

Seeing Through the Aesthetic Worldview

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WHEN ASSESSING DAVID HALL AND ROGER AMES'S claim that the classical Confucian tradition is an aesthetic tradition, comprising an aesthetic order,¹ a comment by the philosopher J. L. Austin on the relationship between language and truth is insightful. Austin asks whether the claim "France is hexagonal" is true or false.² When teaching children to recognize countries on a map, for example, it might be considered true; but to the professional geographer it might be false. Austin, however, suggests that it is neither true nor false, but a meaningful and suggestive "rough description."

A similar defense could be made for Hall and Ames's claim that the classical Confucian tradition be understood as constituting an aesthetic order. Some have argued that this claim is simply false.³ However, following Austin, this claim should be understood, not in terms of its literal truth or falsity, but in terms of its usefulness and suggestiveness. It is a general description that can guide inquiry into early Chinese thought. In what follows, I locate Hall and Ames's "aesthetic order" within a broader interpretive lineage that understands the Chinese tradition as an aesthetic tradition. I show how conceptions of "aesthetic" evolve within that lineage, how Hall and Ames built upon earlier New Confucians, and how their work might be extended further.

Postimperial China sought a Chinese modernity true to China's classical tradition while adjusting to Western influence. This led several modern Chinese thinkers to articulate how some notion of the aesthetic has been central to Chinese culture and society. Cai Yuanpei, for example, called for aesthetic education (*meiyu* 美育) to replace religion.

While religion crudely incited the emotions, aesthetic education would instead cultivate more refined feelings and gradually eliminate selfishness.⁴ Xu Fuguan noted how, historically, aesthetic vocabulary applied in the realms of music, art, and painting evolved into descriptions of the characteristics of outstanding men.⁵ Others identified the aesthetic qualities that characterize the Chinese humanistic tradition as a whole. Zong Baihua developed *shengming meixue*, roughly “life aesthetics,” which stressed the centrality of art and an aesthetic attitude toward life and, more broadly, the cosmos.⁶ Similarly, some accounts of *tianren heyi* (the unity of humanity and the cosmos) stress the centrality of beauty. Li Zehou argues that humanity is evolving toward a final higher state, in which human psychology evolves to recognize beauty as the highest value.⁷

The view that aesthetics is central to human conduct and social order derives from the cosmology articulated in the classical corpus. As New Confucian thinker Tang Junyi notes, “The spirit of Chinese literature and art is closely related to Chinese philosophers’ natural cosmology.”⁸ This cosmology has traditionally been described as “ceaseless generation” (*shengsheng buxi*). *The Great Treatise on the Book of Changes* reads:

The successive movement between *yin* and *yang* forces is what is called “*dao*” and that which follows from this movement is good (*shan*). . . . The benevolent see it and call it benevolence. The wise see it and call it wisdom. The common people act according to it in everyday life but do not recognize it. . . . [D]aily renewal is known as abundant potency, ceaseless generation is what is known as “change.”⁹

In this view, the world is a site of ceaseless transformation. Such transformation is found at many levels, from the movement between night and day, to the cyclical rotation of the seasons, through to the ongoing biological processes that sustain every living cell. Furthermore, as expressed by *tianren heyi* and Tang’s notion of *yiduo bufenguan* (the inseparability of the singular and the multiplicity),¹⁰ humanity is embedded at the center of this vibrant and organically structured cosmos. Such a view has implications for aesthetics and its role in shaping human conduct, which the New Confucians in particular explored. The simplest connection is that the unified world, with its harmony and vitality, is the paradigm of beauty. Closely related to this is the effect of this integrated

whole on human sensibility and affective response. For Tang Junyi, the beauty of this “vital, rich, and continuous process of transformation” leads subjects to a reverence for all life that influences thought and action.¹¹ Such thinking hints at a quasi-causal account linking this processual world to human action. There is a confidence that the inherent vitality of the living natural world can directly evoke human emotions.¹² A person with the appropriately cultivated sensibilities will feel emotions present, in some sense, in reality itself. Such a causal connection might be understood as the energies, or *qi*, that circulate in the putatively external world but also permeate the body and produce emotions; it might also be captured in ideas such as resonance, where the human mind becomes attuned to a wider field of patterns. Regardless of mechanism, this link between the world and the emotions is seen in Chinese art, especially painting, which Fang Dongmei notes is “nothing more nor less than the expression of exuberant vitality,” adding, “I take this to be foundation of all forms of Chinese art.”¹³

