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**Is the Unity of Goodness and Beauty
the Distinctive Feature of Confucian Aesthetics?**

Abstract

The proposition that the unity of Beauty and Goodness (meishan heyi 美善合一) is the distinctive feature of Confucian aesthetics was too easily taken as axiomatic by aestheticians and accordingly presumed it to be the theoretical foundation of Confucian aesthetics and education. In contemporary Chinese academic circles, this stance has received such overwhelming support that an implicit consensus has emerged, giving the appearance that there is hardly any need for a philosophical argument to justify or otherwise challenge the original proposition. To advance a new point of view by returning to the ancient texts, we will show that in old Chinese the characters 美 and 善 are synonymous, and that the aesthetic thoughts of Confucius and early Confucians are more often expressed with the term yue (樂) than mei (美), while their idea of the relation between beauty and goodness is put forth with the terms li (禮) and yue (樂), instead of shan (善) and mei (美). We then attempt to prove that the two most frequently quoted proof texts for presuming that there is a unity of goodness and beauty in the ancient tradition, specifically one passage from the Mencius and another from the Analects, are in fact not about the union of beauty and goodness. We conclude with a brief account of the significance of this argument for the study of Chinese and world aesthetics.

Keywords

unity, beauty, goodness, Confucian aesthetics, Confucius, mei 美, shan 善, li 禮, yue 樂

Introduction

We once tried in an essay to prove that the statement – “the unity of beauty and goodness is the distinctive feature of Confucian aesthetics” – is actually a false proposition. But one reviewer commented that:

“When I see the title, it immediately comes up in my mind that it is Plato who argues for this unity. So you must be right in rejecting it. But given that it is so obviously wrong, is it worth a rejection?”

To him, this statement is manifestly untrue since the unity of beauty and goodness is part of a specific Western aesthetic tradition, which can be easily found in works on the history of Western aesthetics (e.g. Tatarkiewicz 1999; Beardsley 1996).¹ Yet when it comes to scholarly presumptions about China, the matter is different. This is particularly noticeable when it comes to implicit beliefs about central Confucian traditions. Research by scholars from China, Japan, and South Korea (Fu & Wang 2015: 68–69, 80) shows that the presumption of the unity of beauty and goodness is widespread, as is the corollary taking of this presumption to be the distinctive feature of Confucian, and through that, traditional Chinese aesthetics.² Such academic habits of thought become a matter of course, to the point where, for at least

the past four decades, these patterns are regarded as axiomatic (Liu Yuedi 2010: 8; Ye 1985: 46; Wang Cizhao 1995: 43). Accordingly, this very axiom is taught to students, and perpetuates itself as the presumed theoretic foundation of Confucian/Chinese aesthetics.³ Scholarly works confirm each other in their conclusions and, in the end, it seems there is hardly any need for philosophical argument to justify further, or otherwise question it. Precisely for this reason, we believe that it would be beneficial to Chinese aesthetics, as well as the comparative studies of Western and Eastern aesthetics, to make clear the arguments why the unity of beauty and goodness should *not* be considered a salient feature in Confucian aesthetics, and why we *should* consider this presumption the consequence of the importation of a (single strand) of Western aesthetic thinking into Chinese discourse.

This is to suggest that the introduction of Western aesthetic notions about the idea of the union of the beautiful and good (particularly from the beginning of the 20th century) evoked a practice in some Chinese scholars to project such sentiments backwards into Chinese classics, thereby finding the specific arguments that their general concepts told them to seek. Such an effort, while often focusing on interesting texts and fruitful controversies, created some confusion about the meaning of philosophical traditions, and through that, an appreciation of Chinese aesthetics itself (E 2010).

Here is an overview of the conceptual problem. Since the term aesthetics is rendered in Chinese as *mei xue* 美學 (literally a “discipline of beauty”, and since beauty and goodness are translated into Chinese as *mei* (美) and *shan* (善), sentences or phrases with the characters 美 (and sometimes other characters related to it) and 善 in the pre-Qin (a period roughly from 770 to 221 BCE) Confucian classics have been quoted as the main evidence of the claim that the union of the beautiful and good is (also) the distinctive feature of Confucian aesthetics.⁴ Some believe that “aesthetic research is inseparable from *mei* (美) and the study of Chinese history of aesthetics should start from the character 美 (Yu Kailiang 2012: 47). Moreover, some well-known aesthetic researchers such as Zhang Fa (2014a, 2014b), and Yang Chunshi (2018), even dig hard in ancient Chinese classics such as *Book of Documents* (*Shangshu* 尚書), the earliest historical document in China, and *Book of Songs* (*Shijing* 詩經) to look for the characters 美 and other characters related to it. They believe that the Chinese aesthetic conception is congealed in 美 and its “origin, evolution and pattern” is formed in the process of complex interactions of various elements, meaning that unpacking this process is fundamental to the understanding of the key feature of Chinese aesthetics (Zhang 2014a: 125).⁵

There is much to discuss here, but a fundamental point cannot be overlooked: in all this effort there is no mention of the character, *yue* (樂), a very important term, indeed, an essential concept in ancient Confucian aesthetics – and not coincidentally the philosophical term that is the easiest way to associate ancient Chinese aesthetics with modern Chinese (and Western) aesthetics.⁶ In disentangling the various threads of the argument, an important theoretical presupposition of how the problem of aesthetics is to be conceived altogether cannot be settled by secondary sources alone. We should return to examine the original texts. By explaining the meanings of *mei* (美) and *shan* (善) in the Old Chinese dictionary and texts, we will show that the two words are often synonymous. This makes a difference because such a conflation is not present

in modern Chinese usage and is the first clue that the sense made of things later is not identical to the ideas presented of old.

Hence, a text with the character 美 in the ancient Chinese classics does not necessarily mean it refers to directly what present-day philosophers might consider a direct aesthetic issue, even though the modern usage of the word is the most common Chinese character for “beauty”. More simply, the term *mei* (美), while evocative in its signification, can be taken to coalesce with and augment the term for good, not entirely dissimilar to the way English speakers can call something a “lovely gesture,” referring, thereby, not to aesthetic beauty, but to an act that is sensitive, refined and fitting. Buttressing this claim is the fact that the old Confucian classics did have other characters for tangible beauty and aesthetic transport, namely *yue* (樂) which literally

