﻿ Li Zehou, *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, pp. 58-68.

Morality and Vitality in Mencius

If Confucius brought a self-conscious humanism to the tradition of rites and music, it was Mencius who first established the highest of Chinese aesthetic categories: yanggang zhi mei—a virile, dynamic, and moral beauty—which might be considered to be the vital force of the moral subject. It seems to be true for all peoples that sublime and dynamic beauty historically and logically precedes fine and delicate beauty. This is evident in the pyramids of Egypt, the great stone gateways of India and Babylon, the bronze taotie of China,31 the totem poles of the Mayans, and so on. All of these, which Hegel referred to as various types of symbolic art, produce intense stimulation and an experience of the sublime through their rugged grandeur and formidable size. Having their origins in the fanaticism of primitive totemic magic, these monuments are not the result of an individual’s free creation, but the fruit of the collective suffering and toil of the slaves who built them. Therefore what they display in the huge form and acute conflict of material objects is actually the great strength of collective human subjective force. Because this strength has a mystical character arising from its transcendence of individual capabilities, it opens the door for all kinds of later religious art, whether it be the unparalleled large statues of Buddhas with a thousand eyes and a thousand hands, the cathedrals with towering spires, or savage, bloody cave paintings. All of these types of art use their ability to stir consciousness of the sublime in the human heart in order to direct people to spirits or gods that transcend finitude. What one experiences in them, for example when faced with a huge architectural wonder, is the smallness of the individual and the overwhelming power and triumph of the massive object. It is not my intention here to take up the various theories of the sublime, including Kant’s famous triumph of reason, and so forth. What I am interested in are the characteristics of the Chinese people in this regard. Because of the emphasis in both Confucian humanism and the rites and music tradition on the humanized inner nature (the molding of desire and the emotions), China’s primitive symbolic art and aesthetic sense of the sublime took a very different course from those of India and the West. This course was firmly secular and social, moving first away from the power of the gods and toward human achievement, then away from external achievement and toward inner moral

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﻿power. It moved away from the sublime and toward strong beauty (zhuang mei), then away from the strong beauty of achievement and toward moral greatness. Between the Shang and Zhou bronzes and the poems of the “Greater Odes” and “Hymns” sections of the Book of Songs, one can roughly make out the first type of movement. For example, the mystical idea of communication between gods and humans that is evident in designs such as the taotie on the bronze vessels, is transformed in the Songs into the praise of the clan’s ancestors and their achievements. From the Zuozhuan and the Analects to Mencius, the second type of movement is evident. In the Analects, for example, we find the following passage: “Ah, great was Yao as ruler! Majestic! Only heaven is great, and only Yao attained this greatness. Boundless! So much so that the people could not put it into words. So majestic were his achievements, so dazzling his embellishments of culture!” (Analects 8.19). That is to say, words are not adequate to describe Yao’s great achievements; the “majesty,” or loftiness, of his greatness was here still connected to his achievements and position. In contrast to this, Mencius did not regard external achievements or position as being of any importance. He said, “When speaking to important men, one must look on them with contempt and not be intimidated by their high position” (Mencius 7B.34).32 No longer is external eminence emphasized, for it is merely external. In Mencius, this “lofty” “greatness” becomes “strong beauty,” which he discusses directly in terms of the perfection of the individual personality: Haosheng Buhai asked, “What sort of person is Yuezhengzi?” Mencius answered, “He is a good man, and a true man.” “What is good? What is true?” Mencius answered, “The desirable is called good; to have it within oneself is to be true. Fullness is called beauty; to be filled and shine forth is called great. To be great and transform is to be a sage; to be a sage and unknowable is called divine. Yuezhengzi has attained the first two, but not the last four. (Mencius 7B.25) Mencius here describes six levels of human personality, the good, the true, the beautiful, the great, the sage, and the divine. In doing so, he makes a very clear distinction between “beauty” and the purely moral levels of “good” and “true,” actually placing beauty above these two. “Good” means “desirable”; in other words, if one is “good,” in all one’s actions one seeks things that are desirable, namely, things that accord with humaneness and righteousness. “True” means “having it within oneself ”; if one is “true,” in all one’s actions one takes as guide the principles of humaneness and righteousness that belong to one’s

