

The Ethics of Confucian Artistry

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*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*, 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’] 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, 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 BC) saw himself as the preserver and restorer of a declining culture.² For him, the early Zhou Dynasty (1045-771 BC) 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 BC), when ritual vessels were decorated with images of animals and inscribed with pictographs, the ancient precursors of written language. In 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 *Analecets* states that “Achieving 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 “One 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 BC) 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 or not specific works pay homage to traditional forms and whether or not 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, theatre, 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.

Hall and 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 appropriating meaning from a system of customs and expressing them in novel circumstances. One cannot follow the *li* blindly, but one must learn how to skillfully apply them; this, in turn, produces a sense of authorship that is an essential component of the self-cultivation process. For this reason, Confucius criticizes those who simply go through the motions of ritual action.¹² On the contrary, to appropriate the *li* is to make them one’s own, to personalize them by developing a characteristic style of enacting them. A.C. Graham supports this point by noting that Confucius never laid down fixed rules regarding the details of ritual action. For example, merely aping Confucius’ style would be a grave error since “his good manners plainly have nothing to do with prescribed forms.”¹³ And further, with regard to Confucius’ project as a whole, “in spite of his fidelity to the Chou [Zhou] he sees the rebuilding of contemporary culture as a process of selecting and evaluating past and present models.”¹⁴

Hence, for the Confucian, a virtue essential to any practice—artistic or otherwise—is the authentic appropriation of its *li*. Without this kind of appropriation, the goods internal to the practice cannot be actualized since “going through the motions” is not to fully participate in the

practice. For artists, the *li* pertain both to the relationships between practitioners (teachers, students, colleagues, etc.) and to the skills that they all acquire and develop of necessity in the company of others. This point of convergence is emphasized in the linguistic association between appropriate ritual actions and the appropriation of actions by individuals in performances of their own.

The character *li* (禮) comprises two elements, *shi* (示) which means to manifest or display, and the phonetic element, 豊, which stands for the ritual vase. The character as a whole refers to the rites performed by the ancient kings, which involved the presentation of a ritual vase and other sacrificial offerings. One also finds the ritual vase in the character that denotes the human body (*t'i*, 體), whose other component is *gu* (骨), the skeleton or, more generally, “organic form.” This cluster of concepts leads Hall and Ames to conclude that “The notion of formal *li* action overlaps with *t'i*, body, in that *li* actions are *embodiments* or formalizations of meaning and value that accumulate to constitute a cultural tradition.”¹⁵ Ritualized action is an affair of habit, whether habitual modes of behavior that occur between members of a practice (etiquette, manners, etc.) or the development and maintenance of skill matrices necessary for the execution of the art in question. On this account, the human body is at the intersection of the moral and the aesthetic, as the ability to intelligently form habits enables one to become both a good person and a good artist.

Thus, “appropriateness” or *yi* has both moral and aesthetic connotations. It is grounded in ritual, which, as we have seen, includes both moral and artistic practices. A Confucian holds that in developing technique artists gain an embodied knowledge of aesthetic appropriateness. Good calligraphers master brushwork, understand the spatial logic of individual characters, understand the principles of composition, and are aware of stylistic variations; all of them are a part of

appropriate execution. This explains why, in this tradition, a sense of appropriateness is generated through the diligent reproduction of famous works. A text that especially lent itself to this process was the “Thousand Character Essay” (*Qian-zi wen*, 千字文), a work that is composed of one thousand different characters selected by artists from the collective work of the eminent master Wang Xizhi (303-361 BC). This text was studied and reproduced by students and famous calligraphers in every known script including seal, clerical, standard, draft-cursive, and modern cursive.¹⁶

The way to absorb calligraphic *li* is to repetitiously copy the work of past masters, to break down difficult characters into their constituent parts and to put them together again in fluid, controlled movements. This process establishes a somatic relationship between artist and tradition. Emphasizing the presentational characteristics of Chinese characters, Wen C. Fong writes, “calligraphy embodies an artist’s identity, and its gestures form a projection of the artist’s body language.”¹⁷ Through copying, a student gains growing insight into the master’s corporeality, that is, the manner in which the master’s movements inform each character’s rhythm and form. Students’ awareness of the tradition they work within is not limited to reflection; through embodiment and ritualized action, students appropriate the tradition in an intimate way. Their actions acquire significance since they are informed by and build upon a tradition of embodied technique.

