

Chinese Aesthetics

HUMN2001 – VIDEO LECTURE – WK4
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Context of the Chinese Philosophical Tradition

- Began to be codified:
 - Spring and Autumn Period (771 to 476 BCE)
 - And the Warring States Period (453-221 BCE)
 - The overlap in intellectual terms is called the Period of a “Hundred Schools of Thought”
 - China unified at the end of the Warring States Period by the Qin or Ch’in dynasty, from which we get the name China



Context of the Chinese Philosophical Tradition

The **Chinese Tradition** is made up are several diverse sources and lineages which have significantly influenced one another in different ways over time. These include (among many others):

- The I-Ching
- School of Yin-Yang
- Confucianism (Ruism)
- Taoism
- Mohism
- Legalism
- (after the Warring States Period) Buddhism (originating in India)

Context of the Chinese Philosophical Tradition

We will focus on three main sources of philosophical ideas in this period:

- Confucianism (our primary subject)
- Legalism
- Taoism

Confucianism

- We will come back to this in significant detail
- Our assigned texts are in the Confucian tradition.
- For now let us move elsewhere.



Legalism

- Legalism or *Fajia* (法家) was the chief administrative or political philosophy of State during this period and afterward in the Qin dynasty.
 - The prosperity of the State
 - and the consolidation of the power of its ruler were most important
 - These were seen as the greatest means of securing order and stability within a political community.

Legalism

It is often considered a form of political 'realism' and has had a profound influence on the bureaucratic system of China since the Qin dynasty.



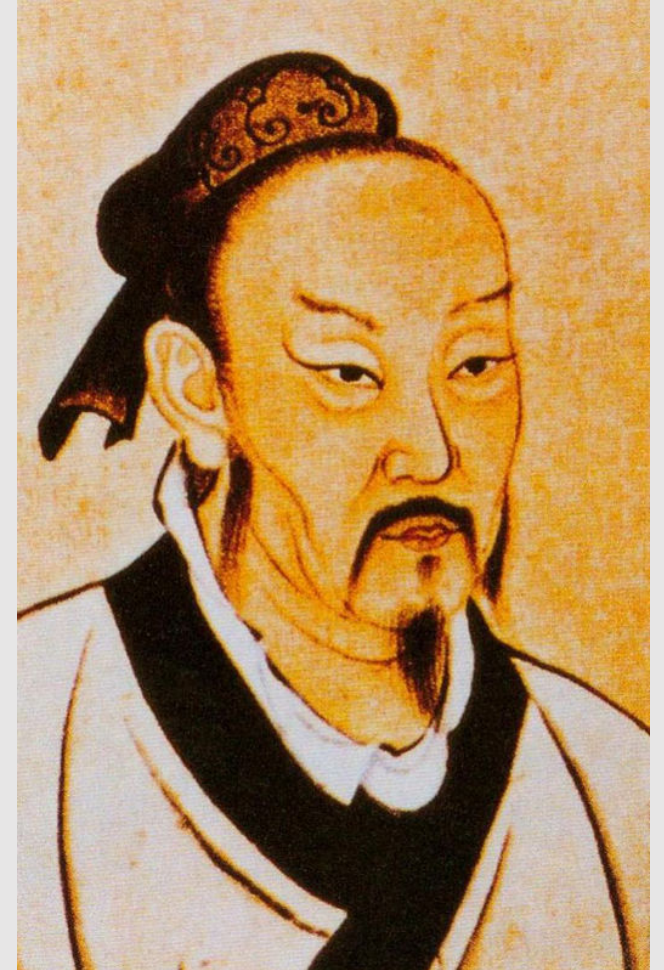
Legalism, cont.

It's said that one the primary precepts of Legalism is a belief in the essential selfishness of human nature — a selfishness that needs to be suppressed in order for a community to thrive.



Legalism, cont.

- According to Han Fei, an important synthesizer of Legalist thought, three concepts were of the highest importance for a ruler to rule over their subjects.:
 - *Fa* (法): law or principle.
 - *Shù* (術): method, tactic, art, or statecraft.
 - *Shi* (勢): legitimacy, power, or charisma.