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﻿own nature and does not depart from them under any circumstance. “Beauty” means “fullness.” To be beautiful one should not only practice and keep the moral principles of humaneness and righteousness, but one should so extend and absorb these principles into one’s personality that every aspect of one’s external deportment, manners, and so on, will naturally display them. “Beauty,” then, is goodness completely worked out in the personality of the whole human being. It includes goodness but at the same time transcends it. Greatness is likewise related to beauty, sageness to greatness, and divinity to sageness, each higher than the one before. All of these, however, arise from “beauty” (“fullness”), and therefore are not categories of purely moral or ethical value, but categories that also bear aesthetic and teleological weight. “Greatness” means “to be filled and shine forth” with magnificent beauty. To be a sage is to be great and transform. According to Mencius’ explanations of the “sagehood” of Bo Yi, Liu Xiahui, and particularly of Confucius, what characterizes a sage is not only a kind of resplendent, magnificent beauty, but also the demonstration of a kind of power that cannot be achieved through wisdom or skill but arises from one’s accumulation of the achievements of the previous generations, from which one is able to produce epoch-making innovations. The sage becomes a model for generations upon generations, with tremendous transformative influence. (See the fifth and seventh books of Mencius.) “Divine” means “to be a sage and unknowable”—in other words, to have attained the realm of the sage without it being apparent how one has attained it. “Sagehood” can be achieved through human effort, while “divinity” seems not to have involved human effort. When Mencius classifies beauty into these four levels, and when he discusses its various states and attributes, he is talking about the beauty of the human personality.33 The “sage” and the “divine” have both achieved a “unity between heaven and humans,” with the natural realm and the universe as a whole. What Mencius is strongly advocating here is a subjective force that is at once ethical and superethical; all external achievements (including “sagely” and “divine” artistic creation) are but the expression or manifestation of the perfection of the individual personality. Here, the description of the “beauty” or “greatness” (strong beauty) of the personality in objective terms is connected with its subjective, spiritual level. And the description of this subjective spiritual level, in turn, is the philosophical extension of the Confucian notion of joy or pleasure (le), discussed above. Like Confucius before him, Mencius regarded aesthetic pleasure as the highest human ideal and clearly set out the proper social hierarchy—serving one’s parents (humaneness) and obedience to one’s elders (righteousness)—as the foundation of this pleasure. He said:

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﻿The substance of humaneness is the serving of parents; the substance of righteousness is obedience to elders; the substance of wisdom is to observe these two without deviation; the substance of ritual is to keep them with order and refinement; the substance of music is to take pleasure in them. When pleasure arises, there is no restraining it, but without one’s knowing, the hands and feet will begin to dance. (Mencius 4A.27) What Mencius has done here is to take the two elements of Confucian humaneness—its basis in blood relationships and its psychological principles—and connect them with human pleasure and human life, to form a kind of foundation for human life. Let us look at another passage: The gentleman has three pleasures, and ruling over all under heaven is not one of them. To have both parents living, and one’s brothers unharmed, this is the first pleasure. To have nothing to be ashamed of before heaven or before others, this is the second pleasure. To attract the brave and talented of the world and teach them, this is the third pleasure. (Mencius 7A.20) This is reminiscent of Confucius’ “pleasure” in having plain food and water, or in having a friend visit from afar. This pleasure is rooted in the relationships of everyday life, with parents, siblings, friends, teachers—it is the pleasure of “I” and “Thou.” The implication in art is that “amusing oneself alone” is not as good as “amusing oneself with others,” and “amusing oneself with a few” is not as good as “amusing oneself among many.” Mencius followed Confucius very closely, but his spirit is broader and stronger. Because the individual personality, which is so central, is more pronounced in Mencius, the human subject gains in stature, having “nothing to be ashamed of before heaven or before others” and, “though rich, not lascivious, though poor, unmoved; though threatened by force, unyielding” (Mencius 3B.2). With no need to shrink back from any circumstance, and no cause for reproach or fear, this person need not submit to any power or bow before any god. Is this not a powerful notion of the subjective personality? This is what it means to be “great,” “sagely,” or “divine.” This is the Chinese concept of yanggang zhi mei (dynamic, moral beauty). Because this beauty is the ethical manifestation and radiance of the personality of the moral subject, it is impossible for the terror or misery arising from any external circumstance or objective form to match its indomitable subjective force. This excludes, for example, all kinds of bloody ordeals, battlefields littered with corpses, terrifying forces of nature, and so on. What is stressed here