As noted earlier, copying must move beyond imitation if the art is to be authentically appropriated. Robert E. Harris Jr. observes that “copying” is a “clumsy English term for processes that are subtly different in Chinese terminology: *mo* (摹), to trace, *lin* (臨), to copy freehand; and *fang* (仿), to imitate in a freer manner.”¹⁸ Indeed, the process of tracing great works, copying them freehand, and imitating them in a freer manner by experimenting with

script, size, and overall composition paves the way for the personal appropriation of the art. As Confucius stresses, enacting the rites of a tradition is not a mindless process, but the rites must be personalized by various individuals in various situations. Hence, in reproducing the “Thousand Character Essay,” the student must avoid blind repetition and find a way to make it one’s own. The great Yuan Dynasty (1260-1368 BC) calligrapher Chao Mengfu, for example, produced transcriptions of the “Thousand Character Essay” in several scripts. Further, repetitions by individual artists and their cohorts changed the way the “Essay” is perceived. As Harris notes, it “was transcribed so often as a writing exercise that the text itself may be thought to have disappeared into the calligraphy: that is, the text was so well known that it is doubtful that anybody paid much attention to what it said, accepting it simply as a format for the display of calligraphic skill.”¹⁹

For Confucians, then, one of the most important aspects of taking up an art is participating in a tradition, and artists must strike an appropriate balance between part and whole by simultaneously drawing upon the richness of the tradition and finding a way to appropriate it authentically. One must both preserve and contribute to one’s cultural tradition and the first component of actualizing the goods internal to a practice involves participating in this rich sense. More specifically, if one leans toward an extreme, whether extreme individualism or extreme conformity, then the goods of artistic expression, person-making, and increase of skill will be negatively affected. On the one hand, just as aping Confucius’ style misses the point of embodying the *li*, merely imitating another artist also keeps one from living the tradition and actualizing the goods that it offers. One will not discover the joys and frustrations of aesthetic expression, and there will be no genuine sense of authorship, if the skill involved is limited to that of mimicry. On the other hand, extreme individualism ignores the relationships that are

integral to the continuation of the tradition. Fraternity (*xiao di*, 孝弟) is essential for artistic practice, not only because it guarantees the transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next, but also because it sets the stage for fruitful exchanges between peers. As with excessive conformity, excessive individualism limits one's access to a practice's internal goods.

Hence, artistic ability and personal refinement are maximized by avoiding these extremes. The classical Confucian text *The Doctrine of the Mean* states, "equilibrium is the great foundation of the world, and harmony its universal path. When equilibrium and harmony are realized ... heaven and earth will attain their proper order and all things will flourish."²⁰ The claim is that striking a balance between individual and tradition is essential for flourishing artists and further reminds us that the arts—on the Confucian account—serve primarily humanitarian ends. It is all too easy to stress the individual's relationship with the practice without giving due consideration to what place the practice holds within the culture as a whole. Any practice has moral implications since it entails entering into relationships with others, but in a more general sense, there is also the possibility of extending one's awareness and influence beyond the bounds of the practice itself. In order to see how, we will need to say something more about the ontological status of works of calligraphy.

III. "Organic Form" in Calligraphy

On the most fundamental level, the belief that the written character is an embodied image that suggests something of the artist's comportment is supported by observing the way the medium captures quality of movement. Since brush and ink are readily influenced by variations in force, speed, and breath, the strokes themselves reveal much about the physical act of writing. This is

evident in the conceptual and experiential frameworks used for criticizing calligraphy.

Physiological metaphors are used in order to draw attention to the kinesthetic elements of the characters: flesh (*rou*, 肉), sinew (*jin*, 筋), bone (*gu*, 骨), blood (*xue*, 血), vein (*mai*, 脉), and breath (*qi*, 氣).²¹ Madam Wei's (272-349 BC) famous treatise, the "A Diagram of the Battle Array of the Brush," states:

Calligraphy by those good in brush strength has much bone;

that by those not good in brush strength has much flesh.

