

Beauty and Art in the Oriental Philosophy

An Aesthetic Study in the Traditional Chinese Philosophy

Shuqing He

College of Humanities and Laws
Hangzhou Dianzi University
Hangzhou, China

Abstract—According to records of the Historian (Shi Ji), Confucius deserves a place among the illustrious men in the past and was the sage among the sages. In the oriental, it may be no exaggeration to say that we are still living in the traditions of Confucian thoughts. In the West, Plato did not work out a systemic exposition of aesthetic problems, but he dealt in his writings with all the problems of aesthetic. Likewise in the oriental, Confucius, the founder of ‘*Ru*’ school which has been known in the West as the Confucian, did not write any book specifically on aesthetics, but many passages on beauty and art could be found in the analects of Confucius (*Lun Yu*). The purpose of this paper is to make systematic study of Confucius’s thoughts on aesthetics by means of examining relevant sayings in “*Lun Yu*” and other classic materials that impart his ideas of beauty and art. Now before proceeding to the main issue, a brief survey of his position in history and the characteristics of his thoughts in general will be made to compare with some Athenian philosophers of the classical period.

Keywords—*aesthetics; art; oriental; philosophy; Confucius*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the West, Plato did not work out a systemic exposition of aesthetic problems, but he dealt in his writings with all the problems of aesthetic (Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, 1970). Likewise in the oriental, Confucius, the founder of ‘*Ru*’ (儒) school (Feng Youlan, 1934) which has been known in the West as the Confucian, did not write any book specifically on aesthetics, but many passages on beauty and art could be found in “The Analects of Confucius (*Lun Yu* 论语)”, which is a collection of Confucius’s scattered sayings compiled by some of his disciples.

The purpose of this paper is to make systematic study of Confucius’s thoughts on aesthetics by means of examining relevant sayings in *Lun Yu* and other classic materials that impart his ideas of beauty and art. Now before proceeding to the main issue, a brief survey of his position in history and the characteristics of his thoughts in general should be made to compare with some athenian philosophers of the classical period.

According to “Records of the Historian (*Shi Ji*, 史记)” which compiled by the great historian *Sima Qian* (司马迁) in the former Han dynasty, Confucius deserves a place among the illustrious men in the past and was the sage among the sages (Sima Qian, BC104-BC91).

In fact, Confucius achieved a consummation of the cultures from the age of the emperors *Yao* (尧) and *Shun* (舜) to the Chou dynasty and opened the way for all the descendent scholars. It may be no exaggeration to say that we are still living in the traditions of Confucian thoughts. He still deserves to be revered as ‘the Sage of the Eternal Present’.

As *Feng Youlan* (冯友兰) mentioned in “A History of Chinese Philosophy (*ZhongGuoZheXueShi*, 中国哲学史)”, Confucius was the first man in China making teaching as his profession, and made culture and education highly regarded at that time. And his activities were similar in many ways to those of the Greek Sophists. His influence in Chinese history was also similar to that of Socrates in the West (Feng Youlan, 1934).

Indeed, Confucius closely resembles the contemporary Athenian philosophers of the classical period, although there are some points of difference.

II. THE ETERNAL PRESENT IN THE WEST AND THE ORIENTAL

A. *Confucius and the Sophists*

Both Confucius and the Sophists had widely learned and were the first to teach students by profession.

The Sophists, whose philosophical interests moved beyond nature and came to include the problems on man together with human culture, were dependent for their livelihood upon the tuition fees.

Confucius also concerned himself with the problems on man. And he dedicated himself to the task of teaching people, making no discrimination as to status or blood. Until then all the schools had been run by the king or local feudal lords for exclusive benefit of the sons of nobles, but he said, “In teaching there should be no distinction of class” (*Lun Yu*, XV. 38).

However, unlike the Sophists who as ‘Teacher of Wisdom’ made it their business to do caustic verbal play and sold their knowledge in all fields of study concerning to practical knowledge useful to the daily life, Confucius acted as ‘Teacher of Morality’ and instructed the practical earnest problems of how to humane, how to build up man’s moral character. He did not sell his knowledge, but made it a rule to receive only a simple present of some dried meat in the form

of gifts (Lun Yu, XV. 38). He was concerned with cultivating the human aspects of man's nature with the formation of character for a good world citizen as the chief objective.

In this respect, Confucius somewhat resembles Socrates.

B. *Confucius and Socrates*

Socrates, who was born ten years after the death of Confucius, talked to any person in order to enlighten and awaken the person, emphasizing that man's ethical nature to be a better citizen.