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The most representative example is perhaps the oft-quoted Greek term *kalokagathia* (καλοκαγαθία), which shows the harmonious unity of beauty and goodness. Carolyn Wilde claims “the unity of Goodness and Beauty has been an enduring theme in the Classical tradition of European thought” (Wilde 2004: 165) a tradition that can be traced back to Plato who claimed that “all that is good is beautiful”. Aristotle’s highly influential definition of beauty in *Rhetoric* is also in accordance with the commonly accepted Greek idea of beauty: “Morally Beautiful or Noble, which being desirable for its own sake, is also laudable or which being good, is pleasant because good.” (*Rhet.* 1366a33, in: Tatariewicz 1999: 163) – St. Thomas Aquinas claimed that the “beautiful is the same as the good, and they differ in aspect only” (Part I–II, Q.27, Art.1, in: Beardsley 1996: 102). Both Shaftesbury (1671 – 1713) and Friedrich von Schiller (1759 – 1805) “took their inspiration from the Greek tradition of *kalokagathia*” (Beiser 2005: 92), while in the 20th century, Wittgenstein repeatedly quoted and debated a remark that “ethics and aesthetics are one” (in parenthesis at *Tractatus* 5.421), showing that his thought about ethics and aesthetics in his early writings was heir to the Western tradition. Therefore, it is almost safe to say that this association of beauty and goodness is still highly respected by some people in spite of the kaleidoscope of ideas, theories and thoughts in the contemporary Western aesthetic circle. Thus when Mary Devereaux claims that “even those of us who are not Platonists are heirs to a Platonic tradition that identifies beauty and goodness” (Devereaux 2006: 358), it does not mean that similarities indicate the presence of Platonic ideas in the Chinese tradition.

2

Quite a number of scholars simply take (traditional) Chinese Aesthetics as an equivalent of Confucian Aesthetics, which is a misreading. This is true even among the leading scholars in this field, e.g. Ye Lang claims: “Western

Aesthetics lays particular emphasis on the unity of beauty and truth, while *Chinese Aesthetics* lays particular emphasis on the *unity of beauty and goodness*.” (Ye 1985: 14; cf. Wang Jie 2021; Wang Cizhao 1995; Chen 2000; Li Baoying 2004) Searching the term “美善合一” in CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) on 15 December 2021, we also found that more than 800 of the 1870 journal papers, Dissertations, Master’s theses and conference proceedings mention both “美善合一” and “Confucian Aesthetic feature”, while more than 400 contains both the term and “Chinese Aesthetic feature”.

3

There is an increasing tendency of highlighting the presumption of unity of beauty and goodness. Research papers containing the phrase “美善合一” increased sharply in the past ten years (over 100 per year).

4

An interesting evidence to support Hall and Ames’s claim that “the reverence for tradition” and “the penchant for seeming to remain consistent with the classical sages has led to a situation in which Confucius, among others, has been credited with a rather wide variety of philosophic opinions” (Hall & Ames 1984: 3).

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For more sources, see: Ye 1985; Wang Cizhao 1995; Li Baoying 2004; Zhou 2008; Yu Kiang 2012; Zhang 2014a; Zhang 2014b; Huang & Zhang 2017; Yang 2018; Wang Jie 2021.

6

Chinese aesthetic researchers found that the discussion of the relation between beauty and goodness of Confucian school in pre-Qin period is through *Li* (禮) and *Yue* (樂) (Xu Fuguan 1966: 15; Cai 1983: 6; Wang & Fu 2005: 8). Some even claims that the “aesthetic tradition marked by Rites and Music (*Li* 禮 and *Yue* 樂) is the most groundbreaking of the Chinese people” (Liu Chengji 2021: 171).

means “music”, but becomes a term of aesthetic experience, especially when considered in discussion with *li* (禮), literally “rites and ritual ceremony”. In fact, the record appears to show that Confucius, in considering the place of what we would call aesthetic education in the wider scheme of self-cultivation juxtaposed *li* (禮) and *yue* (樂) to one another, rather than collapsing them together.

As we delineate this argument in fuller detail, we acknowledge that there are long-standing views that appear to come down on the other side of the issue, potentially causing confusion today. For this reason, we will seek to prove that the two most frequently quoted prooftexts for the presumption of the unity of goodness and beauty in the ancient tradition, specifically one passage from *Mencius* and another from the *Analects* itself, are actually not about the unity of beauty and goodness. Hence, once we come to consider the implications for current aesthetic thinking the claim will be that a well-known contemporary Chinese signifier for the unity of the good and the beautiful, namely 美善合一 (*meishan heyi*) is just that: a modern concept that has been impressed backwards on a differing philosophical tradition. Let us proceed to make the case in depth.

The Etymological Study of 美 and 善

The first step is to trace the origin and meanings of *mei* (美) and *shan* (善, literally meaning *beautiful* and *good*) as they appear in the *Liushu* (六書),⁷ or “six types of Chinese script”, a system first proposed by Xu Shen 許慎 in his *On the Origin of Chinese Characters* (*Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字), published in 121 CE.⁸ Here, what is essentially the oldest character dictionary of China suggests the original form of 美, in what we now consider the foundational iteration of Chinese characters, is 𠂔, a character composed of two pictograms 羊, (羊, *yang*) or *sheep*, and 大 (大, *da*) or *big*. These associations may sound odd to a modern ear but are fully compatible with the underlying idea of value. Sheep in this era were likely the most important domestic animal for meat,⁹ and “big sheep” was proverbial for good tasting. Conjoined together, 美 thus means something evocative of “good”, “delicious”, and “nice”. Extended metaphorically, anything good can be called *mei* 美. The fact that both 美 and 善 have 羊 as the radical, meaning *lucky*, only strengthens the association.¹⁰ Interestingly enough, the character 善, in its original form 𠂔 or 𠂔, consists of similar radical and meaning, namely 羊 (羊, *yang* – *sheep*).¹¹ Hence, the final result of *shan* (善) can also convey such abstract and symbolic meanings as: *good*, *nice*, and *fine*. In some contexts, it could also mean “virtuous”. Thus, Xu Shen emphasised again that 善 “is synonymous with 美 (*mei*) and 義 (*Yi*, another character with the radical 羊, which means justice)” (Duan 1981: 107).

However, whatever abstract direction the meaning took in reference to goodness, these permutations did not run in the direction of beauty. Hence, it is best to argue that both 美 and 善 in ancient Chinese classics more often than not have an ethical or pragmatic meaning, rather than an aesthetic one, as Confucius suggests with the claim that:

“It is virtuous manners which constitute the *excellence* [*mei* 美] of a neighborhood [里仁為美].” (*The Analects* 4.1; emphasis ours)

Here, 美 means morally good or excellent, as well as proper. If the reference to 美 was translated as “the beauty of a neighbourhood”, Confucius’s intention would be lost unless it was immediately added that one meant “moral beauty”.

