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## Carrying the Jade Tablet: A Consideration of Confucian Artistry

*Eric C. Mullis*

### Abstract

In this paper I discuss the aesthetic dimension of ritual action. In order to demonstrate how the rites render action aesthetically expressive, I draw on the notion of an "art of context" and further detail the Confucian understanding of artistic practice as an essential component for moral cultivation. In turn, I use John Dewey's account of aesthetic form in order to support and further demonstrate the ability of the rituals and arts to organize action and to thereby render it aesthetically significant. However, Dewey's account entails that we question either conceptual or institutional limitations of aesthetic form as such limitations restrict its value. With this in mind, I question the Confucian emphasis on "traditional" arts and go on to suggest that the list of accepted arts be expanded to include those that enrich the lives of individuals other than the literati. Finally, I argue that such expansion is, in fact, in accord with the Confucian emphasis on the humanitarian virtues since it entails that the arts have the characteristic ability to create and sustain various communities.

### Key Words

Confucius, Dewey, ethics, morality, ritual, *li*, tradition, aesthetics

"In Confucius we have what is called a complete concert. A complete concert is when the large bell proclaims the commencement of the music and the ringing stone proclaims its close. The metal sound commences the blended harmony of all the instruments, and winding up with the stone terminates that blended harmony. The commencement of that harmony is the work of wisdom. The terminating of it is the work sageliness." *Mencius*

### 1. Introduction

It has been argued that ritual action (*li*) must be taken into account if other elements of Confucian philosophy are to be adequately understood. Emphasis on ritual action illustrates the unity of theory and practice at the heart of the tradition and also reveals a practical connection between ethics and aesthetics. Rituals provide normative guidelines for action by demarcating what kinds of behavior are appropriate for specific roles and situations. This framework, in turn, allows one to develop a personal style, for in mastering ritual actions every individual must learn how to apply them in a fluidly changing social and physical environment. Hence, it has been argued that ritual actions have an aesthetic dimension since they provide a framework for meaningful action as well as avenues for performative self-expression. In addition, it has also been stressed that the early Confucians were artists not only because they mastered ritual actions but also since they practiced a wide array of arts including music, poetry, dance, and calligraphy. Confucian practice is aesthetic in nature since it entails cultivating the self through the practice of ritual and art.

Some, however, would question the use of the term "aesthetic" to describe such a practice. No doubt many aestheticians, because they hold that theory and practice must remain separate, would cringe at the surreptitious use of the term. Does ritual practice really deserve the title used to describe great works of art and the experiences associated with them? There is an issue regarding the aims of Confucian practice. The early Confucians stressed that rituals and arts must be practiced if one is to become fully human. The arts provide the polish that human beings need in order to become humane or *ren*. Seen this way, ritual and artistic practices work hand-in-hand to develop a moral sense and ultimately to bring about a state of social harmony. This, in turn, raises the question of whether or not this approach does justice to the power of art to generate intense aesthetic experiences. It shows that there is a connection between ethics and aesthetics but, in doing so, absorbs the latter into the former. Because of these issues one begins to question the quality of Confucian artistry and is ultimately led to consider whether or not the approach has contemporary relevance.

In this essay I will first review the account of Hall and Ames and of Robert Eno, which both describe the aesthetic dimensions of ritual practice. Next, I will draw on John Dewey's *Art as Experience* in order to flesh out an account of aesthetic form that further clarifies the aesthetic elements of ritual practice. Then I will use that notion to further explore the relationship between ritual and artistic practices. In doing so, I hope to further our understanding of ritual and to say more about the relevance of this approach for contemporary discussions regarding the relationship between ethics and aesthetics. Even though Confucian aesthetics has its difficulties, I think that makes an important contribution to contemporary discussions on this relationship by providing novel insights into the aesthetic elements of moral development.

## 2. The Organizing Function of Rituals

Emphasis on the organizing function of ritual action has roots in China's ancient past. We learn from the *Book of Documents* (*Shujing*) that rulers of the Shang (1751-1112 BC) and Zhou (1111-249 BC) dynasties established and maintained harmony between the spiritual, human, and natural worlds by performing various rituals.<sup>[1]</sup> Sacrifices, for example, demonstrated thanks for a year's harvest and aided in procuring a bountiful one in the ensuing year. If, on the other hand, these rituals were performed incorrectly, or worse, ignored altogether, then chaos would ensue. The king's ritual actions reverberated throughout the kingdom, affecting quality of weather, crops, and social relationships.

In time, Confucius (551-479 BC) secularized ritual action by drawing attention to the etiquette and standards of personal conduct that are necessary in everyday life. When his student Zilu inquired as to how to best serve the spirits and gods, Confucius replied: "Not yet being able to serve other people, how would you be able to serve the spirits?"<sup>[2]</sup> This response illustrates a humanitarian shift that hinges on the belief that a kingdom can be harmoniously ordered if its ruler and its citizens correctly perform their respective rituals. "Achieving

harmony (*he*) is the most valuable function of observing ritual propriety (*li*). In the ways of the former Kings, this achievement of harmony made them elegant and was a guiding standard in all things large and small."[\[3\]](#) And further, "Lead them [the people] with excellence (*de*) and keep them orderly through ritual propriety and they will . . . order themselves."[\[4\]](#) Ritual propriety delineates how ministers should dutifully serve their princes, how fathers should preserve their families, how sons should respect and serve their fathers, students their teachers, and so on.

In any instance, a role is fulfilled by practicing the appropriate *li*. If, for example, a son does not act deferentially toward his father and act as a good example for his younger siblings, then he does not perform the duties of a son and consequently is a son only in name. Hence, Confucius' famous statement that "The ruler must rule, the minister minister, the father father, and the son son."[\[5\]](#) One is a ruler, minister, father, or son only if one performs the rituals that characterize one's role. Ritual practice outlines how individuals fulfill their duties and thereby find a place in a hierarchy of social roles.