Similarly, Confucius, living in the age of great social and political disorder in the late Chou dynasty, traveled extensively and taught his disciples the strategies about the practical problem, such as what they should do and how they should live as virtuous men.

Like Socrates, who sought through inductive reasoning to frame universal definitions from which standards for human conduct might be made (Aristotle, 2009), Confucius expounded the doctrine called '*Zheng Ming* (正名)' or the rectification of names, which would serve as the standards for conduct (Lun Yu, XIII. 3). By clarifying the deep significance of the correct meaning of names, he taught us an important fact, to borrow Prof. Tomonobu Imamichi's words, that the truth should be recognized in the form of the words and a man should practice what is recognized as truth (Tomonobu Imamichi, 1968).

Both Socrates and Confucius wrote no works themselves, but their thoughts were recorded by their disciples in the form of dialogue. Again, they both are similar in their positions in history. Just as Socrates raised the problem of man's ethical nature, and it was developed to the problems of the conception and realization of an ideal ethical state and politics by Plato and Aristotle and became the orthodoxy of the western philosophy, so the problem of human nature raised by Confucius was developed to the problem whether man's nature was good or evil by Mencius and *Xunzi*, and thus Confucian doctrine became the orthodoxy of the Eastern philosophy. In this respect, Confucius may be regarded as the counterpart of Socrates in the East.

Yet Confucius differs from Socrates who was concerned himself, in the field of aesthetics, with such problems as imitative and representational character of art and idealization of nature in art (Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, BK.III. 10. 1-3), or purposiveness and relativity of beauty (Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, BK.III. 8. 4-7). Confucius lays emphasis mainly upon the significance of beauty as moral value or that of art for the cultivation of man's character.

In this respect, Confucius is somewhat similar to Plato and Aristotle.

C. *Confucius and Plato, Aristotle*

Plato dealt with the ethical significance of beauty in life and the function of art demanded in an ideal state in his writings. Following Plato, Aristotle also discussed the significance and educational efficacy of art in the best type of body politic.

However, Confucius differs in the methodology from Plato whose concept of beauty was characterized by idealistic theory of existence and aprioristic theory of knowledge based on his metaphysics (Plato, *Symposium* 210E-211D).

Confucius taught us the significance of beauty and art, in his instructive, brief saying which were full of suggestiveness and based on his anthropocentric practical philosophy.

Confucius also differs from Aristotle who was mainly concerned with problems like man's innate tendencies of imitation in the process of artistic creation (Aristotle, *Poetica*. 1448b) and educational efficacy of art in the body politic (Aristotle, *Politica*. 1338a), but Confucius considers art as a means of ennoblement and perfection of personality useful to the state and society. He called such a personality '*Jun Zi* (君子)'. To him, a true artist was a '*Jun Zi*' or the Superior Man capable of realizing a well-ordered society.

To him, the ultimate aim of instruction was not a more acquisition of knowledge or a disinterested research into the abstract truth, but '*Dao* (道)', the right way of truth, to become a man of rounded character who practices and realizes man's ethical nature in his practical life.

He believed not in learning for its own sake but in learning for man's sake, and advocated ethical life characterized by the Anthropocentric Practical Philosophy of the Superior Man.

The very first chapter of "*Lun Yu*" said:

"Is it not pleasant to learn with a constant perseverance and application?"

Is it not delightful to have friends coming from a far?"

Is he not the Superior Man, who feels no displeasure though man may take no notice of him?(Lun Yu, I, 1.)"

These verses frankly suggest the essence of his optimistical, anthropocentric, practical philosophy. It is interesting to note that there are 45 passages in "*Lun Yu*" in which the word 'delight' or 'pleasant' is used, yet there is not even on single mention of the opposite concept, 'pain' or 'painful'. This suggests the essence of Confucius's educational philosophy and the love of learning.

We are apt to interpret these three verses as being unrelated, but actually they are mutually related and form an entity of three concepts: learning, friends, and the superior man. They mean: (1) that learning is pleasant, (2) that it is also pleasant to share the delight of learning with friends who entertain the same intention, (3) and that the superior man who cultivates himself and endeavors to attain self-perfection through learning and friends never feels solitude but is full of happiness.

I think as if these verses suggest our present situation. For all of us Aesthetics is pleasant; it is also pleasant to share the delight of discussion in this entretien with those who came from afar; and we aestheticians, who enlarge our

scholarly world through this entretien, find our reward in our study.