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﻿is precisely the peerlessness of this positive moral force. It is the courage, initiative, and fortitude expressed in the line, “If on self-examination one finds oneself in the right, one will go forth even against ten thousand” (Mencius 2A.2). Whereas Kant’s notion of the “sublime” uses vast, unpleasant external form to manifest the triumph of morality and reason, Mencius’ approach here is characterized by the use of a direct positive presentation of morality and reason to manifest the same. With Mencius, the sublime is not represented by the ancient achievements of collective slave labor, nor by the vast external forms of nature; rather, the sublime becomes the manifestation of moral force in an individual life. Because this moral force is in direct communication with the universe, and is united with both heaven and earth, it needs no recourse to divine power, nor does it rely on vast material objects or terrifying mysterious symbols. The moral power of an individual personality itself becomes an inner condensation of reason, which can manifest itself as a kind of sensuous vital force. This is the most important characteristic of what Mencius refers to as qi (“force,” or “pneuma”), as this passage will illustrate: “I excel at cultivating my flood-like qi. . . . This qi is exceedingly vast and powerful. If it is nourished with integrity and not impaired, it will fill up heaven and earth. This qi pairs righteousness and the Way; otherwise it wastes away. It is born of an accumulation of righteousness, but is not gotten by a sporadic show of righteousness. If one’s actions cannot satisfy one’s heart, it wastes away.”34 What is important here is that this force, which is material (vital sensuosity), is born of the accumulation and condensation of righteousness (moral reason), which is spiritual. The condensation of morality is transformed into a vital force, so that life ceases to be merely animal existence and becomes truly human. This constitutes another large step forward in the conscious humanity of Confucian humanism. It is clear, then, that “flood-like qi” is not simply a rational moral category but at the same time entails a sensuous moral character. This is the crux of the matter. Sensation and supersensation, the natural life and the moral subject, here overlap and intermingle. For the reason of the moral subject condenses in the natural life to become an “exceedingly vast and powerful” sensuous force, a material vitality of unparalleled strength. This intensifies the potential for the individual personality to progress from “beauty” to “greatness,” “sageness,” and “divinity.” What makes individuals moral subjects is not only their external appearance, their experience, or their moral character, but also a kind of sensuous becoming and sensuous force. “Flood-like qi” has a twin nature; it is both sensuous and supersensuous, uniting life and morality. Moral reason thus consists in the qi of this sensuous, perceptual existence. In this respect, the “inner sage” of Confucius and Mencius differs from those of religious theologies.

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﻿This is the fundamental characteristic of Confucian philosophy, ethics, and aesthetics. It is no wonder, then, that the concept of qi is the single most fundamental category in Chinese culture. It is important to Chinese medicine and to spiritual practices like qigong (Chinese breathing exercises), practiced to this day. It is an integral category in divination, geomancy, and fortune-telling. A crucial philosophical concept, it also plays an important role in literature. Cao Pi (187–226) remarked that “literature is primarily a matter of qi.”35 In art, also, qi comes into play. Six Dynasties critic Xie He (fl. 500–535) made “lively and harmonious qi” the primary standard for calligraphy.36 But what exactly is qi? To this day we have no clear and satisfactory definition. It is not purely material, since it is a type of vital force; nor is it purely spiritual, since it has an intimate connection to the material. Cao Pi’s discussion of qi in literature treats it as an innate quality of the body, which “father cannot transfer to son, nor older to younger brother,” and which “cannot be forced.”37 Tan Sitong of the late Qing explained that “this ‘flood-like qi’ is no special qi, but the same qi we breathe through our nostrils, the same vital energy we regulate with our medicine, the same vigor and sap that enliven a courageous person; it is the qi of both the sage and the common man.”38 So it is evident that qi does have something to do with physiological breathing. Critical notions such as the “fullness” or “restraint” of qi in poetry and prose are related to the syntax, intonation, and structure of recitation or silent reading, and therefore to the rhythm, speed, and meter of physiological breathing in both the creative and receptive processes. But qi cannot be explained simply as a function of physiological breathing. In the previous chapter’s discussion of the importance in Chinese arts and letters of the establishment of form, the mastery of skill, and the imitation of models, these were not simply to be understood in terms of reason. What was even more important was training in and mastery of this type of sensual power. But again, qi is more than just a matter of physical perception; as we see in such terms as fengqi (fashion or mood) and qiyun (destiny or fortune), it also bears a certain social character. Liu Xie (ca. 465–522) remarked in the “Shi xu” chapter of his classic of literary thought, the Wenxin diaolong, “When a society’s ways are in decline and there is general complaint . . . there is probably much qi.”39 In sum, qi assumes concurrently the dual characteristics of morality and vitality, the material and the physical. It is to Mencius that we owe the notion of qi as a kind of sensuous vital force in which reason is condensed and through which energy can be released. As mentioned above, because this kind of sensuous vital force in Mencius is a strength of will that arises from the condensation of reason as well as from