Taking a broader look, we see that in most cases both 美 and 善 in ancient classics have an ethical or pragmatic meaning rather than an aesthetic meaning, as is illustrated by a passage from the *Xiaojing* 孝經 (*Classic of Filial Piety*), likely compiled by Confucian scholars in the course of the early Han period (from 206 BCE to 220 CE):

“For changing their manners and altering their customs, there is nothing *better* [shan 善] than music. For securing the repose of superiors and the good order of the people, there is nothing *better* [shan 善] than the rules of propriety [移風易俗，莫善於樂；安上治民，莫善於禮。[孝經]; emphasis ours, transl. James Legge].”¹²

Here 善 means *good* in the sense of useful, upright and fitting. Both cases involve judgment on ethical or pragmatic values. Extrapolating from such a context, it seems unlikely that, were Confucius and other early Confucian scholars to discuss aesthetic issues, they would use the character 美. To provide more evidence of 美 being used in a broader sense, synonymous with 善, we will go on in the next section to analyse the 14 instances of 美 (including 2 repetitions) in the *Analects*.

美 in the *Analects*

A study of Confucian aesthetics must return to Confucius himself. But, as we already claimed, in the *Analects*, a catalogue of usage shows the character 美 is more often related to 善, namely good, virtuous or fine than aesthetic beauty. However, a seminal text like *the Analects* requires a granular exposition. What is revealed by further immersion in the words tradition ascribes to Confucius himself? Let us sharpen our purview of the aesthetic terms – as

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The 六書 are namely *Xiangxing* (象形, pictograms of optically perceivable or imaginable things); *Zhishi* (指事, ideograms of simple relationships, often derived from a pictogram), *Xingsheng* (形聲, combination of significant-phonetic part), *Huiyi* (會意, combine two or more pictographs or ideographs to create a new character), *Zhuanzhu* (轉注, transfer), and *Jiajie* (假借, loan characters, borrowed for a word pronounced similarly but with a different meaning). For instance, both 美 and 善 belong to the category of *Huiyi* 會意 and both of them share the same radical 羊 – *sheep* (Duan 1981: 107).

8

Presently, the original text of the dictionary survives in various commentaries to it. Among them, the most authoritative one is *Shuowen jiezi Duanzhu* (說文解字段注 – *The Annotated Edition of Shuowen Jiezi*) by Duan Yucai 段玉裁 (1981).

9

shan 膳, a character composed of 飠, meaning *meat*, and 善, meaning *good* (see Duan 1981: 212).

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Duan Yucai annotates that “羊 means lucky [...]. According to the annotation to *Kaogongji* 考工記 (*Records on the examination of craftsmanship*), 羊 means good, for all the characters such as 讜 (*shan*), 義 (*yi*, just), 羨 (*you*, leading to good) and 美 (*mei*) have the same radical 羊” (Duan 1981: 152).

11

The original form of 善 is 讜, appeared only in the *Zhouli* 周禮 with two 言 (讜), other 善 in the classics have only one 言 (言 讜, a character combined of a pictogram of a tongue with a stroke indicating speaking) (Duan 1981: 94).

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In discussing the examples of *Analects*, we will quote the translations of James Legge unless otherwise mentioned.

well as concepts associated with aesthetics – as they appear in *Analects*. If we divide the 12 appearances of 美 into three groups according to the main categories of the entry in the dictionary, the first group of six 美, is entirely about moral goodness, or synonymous with 善. The second group is about utilitarian value, which likewise can be interpreted as good, nice or fine. The final, and least prominent grouping does refer to a sense of aesthetic beauty. We will explain this in due course.

The six 美 in the first group appear in the discussions about harmony, sociability, and one's personality or virtue. For instance, when talking about the important function of observing ritual propriety (*li* 禮) for achieving harmony, Confucius says:

“In the ways prescribed by the ancient kings, this is the *excellent quality* [*mei* 美] [先王之道斯為美.]” (*Analects* 1.12; emphasis ours)

Here, 美 is used to describe the function of observing ritual propriety, which is excellent or elegant. When asked about a person's characters, he says if one is “proud and niggardly, those other things are really not worth being looked at”, even if he has “abilities as *admirable* (*mei* 美) as those of the Duke of Zhou [如有周公之才之美]” (*Analects* 8.11; emphasis ours), the Duke being renowned for virtuous behaviour. And Confucius tells his disciples that a gentleman

“... seeks to perfect the *admirable qualities* [美] of men and does not seek to perfect their bad qualities [君子成人之美，不成人之惡.]” (*Analects* 12.16; emphasis ours)

Here, 美 referring to the good qualities of a person, is synonymous to 善. Thus, to provide a variant on an argument already offered, if the beginning of the above analect was translated “seeks to perfect the beautiful qualities”, it would be necessary to clarify that these were ethically beautiful qualities.

In another situation, in response to the question, “What kind of a person is it that can be given the reins of government?”, Confucius answers:

“A person who honors the *five virtues* [*wu mei* 五美; emphasis ours] and rejects the four vices can be given the reins of government (『何如斯可以從政矣？』子曰：『尊五美，屏四惡，斯可以從政矣。』)” (*Analects* 20.2)

When asked what exactly are the five virtues (五美), he explains that such persons suitable for government

“... are generous and yet not extravagant, work the people hard and yet do not incur ill will, have desires and yet are not covetous, are proud and yet not arrogant, and are dignified and yet not fierce [『君子惠而不費，勞而不怨，欲而不貪，泰而不驕，威而不猛。』]” (*Analects* 20.2)¹³

These virtues all are highly important to Confucius's thought, but it would be stretching the meaning to propose that such what can be literally translated as “five beautiful (qualities)” squarely coincide with aesthetic beauty. The fact that Western translations tend to force the issue by rendering 五美 as “five virtues” only strengthens the claim for the figurative understanding of 美.

The second group of 美 concerns utilitarian value. For instance, Zigong is said to be superior to his master, but Zigong takes a wall and a house as an analogy to show that that is because ordinary people cannot understand the merits of Confucius.

“My wall is shoulder high, so one can catch a glimpse of the charm of the buildings inside.”

He says:

“The Master’s wall, on the other hand, is massive, rising some twenty or thirty feet in the air. Without gaining entry through the gate, one cannot see the *magnificence* [美] of the ancestral temple or the lavishness of the estate inside [不見宗廟之美，百官之富。]” (*Analects* 19:23; emphasis ours)¹⁴

Thus, 美 signifies the magnificence or splendour of the temple, something a disciple cannot appreciate without intense effort. This does appear to bring aesthetic consideration into the discussion, but beauty, again, is a poetic way of signifying value. To make sense of some of the underlying issues, consider an example from the Western tradition. In the King James Bible, Matthew 7:17 is translated as

“Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit.”

