metaphysics or abstract philosophical systems, at least during the formation of the Chinese tradition during antiquity. This further undermined any efforts to derive existential meaning from abstractions. The deepest levels of human meaning could come only from the human realm, and the realm of sociable human relationships and the everyday in particular. In such a tradition, pleasure or delight thus becomes foundational, including those that are realized through well-ordered social interaction.

The kind of delight or pleasure that become the end of human action and the process of self-cultivation was not a crude or physical pleasure, however. It was a complex state that becomes possible only through education and increasing mastery of the social world, and emerges as an aesthetic sensibility. Kongzi was a figure who roamed in delight, allowing his sense of *le* to effortlessly guide his conduct, but he was not a simple hedonist.

6 Assessing Li Zehou’s Work

The breadth of Li’s scholarly interests, the volume of his work and the tendency for his ideas to evolve through successive iterations make simple assessments of Li’s work difficult. The following discussion focuses on a selection of issues relevant to his contributions to contemporary Chinese thought.

Li’s treatment of Marxism has aroused much debate. Gu Xin (1996), for example, views Li’s understanding of Marxism as merely a continuation of a Hegelian-Marxist materialist-dialectic—whereby the evolving means of production and technological forces determine subjective consciousness and ethics. Such a reading, if true, has two consequences. First, it reduces the philosophical importance of Li’s work, by locating it within an already-familiar and orthodox line of thought. Second, it suggests that Li’s work might be a validation of the Chinese Communist Party and

⁸In Li Zehou’s words, “This pleasure...is a spiritual realization and a freedom to live, in which human wisdom and virtuous behavior are sedimented and transformed into a psychological noumenon that transcends the foundation of wisdom and morality upon which it is built” (Li 2010: 52).

⁹A ‘culture of concern’ refers to Xu Fuguan’s categorization of classical Chinese culture as one of ‘concern consciousness’ (*youhuan yishi* 憂患意識), which was intended to contrast with cultures characterized by guilt. For more on Xu’s thought here see (Ni 2002).

its political approach; unlike some of his contemporaries, Li avoids any call for radical reform of the social system. Others, however, have denied that Li's understanding of Marxism can be understood in this way. Some have argued (Chong 1996; Cheek 1999) that Li's work is couched in Marxist language out of political expediency. Li Zehou wrote using a language of the ruling ideology to avoid being labeled as a counter-revolutionary. But this does not mean that his works were orthodox. Chinese intellectuals have often used the language of an official discourse to avoid censorship, without being committed to the ideology. Li's contemporary, ZHANG Dainian (張岱年) wrote a dictionary of key Chinese philosophical terms that initially included similar judicious use of phraseology and rhetoric (1989), although much of that language was later removed as the political climate changed (Zhang 2002). Also, Li's use of familiar Marxist terminology made it easier to influence his target audience, and engage the Chinese people on the question of Chinese modernity. An entirely new theoretical framework would have hindered Li's pragmatic goal of stimulating wide-ranging debate.

Other writers (e.g., Cauvel 1999) argue that Li offered a truly innovative modification of Marxist ideas. His analysis might begin from Marxist concerns and use some Marxist language but he is, to use his own term, a 'post-Marxist'. He seeks to develop Marxist thought in novel ways, discarding misguided ideas and reworking original themes into a novel vision of human nature and the highest form of human community. On this reading, Li is sincerely interested in Marxism, rather than merely paying lip-service, but seeks to reformulate some of its central ideas. Many of his neologisms support this reading, indicating a novel integration of the Chinese tradition and Marxist themes. *Cultural-psychological formation* is one example; another is Li's phrase "Western base and Chinese application" (*xiti zhongyong* 西體中用; Li 1987: 311–341). This is a response to a slogan created by Zhang Zhidong's (張之洞) that was associated with the Self-Strengthening Movement (自強運動), "Chinese Learning as substance, Western Learning for application" (*zhongxue wei ti, xixue wei yong* 中學為體, 西學為用). That earlier slogan defended traditional Confucian learning, while promoting China's adoption of Western technology and economic ideas. Li's reworking of the slogan implied that a Western materialist framework should be used to understand the fundamental social and ontological processes that had shaped life in China, while traditional Chinese thought could guide more practical and social affairs.

This question of interpretation matters for the Western reader of Li's work. At a time when relatively few professional philosophers work on Marxist thought, encountering a body of work replete with Marxist terms and influence might lead the reader to conclude that Li's work is another example of academic work laden with outdated dogma, or one intellectually constrained by the demands of a certain political climate. But Li's work, set against the intellectual backdrop of China in the 1970s and 1980s, is arguably an independently-minded reconstruction of the more enduring elements of the Marxist tradition. It can be read as an attempt to develop a Chinese Marxism that moved away from the more questionable parts of Marxist and Maoist thought, such as a teleological and millenarian account of history, or the conviction that the peasant masses offered the best model of how to be proletarian

revolutionaries.¹⁰ It also parted from Maoism in its rejection of a crude voluntarism and anti-imperialist tone, and neither state nor party have a prominent role in Li's thought. The nuance and novelty of Li's work gives the reader reason to persevere with his occasionally opaque language and speculative claims, and entertain more deeply his intellectual vision.