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﻿sensuous activity governed by morality, it cannot be obstructed or shaken by any external thing. What is important here, then, is the control or mastery of reason, which is reflected in aesthetics in such terms as zhu jing (devotion to one’s pursuit), xian le (holding the reins), and jie xuan (controlling the pace). The latter term comes from Liu Xie’s remarks in the Wenxin Diaolong chapter entitled “Yang qi” [Cultivating qi]: “In producing and enjoying art and literature, it is important to control one’s pace, so that one’s heart will be clear and harmonious, and one’s qi will flow unimpeded.”40 Yan Zhitui (531–595) compares writing to riding a horse, in which, “even if the horse has great strength, you must control it with the reins.”41 The first term comes from the advice of Zhang Xuecheng (1738–1801), in his collection of essays, the Wen shi tong yi, that “when putting pen to paper you must devote yourself to your pursuit; this one thing covers it all. If you devote yourself to your pursuit, then your heart will be quiet and your qi will be regulated, so that you can adapt yourself easily to the requirements [of your genre].”42 Notions of later generations such as “momentum,” “integrity,” “directing strength into momentum,” and so on, all have their origins here. All have to do with how the subject, through the cultivation of reason, can control sensation, so that it becomes a material capability controlled and governed by the will. For example, “integrity” is usually considered to be qi in a static state. And “momentum” is a kind of potential energy, a qi that contains energy—like the momentum of water pouring off a steep roof, or a hot knife cutting through butter. The kind of strong and dynamic qi valued in art and literature always has to do with this kind of momentum and integrity. It is not mainly found in external appearance but in a great inner life—a kind of moral potentiality and momentum. It finds expression quite apart from powerful rivers, magnificent peaks, or the glory of celestial bodies. It is the subjective morality and vital power that can be condensed into any image or form. This power manifests itself in sensuous language as the highly generalized rhythms or rhymes we find in Du Fu’s poetry, Han Yu’s prose, Yan Zhenqing’s calligraphy, Fan Kuan’s paintings, and Guan Hanqing’s arias, to name a few. When Mencius transformed the sublime into this “momentum,” he did not stop at purely rational subjective morality, but required that the moral personality and spiritual transcendence of the subject should become one with nature and the entire cosmos: “This qi is exceedingly vast and powerful. If it is nourished with integrity and not impaired, it will fill up heaven and earth” (Mencius 2A.2). According to Mencius, it is through this “flood-like qi” that is “born of an accumulation of righteousness” that one can achieve communion with heaven and earth, and the “unity of heaven and humans.” This is what later would be explained by Wen Tianxiang (1236–1282) in his “Ode to Right Qi” as