Calligraphy that has much bone but slight in flesh is called

sinew-writing; that with much flesh but slight bone is called

ink-pig ... Every writer proceeds in accordance with the

manifestation of their digestion and respiration of energy.²²

"Flesh," "sinew," and "bone" refer to the formal or structural elements of the characters while "blood," "vein," and "breath" refer to their energetic qualities. The centrality of these concepts to criticism for Daoists and Confucians alike intimates that works of art are best understood in terms of a "process ontology." On this point Francois Jullien notes that "artistic activity was seen as a process of *actualization*, which produced a particular configuration of the dynamism inherent in reality."²³ This is especially clear in calligraphy, for in the dynamic process of writing a character, "a particular gesture is converted into a form, just as a particular form is equally converted into gesture."²⁴ The reciprocal process of absorbing the characters (through repetitious practice) and expressing them is contingent upon and reflects the work of a body that is continually being affected by and is continually affecting its social and physical environment.

Each character is something of a signature. A text from the Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD) makes this clear:

All men differ in their energy (*qi*) and blood (*xue*), and vary in their sinew and bones; the heart-mind (*xin*, 心) may be dispersed or dense; the hand may be skilled or clumsy. The beauty or ugliness of calligraphy is in the heart-mind and hand.²⁵

This culminated in the popular saying; “Writing is like the person” (*zi ru qi ren*, 字如其人) and was largely influenced by the Confucian belief that artistic practice is an intensely personal affair. Further, the quote’s mention of the “heart-mind” brings us to the ethical implications of this view.²⁶

It has been shown that the artist’s corporeality determines the form of the characters he or she writes. Moreover, since the “heart-mind” is an essential part of the body, it too influences the quality of the characters. For example, mental agitation or ill health influence brushwork by producing feeble emaciated lines, lines that exhibit a loss of control. The logical conclusion of this approach is an aesthetic moralism, that is, the identification of calligraphic and moral value. “Stability” and “uprightness” describe both well-written ideograms and well-refined moral characters as do “decisiveness” and “felicitous placement.”²⁷ Good (*shan*, 善) characters can only be written by good people; harmonious (*he*, 和), well-balanced (*ping*, 平) characters reflect individuals who have actualized a state of moral equilibrium. Again, this is contingent upon the connection between ritual and art, for they are both seen as instrumental in refining the self.

IV. Contributions to Moral Criticism

The first section of this paper describes Confucianism's advocacy of practicing the arts, for such practice is seen as essential for the self-cultivation process and more generally for cultivating an awareness of one's place within a tradition and culture. Emphasis is placed on the artist's character as well as the effects that his or her work has on its audiences. Furthermore, this is not a reflective awareness, for the effect is contingent upon gestural communication; the viewer sees something of the artist's very corporality in the work and—qua embodiment—becomes tacitly aware of a high level of somatic refinement. Hence, in viewing good calligraphy, the observer will see something of the artist's character or state of refinement and will be affected positively.

An essential element of this approach is its understanding of form. As mentioned, *gu* (骨) denotes “bone” or “organic form,” a notion that centers not on abstract relationships among lines, shapes, and colors but upon energetic quality. Calligraphy may seem to lend itself to a “purely” formalist mode of appreciation, especially its more modern forms such as the cursive or *cao* (草) script. However, something important would be lost in an analysis that ignored the way the form of the script presents the artist's bodily activity. No doubt, an aesthetic autonomist who stresses the importance of objective form would argue that this is precisely where Confucian aesthetics goes wrong. Still, I would argue that an analysis of calligraphy in solely formalistic terms would bracket an essential element of the art, that is, the quality of line that is contingent upon the quality of physical movement of making that line. The rhythm and intensity of the character originates in the movements of the hand, arm, and torso, and are also influenced by the calligrapher's breath and psychological state. One wonders whether a work's rhythms and

tensions spoken of abstracted from such phenomena would be an analysis of the art of calligraphy at all.

Like many who discuss the intersection of art and ethics, Noël Carroll focuses primarily on works that take a narrative form and he argues that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has ethical import since it provides “richly particularized episodes of cruelty and inhumanity” and this “engages the reader’s imagination and emotions, thereby giving the reader a ‘feel’ for what it was like to live in slave times.”²⁸ He continues by claiming that most fiction “engages audiences in a constant process of ethical judgment encouraging readers, viewers, and listeners to form moral evaluations of characters and situations.”²⁹ Confucians, however, hold that the organic form of calligraphy can both *acquaint* viewers with moral situations and *cultivate* their moral sensibilities, including fine perceptual discrimination, imagination, and moral reflection.