Taoism

- Taoism is a metaphysical and religious philosophy concerned with the relationship between the individual and Nature, broadly conceived.
- It is often considered the most abstract and mystical tradition of ancient China
- It has much in common with ascetic practices and thought in other cultures



Taoism

Major texts of Taoism are:

- Laozi's *Tao Te Ching* (道德经), and
- Zhuangzi's *Zhuangzi* (莊子)



Zhuangzi's Butterfly Dream

Taoism

Major concepts of Taoism include:

- ***Tao*** (道)
 - ‘The way’
- ***Yin-yang*** (陰陽)
 - lit. ‘dark-bright’ fig. ‘negative-positive’ etc.
- ***Wu wei*** (無為)
 - ‘non-action,’ ‘effortless action,’
- ***Tian*** (天)
 - ‘nature or heaven’
- ***Pu*** (樸 or 朴)
 - ‘simplicity’ or ‘pre-linguistic purity’



Confucianism

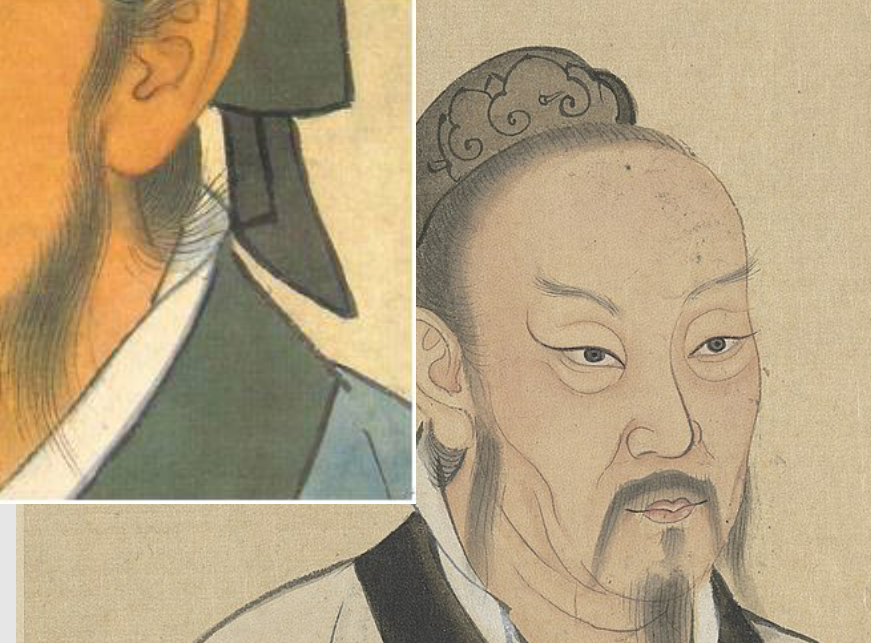
Confucianism, also called Ruism places emphasis on:

- Ritual
- Propriety
- Family (filial piety)
- the State



Confucianism

- Three main figures of Classical Ruism:
 - Confucius
 - Mencius
 - Xunzi



Confucius

孔夫子, Kǒng Fūzǐ,
trans. 'Master Kong'

- Dates ~ 551–479
BCE
- Considered the first
systematic thinker of
the practices of the *ru*
(masters of ritual and
music)



Confucius

Confucius is most often associated with **three major strands of thinking** according to scholar Mark Csikszentmihalyi (SEP 2020). These are:

- “a **psychology of ritual** that describes how ideal social forms regulate individuals”;
- “an **ethics** rooted in the cultivation of a set **of personal virtues**” and;
- “a **theory of society and politics** based on normative views of the **family and the state.**” (Ibid.)

Confucius

The Life of Confucius



Confucius

Sources

- Many sources of differing age.
- Some are thought to be more authoritative but the chronology isn't certain.
- ***The Analects*** is traditionally taken to be the chief authoritative source.



Confucius

Concepts

- *Ru* (儒)
 - ‘masters of ritual and music’
- *Qi* or *Ch’I* (氣)
 - lit. ‘air,’ ‘breath,’ figuratively ‘material energy,’ ‘energy flow’ ‘vital force’)

Confucius

Concepts, cont.

Confucian Virtues:

- The principal virtues recorded in the *Analects* for a ‘gentleman’ or *junzi* (君子) following the *tao* (‘way’) are:
 - Benevolence/humaneness/humanity (*ren* 仁),
 - righteousness (*yi* 義),
 - ritual propriety (*li* 禮),
 - wisdom (*zhi* 智), and
 - trustworthiness (*xin* 信).