More specifically, the *li* draw and maintain distinctions between those who occupy various roles. Examples of ritual action include simple etiquette or manners, gift giving, standards of dress, and ceremonies that honor the dead. For example, formal speech is used when speaking to superiors while informal speech is used among peers. We learn of Confucius that "At court, when speaking with lower officials, he was congenial, and when speaking with higher officials, straightforward and yet respectful."[\[6\]](#) In addition, the king's sacrifices mentioned above demonstrate that gift-giving is another essential form of deferential action. Gifts are used cross-culturally to establish and preserve various relationships, and we find accounts of Confucius both accepting and giving gifts in a ritualistic manner.[\[7\]](#) In addition, rulers would dress in ceremonial robes while performing rituals and, more generally, officials, scholars, and soldiers would distinguish themselves with specific robes, hats, and other adornments. This is in accord with Confucius' emphasis on appropriate attire for the appropriate occasion [\[8\]](#), and with the way in which he molded his actions in response to the dress of others.[\[9\]](#) Finally, on a more religious note, one can honor the dead by presenting gifts that acknowledge and express gratitude for their accomplishments. Hence, the *Analects* stipulates that if rulers are "circumspect in funerary services and continue sacrifices to the distant ancestors . . . [then] the virtue (*de*) of the common people will thrive."[\[10\]](#)

These examples demonstrate how the practice of ritual provides normative guidelines for behavior by delineating appropriate action, whether it take place in mundane, more formal, or even religious contexts. This ultimately hinges upon the Confucian observation that social order can be maintained and a state can flourish only if clear distinctions are drawn between individuals who perform different roles. Ritual actions perform this function.

More important for our purposes, we must remember Confucius' comment that the rituals practiced by the Sage-Kings not only ordered the empire but also rendered their

actions elegant. This intimates that ritual mastery renders action purposive, deliberate, authoritative, and ultimately artistic. He further states that "Through self-discipline and observing ritual propriety (*li*) one becomes authoritative in one's conduct."<sup>[11]</sup> This can be seen not only in the rituals that Confucius practiced but also in the manner in which he practiced them. For example, upon meeting someone in mourning dress—even a friend—he would "invariably take on a solemn appearance"<sup>[12]</sup> and while mounting his carriage he would "invariably stand upright and grasp the cord."<sup>[13]</sup> In addition, we find that

"On grasping the jade tablet as the lord's envoy, he would bow forward from the waist as though it were too heavy to lift . . . His countenance would change visibly as though going off to battle, and his steps were short and measured as though following a line. On the occasion of presenting his credentials, his demeanor was dignified, and in private audience, he was affable."<sup>[14]</sup>

Not only does ritual practice allow one to "take a stance," that is, to carve out a place within a particular social system, but it also puts one in concert with others and allows for the development of personal style. Acting in the social context delineated by the *li* renders action meaningful and increasingly significant. In respectfully carrying the jade tablet, Confucius embodied the weightiness of his tradition; his actions are articulated and were informed by a long tradition of acting as the lord's envoy. This leads Hall and Ames to argue that the relationship between individual and social context made possible by ritual practice is indicative not of a logical or a rational order but of an aesthetic sort. They write:

"Aesthetic order begins with the uniqueness of the one thing and assesses this particular as contributing to the balanced complexity of its context . . . . The focus of an aesthetic order is the way in which a concrete, specific detail discloses itself as producing a harmony expressed by a complex of such details in relationship to one another."<sup>[15]</sup>

Social interactions instantiate a "logical" or "rational" order when they conform to a system of generalized rules and laws and when the particularities of the individuals who enact them are glossed over by such general concepts as "human nature," "human rights," and "equality under the law." On the other hand, social interactions are "aesthetic" when the particular is expressed authentically and seen as indicative of the field of action in which it takes place. Confucius notes that the superior man is not simply a tool who mindlessly follows prescribed rules<sup>[16]</sup> and that individuals must not passively follow but must work to broaden the way (*dao*).<sup>[17]</sup> This reveals that ritual actions must be practiced sincerely and genuinely.<sup>[18]</sup> In order to focus the whole and to bring parts into harmony with one another an individual must appropriate the *li* in his or her own way. No two fathers will father in the same way even if they both fulfill the role by practicing the same rituals. Different fathers will appropriate their roles differently based upon their respective dispositions and skills. Hall and Ames argue that the genuine form of role appropriation is denoted by *yi*:

"At its most fundamental level, *yi* denotes the importation of

aesthetic, moral, and rational significance into personal action in the world. It is from this that the sense of *yi*, as 'meaning' or 'significance' arises. A person, like a word, achieves meaning in the interplay between bestowing its own accumulated significance and appropriating meaning from its context."[\[19\]](#)

Action becomes increasingly significant when it grows out of and expresses the rich social context provided by the *li*. The jade tablet carried by Confucius, because of its long history of religious and political usage, was already a culturally significant artifact, as jade had been used in rituals as early as the Neolithic age and had been exchanged by rulers and officials as early as the early Shang.[\[20\]](#) Hence, the tablet itself was socially significant because of jade's accumulated cultural meaning. This significance, in turn, was magnified when Confucius mindfully incorporated it into his actions. His personal expression of the tablet's weightiness and his style of carrying it demonstrated how an authentic performance can draw on and articulate a social tradition and, reciprocally, how the tradition can render action more significant by allowing it to radiate beyond the present moment.[\[21\]](#) This is possible only if there is a stable social framework for action and if that framework is expressed genuinely by a variety of individuals in a variety of circumstances. The remarks scattered throughout the *Analects* illuminate the Master's style and demonstrate that he mastered the "art of context," that is, he mastered the skill of expressing an aesthetic order, of appropriating and embodying rituals and performing them in a manner that increased the significance of his actions and yet rendered them stylistically distinct from those of others.