The Tradition of Theorizing the Aesthetic and *Thinking Through Confucius*

Hall and Ames’s work might be considered a continuation of this New Confucian project, since their account of the classic Chinese tradition as an aesthetic tradition also starts from recognition of some kind of comprehensive unity between humans and the world. Their approach, however, holds out the promise of avoiding metaphysical or causal problems facing these earlier accounts, in which attempts to link a world of processual transformation directly with human emotion struggled to find a causal explanation of how such correlation could arise. Hall and Ames, however, emphasize a different conception of aesthetic. In their account, this unity is understood, not in terms of metaphysical or causal connection, but through aesthetic judgment. This conception utilizes a Whiteheadian metaphysical framework, whereby the holistic cosmology is now understood as giving rise not to emotions but to an *aesthetic order*.

The starting point in theories of aesthetic order is the claim that reality cannot be understood as a rule-governed or principled order, which Hall and Ames call a “rational order.”¹⁴ Reflecting the traditional cosmology, this view denies that the multiplicity can be explained by any theory or set of final principles. Instead, the most complete order possible in such a world is understood in aesthetic terms. At its simplest

such order can be understood by analogy with the arts, such as painting, where particular elements (e.g., line, form, color, and so on) are brought together to create an aesthetically pleasing effect. “Aesthetic” is used “to name the sort of order comprised by particulars construed precisely in terms of their particularity.”¹⁵ The same applies to the creation of an ideal social order. Each element of society is to be optimally arranged, where attainment is marked by such phenomena as a sense of appropriateness or ease, the integration of different social roles, and the lack of social conflict.¹⁶ In avoiding appeal to foundational principles, this account also avoids the problem of providing epistemological justification for such principles.

This notion of the aesthetic generates a practical task, the creation of social order, which is taken up by exemplary persons (*junzi*). Through judgment and action, exemplary persons influence other elements in the field, such as the common people (*min*), inducing them into an order formed around exemplary persons.¹⁷ The Pole Star reference in *Analects* 2.1 and the references to modeling or setting an example express this ideal. This ongoing and subtle reordering of the community distinguishes the Confucian tradition from a reactionary social order mired in inflexible social convention.

Here the meaning of “aesthetic” shifts from passive response to active intuitive judgment. Although this aesthetic order can be described objectively or impersonally, its foundation resides in individual aesthetic judgments of “rightness”¹⁸ or “appropriateness” (*yi*).¹⁹ The exemplary person *senses* the optimal way of ordering the various elements involved: “The direct entertainment of one’s environs entails no conceptual or ideational mediation. The environing world as in some sense ‘felt’ rather than cognitively entertained consists in ungeneralized particulars.”²⁰ Such aesthetic order thus provides an iteration of Confucian harmony.

This account of an aesthetic order has encountered several familiar objections. These include the claim that classical China does have transcendence and thus a higher ordering force, while others have criticized the allegedly reductive dichotomy of the rational and the aesthetic, particularly where it suggests an essentializing East-West dichotomy. I will not repeat these concerns here, nor possible replies to them.²¹ Instead, I will focus on one specific challenge, which also serves as a stepping-stone to a further conception of the aesthetic that might extend Hall and Ames’s insights.

This concern is that the kinds of human response that follow from the account of a processual and transforming world might be broader than the “aesthetic order” paradigm suggests. Stated another way, the practical wisdom of the exemplary person is not grounded solely in felt aesthetic response. The practical rationality of the exemplary person featured in the *Analects* is more diverse than a sensing of the optimal order of particulars. Other aspects of Confucian psychology and practical judgment seem equally important to creating social order. One such example is the cultivated sense of obligation. This is most clear in certain human bonds, such as father and son. The *Analects* frequently portrays commitments to kin in terms of a “categorical” quality of experience (the felt duty to uphold one’s father’s way for three years, to cover for his sheep-stealing, not to cause undue worry to parents, and so on). Unlike an aesthetic sensitivity to the whole, certain concerns seem *qualitatively more important* and, in some cases, overriding. Xu Fuguan’s alternative gloss on the Chinese tradition as a culture of “anxious concern” (*youthuan yishi*) captures such dispositions.²²