Li Zehou's work is also important for its suggestion of a middle path between westernization and Chinese nationalism. Li Zehou's theory of sedimentation—the concepts or ideas through which the human subject understands and experiences the world are the product of an evolving historical and social milieu—has consequences for the question of how to articulate a Chinese modernity. Specifically, Li's thought provides a way to navigate between two conflicting views. One is that so-called 'Western' values such as liberalism, democracy and Christianity, should define China's future path. On the other hand, traditionalists or nationalists offer some version of the idea of the specialness of Chinese culture, as something to be preserved and insulated against Western influence. Some versions of this view also hold that classical culture and thought is not fully appreciated by those not raised within the tradition.

Li provides an alternative approach to such views. He is not unique among Chinese thinkers in trying to find a path between these two extremes, but he provides a distinctive account of one such middle way. On the one hand he takes seriously the idea of 'culture' and the differences between cultural traditions; however, he does not defend the idea of a culture having an essence, something that must be preserved at all costs. The open nature of the driving dialectical relationship between the human subject and its environment means that the cultural and psychological formation that comprises the Chinese tradition is always open to the absorption and accumulation of new practices and ideas, including those from outside of China. However, at the same time, such evolution is rooted in a distinct tradition of cultural transmission, stretching back to the clan systems and ritualized practice of Chinese antiquity. This includes the ideas through which subjects cognize the world and affectively experience it. As a result, doctrines that offer far-reaching and foundational claims about the nature of the world or the human subject, such as Christianity or liberalism, cannot become dominant in China in any simple way—for they can have influence only in so far as they fit with or can be integrated into existing categories and concepts that define the Chinese worldview at the present time. Such a nuanced position seems largely correct: there is a Chinese tradition that exerts a wide-ranging and coherent influence on an emerging Chinese modernity; but it is

¹⁰A feature of Chinese Marxist theory was expediency. Caught up in an intense revolutionary struggle, Chinese Marxists did not have the leisure for in-depth study of classical Marxist theory that the Western intelligentsia had enjoyed; expediency demanded practical doctrines. After 1949, official orthodoxy demanded that theorists cleave to the official party line, with only a small number of Marxist-Leninist texts approved for discussion by party czars (Maurice Meisner 1985: 3). See also Brugger and Kelly (1990). On the relation of Maoist thought, Marxism, and Leninism see Benjamin Schwarz (1979) and Richard Pfeffer (1976). A recent creative attempt to once more integrate Marxist and Confucian thought is Chen Weigang 陳維綱 (2014).

not monolithic or inert. New ideas or practices can become sedimented into the evolving cultural-psychological formation of the tradition. It remains an open question whether the cultural-psychological formation of those in China and those outside will at some future point become similar.

Finally, Li's work can serve as a source of ideas for discussions beyond the Chinese tradition. In recent debates with Michael Sandel on the role of justice in the good society, for example, Li claims that harmony is a higher regulative ideal than justice (Li 2016). Justice relies on reason and logical discourse to generate rules that order society, but Li seeks greater recognition for the role of the emotions in creating stable social arrangements. This assertion rests on a confidence that an order emerges from the natural and historical realms that, if trusted and allowed to influence affective responses, can harmonize human actions and desires, as well as human relations and the relation between humans and the natural world. This source of order, however, is not always represented in explicit rational discourse and negotiation. Customary norms, for example, might be expressions of norms that accommodate such well-grounded emotional responses, even if no explicit rational justification for them is apparent. Li argues that insistence on the integration of reason and emotion is a feature of the Chinese philosophical tradition, in contrast to the sole focus on logical reasoning found in the tradition upon which Sandel draws. The regulation of social morals and markets through both emotional and rational responses is, *pace* Sandel, the most secure way to protect the common good and bring about the good life for all.

Li's work also invites us to rethink the place of the aesthetic in everyday life. Typically, Anglo-American aesthetics has kept a narrow focus, focusing on questions deriving from art and often approaching questions of beauty from within this framework (Saito Yuriko 2007; Sherri Irvin 2008). While this is now changing,¹¹ discussions in aesthetics are often confined to areas of human conduct outside of the public realm and moral debate, and are removed from the concerns of daily life. However, Li's theory suggests that the role of the aesthetic in guiding action should be recognized as much broader. Aesthetic experience is a pervasive guiding force in everyday life, and this demands a more thoughtful exploration of the intersection between the aesthetic and the ethical. Li's work might thus enrich the efforts of those in the Euro-American tradition who have sought to develop similarly broad accounts of aesthetics, such as John Dewey (1980) and Irvin (2008).

Li offers the provocative suggestion that 'beautiful' aesthetic experience can itself play a defining role in what counts as meaningful forms of life (Lambert 2018). Echoing the figure of Kongzi at 70 (*Analects* 2.4) who resided in feelings that reliably guided conduct, a cultivated aesthetic sensibility might somehow bridge the divide between areas of human life that are currently compartmentalized, such as work and leisure. It could provide guidance in each area of life, and perhaps indicate what forms of labor or work are more worthwhile. This is possible because Li believes that the story of human evolution is one in which beauty (including

¹¹ See, for example, Nyugen (2020) and Saito (2007).

harmony) eventually becomes the highest guiding ideal for human life. Li thus invites us to consider how the sensuous nature of human experience, rooted in shared and stable social practices, can be trusted to guide human action, on a more-or-less equal footing with the ideals of individual deliberation. Similarly, how aesthetic values or experiences might govern and direct human relationships, as Li claims they did for the early Confucians, is a discussion that has barely started. The imaginative and richly suggestive thought of Li Zehou prompts us to confront such questions.

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