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﻿follows: “There is right qi in heaven and earth, variously bestowed and spread throughout the forms. Below, it takes the shape of rivers and mountains; above, the shape of sun and stars. Among men it is called flood-like; its abundance can fill the vast seas.”43 In Mencius we find a great deal about “preserving one’s heart and nurturing one’s nature, so to serve heaven” (Mencius 7A.1); or, “What the gentleman passes is transformed; what he abides is divine. Above and below, he flows with heaven and earth” (Mencius 7A.13). These all point out that the sensuous vital force of the moral subject can communicate with heaven and earth and attain oneness with the universe—in other words, that heaven can be reached through the human, and that heaven and humans can be united in their morality and vitality. This unity will be the topic of the next section. The Unity of Heaven and Humans in Xunzi and the Book of Changes Due to the influence of Song and Ming neo-Confucians, usually only Confucius and Mencius are considered to be the founding fathers of Confucianism. In actuality, however, without the contribution of Xunzi, Confucianism would never have survived. As I have argued elsewhere, without Xunzi, there would have been no Han Confucianism; and without Han Confucianism, it is difficult to imagine the shape Chinese culture would have taken.44 Mencius and Xunzi are like two wings on the body of Confucianism, without which it would have remained a flightless bird. Xunzi advocated using the “rites and righteousness” of ethics and politics to rein in and govern sensuous human desires and natural instincts, demanding that internal desire be satisfied within the constraints of external ritual, or conversely, that external ritual be implemented through the satisfaction of internal desire. Thus desire should reasonably be satisfied through the practice of ritual, while ritual should attain adherence through the reasonable satisfaction of desire. Mencius can be said to have advanced the theory that human nature (in the form of social rationality) is good, arguing that an a priori morality governs and pervades human sensuosity. Xunzi, on the other hand, advanced the theory that human nature (in the form of physical or animal sensuosity) is evil, arguing that human sensuosity must be normalized and reformed through the existing social order. Although they part company on this issue, the two thinkers both attempt to answer the question, common to Confucian humanism, of how individual sensuosity can acquire social rationality. How is social rationality sedimented within individual sensuosity? For Xunzi, diligent and extended study and self-cultivation are required before one’s spirit will find joy in morality (rationality), as the eyes find joy in beautiful colors, the ears in beautiful sounds, and the mouth in delicious foods.

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﻿But unlike Mencius, Xunzi does not believe this education and molding of the inner nature to be an end in itself; rather, the humanization of the inner nature should serve an external undertaking, namely, the governance and stability of the world. Thus, what Xunzi stresses is the external functionality of human subjectivity, the human subjugation or conquest of the whole world, including both inner and outer natures. This conquest cannot be only moral or spiritual, but must also be actual and material. This is the famous Xunzian notion of “mastering destiny and making use of it”: Nature [i.e., human nature] is the unhewn, plain wood; artifice is its ornamental carving. Without nature, artifice would have nothing to add to; without artifice, nature could not beautify itself.45 The northern sea has galloping horses and barking dogs, but the Central Kingdom acquires and domesticates them. The southern sea has feathers, ivory, hides, copper, and cinnabar, but the Central Kingdom acquires and makes a fortune from them. The eastern sea has purple dye, hemp, fish, and salt, but the Central Kingdom acquires them and uses them for clothing and food. The western sea has skins and yak tails, but the Central Kingdom acquires and makes use of them. . . . Therefore, of all the things that are under heaven or on the earth, there is not one whose beauty and function is not fully made use of to adorn the sage above or to nourish the people below and rejoice their hearts. This is what is called great divinity.46 “Divinity” here should be distinguished from this term as it is used in Mencius. Here the term refers to and eulogizes the real power to transform human subjectivity. This power is not expressed in the establishment of the moral subject or of an inner intentional structure, but in the actual conquest and transformation of both inner and outer natures. It does not operate from the point of view of the individual personality, but from the point of view of humankind as a whole (history and reality). Even at this early date, there already existed a vigorous affirmation of the material dynamic power of collective human subjectivity. The fact that Xunzi anticipates the simple concept that humans are distinguished from the animal kingdom by their use of tools is especially rare and remarkable in the history of world philosophy. Together with Mencius’ notion of the inner personality of the human subject, the brilliance of Xunzi’s broad, externally oriented philosophy directly reflects and at the same time illuminates the great artistic tradition that prevailed from the Warring States period through the Qin and Han dynasties, which mainly takes the conquest of the world as its subject. This is a point I have treated elsewhere.47 Xunzi’s