Another point of contrast is the *Analects*’ concern with deliberative reflection about conduct. The three kinds of daily reflection demanded in *Analects* 1.4 suggest a role for self-conscious deliberation in good conduct. Similarly, *Mencius* 4A17’s approval of a man touching the hand of a drowning sister in order to save her is an endorsement of the deliberative weighing of options and recognition of reasonable exceptions to a rule (*quan*). Here practical reasoning does not take the form of felt or sensed response but is deliberate and structured in its thought patterns. Finally, the classical texts’ composite account of practical wisdom incorporates habitual responses—responses that are automatic and fitting but involve no affective state. Ritual responses, for example, can be fluent and appropriate without reliance on any obvious sensed feeling of rightness. In summary, then, what makes the exemplary person exemplary seems to be not solely action or judgment grounded in the felt experience of particulars and a sensed order among them. Confucian social order seems to involve more than aesthetic order.

Building on Hall and Ames’s creative reinvigoration of Confucian thought through an appreciation of the role of the aesthetic in the Confucian tradition, we might consider an additional Confucian sense of “aesthetic” that also contributes to social order: the practical concern to create aesthetic goods within everyday social life. This account also

draws on Whitehead for relevant conceptual resources, while incorporating the Deweyan instrumentalism of Ames's later work.

Thinking Through Ames

This alternative account of the aesthetic does not focus on aesthetic awareness as the *basis* of intuitive judgments of appropriateness; instead, the creation of certain kinds of shared affective experiences becomes the *aim* or *goal* of practical judgment and action.

This creative adaptation draws on Whitehead's notions of an *event*. Whitehead explains events as the "final real things of which the world is made up . . . drops of experience, complex and interdependent."²³ For Whitehead, such events are the significant phases of concrete experience and the points at which interpenetrating forces merge. Here I focus on events that arise in first-person experiences and the *quality of experience* attained when constitutive elements or possibilities are brought together in the right way, producing "satisfaction."²⁴ In this way the notion of event is given a narrower, explicitly interpersonal and social gloss more directly applicable to classical Confucian thought. The latter also values events, understood as social interactions that are distinguished by their affective qualities. This concern with the quality of experience and its aesthetic dimension is manifested in the texts' concern with musicality (*yue*) and its correlate, joy or delight (*le*). The affective experiences to which such terms point can be thought of as "events" or "occasions," which arise not simply in music but in appropriately ordered social life.

The importance of 樂 (*yue/le*) to action in the classical texts appears in various guises.²⁵ The *Analects* does not accord 樂 (*yue/le*) the same coverage as general moral terms such as *ren* or *de*, but it is often attributed high value or even priority.²⁶ In 6.20, for example, delight is placed above knowledge (*zhi*) and even liking (*hao*). More importantly, in 11.26 when Confucius asks his followers what they would most like to do, he identifies most strongly with Zengxi's answer about taking delight in shared company—bathing with friends in the River Yi and singing together while strolling home. Similarly, in 7.32 Confucius delights in singing harmonies with his students. Furthermore, the importance of delight as a general state of mind is expressed in two ways. First, a state of delight can resist the vicissitudes of life. Yan Hui is the paradigm of residing in such delight,²⁷ but the ideal of having reliable access to such

a state over time appears elsewhere.²⁸ In general, the *Analects*' valuing of music and its effects on the subject's conscious life reinforces the value of aesthetic experience, as well as indicating how it is analogous to musical experience. Passage 7.14 indicates the intensity of the states that music produces—listening to the Shao music obliterates Confucius's sensitivity to lesser experiences, such as hunger.²⁹

Perhaps the most explicitly social gloss on *le* is found in the *Mencius*. Here it is described as the fruit of well-ordered human relationships:

The greatest fruit [*shì*] of humaneness [*rén*] is serving one's parents. The greatest fruit of rightness [*yì*] is going along with one's elder brother. . . . The greatest fruit of music is taking joy [*le*] in these two. When there is joy, they grow. When they grow, how can they be stopped? When they come to the point where they cannot be stopped, then, without realizing it, one's feet begin to step in time and one's hands begin to dance.³⁰

Significantly, *le* here is not simply a pleasant feeling but emerges from social interaction and confirms when it has gone well. In addition, Mencius also articulates the metaphysical and political dimensions of delight. Several dialogues in Book 1 explain how delight is increased by sharing (by rulers with the people),³¹ how the right character is needed to appreciate appropriate delight,³² and that it is the ruler's duty to create and share delight with the people.³³ Confucian delight is thus more than mere hedonism or private pleasure; it has social and political dimensions. Delight also has cosmological significance in the *Mencius*.³⁴

Further research is needed to fully articulate the importance of musical or delightful events to Confucian thought.³⁵ Here I can offer just two further comments. The first is the importance to this account of ordered social relationships and roles, which are themselves so central to Confucian thought. Indeed, these relationships might be the main context within which events arise, with interactions within them being the primary source of delight; at least, the prominence of social and personal attachment in the early Confucian texts invites further exploration of this claim.

Second, the creation of such delight-based events is an ethical task. Focusing on the Kong-Zisi-Meng lineage, the *Zhongyong* hints that the good life consists in the skillful creation of a certain quality of interaction with others. It describes the *junzi*'s task as bringing focus to everyday

affairs (*zhong yong*), and the text's opening passage suggests this focus be understood affectively—as a dynamic balancing of emotions in the course of daily activity. Strikingly, the text distinguishes the practical task of bringing focus to everyday affairs from the more overtly political tasks of rulership.³⁶ *Zhongyong* 20 points out that becoming a *junzi* requires a focus on one's kin (*shiqin*) and that this in turn requires *zhiren* 知人—an understanding of people or an ability to interact with them, to bring to fruition what exists only in incipient form. Here what is brought to fruition might include shared affective experiences indicated by terms such as *le*. To achieve this across the multiple social and interpersonal interactions that make up the course of the day is to realize a form of human flourishing constituted by events or occasions. In this way the natural cadence and flow of the day, understood as an ongoing series of social interactions with multiple people, mirrors Whitehead's more metaphysical picture of events.

There are challenges to approaching the classical Confucian tradition in this way. Clearly, delight is not a simple good in the texts,³⁷ nor is it the only important affective state—*le* is only one of several affective states emphasized in *Zhongyong* 1. There are limits to the guidance provided by music and affective states in Confucian society. On the other hand, perhaps *le* 樂 is best understood not as a single emotion but as a range of related states, such as delight, ease, and contentment, which might collectively constitute a mood or state of mind. Ultimately, perhaps the creation of affect-laden social events is best understood as merely one ethical task within a broader Confucian ethical vision. Indeed, perhaps there is no single Confucian goal or paradigm but merely a cluster of related values and approaches.

Roger Ames and his collaborators David Hall and Henry Rosemont Jr., building on earlier New Confucians like Tang Junyi, have excelled in articulating the place of the aesthetic in classical Confucian ethical and social thought. If we look forward, it is possible to extend this approach by reconsidering the meaning of “aesthetic,” shifting the focus from intuitively sensed judgment of particulars to the practical goal of shared affective experiences realized in everyday social life.

Notes

1. See TTC, 16, which describes order that is “fundamentally aesthetic”: “Aesthetic order is achieved by creation of novel patterns.”

2. J. L. Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 143.

3. See Philip J. Ivanhoe, review of *Thinking Through Confucius*, by David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Philosophy East and West* 41, no. 2 (1991): 248.

4. Cai Yuanpei, "Replacing Religion with Aesthetic Education," trans. Julia Andrews, in *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature, 1893–1945*, ed. Kirk A. Denton (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 182–189.

5. Xu Fuguan, *Zhongguo yishu jingshen* [The Spirit of Chinese Arts] (Taichung: Tunghai University, 1966), 150–157. See also Tu Weiming, "Embodied Knowledge: Body, Heart/Mind, and Spirit in Confucian Aesthetics," *Asian and Asian-American Philosophers and Philosophies Newsletter* 5 (2006): 2.