Now, in the first verse, we find the two concepts, 'learning' and 'application', go hand in hand. This seems to suggest that a sage's scholarly activity is completed by the practice of application of the knowledge which he acquired by his learning.

In this respect, we may say that for Confucius the significance of scholarly activity was to make learning practical. In fact, according to Chinese tradition, a majority of people should study philosophy just as in the west, they should go to church, and the purpose of the philosophy study is to enable a man to achieve his life 'as a man,' not as some particular kind of man (Feng Youlan, 1966).

For Confucius, learning without practice in daily life was useless, and the practice without learning was to result in recklessness and uncultured and ignorant deeds.

III. AESTHETICS IN THE CONFUCIANISM

Since Confucius's thoughts were based on the anthropocentric practical philosophy, his ideas of beauty and art were naturally characterized by the practical ethics of 'Jun Zi (君子)'—the superior man as an ideal person of perfect virtue.

In "Lun Yu," the term 'beauty (*Mei*, 美)', stands for two kinds of value: one is the sensual or external values (Lun Yu III. 8) and the other one is the spiritual or inner values. 'Mei' as the character itself means the moral goodness, and also the embodiment of benevolence (*Ren*, 仁), which constitutes the essential core of his thoughts.

A. Beauty Associated with Goodness

Sappho, the ancient Greek poetess, is said to have left us the following saying in one of her poems:

"A beautiful man is only so in appearance, while a good man will be beautiful as well."

This aphorism may be admitted to express the typically Greek association of beauty and goodness (*kalokagathia*). Similar concept is found in the dialogue between Socrates and Aristippos (Xenophon, Memorabilia, BK. III. 8. 4-7) and in the thoughts of Plato (Plato, Politia, 508E-509) and Aristotle (Aristotle, Ethica Nicomachea, 1123b-1124a) as well.

We may find similarity in the ancient East, in the thoughts of Confucius and his followers.

The Greek word 'kalos' (beautiful) was an adjective of wider meaning, denoting external and internal qualities, especially moral qualities such as value, usefulness of goodness (W. Tatarkiewicz, 1970). It comprises all the virtues expected of the Superior Man.

Confucius often uses the term 'Mei (美)' in the sense of Goodness (*Shan*, 善) in close connection with ethics and politics as in his 'Five Beauty (五美)' theory (Lun Yu, XX. 2).

For him, the Superior Man devotes himself not only to the search after moral beauty of his own person but also to

the perfection of the moral beauty of others (Lun Yu, XII. 16).

And in art criticism, he regards the fusion of beauty and goodness as the ideal condition, admitting the associated idea of beauty and goodness as a criterion (Lun Yu, III. 25).

We can also find the fusion of the concept of beauty and goodness in other Confucianists such as Mencius and *Xunzi*. Mencius, who advocated the Doctrine of Innate Goodness, alludes that beauty is the thing that which man's aprioristic innate goodness is filled with (Mencius, BK. VII. Pt. II. Ch. 25); and *Xunzi* who advocated the Doctrine of Original Sin, uses the word 'Mei' beauty in the sense of goodness (*Xunzi*, BK. 4. 8).

Thus, generally speaking, both in the East and the West, there was no definite distinctions between beauty and goodness in the ancient world, and the both were regard merely as the two different aspects of one and the same value.

B. 'Ren' as Moral Value

Now, what was the essence of the moral value of beauty which was associated with goodness and pursued by the Superior Man? For him, it was no other than 'Ren', and this denoted all the virtues of human-heartedness, the ideal moral value attained only through the practice.

According to him, the right way of truth (*Dao*, 道) of the superior man stood for three virtues, namely, 'Ren', 'Zhi (知)'—wisdom, and 'Yong (勇)'—courage (Lun Yu. XIV. 30). 'Dao' is not far to seek (The Doctrine of the Mean, Ch. 13), and the seeker is man himself (Lun Yu, XV. 28): it is the ultimate aim of his life.

Therefore, he said:

"If a man learn 'Dao,' the right way of truth, in the morning, he may die in the evening without regret (Lun Yu, IV. 8)."

Confucius said to a disciple named *Zengzi* that 'Dao' was one all pervading principle. *Zengzi* explained it with the two words: 'Zhong (忠)'—conscientiousness and 'Shu (恕)'—altruism (Lun Yu, IV. 15). These two are voluntary virtues of the Superior Man and no other than the expression of his will to practice 'Ren'; he practices 'Ren' on his own initiative, not as return courtesies to some benefactor.