The second word for “good” is *kalos*, which, of course, can be translated as *beautiful*, but which here means ideal in a moral sense. This is also true in the following Chinese examples: Confucius praises the merits of the sage-king Yu, who

“... used himself coarse food and drink, but displayed the utmost filial piety towards the spirits. His ordinary garments were poor, but he displayed the utmost *elegance* [美] in his sacrificial cap and apron [菲飲食，而致孝乎鬼神；惡衣服，而致美乎黻冕。]” (*Analects* 8.21; emphasis ours)

Here, 美 is used as a signifier of splendid clothing, however, the focus is not on the aesthetic beauty of it but to show King Yu’s respect for the gods so as to win their blessing for the nation.

This is the main thrust of the *Analects* in respect to beauty. To be sure, there is also a minor current whereby 美 is mentioned twice involves in reference to a solidly aesthetic sense and conveying something similar to the modern idiomatic equivalent or to *beauty/beautiful* in English. Yet, these usages are not of great philosophical magnitude. One simply reproduces popular usage, such as the lyric quoted from *the Book of Songs* (*Shijing* 詩經) by Zixia to consult his master about the appearance of 禮 (*li*, *ritual ceremony*):

“Oh, the dimples of her smile! / Ah, the black and white of her *beautiful* [美] eyes!” (*Analects* 3.8; emphasis ours)

The other 美 appears in a pejorative context as Confucius comments on the degeneration of his time for primarily esteeming a smooth tongue and the good looks of a person.

“Without the eloquence of Tuo, the Temple reader, and the beauty [美] of Prince Chao of Sung, it is hard to escape in the present generation [不有祝鮀之佞，而有宋朝之美，難乎免於今之世矣。]” (*Analects* 6:16)¹⁵

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Translated by Ames and Rosemont Jr. James Legge translates 五美 as the five excellent things. Available at: <http://ly.exuezh.com/Chapter/SearchResultChapterContent?id=20&chapterId=20.2&query=%E4%BA%94%E7%BE%8E&pageIndex=1&pageSize=10> (accessed 15 December 2021).

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Translated by Ames and Rosemont Jr. Available at: <http://ly.exuezh.com/Chapter/>

[SearchResultChapterContent?id=19&chapterId=19.23&query=%E7%99%BE%E5%AE%98%E4%B9%8B%E5%AF%8C&pageIndex=1&pageSize=10](http://ly.exuezh.com/Chapter/SearchResultChapterContent?id=19&chapterId=19.23&query=%E7%99%BE%E5%AE%98%E4%B9%8B%E5%AF%8C&pageIndex=1&pageSize=10) (accessed on 15 December 2021).

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Prince Chao of Sung was celebrated for his beauty of person and had been guilty of incest with his half-sister.

In this situation, 美 is indeed aesthetic, though the focus here is not about aesthetic matters, and it is not evident that Confucius wants us, at this point, to appreciate beauty. Indeed, these passages, which can be removed from context to assert that Confucius was openly hostile to a sphere of physical beauty, serve to further distance Confucius from the claim that goodness and beauty are one.

Such appearances of 美 in ancient Chinese classics are more often used in an ethical or practical sense, or as a synonym of *shan* (善), instead of in an aesthetic sense. Nevertheless, for those who believe that studying Chinese or Confucian aesthetics (美學, literally the study of beauty) are required to produce an unambiguous definition of 美 in Chinese classics, it is not unusual for them to come to the (misleading) conclusion that the distinctive feature of Confucian aesthetics is the unity of beauty and goodness, or even go so far as to think that beauty (美) is subordinate to goodness 善 (Huang & Zhang 2017). But this is a misunderstanding of the notion of aesthetics as expressed in the original Confucian texts, one that impedes important philosophical discussions in our own times. We will in the next section try to show that, as a matter of fact, Confucius himself and other early Confucians *do* discuss aesthetic issues, especially the relation between beauty and goodness with the character 禮 (*li*) and 樂 (*yue*) instead of 美 and 善.¹⁶

Confucians on Beauty and Goodness with *Li* 禮 and *Yue* 樂

Wladysław Tatarkiewicz once warned that a historian of Western Aesthetics, “... if he wants to describe the development of human ideas about beauty, cannot confine himself to the term ‘beauty’, because such ideas have appeared also under other names.” (Tatarkiewicz 1999: 6)

This is quite true with the study of Chinese Aesthetic history. Our philological investigation of the Confucian classics in the pre-Qin period, shows that there is actually not a single character of 美 in the generally acknowledged Confucian aesthetic works, such as *the Record of Music* (*Yueji* 樂記),¹⁷ *the Discourse on Music* (*Yuelun* 樂論), and not even in the “Bianyue” (辯樂), the chapter on music in *The School Sayings of Confucius* (孔子家語), nor, to conclude the list, in “The Six Classical Arts (六藝)”, the chapter on arts in *The Collected Sayings of Confucius* (孔子集語). As mentioned earlier, the core term in these works is 樂 (*yue*), which, again, literally meant (and currently means) *music*. Why do the Chinese aesthetic classics center on this key term 樂? Answering this question opens more supple and flexible ways to understand traditional Chinese aesthetics.

It is generally accepted that Chinese art starts with music. Etymologically, scholars maintain that even the oldest meaning of 樂 is music. As is shown in the oracle bone inscriptions, the earliest Chinese character 樂 written as 𪛗 or 𪛘 is a pictograph of a stringed instrument and/or woodwind, referring to music (Xu Zhongshu 1991: 1280). *The Shuowen jiezi* explains:

“*Yue* (樂) is the general term for the five notes and the eight timbres, and also various percussion instruments.” (Duan 1981: 280)

There is no doubt that 樂 (*yue*) as a kind of instrument symbolises music. But it should be noted that 樂, as we understand it in modern Chinese, is a narrower concept than an ancient might rephrase as “music, and music alone”.

That is, while 樂 was undoubtedly music for the ancients, this was an art that had many parts.

As noted by Guo Moruo, an expert in the study of oracle bone inscription:

“Yue (樂) [...] is always linked with poetry and dance. But so were painting, chasing, architecture and other plastic arts. It even covers the guard of honor, hunting, banquet and so on. So what is called yue (樂/music) is [also] le (樂/joy) [樂者樂也].” (Guo 1957: 155–156)

This quote is cited from *Discourse on Music* 樂記, and it should be emphasised that the same character 樂 can be read as meaning either *music* or *joy*. Because of this linguistic alternative, almost all the schools in the pre-Qin period spoke about beauty without the word 美 (*mei*), but with the character 樂 (*yue*), e.g., Mozi’s (468 – 376 BCE) criticism of Confucian aesthetics is called *Against Music* (*Fei Yue* 非樂). Additionally, Xun Zi’s subsequent apology for Confucian aesthetics is named *Discourse on Music* (*Yue Lun* 樂論). Furthermore, in their discourses on “beauty” and “goodness” or the relationship between the two, Confucius and the Confucians developed their ideas around the two key terms *li* (禮, *ritual*) as both contrasting and complementary to *yue* (樂) (Xu Fuguan 1966: 15; Fu & Wang 2015).