### 3. Confucius and the Practice of Art

Another important element of Confucian practice is the practice of art. One is struck by the number of references to the arts that arise within the *Analects* alone. We learn that Confucius not only appreciated music, poetry, and archery but also enjoyed singing: "When the Master was with others who were singing and they sang well, he would invariably ask them to sing the piece again before joining in the harmony."[\[22\]](#) There are also references to dance in other Confucian texts including the *Mencius* and the *Xunzi*. Mencius (372-289 BC) noted that the actuality of music consists in rejoicing in and practicing the virtues of humanity (*ren*) and righteousness (*yi*) and that when listening to such music, quite unconsciously, the "feet begin to dance and the hands begin to move."[\[23\]](#) Xunzi (310-237 BC) recognized that dancing entails harmonizing with gong and drum and, more generally, learning to master bodily movement.[\[24\]](#) All of this leads Robert Eno to argue that early Confucianism was not a philosophy *per se* but a social phenomenon "primarily involving the joining together of men in groups to chant ancient texts, sing ancient songs, and play ancient music."[\[25\]](#)

On this view then, the arts are instrumental to cultivating the self (*xiu shen*). Hence, the Master says: "I find inspiration by intoning the songs, I learn where to stand from observing ritual propriety (*li*), and I find fulfillment in playing music."[\[26\]](#) The connection between artistic and ritual practice is the routinization of behavior that makes self-mastery possible.

Executing funeral rites, carrying the jade tablet, playing the zither, singing, chanting poetry, and dancing all entail the development and mastery of skill sets that comes about only through disciplined, repetitious practice. Hence, the Confucian approach has an aesthetic dimension not only because of the aesthetic order that ritual practice makes possible but also because of its emphasis on the transformative power of artistic practice. Practicing the arts is intrinsically enjoyable and supplements the self-cultivation process. Tu Wei-Ming writes that the arts, on this account, "are not merely acquired skills; they are instrumental in establishing and enlarging [the self]."[\[27\]](#)

The jade tablet also illustrates this point, for nephrite must be extensively polished before its internal beauty is revealed. Likewise, human beings must be polished through artistic practice before they can become truly authoritative persons. Jade is not only symbolic because of its historical usage but also because it reveals how things can be transformed through diligent work. Xunzi nicely brings together natural and precious objects and moral virtue by describing the brightness that they all manifest:

"Of the things of heaven, none is brighter than the sun and moon. Of the things on earth, none is brighter than water and fire. Among things, none is brighter than pearls and jade. And among man's virtues, none is brighter than propriety and righteousness. For if the sun and moon were not high, their brightness would not be glorious. If water or fire is not gathered in great quantity, its luster would not be extensive. If pearls and jade were not gleaming on the outside, kings and dukes would not consider them precious. If propriety and righteousness are not applied in the country, their accomplishments and fame would not shine."[\[28\]](#)

With this said, it must also be remembered that practicing the arts is necessarily a social affair. The student does not practice alone, but studies under teachers and with other students and, in a general way, inherits a tradition full of various artists and styles. Taking this into account, in turn, allows us to see the overlap between the practice of ritual and art, for the power of an art to polish its practitioners is essential in order for the artist to authoritatively find his or her place within culture. Every artistic practice depends upon a living community of practitioners who build upon the work of the masters who came before them. Practicing the arts allows one to further master the ability to find one's place not only because it makes personal refinement possible but also because it links one with others who embody and express the same artistic tradition. Artistic practice brings one's actions into concert with others as shared skills, problems, and experiences provide a common experiential ground.

One element of this is the coordination of feeling produced through communally interacting with and creating works of art. Noël Carroll writes that "artworks attune audience members to each other . . . [they] have the power to build communities of sentiment in their audiences and/or participants."[\[29\]](#) And further, "they do this by engendering cognate feelings amongst spectators in response to the same subject, which may be of especial cultural, political, or religious

significance."<sup>[30]</sup> An important element of aesthetic value, then, is the social cement that it provides. Again, the jade that Confucius carried was significant not only because it was the fruit of intense human labor, but because of the fact that, through the lens of custom, it was seen as embodying the moral and aesthetic virtues of nobility, perfection, and constancy. Not unlike the actions of the sage who carried it, the jade tablet has the power to elicit feelings of respect and awe for those who inhabit a cultural tradition that forms and uses jade in such a manner. In a more general way, this analysis fleshes out in further detail Eno's remark that the early Confucians were a group of men who enjoyed assembling and practicing the arts. Their communal practice of the arts produced shared feelings that, in turn, solidified their shared commitment to the difficult work of moral self-cultivation.

Hence, we have seen that rituals function aesthetically in two ways. First, they establish an aesthetic order and consequently render human action more significant by providing a stable context for the development of personal style. Second, the mastery of skill entailed by artistic practice is itself ritualistic in nature and acts as means for cultivating the self. Moreover, artistic practice enriches the art of context by providing works of art that evoke common sentiments and thereby solidify one's sense of place within a particular social framework.

John Dewey's account of aesthetic form will further explain the aesthetic dimension of ritual practice and clarify the link between ritual and artistic practice. This will, in turn, allow us to say something about the relevance that Confucian artistry has for us today.

#### **4. Dewey on Aesthetic Experience and Form**

Dewey's notion of aesthetic form differs from traditional accounts in several ways. This can be illustrated by briefly noting the view of the traditional formalists who emphasize the objective characteristics of works of art: the relationships of line, shape, and color that are especially evident in the visual arts.<sup>[31]</sup> Formalists argue that aesthetic form produces aesthetic emotion and, further, provides grounds for criticism as well as judgments about what are and are not works of art. In addition, emphasis on an artwork's objective properties solves the difficulties of aesthetic subjectivism and problems of interpretation. A good critic will draw our attention to the work's form and away from its "charms," and this, in turn, will allow him or her to make objective claims about the work's aesthetic value.

Implicit here is a subject-object dichotomy that entails ontological divisions between artist, work, and spectator, and it is the job of aesthetic form to bridge these divides. This approach is untenable for both Deweyan and Confucian aesthetics: The former continually made it a point to battle philosophical dualisms, while the latter is part of a broader philosophical tradition that never rigidly divided mind from body, theory from practice, or form from substance. Dewey's account of aesthetic form avoids the division between subject and object, and artist/spectator and artwork, and provides a framework that allows us to further explore the aesthetic dimension of ritual action.