According to what has been said above, 'Dao' is not an abstract principle, but is in the realities of life, which is realized by the Superior Man who seeks after benevolence, wisdom and courage, in his practical conduct.

Among these virtues, the most essential and fundamental one may be said to be 'Ren'.

For Confucius, wisdom is never an end by itself; it is preparatory search for the right way of behavior; Wisdom without benevolence can not be lasting (Lun Yu, IV. 32); Courage is necessarily possessed by the man of benevolence as his will to practice 'Ren' (Lun Yu, IV. 5).

Therefore, Confucius said "Ren is more to man than either water or fire" (Lun Yu, IV. 34). He emphasized the importance of practical moral life. For this reason, "The

determined scholar and the men of 'Ren' do not seek to live at the expense of injuring their virtue. They will sacrifice even their lives to preserve 'Ren' complete. (Lun Yu, IV. 8)"

In "Lun Yu" which is consisted of 492 sections, the word 'Ren' appears 105 times extending over the 58 sections. Judging from the frequency, it is no exaggeration to say that Confucius's thoughts were focused upon the problem of 'Ren'.

C. Aesthetics and Moral Value

When we admit that a man is fundamentally a 'Practical Being', his 'practice' implies to exceed the present toward the end to be realized in the future. There has to be the 'will' to exceed the present condition and the 'conduct' as a means of realizing his will.

For Confucius, the practical will of 'Ren' was love (Ai, 爰) and the practical conduct of 'Ren' was propriety (Li, 礼).

'Ai' was the inner will to realize 'Ren' while 'Li' was the external form of the realized 'Ren'.

In "Lun Yu", as there are several variant definitions of 'Ren,' all given by Confucius himself, it is difficult to define 'Ren' in a few words. Whenever Confucius was asked about 'Ren' by his disciples, he gives different definitions in accordance with their different dispositions or levels of mental attainment.

The definitions themselves raise three problems on the ideal moral value of 'Ren'. The first is the problem of 'love', which constitutes the emotional substance of the benevolent conducts. The third is the problem of the ideal world of the men of 'Ren'.

1) 'Ren' as 'Ai': The beginning of 'Ren' is the voluntary will to practice it. Confucius teaches us that 'Ren' is not far to seek. He said, "Ren is at hand (Lun Yu, XII. 8)." It is the spirit of 'Ai'. The beginning of 'Ren' is to practice filial love (Xiao, 孝) and (Ti, 悌) fraternal love (Lun Yu, I. 2).

We find similarity in Socrates who encouraged the filial and fraternal loves in the education for the young (Xenophon, Memorabilia, BK. II. 2 & BK. II. 3). But unlike Socrates who emphasized such loves as gratitude for favors or mutual benefit, Confucius taught love as intrinsic to human nature and moral duty.

'Ren' as such is no other than a good human relationship attained through the humanistic love. It is attained by one's inner development of the mind toward an altruistic goal. Therefore, when the practice of 'Xiao' and 'Ti' as love, beginning from one's own love for their parents and brothers, extended to the love for other's parents and brothers and further to all the others, well-ordered society and peaceful world would be realized. Mencius put it concretely: "Treat the elders in your own family with the reverence due to age, so that the elders in other families shall be treated likewise. Treat the young in your own family with the kindness due to youth so that the young in other families shall be treated likewise. (Mencius, BK. I. Ch. 7.)"

It is true that Confucius laid special emphasis on the personality cultivation. But he did not think that any individual could live in isolation from his fellow beings. Like Aristotle who thought that man was 'zoion politikos' – political animal (Aristotle, Politics, 1253a). Confucius considered man as 'Social Being', not isolated being but as an inseparable member of the family, the state, and the world.

Therefore, in Confucius's idea of 'Ren', we may find two phases; the individual one and the social one. The former forms his 'Ethical Anthropology' of the individual self-perfection; the latter forms its 'Ethical Sociology' of the ideal society in which ethical individuals live.

In this point of view, Confucius's idea of 'Ren' is concerned not only with individual personality, but also with dynamic functional relationship among men as each person seeks to develop his inner world and ennoble himself as a world citizen.

2) 'Ren' and 'Li': For Confucius, the superior man certainly had much to learn, but the more important thing was to behave in accordance with 'Li'. Therefore Confucius said, "The Superior Man, extensively studying all learning, and keeping himself under the restraint of 'Li'-the rules of propriety may not overstep what is right (Lun Yu, VI. 25)."