Let us proceed to examine such delineations of aesthetic thought in detail. As it is stated in *The Discourse on Music*:

“Through the perception of right produced by *ceremony/ritual* [禮], came the degrees of the noble and the mean; through the union of culture arising from *music* [樂], harmony between high and low [禮義立, 則貴賤等矣。樂文同, 則上下和矣。]”¹⁸

Here, *ceremony/ritual* (*li* 禮) and *music* (*yue* 樂) refer respectively to behavioural systems that are to be conjoined to music and/or art. This suggests the important task of self-cultivation, if only to a degree, comes through aesthetic education.¹⁹

Clearly, none of this depreciates the realm of the aesthetic. Here are more examples from canonical Confucian works stressing the special status of music (樂) in cultivating desired mental states:

- 1) *Music* (樂) has its origin from heaven; *ceremonies* (禮) take their form from the appearances of the earth [...]. The supreme *music* must be easy; the supreme *ceremonies* must be simple (樂由天作, 禮以地制 [...]. 大樂必易。大禮必簡。[樂記]).

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For more information about Confucius’ ideology of *Li* (禮 *Rites/goodness*) and *Yue* (樂 *Music/beauty*), see Fu & Wang 2015: 68–81.

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Though *Yueji* (樂記) is a work that concerns political, ethical and social issues, it is also acknowledged at least in the field of Chinese aesthetic studies, as one of the most representative Confucian aesthetic works. E.g. Li Zehou takes it as one of the three cornerstones of Chinese aesthetic treaties, together with Yan Yu’s (嚴羽 1192 – 1197) *Reflections on Poetry* (滄浪詩話) and Liu Xie’s (劉勰 465 – 520) *Wenxin Diaolong* (文心雕龍) (Li Zehou 1999: 158). Other researchers claim that 樂

記 is the first ground-breaking work of the Chinese aesthetics (cf. Wang Yi 2009; Gao 2011; Yuan & Hei 1999: 20). For more information about the study of *Yueji* 樂記, see Lin Guanhua 2021.

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All references to *Record of Music* are taken from James Legge unless otherwise noted.

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Or in the words of Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 (1868 – 1940), one of the most influential aestheticians in modern China, that ritual (*li* 禮) is ethical education and music (*yue* 樂) is aesthetic education (Cai 1983: 6).

- 2) *Ceremonies* (禮) afforded the defined expression for the (affections of the) people's minds; *music* (樂) secured the harmonious utterance of their voices [禮節民心，樂和民聲。[樂記] (*Record of Music*).
- 3) *Music* (樂) joins together what is common to all; *ritual* (禮) separates what is different. The guiding principles of *ritual and music* (禮樂) act as the pitch pipe that disciplines the human heart 樂合同，禮別異，禮樂之統，管乎人心矣。[荀子·樂論] (*Discourse on Music*; transl. Knoblock 1994).

In all the above examples, ritual/ceremonies (*li* 禮) and music (*yue* 樂) are put side by side in describing their functions. They cannot be substituted for each other. Moreover, in the *Record of Music*, apart from the 58 places with the characters 禮 and 樂 being put in couplets, there are 23 places where the words “*Li* and *Yue*” (禮樂) appear conjoined together. This is so in Xun Zi's *Discourse on Music* 樂論, with 禮 and 樂 being put together 9 times, 10 times in couplets. The juxtaposition of 禮 and 樂, as we see, serves for a higher purpose for the pre-Qin Confucians, namely to reach the acme state described in *Record of Music*:

“He who has apprehended both *ceremonies and music* [*li* 禮 and *yue* 樂; emphasis ours] may be pronounced to be a possessor of virtue. Virtue means realization (in oneself) [禮樂兼得，謂之有德，德者得也。[樂記]].”

The conversation between Confucius and his disciple Zizhang in the *Record of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記), also proves his idea of *li* 禮 and *yue* 樂 or goodness and beauty:

“... to speak and to carry into execution what you have spoken is ceremony [*li* 禮]; to act and to give and receive *pleasure* [*le* 樂; emphasis ours] from what you do is *music* [*yue* 樂; emphasis ours]. The ruler who vigorously pursues these two things may well stand with his face to the south, for thus will great peace and order be secured all under heaven [言而履之，禮也。行而樂之，樂也。君子力此二者以南面而立，夫是以天下太平也。[禮記·仲尼燕居]].”²⁰

That is to govern by the rules and regulations is *li* (禮), and to act correctly with pleasure is the meaning of music (*yue* 樂), even though the “acting correctly” part sets the agenda. It contains the essence of the relation of *li and yue*, i.e. goodness and beauty.

This concludes the investigation of Confucian attitudes toward aesthetics in relation to goodness. These points raise another fundamental question: why did the notion that Confucius believed in a unity of beauty and goodness persist? In the following section, we will show that scholarship has been misdirected by unsound interpretations of the two most frequently quoted proof-texts for presuming the ancient tradition thought beauty and goodness were one.

The Proof-text from *Mencius*

We once made a detailed exegesis of a passage in *Mencius*, one of the two places most frequently cited as evidence of the presumption of the unity of beauty and goodness. However, the statement in this passage, “Chongshi zhiwei mei” 充實之謂美 (literally: to possess those qualities is called beauty), is actually about goodness (*shan* 善) (Wang & Fu 2005: 8; Wang & Fu 2008: 68–82). Thus, rather than casting doubt on our thesis this moment in *Mencius* supports it for the following reasons: First, the context and the theme of the passage with the statement, “Chongshi zhiwei mei” shows that it is Mencius's

comment on the moral stature of his disciple, Yue Zhengzi, who was reported to embark in a political career. That is to say, the proposition *per se* is in an ethical discussion, therefore “Chongshi zhiwei mei (美)” though with the character 美 cannot be primarily concerned with aesthetics.