Mencius

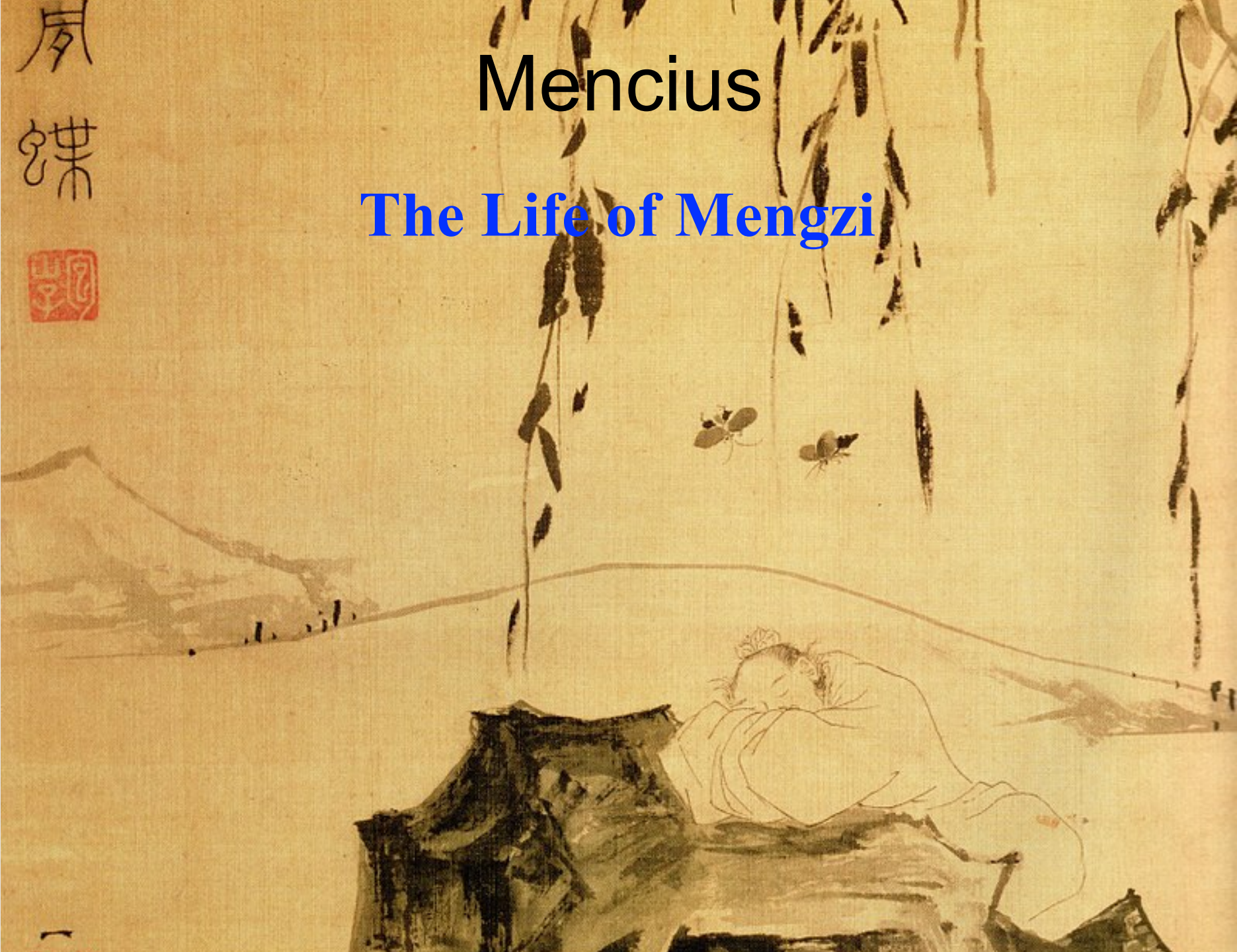
孟子, Mengzi

- DATES: 372–289 BCE
or 385–303 or 302
BCE
- Called the ‘second sage’, he is often considered the second most important source of Confucian thought



