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Source: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Winter, 2007, Vol. 65, No. 1, Special Issue: Global Theories of the Arts and Aesthetics (Winter, 2007), pp. 99-107

Published by: Wiley on behalf of The American Society for Aesthetics

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4622214>

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The Ethics of Confucian Artistry

禮云禮云，

玉帛云乎哉

樂云樂云，

鍾鼓云乎哉

In referring time and again to observing ritual propriety,
how could I just be talking about gifts of jade and silk?

In referring time and again to making music,
how could I just be talking about bells and drums?

Analects 17:11

In the West, Confucian thought was originally presumed irrelevant to serious philosophical study. For example, in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, G. W. F. Hegel remarked that the morality presented in the *Analects* was “good and honest, and nothing more.” And further, with regard to deep philosophical inquiry, “there is nothing to be obtained from his [Confucius’s] teachings.”¹ There has been a resurgent interest in Confucianism, however, as it has become clear that the early translations of the Chinese classics are fraught with difficulties. More nuanced translations have provided grist for novel discussions regarding virtue ethics, environmental ethics, and the performance of language, as well as aesthetics.

In this paper I investigate a point of intersection between art and ethics from a Confucian perspective. Confucian philosophy addresses the issue by first stressing the development that artists must undergo in acquiring their arts, emphasizing the development of artistic ability and ultimately the

process of person-making. Practicing an art is necessarily a moral affair as it entails transforming the self, finding a place within a tradition, and otherwise entering into significant relationships with others. Second, Confucianism also says something on the matter of the relationship between aesthetic and ethical value. It denies the moral autonomy of works of art and argues that art objects should serve the interests of the communities and states that they inhabit. I show that this stance rests on an implicit belief about the ontology of works of visual art. Using the art of Chinese calligraphy as an illustration, I begin with a discussion of the relation between art and ritual, which encompasses both the religious and the moral, broadly conceived. I then describe the contributions that this approach has for contemporary debates over the ethical criticism of works of art.

I. RELIGIOUS RITUAL AND ITS SECULARIZATION

A. C. Graham notes that Confucius (551–479 BCE) saw himself as the preserver and restorer of a declining culture.² For him, the early Zhou Dynasty (1045 - 771 BCE) demonstrated how political harmony could be achieved and culture could flourish. The institutions central to Zhou culture and cherished by Confucius were its rituals and arts—its *li* (禮). For this reason, in the Confucian *Analects*, a great deal of importance is placed both on ritual propriety and the practice and appreciation of arts such as music, poetry, and archery.³

The association of ritual and art began in the Shang Dynasty (1766 - 1122 BCE), when ritual vessels were decorated with images of animals and inscribed with pictographs, the ancient precursors of written language. During the Zhou Dynasty a transition was made from the use of pictographs

to graphs characterized by smooth and flowing strokes and, in general, increasing attention was directed toward overall composition and style.⁴ The movement away from religious toward purely artistic usage culminated much later in China's history; however, Confucius—living after the fall of the Zhou Dynasty—was instrumental in continuing the trend of ritual and art toward the secular. The rituals and arts that previously had been used to serve the gods were seen as instrumental in serving humankind. Rituals such as funeral rites, wedding ceremonies, and the celebrations that punctuated the lunar calendar were still practiced, but “ritual” took on the more secular notion of proper etiquette or good manners. Ultimately, Confucius incorporated the rites into secular relationships in order to make the ideal of social harmony—exemplified by the Zhou Dynasty—a more realistic one. Hence, the *Analekts* state that “[a]chieving harmony (*he*, 和) is the most valuable function of observing ritual propriety (*li*, 禮). In the ways of the Former Kings, the achievement of harmony made them elegant, and was a guiding standard in all things large and small.”⁵

The consequences that this transition had for Chinese art and aesthetics were nothing short of momentous. The Zhou Dynasty was revered because its *li* provided the foundation for a stable and culturally refined state. For Confucius, since ritual was essential in bringing about social harmony and since the arts were seen as an important component of ritual, the arts, too, were seen as instrumental in actualizing two interrelated social ends: self-cultivation and social harmony. Rituals are essential for social harmony as they delineate various roles and provide normative guidelines for action. In turn, they provide the social framework necessary for self-mastery. Confucius held that “[o]ne stands to be improved by the enjoyment found in attuning oneself to the rhythms of ritual propriety and music.”⁶ Hence, the early Confucians viewed moral and aesthetic goodness as intertwined, for practicing the arts and rituals allowed one to cultivate the self and to ultimately become a good person, a process that, on this view, is essential for the establishment and maintenance of a good state.

The association of moral and aesthetic goodness was also expressed in the criticism of works of art. For example, Confucius detested the overly complex and unorthodox music of Zheng as it threatened the traditional music of the court.⁷ Xunzi

(298–238 BCE) later reiterates the point by arguing that “the songs of *Zheng* and *Wei* cause the hearts of men to be dissipated . . . the *Succession* dance and the *Martial* music [however] cause the hearts of men to be filled with dignity.”⁸ These remarks illustrate the early Confucian belief that the arts are capable of affecting their audiences positively *or* negatively, and that the arts ultimately reflect the moral status of the states in which they are practiced. Hence, criticism addresses whether specific works pay homage to traditional forms and whether they are compatible with or function like *li*. Capturing the effects of good music on both individual and state, Xunzi writes: “When [good] music is performed, the inner mind becomes pure; and when ritual is cultivated, conduct is perfected. The ears become acute and the eyes clear-sighted; the blood humour (*qi*, 氣) becomes harmonious and is balanced, manners are altered and customs changed. The entire world is made tranquil, and enjoys together beauty and goodness. Therefore it is said: ‘music is joy.’”⁹

With these general points made, I continue by exploring what implications this approach had for artists working within this tradition. I take Chinese calligraphy as my example, in part because its history—like that of music, theater, and painting—is deeply interwoven with Confucian thought.

II. APPROPRIATENESS AND APPROPRIATION

‘Appropriateness’ has two senses, as an adjective and as a verb, which jointly capture the essence of authentic ritual action. The first sense is the more literal one, the “morally appropriate,” which entails acting in accord with the norms outlined by the *li*. Confucius said: “Having a sense of appropriate conduct (*yi*, 義) as one’s basic disposition, developing it by observing ritual propriety (*li*, 禮), expressing it with modesty . . . this then is an exemplary person.”¹⁰ *Yi* is homophonous with another *yi* (宜), which denotes “right,” “fitting,” or “suitable.” Hence, *yi* simultaneously describes how one’s cultural environment contributes to the process of person-making and how one finds a place within it.

David Hall and Roger Ames describe the second sense of ‘appropriate’ as signifying the “disposition of making the ritual action one’s own and displaying oneself in that conduct.”¹¹ Conservative readings of Confucius often miss this sense of