Second, both Zhao Qi 趙歧 (108 – 201 CE) and Sun Shi 孫奭 (962 – 1033 CE), the two famed commentators of *Mencius* in the Dynasties of Han and Song believe that 美 in this passage is used to describe one of the six levels of *shan* (善, *goodness*), i.e. *good* (*shan* 善), *honest* (*xin* 信), *beautiful* (*mei* 美), *great* (*da* 大), *sage* (*sheng* 聖), and *divine* (*shen* 神). Therefore, the character 美 in “充實之謂美” is a moral concept synonymous with 善 (*good*) (Ruan 1979: 2775–2776). A study of the characters 樂 (91 in total) and 美 (14 in total) in *Mencius* shows that the passages containing 美 or 樂 mainly center on, or are related to, such notions as “benevolence, goodness and righteousness” and their relation to other forms of virtuous behaviour. When Mencius did occasionally mention *Li* 禮 and *Yue* 樂, he meant to explain his ethical idea of benevolence and goodness or his political ambition (Fu & Wang 2015: 74). It is thus fair to say that when Wang Fuzhi (1619 – 1692 CE), a famed literary critic from the early Qing Dynasty, claimed that “the whole text of *the Mencius* has no discussion of *yue* 樂” (Wang Fuzhi 1975: 232), “the whole text of *the Mencius* has no discussion of *li* 禮” (Wang Fuzhi 1975: 504), he meant to point out Mencius’ failure to carry on Confucius’ ideology of *li* 禮 and *yue* 樂.

The Proof-text from *Analects* 3.25:

盡善 (*Perfectly Good*) Does not Mean *Morally Good*

This point from the reception history must be kept in mind because it clears the field to return to Confucius and focus on the hardest case. Perhaps no passage in *the Analects* is more frequently quoted than the following to prove that Confucius and Confucian aesthetic theory is the unity of beauty and goodness:

“The Master said of the music of *Shao* that it was *perfectly beautiful* [盡美] and also *perfectly good* [盡善]. He said of the music of *Wu* that it was *perfectly beautiful* [盡美] but not *perfectly good* [盡善] [子謂[韶], 『盡美矣, 又盡善也。』謂[武], 『盡美矣, 未盡善也。』] [論語; emphasis ours].” (*Analects* 3:25)

Some modern Chinese aestheticians would take this passage as strong evidence of the unity of beauty and goodness (*meishan heyi* 美善合一) being Confucian aesthetics, for it shows that music (*yue* 樂) should be not only beautiful in form but also good in content (cf. Ye 1985; Li Baoying 2004; Zhou 2008; Yu Kailiang 2012; Yu Qun 2014; Zhang 2014b; Yang 2018). Representative statements using this passage to draw a global conclusion are as follows:

“The heritage of Confucian Aesthetics lies in the unity of beauty and goodness.” (Liu Yuedi 2010: 8)

Or:

“The feature of Confucian aesthetics is the goodness-based unity of beauty and goodness.” (Wang Cizhao 1995: 43)

Thus Confucius’s comment of the music of Wu being “perfectly beautiful but not perfectly good” is interpreted as goodness is superior to beauty. Furthermore, some researchers take this analect as an example to claim that the typically Chinese aesthetics is featured with the “Virtue first” [以德為先] of social beauty, “analogical to Virtue” [比德之美] of the natural beauty and the “Moralizing function” [道德教化] of the Artistic Beauty (Huang & Zhang 2017: 18).

Such nearly unanimous interpretation of this analect can find proofs from a number of Confucian commentators in the *Annotations and Sub-commentaries to the Analects* (*Lunyu zhushu* 论语注疏). For instance, Kong Anguo’s 孔安國 (156 – 74 BCE) annotation of analect (3:25) says that:

“*Shao*, the music of King Shun, tells about his peaceful succession of King Yao by virtue of his goodness, so it is perfectly good [...]. *Wu*, the Music of King Wu, who overthrew the wicked King Zhou by force of arms, it is thus not perfectly good [韶，舜樂名，謂以聖德受禪，故盡善 [...]. 武，武王樂也，以征伐取天下，故未盡善。]” (Ruan 1979: 2469)

Likewise, Xing Bing 邢昺 (932 – 1010 CE), another Confucian classicist, said that this analect discusses the music of *Shao* and *Wu*:

“*Shao* 韶 is synonymous with *Shao* (紹), meaning ‘succession’. King Shun succeeded King Yao because of his virtue, his music is thus named *Shao*, suggesting (peaceful) succession. The meaning of this passage is that the music and dance of *Shao* are perfectly beautiful and good because of King Shun’s succession by his great virtue. Whereas the music of King Wu, who won sovereignty through military force, is rightly named *Wu* (武), meaning military. His music and dance are perfectly beautiful, but unfortunately because King Wu came to throne through conquest, it is not as good as a peaceful succession. Hence, the music is not perfectly good [盡善] [韶，紹也，德能紹堯，故樂名韶，言韶樂其身及舞極盡其美，揖讓受禪其聖德又盡善也。謂武，盡美矣，未盡善也者，[武]周武王樂，以武得民心，故名樂曰武。言武樂音曲及舞容則盡極美矣，然以征伐取天下不若揖讓而得，故未盡善也。]” (Ruan 1979: 2469)

What we learn from these annotations and comments is that the *Shao* 韶 is a piece of music attributed to King Shun 舜帝 (2255 – 2205 BCE) who was praised for his virtue (*shan* 善), while the music of *Wu*, the War Dance is about King Wu 武王 (1087 – 1043 BCE). King Shun succeeded Yao 堯帝 peacefully by his goodness (善). By contrast, King Wu, though animated by a good cause, came to the throne through overthrowing the tyrant King of Yin by military force, suggesting, therefore, that the music of *Shao* by Shun is better (善) than the music of *Wu*.

Thus, it seems that these classicists and modern aestheticians share a common understanding of this analect, namely, when Confucius says “jin mei” (盡美), he means perfect in artistic performance, while when he says “jin shan” (盡善), it means perfect in moral expression. Accordingly, the music of *Shao* is both perfectly beautiful and good because King Shun came to the throne peacefully and the music of *Wu* is perfectly beautiful but not good enough because King Wu won the throne by force. But we should keep in mind that this is a gloss, and that Confucius himself did not provide any explanation for his comments about the two pieces of music. Moreover, these annotations did not make it clear whether *The Analects* 3.25 is simply an artistic criticism of the Music of *Shao* and *Wu*, or an example that Confucius took to explain his opinion about the relation of beauty and goodness. Still, if we compare this passage to the above mentioned 12 references to the character 美 in *The*

Analects, one cannot find another example to show that Confucius uses 美 to set off beauty as something distinct from and lower than goodness. Therefore, the passage allows a rich field of speculation, but is too ambiguous to settle debate.