The essential component of this process is gestural communication, for calligraphy provides insight into a refined mode of embodiment. Its form provides knowledge about the feel of writing elegant characters, that is, the sense of controlled movement in which the body, brush, ink, and paper become elements of an organic whole. The sensitive viewer becomes aware of the possibility of somatic refinement not only because the work presents something of the artist’s comportment but also because she too is an embodied being who communicates with others by writing and gesturing. In his *Manual on Calligraphy* Sun Guoting (648?-703? AD) notes that Wang Xizhi’s late work demonstrates that “his thoughts were well considered and his intent (*zhi*, 志) and breath (*qi*, 氣) in perfect harmony and balance. Never agitated, never sharp, [his] style and demeanor naturally resonate far (*zi-yuan*, 自遠).”³⁰ The work of the experienced calligrapher gives the reader insight into the manner in which the gestural abilities of the human body can—through the use of a sensitive medium—become aesthetic.

In calligraphy, the artist's character is presented by means of embodied form, and the task consequently becomes that of discriminating quality of character or level of refinement by evaluating the quality of the work. Sun's comment illustrates that value is placed on control of the medium and the self-control necessary for this to be achieved. In order to understand the work's organic form the viewer must make fine perceptual discriminations regarding the work's structure and its movement of energy. Further, the work reveals the state of the artist's heart-mind (*xin*), how one's emotions influence the creative act, and how clear one's intent (*zhi*) is. For this reason, the experienced viewer is called to reflect upon the possibilities of the self-cultivation process and the effect that it has on the emotions and on the general clarity of the mind.

In sum, on this account, the art of judging calligraphy is akin to that of judging character. In judging another, one observes their etiquette or manners, the way they express their emotions, and their overall style of acting in order to assess whether or not they are good, trustworthy, and have other moral virtues. Likewise, in judging a work of calligraphy, a critic will observe what the work's form reveals about the artist's moral standing. In judging either character or organic form, consistency is essential not only because each element mutually affects and is affected by the others, but also because inconsistency indicates a loss of control, which, on this view, is both an aesthetic and a moral defect. The level of the artist's state of moral refinement is believed to be clear in all his actions—artistic or otherwise—and a keen eye will be able to read the artist's level of refinement either by observing his work or his everyday actions.

I earlier described the Confucian view that instances of organic form are products of artistic acts that are indicative of a characteristically artistic mode of embodiment. The notion of

organic form turns our attention away from art objects toward the performances that bring them into being. These performances, of course, are not isolated affairs, but actions that take place within the broader context of a life. Along these lines, it has been pointed out that it is a strange fact that western cultures hold rational individuals accountable for their actions in every context except the aesthetic.³¹ Westerners generally judge the moral outcomes of other's actions regardless of the arena in which they unfold, whether political, religious, public, or private. Further, these judgments often pertain to the things that people make: craftspeople are judged on the quality of their craft, surgeons on the quality of the procedures they perform, scientists on their inventions, parents on the character of the children they raise, and so on. Works of art and the artists who create them, however, are often construed as immune to such criticism. But if actions that take place outside of the artist's studio are often, if not always, susceptible to moral criticism, then why should those that take place within the studio remain immune to it? An approach that bases itself on moral character views all action as open to ethical criticism, and consequently calls aesthetic immunity into question. The Confucian morality that unites aesthetic value with moral value may seem extreme, but why should it be considered any less plausible than the opposite extreme—aesthetic autonomy—especially when we take into consideration the inconsistent application of the notion of moral responsibility mentioned above.³²

The notion of moral responsibility has another dimension. Mencius (371-289 BC) cites the case of the famously skillful archer Yi who was murdered by a student who had mastered everything Yi had taught him.³³ It could be argued that the student's shot was a "good" one even though it killed his teacher, for it required a great deal of dexterity and skill. Mencius' purpose in citing the story is to show just the opposite, that the shot was indeed a bad one because it assaulted the *li* on several fronts. By killing his teacher—presumably for fame, as the student