6. See Chen Wangheng, "Zong Baihuade shengming meixueguan" [Zong Baihua's life aesthetics], in *Jianghai Xuekan* 1 (2001): 101–107.

7. Li Zehou and Jane Cauvel, *Four Essays on Aesthetics: Toward a Global View* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006). See also Li Zehou, "A Few Questions concerning the History of Chinese Aesthetics (Excerpts)," *Contemporary Chinese Thought* 31, no. 2 (1999): 66–76, 74.

8. Tang Junyi, *Zhongguo wenhua zhi jingshenjiazhi* [The Value of the Spirit of Chinese Culture] (Taipei: Zhengzhong Bookstore, 1979), 291.

9. *The Great Treatise*, trans. James Legge, <http://ctext.org/book-of-changes/xi-ci-shang> (modified for clarity).

10. Tang Junyi, *Tang Junyi Quanj* [Collected Works of Tang Junyi], vol. 11 (Taipei: Xuesheng Publishing, 1988), 16–17.

11. Tang, *Zhongguo*, 107, 189.

12. *Ibid.*, 188.

13. Thomé H. Fang, *The Chinese View of Life: The Philosophy of Comprehensive Harmony* (Taipei: Linking Publishing, 1980), 131–132.

14. TTC, 16.

15. TTC, 351n3. Note also: "Aesthetic order is achieved by the creation of novel patterns," (16) without "the imposition of antecedently existing patterns upon events" (105).

16. See TTC, 131–192. See also CRE, chap. 4, for a discussion of social roles within this worldview.

17. CRE, 138–145.

18. TTC, 105.

19. For a discussion of *yi*, see TTC, 89–110. See also David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, "Getting It Right: On Saving Confucius from the Confucians," *Philosophy East and West* 34, no. 1 (1984): 3–23.

20. TTC, 351n3.

21. For an overview of objections, see Ivanhoe's review of *Thinking Through Confucius*. See also Michael Martin, review of *Thinking Through Confucius*, by David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 17, no. 4 (1990): 495–503.

22. Xu Fuguan, *Zhongguo Renxinglunshi* [The History of Human Nature in China] (Beijing: Beijing Normal University Press, 2005).

23. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: Macmillan, 1929), 27. On events, see also Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Pelican Mentor, 1948), 74.

24. See Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 24–26.

25. See Andrew Lambert, “What Friendship Tells Us about Morality: A Confucian Ethics of Personal Relationships” (PhD dissertation, University of Hawai'i, 2012).

26. See the textual study of 樂 in the *Analects* in Ni Liu, “Lunyu zhong de xi yu le” [Xi 喜 and yue 樂 in the *Analects*], *Zhexue yu Wenhua* 哲學與文化 44, no. 11 (2017): 167–182. The importance of 樂 in Neo-Confucian thought also suggests that *le* is a technical term. See Yong Huang, “Why Be Moral? The Cheng Brothers' Neo-Confucian Answer,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 36, no. 2 (2008).

27. *Analects* 6.11. See also *Analects* 1.15.

28. *Analects* 4.2 and 7.16.

29. See also *Analects* 7.19: this delight-filled state also banishes worry.

30. *Mencius* 4A27.

31. *Mencius* 1B2, 1B11. See also Andrew Lambert, “Pleasure in Mencius 1,” *Warring States Papers: Studies in Chinese and Comparative Philology* 2, no. 26 (2017): 149–155.

32. *Mencius* 1B2. See also the second section of the *Wuxingpian*: “The *junzi* . . . without a sense of repose [*an*] will not reside in delight, not residing in delight he will not have potency [*de*].”

33. *Mencius* 1B8.

34. In *Mencius* 7A4, delight is an indicator of successful integration with broader cosmic processes: “The ten thousand things are complete within me. There is no greater delight [樂] than examining one's person and finding oneself to be fully integrated [*cheng*].”

35. See Andrew Lambert, “Determinism and the Problem of Individual Freedom in Li Zehou's Thought,” in *Li Zehou and Confucian Philosophy*, ed. Roger T. Ames and Jinhua Jia (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017).

36. See *Zhongyong* 11 and 9.

37. See *Analects* 16.5 and 13.25.