Mencius

The Life of Mengzi



Mencius

Main philosophical contributions

- *xing*, 性
 - ‘human nature’
- **the four ‘sprouts’** of *xing*:
 - commiseration > humanity/benevolence (*ren*)
 - shame and dislike > righteousness (*yi*)
 - deference and compliance > propriety (*li*)
 - right or wrong > wisdom (*zhi*)



Xunzi

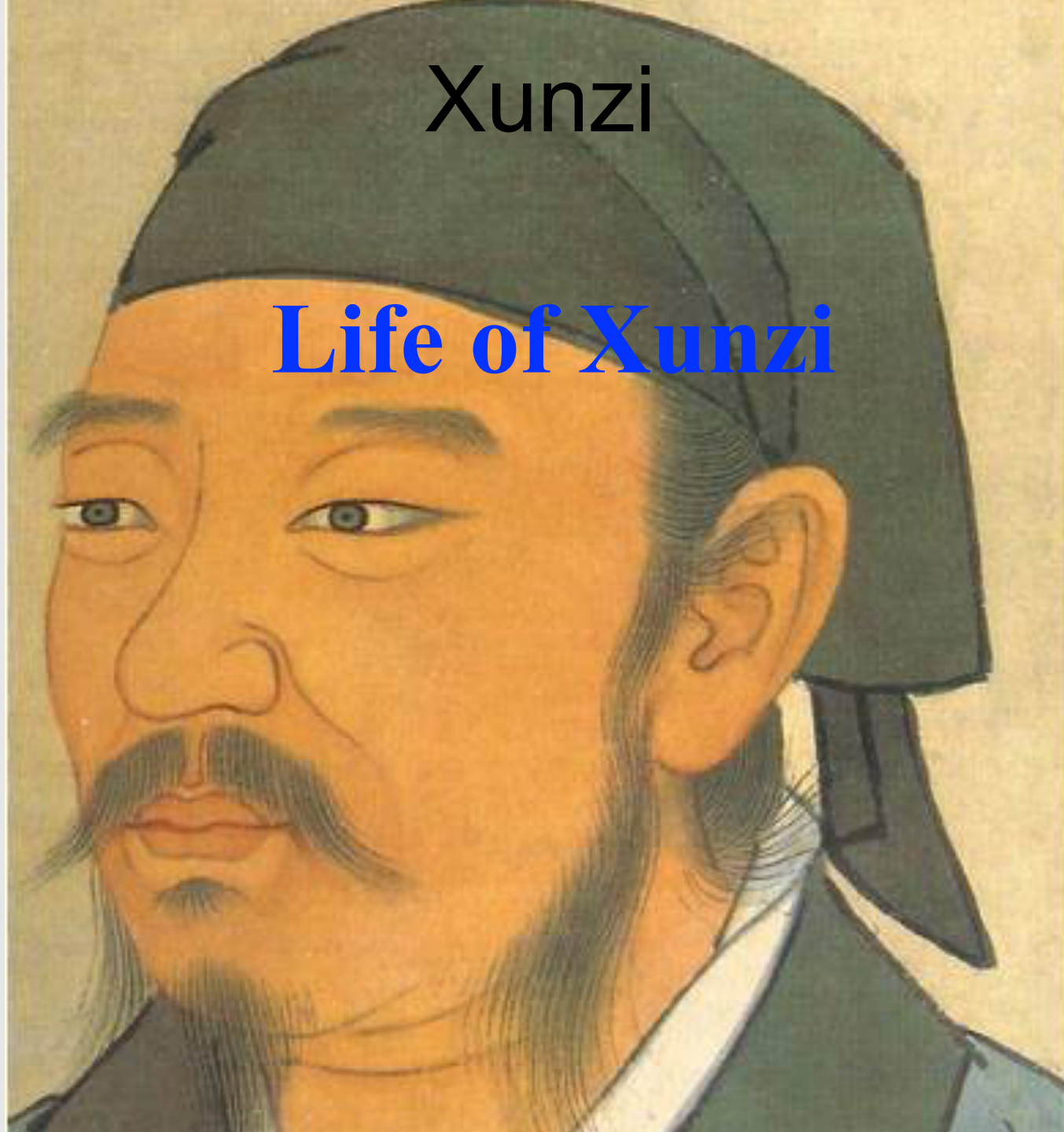
荀子, Xunzi

- DATES: ~310 – ~235 BCE, or ~314 – ~217 BCE
- The third of the classical Confucians, he is thought of as a counter point to the optimistic Mencius
- And thought to bridge Legalism with Confucian teaching
- Primary source is the *Xunzi*