For him, 'Li' was the norms of all human conduct. It was the embodiment of his inner virtue 'Ren', which marked man off from other animal beings. It was the flower of human culture, beauty, when Confucius was asked about 'Ren' by Yan Yuan, he said, "To subdue oneself and return to Li, is Ren", and advised to see, hear, say or do nothing improper (Lun Yu, XII. 1).

This suggests that 'Li' as an embodied form of 'Ren' is possible only by overcoming all the sensual impulses and desires and to behave in accordance with the rules of ethical order.

In the last chapter of "Lun Yu", Confucius said, "Without acquaintance with rules of propriety, it is impossible for the character to be established (Lun Yu, XX. 3)". If a man lacks his inner virtue, though he practices refined manners in his external conducts, it remains but an empty form without substantial content.

3) 'Ren' as the principle of embodiment of Aesthetics: According to what has been said above, the heart of the moral values of beauty as goodness is 'Ren'; the will to practice 'Ren' is the spirit of love, and the embodiment of 'Ren' in conduct is 'Li'.

Confucius said, "It is Ren which embodies beauty of a neighborhood (Lun Yu, IX. 1)".

He implies that the society of men of 'Ren' emits beauty. 'Ren' may be accepted as the principle which embodies 'beauty'. 'love' as the inner will to practice 'Ren' is the beautiful spirit, 'li' as the practical form of its external embodiment is the beautiful conduct. And further, we may also find that 'Ren' is the fundamental principle which embodies 'art', and thus 'beauty' and 'art' are reduced to a single principle of 'Ren'.

One may ask was it possible to realize such a moral value as ‘*Ren*’ in reality? It was not easy even for the Master who came to be respected as the eternal present (Lun Yu, XIV. 30). It was only an ideal moral value and the supreme aim in human life.

An ideal is something imagined in a state of perfection, a model. It exists only in idea. Accordingly, it will never be realized perfectly. Nevertheless, and ideal is something without which there can be no worthwhile life. If a man possesses a lofty ideal and endeavors to attain it, his life will be full of hope and worth living.

For Confucius, ‘*Ren*’ was an ideal moral value that everyone should strive to attain as the supreme aim of human life for the better world.

IV. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CONFUCIUS’S AESTHETICS

We frequently hear that Confucius was a person of the past and so his thought is not applicable to the present day situation that is quite different from that of his days in every way. He is often dismissed as old-fashioned.

The term ‘present’ often suggests advancement, possibility of future growth, vitality, and even attractiveness. It is generally accepted positively. On the other hand, the term ‘past’ is used in the negative sense to mean something worthless, worn out and enervated.

This may be true to a certain extent especially in the sphere of natural science. But it is not necessarily true in the domain of spiritual life and moral culture. Human nature and morality are rather constant through ages. The changeable is not their essential traits but their outward forms of practice adjusted to the changing society.

V. CONCLUSION

Confucius taught us the true meaning of life and morality devoted to the realization of well-ordered society and peaceful world. His thought shines brilliant through all times with the eternal value of a great classic. His anthropocentric practical philosophy needs to be allowed to guide us as it has always done, especially because the dehumanizing effects of the highly developed mechanical civilization of our age are quite threatening. For this very reason, his thought deserves to be appreciated more sincerely in a new light so that we may properly interpret the problems of man living in the age of technology.

REFERENCES

- [1] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethica*, Dover Publications, 1998.
- [2] Aristotle, *Politics*, Dover Publications, 2000.
- [3] Trans. W.D. Ross, Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Nuvision Publications, 2009.
- [4] Trans. James Legge, D.D., Confucius, *The Doctrine of the Mean*, The University of Adelaide, 2014.
- [5] Feng Youlan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*. Derk Bodde, The Free Press, 1966.
- [6] Trans. James Legge, D.D., *The Confucian Analects*, London: N. TRUBNER & CO.,60, Paternoster Row, 1869

- [7] Trans. Joanne D. Birdwhistell, *Mencius and Masculinities*, State University of New York Press. 2007.
- [8] Trans. Joe Sachs, Plato, *Republic*, Focus Publishing, 2006.
- [9] Trans. Bury; Robert Gregg, Plato, *The Symposium of Plato*, Penguin Classics, 2003.
- [10] Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics*, I. Mouton, 1970.
- [11] Trans. E. C. Marchant, Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, LOEB, 1989.
- [12] Trans. John Knoblock, Xunzi, Stanford University Press, 2007.