For Dewey, "form" is not purely an objective phenomenon, but one that implicates artist, art object, and observer. He writes:

"The artist creates a substance so formed that it can enter the experience of others and enables them to have more intense and more fully rounded out experiences of their own. This is what it is to have form. It marks a way of envisaging, of feeling, and of presenting experienced matter so that it most readily and effectively becomes material for the construction of adequate experience on the part of those less gifted than the original creator."[\[32\]](#)

Dewey's insight here is that works of art can generate experiences like those that naturally punctuate the stream of everyday life. These kinds of experiences have characteristic qualities, are characterized by a movement of energy toward a consummatory end, and entail an organic relationship between parts and whole. A good conversation, for example, has a characteristic quality that is determined by subject matter, the nature of the participants and of the environment, and so on. It can be enjoyable and light-hearted, or serious in nature. At the same time, it will flow effortlessly and will not be marred by uncomfortable pauses or otherwise disrupted by unforeseen circumstances. This effortless flow depends upon the significant contributions made by the participants. Each member will contribute something important to the conversation but will not railroad it by ignoring its broader context or by ignoring the contributions of others. Dewey writes:

"In such experiences, every successive part flows freely, without seam and without unfilled blanks, into what ensues. At the same time there is no sacrifice of the self-identity of parts . . . In *an* experience, flow is from something to something. As one part leads into another and as one part carries on what went before, each gains distinctness in itself. The enduring whole is diversified by successive phases that are emphases of its varied colors."[\[33\]](#)

Because of these factors *an* experience stands out against an experiential background that is often marred by monopolies of one element, antagonistic forces, or unforeseen starts and stops. *An* experience, because of its organic quality, radiates beyond itself by providing connections between previously disparate elements of experience. A good conversation is not only intrinsically enjoyable but can resolve a problem, disclose unforeseen avenues for action, educate, and so on.

The next step is to notice the similarities between these kinds of experiences and works of art that have good form. They both enrich life by providing fulfilling experiences in the present moment and continuing to work by influencing future experience. "Form is a character of every experience that is *an* experience. Art in its specific sense enacts more deliberately and fully the conditions that affect this unity."[\[34\]](#) A good conversation, for Dewey, is akin to a good work of art because they both have the ability to enrich life in this manner.

However, the form of a work of art differs from an experience since it entails the use and mastery of aesthetic media. A distinguishing feature of aesthetic form is the transformation of material into the "media of expression."[\[35\]](#) Artists utilize various materials, -stone, paper, wood, ink, metal, sound- and

coordinate their inherent energies by giving them a characteristically aesthetic *telos*. In this way, before a calligrapher can write beautiful characters, he must master brush, ink, and paper, as well as the spatial logic of the characters themselves. The mastery of these materials allows him to aesthetically express himself. His sensitivity to the energies of his materials allows him to skillfully fuse them into an organic whole. He guides each element and brings them into accord with one another, a process that, in turn, builds in value as each part contributes to the movement of energy toward the work's end. In turn, the quality of this end depends both upon the energies of the materials used and the quality of the artist's technique. The work's design, or form, entails both the materials used and the way in which they are used. An adequate understanding of form entails sensitivity to both "what" and "how."

In addition, some arts depend upon the organization of both the energies of action and material while others rely solely on the former. Dewey writes:

"Acts that were primitively spontaneous are converted into means that make human intercourse more rich and gracious, just as a painter converts pigment into means of expressing imaginative experience. Dance and sport are activities in which acts once performed spontaneously in separation are assembled and converted from raw, crude materials into works of expressive art."[\[36\]](#)

Hence, this account of form can also take into account the performance arts and many other activities that traditionally have not been accepted as fine art. Here, the transformation is from loosely associated acts into integrated activities that lead to fulfilling ends. In any art there is an element of integration that must be attained if the body in its activity, with or without instruments or material, is to become an expressive medium. The form found in the plastic arts depends upon the development of aesthetic media while that of the performance arts depends upon the unification of activity. In a general way then, artists reiterate that experience can be organized and lead to consummatory ends, but they do so by mastering specific materials and techniques that both have characteristic energies. Aesthetic form enriches experience, not only by leading it to consummatory ends, but by expressing and clarifying those energies.

### **5. Confucian Ritual and Aesthetic Form**

It can already be seen that Dewey's account of form allows us to say something about the aesthetic dimensions of Confucian practice. First, it shows further why ritual actions are aesthetic in nature. Earlier, we saw Hall and Ames arguing that rituals provide the social foundation necessary for significant action and personal style. The // establish a social framework that allows for aesthetic interaction between part and whole, between individual and social context. Like the components of a piece of music, the colors and forms of a painting, or the scenes of a play, the actions of individuals are brought into accord with one another in lieu of a consummatory end. Just as the components of a work of art constitute and lead to the work's end, shared ritual actions ideally constitute and produce the ends of social harmony and person making. Further,

Dewey's account of aesthetic form allows us to see how the art of context brings about consummatory experiences. The // are meaningful as they are intrinsically enjoyable and because they have the power to connect previously disparate elements of experience with one another. Again, the fact that the rituals are shared by various individuals within a culture ensures this, for the significance of action is increased as one's actions are echoed by those of others in different places and times. He writes:

"Rite and ceremony as well as legend bound the living and the dead in common partnership . . . . Communal modes of activity united the practical, the social, and the educative in an integrated whole having aesthetic form. They introduced social value into experience [and] connected things that were overtly important and overtly done with the substantial life of the community."[\[37\]](#)

This analysis is supported further by Dewey's observation that the non-aesthetic lies at two extremes. He writes that, "At one pole is the loose succession that does not begin at any particular place and that ends-in the sense of ceasing-at no particular place."[\[38\]](#) At the other pole is "arrest, constriction, proceeding from parts having only a mechanical connection with one another."[\[39\]](#) Ritual action avoids these extremes, for it entails the organization of actions and dispositions as well as emphasis on authentic practice. Unaesthetic extremes are avoided as the // actively form the lives of those who jointly practice them.