Xunzi

Life of Xunzi



Xunzi

Main philosophical contributions

- *Xing'e* 性惡
 - “Human Nature is Detestable” (alt. trans. ‘evil’ ‘hateful’)
- *Wei* - Opposed to the Taoist view, Xunzi thought that all human good comes from human artifice (*wei*) or conscious and deliberative human action.
 - “What is good [in people] is their artifice” (“*Qi shan zhe wei ye*” 其善者偽也) (quoted in Goldin, SEP, 2018).
- Beginnings of moral constructivism in China?
 - The *tao* is not merely given from Heaven (*tian*) but perhaps afforded (at least in part) by human cultivation itself. Human cultivation is not just in harmony with the *tao* of *tian* but constructs its *tao* through practice.

Reading Tu Wei-Ming's "The Idea of the Human in Mencian Thought: An Approach to Chinese Aesthetics"

“...Confucians and Taoists share the belief that **self-cultivation** is basic to artistic creativity. This is contrary to the trite and commonplace observation that the essential **purpose** of art is to assist in the **perfection** of the moral and spiritual personality. It suggests **a way of perceiving what art is** rather than what its **function** ought to be.” (Wei-ming 57).

“...Fu-kuan adds that a root idea of Chinese aesthetics is precisely this insistence that the dichotomies of subject/object, self/society, and man/nature [sic.] are unreal and transformable.”

Reading Tu Wei-Ming's "The Idea of the Human in Mencian Thought: An Approach to Chinese Aesthetics"

“ My purpose is **twofold**: [1] to explore the idea of the human in classical Confucian thought with particular emphasis on Mencius, [2] and to suggest that such an exploration could be fruitful for an understanding of Chinese aesthetics.”

- From this Wei-ming gives us a series of subheadings starting paragraphs within which his two-ply exposition will unfold. These are in turn:
 - Tao (the Way)
 - Shen (Body)
 - Hsin (Heart)
 - Shen (Spirit)

Reading Tu Wei-Ming's "The Idea of the Human in Mencian Thought: An Approach to Chinese Aesthetics"

“As a metaphor in Mencian language, the Way is never a static category, signifying something external and objective. It is a **process**, a **movement**, and indeed a **dynamic unfolding** of the self as a vital force for personal, social, and cosmic transformation. **Rather than as a norm to be conformed to, Mencius sees the Way as a standard of inspiration that must be reenacted by ceaseless effort.**” (Ibid 58)

“We do not achieve humanity (*jen* or *ren*) purely and simply by being alive” (Ibid).

“Even though Mencius denounces those who choose not to improve themselves as a committing inexcusable self-abasement, he fully recognizes their right to be human” (ibid)

Reading Tu Wei-Ming's "The Idea of the Human in Mencian Thought: An Approach to Chinese Aesthetics"

"It seems that there is a moral "deep structure" inherent in human nature that can fully developed, without forcing, as a natural process of growth." (ibid 59)

"There is a multiplicity of paths to be pursued...but they converge at various states to give us **standards of inspiration** that we can look up to...as [ways of witnessing the excellence in humanity](#). This leads to the following characterization in the *Mencius*:

He who commands our liking is called good (*shan*)

He who is sincere with himself is called true (*hsin*)

He who is sufficient and real is called beautiful (*mei*)

He whose sufficiency and reality shine forth is called great (*ta*)

He whose greatness transforms itself is called sagely (*sheng*)

He whose sageliness is beyond our comprehension is called spiritual (*shen*)"
(sic., ibid.)

Reading Tu Wei-Ming's "The Idea of the Human in Mencian Thought: An Approach to Chinese Aesthetics"

Wei-ming on Body (*shen*, 身)

- The state of one's body (which may/may not align with the modern English word 'body') is important in the realization of *ren*
- This is because the self (the object of cultivation) is inseparable from the body (ibid 60)
- This is related to the arts because art ((which are etymologically related the 'activity of planting and cultivating fields' (60) are firstly disciplines of the body
- The six classical Chinese arts are: ritual, music, archery, charioteering, calligraphy, and arithmetic.
 - You'll notice none of the traditional European plastic visual arts is included.
- The disciplines of the body teach people how to fully participate in a community.
 - "...we emulate those who are worthy of our admiration and turn our gaze within to scrutinize ourselves in the presence of a bad man" (61, sic.)