would have then been the best archer in the land—the student simultaneously ignored the importance of the student-teacher relationship and the norms that maintain it, threatened the integrity of the tradition, and reduced the *art* to a mere means that allowed him to attain an external good. Now, it can be argued that there is a difference between performing an action in a particular circumstance (as in the case of the archer Yi), and using the product of an action, at some later point in time, to bring about other results, such as fame and fortune. An artist may have not only skill and creative vision, but also develop the ability to spot opportunities for material success. He or she may even be quite ruthless in actualizing these external goods, deftly undermining other artists, strategically playing the market, and so on. Further, the work of such artists may have good organic form and otherwise display a high level of artistic skill. Using art as means to acquiring ends external to the practice—good or bad—may or may not be morally praiseworthy or objectionable, but doing so does not entail anything about the artistic ability of the artist. However, the Confucian stance holds that the notion of artistic mastery is profaned when it is seen as simply denoting the mastery of a skill, independently of how it is used. As noted above, one's work unfolds in the context of one's life and it is consequently disingenuous to divorce one skill from the next in order to justify the pursuit of external goods. On this account, the title “master” should be reserved for those who both master an art *and* the art of living, and perhaps, even though it is a lofty goal, it is one that is well worth pursuing and honoring.

This raises a related question concerning the relationship between moral and aesthetic goodness, namely, can morally flawed individuals create good art? Answering this entails saying something about the manner in which a Confucian judges the actions and/or character of others. This topic demands extended treatment however, it can be said that emphasis is generally

placed on carefully observing action and on the correspondence between what is said and what is done. With regard to the first point, Confucius advised, “Watch their actions, observe their motives, examine wherein they dwell content; won’t you know what kind of person they are?”³⁴ and, with regard to the second, he states that “I am not sure that anyone who does not make good on their word (*xin*, 信) is viable as a person. If a large carriage does not have a pin for its yoke, how can you drive [it] anywhere?”³⁵ Like the carriage pin, making good on one’s work is the link between saying and doing and judging others consequently entails considering the consistency of their actions as well as the correspondence between their words and deeds. In either case, inconsistency demonstrates that the individual lacks self-control or self-awareness.

This does not bode well for artists since, as we have seen, the artistic media that they utilize give the observer clear insight into the artist’s character. Further, artists were saddled with a great moral burden since it was widely held that works of art could readily influence their audiences. Not unlike Plato, Confucius was quite concerned about the effects of viewing works of art with questionable moral content and/or about encountering the work of morally corrupt artists. Consequently, criticism was polarized in the sense that it tended to view works of art and artists as *either* good or bad. If this is the case, then, on this account, a good work of art cannot be executed by an immoral person.

There are two ways to respond to this difficulty. The first is to argue that the Confucian conception of the self is flawed in the sense that it does not take into account the fact that individuals have moral strengths and weaknesses, the second is to argue that moral strengths and weaknesses are not necessarily displayed in all action. With regard to the second point, it can be seen that the medium will disclose the entirety of the artist’s moral being and that the discriminating eye will perceive it. In turn, this leads to a consideration of the first point, for

Confucius is quite clear that the moral ideals that he espouses are difficult to attain. In *Analects* 7:26 he laments that he will never get to meet a sage and goes on to add that he would be content to meet someone who is “constant” however, he is also skeptical about actually meeting such a person. Further, in 7:33 he adds that “In the niceties of culture (*wen*, 文), I am perhaps like other people, but as far as personally succeeding in living the life of the exemplary person, I have accomplished little.” Here, Confucius characteristically effaces himself however, his doubt indicates that he realizes that the way of life that he envisions is notoriously difficult live. If this is the case, then there is room to argue that the Confucian criticism of works of art need not maintain a rigid distinction between good and bad and otherwise ignore the fact that individuals have both good and bad moral qualities. The moral and aesthetic ideals espoused by Confucianism shaped the ancient conception of aesthetic goodness, however, if it is kept in mind that these ideals are lofty, then a more pragmatic conception will arise that will leave room for the acceptance of works by artists who fall short of them. An artist may not be a sage but may still be capable of creating works of art that have a high degree of aesthetic value.

It has been shown that the Confucian stance on the practice of art and the relationship between aesthetic and moral value makes an important contribution to discussions that center on such issues. As discussed, this approach holds that the practice of art is necessarily a moral affair since the arts allow the student to cultivate the self, to find a place within a historical tradition, and to benefit from relationships with others who likewise pursue the goods of artistic self-expression. The analysis of calligraphy demonstrates that the form of the work itself is also important in this context, for the form is an expression of the artist’s very corporeality. The strokes that compose the ideograms are not components of “pure form” but are a product of the artist’s gestural communication. The work of art is a manifestation of an artistic mode of

embodiment and this contributes to the notion that the artist's work should be seen as an expression of character and as unfolding within the broader context of a life.³⁶

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¹ Three Volumes, Translated by E. S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Company, 1892-1896), Volume One, pp. 120-121.