Second, Dewey's account reveals why the transformative power of artistic practice is essential for the embodiment of an aesthetic order. We mentioned earlier that the arts provide the polish that human beings need in order to establish and refine the self. In the last section it was shown that, for Dewey, aesthetic form entails the transformation of material into the media of expression. Form is instrumental for consummatory experiences, but it differs from instances of *an* experience since it hinges on the refined mastery of material and/or action. The practice of art renders action more aesthetically expressive since it entails mastery of skill sets that allow for the production of aesthetic form. Eno illustrates this point well by describing the choreography of ritual action and the transformative power that such choreography shares with other arts:

"Every rite that a disciple memorized, every poem, every zither tune, every intricately choreographed ceremony constituted a new skill in artistry, one that he could apply in social life . . . . [He] was essentially an artist, and his love for his ritual art was not a pose. It was in ritual living that he found his greatest satisfaction."[\[40\]](#)

Through ordering action, the practice of ritual and art sets the stage for aesthetic form and consequently aesthetic experience. Again, this supplements and reinforces the art of context, for the practice of various arts boils down to variations on the ordering of action. Eno writes that "it should be understood that *li* was, in fact, what the entire educational program was about. The point of studying archery was to learn physical and emotional control in a ritualized context; the point of studying texts was to ritualize one's speech. All

aspects of [Confucian] study were directed toward ritualizing the student."[\[41\]](#) And further, like Carroll, Eno notes that art, whether created or appreciated, provides social cement as it creates and supports a community of shared feeling. He writes that the aesthetic "permeates the aura of sanctity of religious activity and . . . adds to the affective power of social ritual. The very nature of group ritual activity as a smooth interaction of cognate roles expresses an aesthetic ideal."[\[42\]](#) [\[43\]](#)

## 6. Confucian Tradition and Aesthetic Expression

The elements of Confucian practice described above raise questions regarding the nature of the aesthetic experiences that grow out of them. It is commonplace that Confucius continually strove to emulate those who had mastered ritual practice and emphasized the cultivation of virtue that such practice makes possible. Hence his famous remark that "Following the proper way, I do not forge new paths; with confidence I cherish the ancients."[\[44\]](#) This deference to tradition is also found in his remarks on the arts. For example, we find that humanitarian virtues take precedence over the joys of playing music: "What has a person who is not *ren* got to do with the playing of music (*yue*)?"[\[45\]](#) Following a tradition that emphasized the moral effects of music, He said "of the Shao music that it was both superbly beautiful (*mei*) and superbly felicitous (*shan*). Of the Wu music he said that it is superbly beautiful but not superbly felicitous."[\[46\]](#)

This criticism becomes more explicit when he says that "I detest the fact that the sounds of Zheng are corrupting our classical court music."[\[47\]](#) Xunzi elaborates further by stating that "seductive looks and the songs of Zheng and Wei cause the heart to grow licentious, while the donning of court robes, sashes, and formal caps, the Shao dance and the Wu song, cause the heart to feel brave and majestic."[\[48\]](#) With regard to archery competition, stress again falls upon appropriate action: "Greeting and making way for each other, the archers ascend the hall, and returning they drink a salute. Even in contesting, they are exemplary persons (*junzi*)."[\[49\]](#) Mencius notes that a benevolent man is like an archer, for, if the latter misses his target, "he does not murmur against those who surpass himself. He simply turns around and seeks the cause of his failure in himself."[\[50\]](#) Further, Confucius argues that reciting the *Songs* can "arouse your sensibilities, strengthen your powers of observation, enhance your ability to get on with others, and sharpen your critical skills."[\[51\]](#) They also enable "you to serve your father, and away at court . . . enable you to serve your lord."[\[52\]](#)

The picture being painted here is one that shows the use of aesthetic experience to reinforce the ethical and religious meanings of social ritual. It is clear that Confucius is skeptical about artistic license if it veers too far from classical forms, for doing so undermines the cultivation of virtue so important to his cause. Eno acknowledges this by stating that, for the Confucians, the aesthetic dimension of ritual behavior is "not so much distinct from the religious and social dimension as characteristic of both."[\[53\]](#)

If this is the case, then one is led to question the quality of the aesthetic experiences had by the artists who practiced in this manner. The difficulty seems to be that Confucius

acknowledges the instrumental value of artistic practice but sees it as instrumental to but one or two ends: education and moral cultivation. One might argue, in turn, that this narrow vision ignores the fact that works of art and aesthetic experience in general are instrumental to many, often unanticipated, ends. Dewey notes that what distinguishes the utility of aesthetic form from that of utensils is the fact that aesthetic form "satisfies many ends, none of which is laid down in advance. It serves life rather than prescribing a defined and limited mode of living."<sup>[54]</sup> Works of art that convey a particular message, political, religious, or philosophical, may be aesthetically valuable, but that value is mitigated by a narrow focus. Their scope is not as broad as those works that are not designed to bring about preconceived ends and which consequently invite a wealth of encounters and interpretations.

But perhaps this liberal critique of the Confucian account is unfair. After all, in a charming passage we find that after hearing the Shao music, for several months Confucius did not know the taste of meat. He said, "I had no idea that music could achieve such heights!"<sup>[55]</sup> One is also reminded of Mencius' allusion to unconsciously being moved to dance in response to good music. These and other such remarks in the Confucian canon lead Eno to suggest that the aesthetic experiences of the early Confucians were akin to those reported by contemporary artists; those in which there is a sense of calmness, aliveness, and joy. He writes, "In the course of their study of ritual, music, and dance [they] more than likely encountered the very sorts of totalistic experiences described by modern artists, athletes, and others."<sup>[56]</sup> In addition, he stipulates that we must remember that what Confucian artists "were perfecting during their long years of self-cultivation were precisely skills suited for this type of noninstrumental action: skills in the human arts."<sup>[57]</sup>

One can only speculate, but it must be kept in mind that this approach conceived the arts primarily as instrumental to socio-political ends and this consequently restricted the avenues of self-expression. Drawing an analogy between Confucian and modern day artists is tenuous, since doing so ignores the qualitative differences between the works and experiences that grow out of radically different artistic traditions. The form of Confucian expressions was constrained by the desire to practice and uphold established standards. Early Confucians would band together to "chant *ancient* texts, sing *ancient* songs, and play *ancient* music" as well as dress in an ancient style of clothing. Consequently, one begins to question the depth of the aesthetic experiences that arose out of a tradition that continually looked backward for its inspiration.<sup>[58]</sup> Could Confucian artists have rich aesthetic experiences when they were restricted to repeating the *same* dances and songs? Can they justifiably be compared to modern-day artists who stress, and, in some cases, obsess about, innovation, novelty, and spontaneity?