Such ambiguity is not settled if we turn to two other texts about the music of *Shao* in the *Records of the Grand Historian* (*Shiji* 史記) and the *Analects* to show that *Shao* is described or commented more for its aesthetic beauty than for both its aesthetic and moral beauty. The first text is excerpted from “the Annals of Xia” in *Shiji*, which records the achievements and moral deeds of Yu (禹) for which he finally won the favour of King Shun who decided to let him succeed to the imperial throne. The excerpt here records the magnificent ceremony of Shun passing the imperial throne to Yu, starting with Kui the official in charge of music:

“Kui played some music; the spirits of Imperial ancestors, and hosts of nobles gave place to one another, and even birds and beasts wheeled about and danced. When the nine airs of Shun’s music (i.e. the Music of *Shao*) were played, the phoenixes came and put themselves in attitudes, the different beasts led each other on to dance, and the various officials were really in harmony. [夔行樂，祖考至，群後相讓，鳥獸翔舞，簫韶九成，鳳皇來儀，百獸率舞，百官信諧。[史記·夏本紀]]”²¹

In this description of the grand ceremony, which featured the music of *Shao* as the main performance, we can feel the beautiful music, the majestic dance, the presence of the spirits of the ancestors and the phoenixes, the happiness of the nobles, the dance of the birds and beasts. Hence, it depicts the beauty and splendour of the ceremony, but makes no explicit mention of the morally goodness of the music or the unity of beauty and goodness in the modern aesthetic sense. If it will be used as a proof of the *Shao* music being “both perfectly beautiful and good” (盡善盡美), it is because of the perfection of its melody, the instruments, the scale and splendor, etc.

Confucius’s further comment about the Music of *Shao* in *The Analects* (7.14) also highlights its artistic beauty. The *Analects* record that when Confucius heard the music of *Shao*, he was said to be so captivated that for three months he did not know the taste of meat, and he said:

“I did not think that music could have been made so excellent as this [子在齊聞韶，三月不知肉味。曰：「不圖為樂之至於斯也！」] [论语·述而]”

Apparently he was more captivated by the aesthetic beauty of *Shao* than its morally goodness, as there is no mention of the character 善 here. In fact, through the years there appeared evidence of some quiet pushback to this generally acknowledged assumption that the *Analects* 3:25 is the proof of Confucius’s aesthetic concept of the unity of beauty and goodness. Thus, Li Zehou 李澤厚, one of the most influential Chinese aestheticians in contemporary China, remarks:

“This passage (the *Analects* 3:25) is hard to understand. If it is about the relation between beauty and goodness, then what kind of relation is it? When it says: ‘perfectly beautiful’ but not ‘good’ enough, does it mean the Music [of Wu] is not good enough because it refers to ‘too much bloody fighting’, or because it does not explicitly define moral cultivation? If so, it would always lead to the situation that an artistic work may be good enough but not beautiful enough,

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Transl. James Legge. Available at: <https://ctext.org/shiji/xia-ben-ji> (accessed on 15 December 2021).

thus cannot achieve the goal of accumulating goodness through aesthetic appreciation. This is the reason why so many literary works, including those by the great moralists, meant ‘to enforce human relationships and to beautify cultivation’, but were mostly doomed to fail. They are perfectly good, but unnecessarily beautiful.” (Li Zehou 1998: 99)

Here, Li questions the prominent agreement on the *Analects* 3:25, an interpretation that has passed down from as early as the Han Dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE) till now. He is not the only one who seeks to avoid a dogmatic conclusion. Others tried to interpret *shan* (善) as something other than “morally good”. Some says it means “consummating” (完善) (Sun 1995: 82). Some, for instance, Edward Slingerland interprets it as “good at something (*shan*)”, meaning something like “good for people to listen to”.²² And Ames and Rosemont comment that 善 here means “productive of good relationships”. So they translated the *Analect* 3:25 as:

“The Master said of the *Shao* music that it is both superbly beautiful (*mei* 美) and superbly felicitous (*shan* 善). Of the *Wu* music he said that it is superbly beautiful but not superbly felicitous.”²³

What unites them all is that they do not take “盡善盡美” as the evidence for the unity of beauty and goodness. Rather, they tried to distinguish this (*shan* 善) from the (*shan* 善) in the sense of morally good.

盡美 (Perfectly Beautiful) Does Not Mean Aesthetically Beautiful

As noted, commentators such as Kong Anguo and Xing Bing interpreted this passage by judging the moral worth (i.e. 善, *goodness*) of the two pieces of music through glossing on the different ways the two kings came to power. They seem to have forgotten that “*mei* 美 and *shan* 善” in ancient classics sometime are synonymous and to find a reasonable interpretation for “the perfect goodness of *Shao*” and “the imperfect goodness of *Wu*”, they had to seek meanings outside of the text. But the point is that these comments of the passage (*Analects* 3:25) were not based on Confucius’ own view and ignored the legitimacy of King Wu in his overthrowing the wicked King Zhou 桀紂. This is not a minor issue in thought of the Chinese literary class. Legitimacy can be lost through an absence of virtue and regained by power guided by righteousness. Thus, Mencius gave a moral justification for King Wu’s action: a ruler who outrages righteousness and behaves tyrannically is a king no more but a mere fellow, and therefore King Wu’s killing the wicked Zhou is not putting a sovereign to death, but the cutting off of the fellow Zhou (*Mengzi*, Liang Hui Wang II [孟子·梁惠王下]). From this perspective, such generally accepted exegeses of *Analect* 3:25 are not conclusive.

Therefore, these comments did not prove whether the melody or lyrics *per se* contains the aesthetic beauty (*mei* 美) or moral goodness (*shan* 善). In this sense, the interpretation of the 美 in this passage by Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130 – 1200), a leading scholar of the revival of philosophical Confucianism sounds more compelling, (his interpretation of *shan* 善 does not differ from the abovementioned classicists, therefore we will just quote the first part of his comment to the *Analects* 3:25 in the *Lunyu jizhu* (Collected Commentaries on the *Analects*):

“*Shao*, the Music of King Shun, *Wu*, the Music of King Wu. Here, 美 means the splendour of sound and appearance, while 善 means the final effect of the music. King Shun succeeded King Yao and governed the nation peacefully; King Wu overthrew Zhou the wicked king to save the nation. Both are meritorious deeds therefore the two pieces of music are *both perfectly beautiful*.

[韶，舜樂。武，武王樂。美者，聲容之盛。善者，美之實也。舜紹堯致治，武王伐紂救民，其功一也，故其樂皆盡美。朱熹[論語集注]; emphasise ours].²⁴

Zhu claims that the two pieces of music by King Shun and King Wu are “both perfectly beautiful” (皆盡美) because of their deeds, a judgment of moral values. Therefore, the beauty “美” here is not an aesthetic concept but a moral one, which differs little from a broadly understood concept of *shan* 善. That is to say, Zhu Xi takes the two words “美” and “善” as synonymous as is defined in the *Shuowen jiezi*. It is reminiscent of the way Plato uses the terms beauty and goodness interchangeably in his *Symposium*, which carries the subtitle “On the Good”, but treats of beauty. A commentator adds of Plato:

“What it says there about the idea of beauty coincides with what his other dialogues say about the idea of the good.” (Tatarkiewicz 1999: 114)

But this was never the whole of Western thought, and its counterpart should not be the whole of Chinese thought as well.