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﻿thought also directly paved the way for the Confucian worldview, developed in the Commentaries on the Book of Changes, of the “partnership of humans with heaven and earth.” The Commentaries carry on and develop Xunzi’s thought. In particular, they continue and expand upon the externally oriented, broadly material practical action that is its strong core. At the same time, they reject the proposition of “mastering destiny and making use of it” along with the “separation of heaven and humans,” instead returning to the psychological-emotional track of the “unity of heaven and humans.” In doing so, the Commentaries actually significantly expand on and enrich the original proposition, by systematically investing “heaven” with a human emotional character. Their emphasis on the “partnership of humans with heaven and earth” is no longer Xunzi’s aggressive attitude of conquest over nature, but rather an attitude of homology and compliance with nature. This has some connection with Mencius’ a priori morality and his notion of destiny, but the Commentaries do not mark a return to Mencius. On the contrary, although the notion of “heaven” in the Commentaries is no longer the purely natural heaven found in Xunzi, neither is it the internally controlling heaven of Mencius. Unlike Mencius’ heaven, it does not originate in the morality of the individual personality or inner psychology, but rather, as in Xunzi, it arises from the breadth of human material activity and history, as well as from the natural world.48 Thus heaven in the Commentaries, while still constituting external nature, in this way actually takes on anthropomorphic moral virtue and emotional content. But this virtue and emotion are simply a coloration and in no way suggest a truly personal will. They are aesthetic and artistic rather than religious, theological, scientific, or epistemological. Many passages from the Commentaries bear this out, including: “As heaven proceeds vigorously, so the gentleman must strive to improve himself unremittingly” (1/1/23);49 “The great virtue of heaven and earth is its daily begetting” (“Xici zhuan,” part II, 66/81/16); “Daily renewal is called [the Way’s] abundant virtue; ceaseless begetting is called change” (part I, 65/77/20); and so on. There is no notion in the Commentaries of an anthropomorphic deity controlling and ordering human affairs. On the contrary, what this text emphasizes is that humans must make every effort to progress in order to stay in step with nature and the cosmos. Nature and the cosmos are constantly changing, transforming, and becoming new; humans must adopt a corresponding dynamic structure in order to attain unity with them. Only then can humans achieve “partnership with heaven and earth”—the unity of body, soul, and the social collective with nature and the cosmos. This “unity” or “oneness” is not a static existence but a dynamic progression. This is precisely what is meant by “daily renewal.”

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﻿It should be clear, then, that Confucian humanism moves from psychology and ethics to the universe, from humans to heaven, from the way of man to the way of heaven, from politics and society to nature and the cosmos. As we move from an emphasis on the molding of inner human nature (emotions, senses, and desires) to the pursuit of a dynamic homology of humans with nature and the cosmos, we have pushed primitive Confucianism to its culmination. Here, the sensuous world of nature and the cosmos is not something negative (as in a great many religions), nor is it something neutral (as in modern science); rather, it has a definite significance and positive value, as well as having a certain sensuous tone and character. This is a kind of distillation of the worldview of Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi, which fundamentally affirms human sensuous existence and becoming, and deeply values sensate life. The positive value of the sensuous world is achieved through selfconscious human effort, not bestowed by any god or personal deity. In this view, heaven and earth are great, but humans are also great, and heaven and humans are interconnected and unified. Therefore, people can use their emotions, thoughts, and energy to work in concert with the cosmos and all that is in it. And all human laws and forms (including the laws and forms of art) echo the universal laws and forms of nature, including for example the laws of motion, flux, dynamic equilibrium, the unity of correspondences, and so on. The notion that “firm and supple displace one another to produce transformation and change” (part I, 65/77/1) is a very important concept in the “Xici zhuan,” the most philosophically influential of the Commentaries that accompany the Book of Changes. In terms of the natural realm, “sun and moon interact and produce light . . . summer and winter interact and complete the year” (part II, 66/82/18, 19). In the human realm, “what unifies the transformations is called [human] affairs” (part I, 65/78/1) and “achievements are manifest in the transformations” (part II, 66/81/16). Therefore, “Heaven and earth change and are transformed, and the sage follows suit” (part I, 65/80/13). “When change is exhausted, transformations occur; transformations continue and endure; thus they are ‘blessed by heaven, there is good fortune, and no lack of benefit’” (part II, 66/82/4). The human race should emulate nature, establishing its achievements amidst motion and transformation, and choosing the path of becoming and development. The view of the Book of Changes that both nature and the human realm can exist only in transformation and flux—fundamentally a standpoint that stresses “becoming”—is the basis for the emphasis in the Chinese aesthetic worldview on motion, power, and rhythm. Since the universe and all that is in it exists in continual transformation and flux, beauty and art must do so as well. Even in that most abstract of Chinese art forms, calligraphy, with its total lack …

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