Two points will clarify the distinction that I am trying to draw and allow me to speak of the relevance of this discussion for contemporary artistic practice. The first concerns the jade tablet that has been mentioned throughout this essay. We saw how Confucius' style of carrying the tablet disclosed his

personal expression of his tradition. This example, in turn, leads us to question how Confucians would interpret the long artistic tradition of transforming nephrite into beautiful objects of the everyday sort; pendants and other pieces of jewelry, vases, statuettes, jewelry boxes, and so on. It seems that the truly significant pieces of jade would have been those that were used in rituals or otherwise reflected the admirable qualities of the Zhou dynasty. Just as music and dance should not deviate too far from that of the classical court, jade-work should also emulate classical exemplars. It seems that *bi* disks, *zong* tubes, and *gui* tablets would have been seen as drastically overshadowing the aesthetic value of other jade objects since they were used in ancient rituals and otherwise expressed the virtues of equilibrium, symmetry, completion, and constancy. On this view, there does not seem to be room for the use of ornament or craft that goes beyond the bounds of ritual action or, more generally, that which is used to demarcate social difference.

This point demonstrates that the *li* provide normative guidelines both for action and aesthetic form. The early Confucians championed the rituals of the Zhou dynasty as they were seen as the fabric out of which a harmonious state could be woven. Further, since the arts were seen as an integral component of the *li*, the arts of the Zhou dynasty became the standard to which all forms of aesthetic expression were to be judged.

Historically, deference to tradition became an incredible burden for artists who were presented with the difficulty of finding novel avenues of expression in a continually narrowing field. As Martin W. Huang notes, "By the seventeenth and especially the eighteenth centuries, all traditional avenues for self-expression were so conventionalized that they had become extremely burdensome."<sup>[59]</sup> James Cahill echoes this by describing the plight of the literati (*wen ren*) for whom "the rules of the game were becoming too cumbersome and confining . . . . [He] was not committing a simple creative act . . . he was, in effect, espousing a cause, asserting his status, [or] commenting on the history of art."<sup>[60]</sup> Because of the pressures of fame and the necessity of passing civil service examinations, a cult of eccentricity developed in which the literati would acquire recognition by consciously acting out and/or describing morally shocking behavior. For the *mingshi*, or well-known eccentrics, the only viable avenue of aesthetic expression was to throw off the weight of the tradition altogether.

The second point pertains to Mozi's (470-390 BC) famous criticism of the Confucian obsession with ritual mastery. Characteristically practical, Master Mo argued that one cannot waste time practicing ancient rituals and arts in times in which war, famine, and starvation are rampant.<sup>[61]</sup> It infuriated him that Confucian scholars lived in an ideal past and otherwise ignored the evils confronted by common people on a day-to-day basis. His utilitarian criticism can be expanded further by noting that the Confucian appropriation of the arts strengthened socio-economic differences by strictly delineating the legitimate modes of aesthetic expression. In light of this difficulty, Mozi went on to argue that the arts should be suppressed. This is, no doubt, an extreme measure, but we

can question the Confucians on Mohist grounds by addressing the legitimization of certain modes of aesthetic expression. It seems that the arts practiced by common people, such as story telling, theatre, pottery, martial arts, wood carving, folk dancing and singing, basket-weaving, etc., would not have been seen as authentic modes of aesthetic expression since they did not gesture toward the arts of the court or, more generally, were practiced by illiterate people who were altogether unaware of the classics: the Book of *Songs* and the *Book of Rites*. This is puzzling, for if Carroll is correct, then the practice of these "lesser" arts is essential for the production and enrichment of communal sentiment. If one of the functions of art is to create communities of shared emotional experience, then it would seem that all forms of art that performed this function, court sanctioned or not, should be promoted.<sup>[62]</sup>

To put the point another way, the promotion of a wide array of arts and crafts is instrumental to realizing a virtue stressed by the Confucians-*shu*.<sup>[63]</sup> Various translated as "deference," "reciprocity," or "altruism," it is the awareness, respect, and appreciation of others that arises through the practice of ritual. It can be argued that practicing and appreciating the arts develops *shu* as doing so evokes common sentiments and consequently establishes and maintains a communal sense. No doubt, a wide array of arts could uphold and enrich secular ritual practice without having anything to do with the Zhou court. The arts sanctioned by the early Confucians were sufficient but not necessary for the emotionally cohesive bond that communally appreciated arts can bring about. Mozi is correct in criticizing the Confucians for their over-riding emphasis on the Zhou *li*, for doing so ignores the enjoyment that the common people derived from practicing their arts and crafts. However, we need not, like Master Mo, go on to banish music and the arts altogether, for doing so also would ignore possibilities of aesthetic form that support feelings of reciprocity and otherwise help maintain communities. As Dewey argues, "The theories that attribute direct moral effect and intent to art fail because they do not take account of the collective civilization that is the context in which works of art are produced and enjoyed."<sup>[64]</sup>

## 7. Art and Moral Self-Cultivation

With this said, much can be gleaned from the Confucian insight that artistic practice is essential for moral self-cultivation. On the simplest level, this approach provides an alternative to the tendency to divide theory from practice and to thereby cloud the relationship between the aesthetic and everyday life. However, there are difficulties that need to be overcome, namely, the sanctioning of a particular form of aesthetic expression and the moral grounds upon which such sanctioning is justified.