Conclusion

The argument put forward here is designed to open a wider, fresher field for aesthetic investigation and theorizing. Chinese traditions do not need to be weighted down by the expectation that the world of art is at one with the world of morality. To be sure, if modern day aestheticians and artists wish to use Confucius and other Chinese philosophical classics to set forth their own vision of a desired unity of goodness and beauty, they should be entirely free to do so. Only the texts used in this effort, even if drawn from the *Analects* itself, should not be imbued with the authority of Confucius or an established ancient “tradition”. Rather, this is an interpretive reading, one to be considered against the notion that the unity of beauty and goodness was the defining characteristic of Confucian aesthetics or more specifically Confucius’s aesthetics. Such a misleading definition can harden into a dogma and prevent us from appreciating the multi-faceted and even unruly nature of the original texts and commentary. Where this realization will take us must be left to further exposition. But the fact that even Confucius appeared to grant an independent driving power to the world of art, suggests to us that future of ancient Chinese aesthetics is one that will be quite open to creativity, innovation and debate.

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Slingerland’s comments on *Analects* 3:25, see Lobel 2021.

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Xiaowei Fu, Yi Wang, David Pickus

**Jesu li jedinstvo dobrote i lijepoga
osebujno obilježje konfucijanske estetike?**

Sažetak

Tvrđnju da je jedinstvo ljepote i dobrote (美善合一) karakteristično obilježje konfucijanske estetike, estetičari su previše lako uzeli za aksiomatsku i na osnovi toga pretpostavili da je teorijski temelj konfucijanske estetike i obrazovanja. U suvremenim kineskim akademskim krugovima ovaj je stav dobio tako veliku podršku da se pojavio implicitni konsenzus, dajući dojam da jedva da postoji potreba za filozofskim argumentom koji bi opravdao ili na drugi način osporio izvornu tvrđnju. Da bismo promaknuli novo stajalište povratkom na drevne tekstove, pokazat ćemo da su u starokineskom znakovi 美 i 善 sinonimni, te da su estetske misli Konfucija i ranih konfucijanaca češće izraženi izrazom yue (樂), nego mei (美), dok se njihova ideja o odnosu između lijepoga i dobrote iskazuje terminima li (禮) i yue (樂), umjesto shan (善) i mei (美). Zatim pokušavamo dokazati da dva najčešće citirana dokazna teksta za pretpostavku da postoji jedinstvo dobrote i lijepoga u drevnoj tradiciji, točnije jedan odlomak iz Mencija i drugi iz Analekata, zapravo ne govore o jedinstvu lijepoga i dobrote. Zaključujemo kratkim prikazom značaja ovog argumenta za proučavanje kineske i svjetske estetike.

Ključne riječi

jedinstvo, lijepo, dobrotu, konfucijanska estetika, Konfucije, mei 美, shan 善, li 禮, yue 樂

Xiaowei Fu, Yi Wang, David Pickus

**Ist die Einheit von Güte und Schönheit
das Erkennungsmerkmal der konfuzianischen Ästhetik?**

Zusammenfassung

Die Behauptung, die Einheit von Schönheit und Güte (美善合一) sei das distinktive Merkmal der konfuzianischen Ästhetik, wurde von den Ästhetikern allzu leicht als axiomatisch erachtet und demgemäß als theoretische Grundlage der konfuzianischen Ästhetik und Bildung angesehen. In zeitgenössischen chinesischen akademischen Kreisen hat diese Haltung eine so überwältigende Unterstützung erhalten, dass sich ein impliziter Konsens herausgebildet hat, der den Anschein erweckt, dass es kaum eines philosophischen Arguments bedarf, um die ursprüngliche These zu rechtfertigen oder anderweitig anzuzweifeln. Um durch die Rückkehr zu den alten Texten eine neue Sichtweise voranzutreiben, werden wir zeigen, dass im Altchinesischen die Zeichen 美 und 善 synonym sind und dass die ästhetischen Gedanken von Konfuzius und frühen Konfuzianern häufiger mit der Bezeichnung yue (樂) als mit mei (美) ausgedrückt werden, während deren Vorstellung von der Relation zwischen Schönheit und Güte mit den Begriffen li (禮) und yue (樂) anstelle von shan (善) und mei (美) hervorgebracht wird. Anschließend versuchen wir zu belegen, dass die beiden am häufigsten zitierten Beweistexte für die Annahme einer Einheit von Güte und Schönheit in der antiken Tradition, ausdrücklich eine Passage aus dem Menzius und eine andere aus den Analekten, in der Tat nicht von der Einheit von Schönheit und Güte handeln. Wir schließen mit einer gerafften Darstellung der Tragweite dieses Arguments für das Studium der chinesischen samt der weltweiten Ästhetik.

Schlüsselwörter

Einheit, Schönheit, Güte, konfuzianische Ästhetik, Konfuzius, mei 美, shan 善, li 禮, yue 樂

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L'unité du bien et du beau est-elle une
caractéristique distinctive de l'esthétique confucéenne ?

Résumé

L'affirmation selon laquelle l'unité du beau et de bien (美善合一) est une caractéristique distinctive de l'esthétique confucéenne a été trop facilement acceptée comme axiomatique par les esthètes, qui ont, par conséquent, supposé que le fondement théorique de l'esthétique confucéenne fût également l'éducation. Dans les cercles académiques chinois contemporains, cette opinion a bénéficié d'un soutien tellement grand qu'un consensus implicite est apparu, donnant l'impression qu'il est à peine nécessaire de proposer une argumentation philosophique qui justifierait, ou mettrait à l'épreuve, l'affirmation originelle. Afin d'offrir un regard nouveau à travers un retour aux textes anciens, nous montrerons que les anciens caractères chinois 美 et 善 sont synonymes, et que les pensées esthétiques de Confucius et des premiers confucistes sont plus souvent exprimées par le terme de yue (樂), plutôt que de mei (美), alors que leur idée sur la relation du beau et du bien est mise en avant à travers les termes de li (禮) et yue (樂), à la place de shan (善) et mei (美). Ensuite, nous nous attacherons à montrer que les deux textes justificatifs les plus fréquemment cités portant sur la supposition qu'il existe une unité du bien et du beau dans la tradition ancienne, plus précisément un passage du Mencius et un autre des Analectes, ne discutent à vrai dire pas de l'unité du beau et bien. Nous concluons par un bref compte-rendu de la signification de cet argument pour l'étude de l'esthétique chinoise et mondiale.

Mots-clés

unité, beau, bonté, esthétique confucéenne, Confucius, mei 美, shan 善, li 禮, yue 樂