² *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China*. La Salle: Open Court, 1989, p. 10. This is supported by *Analects* 7:1.

³ *Analects* 7:32, 8:8, 14:39. All references to the *Analects* are taken from *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*. Translated by Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont Jr. New York: Ballantine Books, 1998.

⁴ Li Zehou, *The Path of Beauty: A Study of Chinese Aesthetics*, translated by Gong Lizeng. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 35-38.

⁵ *Analects* 1:12.

⁶ *Analects* 16:5.

⁷ *Analects* 17:18. The music of the state of Zheng was seen as unorthodox not only because of its intricacy but also because it added one or two tones to the traditional pentatonic scale. For more see Kenneth J. Dewoskin's *A Song For One or Two: Music and the Concept of Art in Early China*. Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies at the University of Michigan, 1982, pp. 45, 92-96.

⁸ *Xunzi*. Translated by John Knoblock. Library of Chinese Classics, Hunan Publishing House, 1999. Volume II, 20:7, pp. 658-659.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 20:9, pp. 660-661.

¹⁰ *Analects* 15:18.

¹¹ David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987, p. 96.

¹² For but one example see *Analects* 3:12.

¹³ *Disputers of the Tao*, p. 12.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Thinking Through Confucius*, p. 88.

¹⁶ See Robert E. Harris Jr., "Reading Chinese Calligraphy" in Robert E. Harris Jr. and Wen C. Fong eds., *The Embodied Image: Chinese Calligraphy from the John B. Elliot Collection*. The Art Museum, Princeton University, 1999, pp. 15-17.

¹⁷ "Chinese Calligraphy: Theory and History" in *The Embodied Image*, p. 29.

¹⁸ *The Embodied Image*, p. 19.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

²⁰ Wing-Tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963, p. 98.

²¹ For more, see John Hay, "The Human Body as Microcosmic Source of Macrocosmic Values in Calligraphy" in Susan Bush and Christian F. Murk eds., *Theories of the Arts in China*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983, pp. 74-102.

²² Quoted in Hay, p. 82. For more on this text see Richard Barnhart, "Wei Fu-jen's *Pi-chen T'u* and Early Texts on Calligraphy" in *Archives of the Chinese Art Society of America*, 18, 1964, pp. 13-25.

²³ *The Propensity of Things: Toward a History of Efficacy in China*. Translated by Janet Lloyd. New York: Zone Books, 1995, p. 75.

²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 76.

²⁵ Quoted in Hay, p. 83.

²⁶ The character *xin* (心) is a pictograph of the physical heart. It is used to refer to the mind as well as the emotions. For an excellent discussion of the connection and the difficulty in translating the character, see Harold H. Oshima, "A Metaphorical Analysis of the Concept of Mind in the *Chuang-Tzu*." In Mair, ed. *Experimental Essays on Chuang-Tzu*. Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1983, pp. 63-84.

²⁷ *The Embodied Image*, p. 34.

²⁸ "Art and Ethical Criticism: An Overview of Recent Directions of Research" *Ethics* 110 (January 2000), p. 362.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 366.

³⁰ Chang Ch'ung-ho and Hans H. Frankel, *Two Chinese Treatises on Calligraphy*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.

³¹ For instance see Mary Devereaux, "How bad can good art be?" in Jerrold Levinson ed., *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 217.

³² Of course, the autonomist will reply that there is good reason to believe that the artist and the work of art should remain immune from moral criticism and such a reply is based on a definition of art and a conception of the role of the artist that are both deeply at odds with those advocated by the ancient Confucians. To fully address and critically examine both accounts would require a separate discussion. For a discussion of autonomism and responses to it, see Carroll (2000), pp. 351-353, 357-360; and Wayne Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988, pp. 3-22.

³³ *The Works of Mencius*, translated by James Legge. New York: Dover, 1970, 4:24, pp. 328-329.

34- *Analects* 7:26

35- *Analects* 7:33

36- An abbreviated version of this essay was presented at the 2006 joint meeting of the North and South Carolina Societies for Philosophy. The author would like to thank the participants for a lively discussion and would also like to thank the editor and anonymous referees of this journal for their comments and suggestions.