Generally speaking, classical Chinese aesthetics is characterized by a view that holds that the art object is an intensely personal expression of a moral being. For example, John Hay notes that the act of painting entails the projection of the artist into the work.<sup>[65]</sup> The term *xin yin* denotes the print of the heart-mind, a print that necessarily implies the moral qualities of the artist. Hence, on this view, a good

painting can only be produced by a good artist and vice-versa.<sup>[66]</sup> The Confucian emphasis on moral quality grows out of the awareness that the work expresses the author's moral standing and has the power to influence those who encounter it. Seen this way, early Chinese art criticism is moral criticism and aesthetic beauty and moral beauty are seen as identical to one another. This demonstrates that the early Confucians said more about the ethics of artistic practice than they did about the arts *per se*. It was consequently easy for them to group the arts under the banner of "self-cultivation" without paying a great deal of attention to qualitative differences among the media that the various arts employ. Harmony (*he*) is seen as the paradigmatic aesthetic value and consequently there is little speculation regarding how different arts manifest it. Moreover, because aesthetic value was seen as an all-or-nothing affair, it was also easy to ignore alternative avenues of aesthetic expression, even if they were capable of producing the communal sentiment central to Confucian practice. The necessary link between ethical and aesthetic expression advocated by this tradition explains why it-by Western standards-never produced a comprehensive philosophy of art. In its beginnings, Chinese aesthetics was limited since it could not conceive art as an autonomous affair separated from ethical practice.

Nonetheless, approaches that recognize art as one component of an interrelated set of human activities have become increasingly important. Many have questioned a rigid division between theory and practice as it is anathema to discussions regarding the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, the relationship between art and community, the educative function of art, and artistic production. The difficulty then, is not that the Confucian approach emphasizes the role that art plays in moral practice but that it construes it almost purely in moral terms.

If, on the other hand, we grant a broader notion of aesthetic form, then we can expand the list of arts that that can be used to communally articulate the self and thereby avoid the difficulties produced by a limited understanding of the possibilities of aesthetic expression. There are many practices that make consummatory experience possible and produce shared sentiments. As mentioned earlier, various activities like sports, games, crafts, and folk arts all entail forming activity and/or material in order to bring about fulfilling experiences. The early Confucians conceived the legitimate arts in light of historical precedents, but in doing so they overlooked the fact that aesthetic form is a refinement of the consummatory experiences that naturally arise in the course of everyday life.

To put it another way, Confucius secularized the Zhou *li* by emphasizing the important role that rituals and etiquette play in everyday life but he clung to ancient art forms that, as Mozi argued, were largely irrelevant to the common people. Broadening the scope of artistic practice avoids the problems associated with continually referring to a narrow tradition and, at the same time, allows us to explore those activities that can be taken up in order to cultivate and develop a sense of self and community, that is, to practice the art of context. If the context is enriched by including a wide array of arts, then possibilities for aesthetically forming one's life will also be



enriched.

## 8. Conclusion

This essay began by questioning the aesthetic dimension of ritual practice. We found that Confucian practice includes mastering the art of context and mastering specific arts-both of which entail ritual practice. One masters the art of context through ritual practice, for doing so allows one to "take a stance," to carve out a place within a given social framework. By carrying the jade tablet, Confucius shows how a tradition can be preserved and articulated by individuals who embody the ritual actions that constitute it. In addition, his style demonstrates how this can be done authentically. If both of these conditions are met, then part and whole mutually reciprocate one another and thereby instantiate an aesthetic order.

Dewey's account of aesthetic form shows how ritual activity organizes action and allows participants to become like the elements of a work of art that harmoniously bring about consummatory ends. Rituals structure behavior by steering it away from un-aesthetic extremes-chaos or mindless repetition. Practicing the arts, in turn, increases the richness of action by allowing practitioners to refine their expressive abilities. In addition, communally practicing and appreciating the arts magnifies the import of ritual practice by coordinating emotional responses. The virtues projected by the polished jade tablet contribute to the significance of Confucius' style.

This led us to a consideration of the constraints that the Confucian approach places on aesthetic form. Emphasis on tradition narrows the field of aesthetic value by narrowing avenues of aesthetic expression. This is at odds with the phenomena of communal sentiment that is essential for Confucian practice. This criticism, in turn, allowed us to argue that art should not be limited to a particular form of practice. Overriding emphasis on a particular tradition stifles the growth of the arts and undermines the ability of art to create communities throughout a culture.

If we take this problem and Dewey's account of aesthetic form into account, then we can respect the continuity between ethics and aesthetics and can explore that relationship further through the practice of a wide array of arts. This, in turn, will reiterate the point that arts need not be limited conceptually or institutionally, that they arise out of the stream of experience, and that they are, in fact, waiting to be practiced.

## Endnotes

[1] Bernhard Kalgren (trans.), *The Book of Documents* (Stockholm: Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, 1950a).

[2] *Analects* 11:12. Throughout, all references to the *Analects* are taken from *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*, by Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998).

[3] *Analects*, 1:12.

[4] *Analects*, 2:3.

[5] *Analects*, 12:11.

[6] *Analects*, 10:2.

[7] *Analects*, 7:7, 10:18, 10:23.

[8] *Analects*, 10:6, 10:14.

[9] *Analects*, 10:25.

[10] *Analects*, 1:9.

[11] *Analects*, 12:1.

[12] *Analects*, 10:25.

[13] *Analects*, 10:26.

[14] *Analects*, 10:5.

[15] David Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), p. 136. For the full discussion see pp. 131-138.

[16] *Analects*, 2:12.

[17] *Analects*, 15:29.

[18] Also *Analects* 3:4: "It is better to express real grief than to worry over formal details."

[19] *Thinking Through Confucius*, p. 95.

[20] See James C.Y. Watt's "Jade" in Fong and Watt (ed.), *Possessing the Past: Treasures from the National Palace Museum*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1996, pp. 37-45. For images of ancient Chinese jades see "From Heaven and Earth: Chinese Jade in Context." Columbus Museum of Art, March 15-November 15, 1998.

<http://kaladarshan.arts.ohio-state.edu/exhib/jade/hp/hp.html> September 6, 2005. The collection includes both ritual objects (scepters, axes, and disks) as well as decorative and functional objects. Also see the National Palace Museum's exhibits of circular, archaic, and Neolithic jades at <http://www.npm.gov.tw> September 6, 2005.

[21] This interpretation is inspired by Tu Wei-Ming's discussion of ritual and the human body. See *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), pp. 96-100.

[22] *Analects*, 7:32.

[23] Wing Tsit-Chan (ed.), *A Source Book In Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 76.

[24] *Hsun-Tzu Yin-Te*, [Concordance of the Hsun Tzu] (Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series, Peking: 1950, Supp. 22), 20.39-40. In order to remain consistent, throughout this essay "Hsun-Tzu" will be transliterated as "Xunzi." Likewise, the more traditional "Mo-Tzu" will be transliterated as "Mozi."

[25] *The Confucian Creation of Heaven* (Albany: State

University of New York Press, 1990), p. 33.

[26] *Analects*, 8:8.

[27] Tu Wei-Ming, *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), p. 99.

[28] Chan, pp. 121-122.

[29] "Art and Human Nature" in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Volume 62, Number 2, Spring 2004, p. 100.

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 100.

[31] For example, see Clive Bell, *Art* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1949).

[32] John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigree, 1980), p. 109.

[33] *Ibid.*, p. 36.

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 136.

[35] *Ibid.*, p. 63.

[36] *Ibid.*, p. 63.

[37] *Ibid.*, p. 327-328.

[38] *Ibid.*, p. 40.

[39] *Ibid.*, p. 40.

[40] *The Confucian Creation of Heaven.*, p. 60.

[41] *Ibid.*, p. 57.

[42] *Ibid.*, p. 35.

[43] One may ask how this account would address the other two major contributors to the Chinese philosophical tradition: Daoism and Buddhism. Can the points made be generalized to these two philosophies? Daoism too advocates practicing the arts in order to cultivate the self, but it stresses spontaneity and freedom from the trappings of culture. On this view, rituals are anathema to the good life, that is, living in accord with the rhythms of the natural world. For more on this point, see A.C. Graham's *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (La Salle: Open Court Publishing, 1989), pp. 170-204. Buddhism's influence on Confucianism during the Song Dynasty (960-1279 AD) cannot be understated. In fact, the great Neo-Confucian scholar Zhu Xi (1130-1200) adapted Buddhist monastic rules into his program for private academies. Nevertheless, Confucians criticized Buddhists for turning away from socio-political affairs in order to realize the spiritual goal of enlightenment. Since it is primarily religious in nature, the ability of Buddhist ritual practice to bring about social harmony is called into question. See Chan's *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, pp. 646-653, for Zhu Xi's criticisms. I am indebted to a reviewer of this journal for raising this question.

[44] *Analects*, 7:1.

[45] *Analects*, 3:3.

[46] *Analects*, 3:25, where "superbly felicitous" implies "conducive to social relationships." For more on the connections between politics and music in ancient China see Kenneth J. DeWoskin's *A Song for One or Two: Music and the Concept of Art in Early China* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, Center for Chinese Studies, 1982). The Shao music celebrated the succession of the sage-king Shun. Wu music was criticized as it was used to bolster troops preparing for battle.

[47] *Analects*, 17:18. It appears that the music of the state of Zheng was overly complex and unorthodox in that it added notes to the traditional pentatonic scale. See DeWoskin (1982), pp. 92-95.

[48] Burton Watson (trans.), *Hsun-Tzu: Basic Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), p. 116.

[49] *Analects*, 3:7.

[50] James Legge (trans.), *The Works of Mencius* (New York: Dover, 1970), Book 2, Part One, 7:5.

[51] *Analects*, 17:9. The *Songs* or *Odes* refers to the poems of the *Shijing* that were chanted aloud. For more, see Bernhard Kalgren (trans.), *The Book of Odes* (Stockholm: Bulletin of the Museum for Far Eastern Antiquities, 1950b).

[52] *Ibid.*

[53] *The Confucian Creation of Heaven*, p. 35.

[54] *Art as Experience*, p. 135.

[55] *Analects*, 7:14.

[56] *The Confucian Creation of Heaven*, p. 179.

[57] *Ibid.*

[58] One is reminded of Mencius' remark concerning the ancient sage-king Yao: "If you wear Yao's clothes, chant Yao's words, and act as Yao acted, then you are simply Yao." Legge, 6:2.

[59] "Stylization and Invention: The Burden of Self-Expression in the Scholars" in Roger T. Ames (ed.) *Self as Image in Asian Theory and Practice*, with Thomas P. Kasulis and Wimal Dissanayake (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), p. 89.

[60] James Cahill, *The Compelling Image: Nature and Style in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Painting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 185.

[61] *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, pp. 227-229.

[62] The argument for the conservative stance taken by the Confucians can be further supported by the following sources: With regard to music, the *Book of Music* [compiled by the Confucian school in the Han dynasty (202 BC-220 AD)] states that only the superior man is able to truly understand music. James Legge (trans.), "The Li Ki," XI-XLVI, *The Sacred Books*

*of the East*, Vol. XXVIII (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1885), XVII.i.7, p. 95. With regard to theatre see *Chinese Theories of Theater and Performance: From Confucius to the Present*, Faye Chunfang Fei (trans.) (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002), p. 27. With regard to calligraphy, see William R.B. Acker, *Some T'ang and Pre-T'ang Texts on Chinese Painting* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1954), liv-lviii. With regard to humor see Xu Weihe, "The Confucian Politics of Appearance and its Impact on Chinese Humor." *Philosophy East and West*, Volume 54, Number 4, October 2004, pp. 514-532.

[63] See *Thinking Through Confucius*, pp. 283-290 for etymology and analysis of *shu*.

[64] *Art as Experience*, p. 346.

[65] "The Self in Song and Yuan Painting" in *Self as Image in Asian Theory and Practice*, p. 67.

[66] *Ibid.*

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