Reading Tu Wei-Ming's "The Idea of the Human in Mencian Thought: An Approach to Chinese Aesthetics"

Wei-ming on Body (*shen*, 身)

- The function of the arts is to cultivate “the buds and sprouts of human possibility” (62).
- By enlarging oneself through the arts, you are able to enlarge others.
- Through one is able to be ‘good’ ‘true’ and ‘beautiful’ (the first three stages laid out earlier).

Reading Tu Wei-Ming's "The Idea of the Human in Mencian Thought: An Approach to Chinese Aesthetics"

Wei-ming on Heart-mind (*hsin* or *xīn*, 心, *xìn* 信)

“An outsider observing a Confucian student’s learning the six arts may easily conclude that he is engaged in a sort of **mimetic dance**. But, presumably, the Confucian master is interested not only in the correctness of the form but also in the mental attitude behind it. He is keenly aware of the difference between a rote performer and an active participant, even though both follow instructions correctly. **There is something missing in the role of the performer. We might say that his heart is not in it. How does the master know that form-likeness is not the real thing?...The Confucian master does not focus solely on the result, however, but also on the whole **process** by which the result is attained.**

In moral education, knowing manifests itself in acting, and through action one authenticates one’s knowledge” (63)

Reading Tu Wei-Ming's "The Idea of the Human in Mencian Thought: An Approach to Chinese Aesthetics"

Wei-ming on Heart-mind (*hsin* or *xīn*, 心, *xìn* 信)

- Because heart 'authenticates' one's moral knowledge, no amount of pure motor-memorization in the body can suffice, in and of itself. Nevertheless, heart cannot be separated from its place in the body. They must act in unity. (65)
- However heart is capable of an immanent, but unlimited expansion. Thus heart is called the '**great body**' of the self (ibid).
- This propensity for moral expansion makes us uniquely human, according Mencius (ibid).
- This has two elements: 1) *ren* cannot be reduced to either biological or social considerations (ibid); 2) far from being a pure ideal, self-development necessarily involves biological and social realities, and is realized through them (ibid).

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Wei-ming on Heart-mind (*hsin* or *xīn*, 心, *xìn* 信)

“Indeed the Mencian heart is both a **cognitive** and an **affective** faculty, symbolizing the functions of **conscience** as well as **consciousness**. It not only reflects upon realities but, in comprehending them, shapes and creates their meaningfulness for the human community as a whole” (66)

“...Mencius also maintains that ‘the great man does not lose his child-like heart’ and that the ‘great body’ is, in the last analysis, our original nature.” (66)

Reading Tu Wei-Ming's "The Idea of the Human in Mencian Thought: An Approach to Chinese Aesthetics"

Wei-ming on Spirit (*shen* 神)

“Sageliness and **spirituality** are therefore, like goodness, truth and beauty, symbols of human perfection. These **are standards of inspiration, to be continuously enacted as we learn to realize ourselves.** In the Mencian perspective, they are not objective criteria from judging human worth but **aesthetic appraisals of what human beings can attain and, by implication, what we ought to learn to become**” (66)

- Human perfection does not imply doing everything right, but rather aims at a process of improvement, and in a sense, of becoming oneself, being at home in oneself.

“Human beings ‘survive in adversity and perish in ease and comfort’ ... We learn to know ourselves, to communicate with others, and to assume responsibility for humanity through endeavour” (67)

- This has universal implications, as one aims to be themselves through being human person, par excellence, not just one of the species. **One must, in this sense, take responsibility for the meaning of humanity as such and embody it in being oneself.**

Reading Tu Wei-Ming's "The Idea of the Human in Mencian Thought: An Approach to Chinese Aesthetics"

Wei-ming on Spirit (*shen* 神)

“Humanity so conceived is not an unrealizable ideal but an **inexhaustibly abundant power of moral and spiritual transformation**” (68)

Reading Tu Wei-Ming's "The Idea of the Human in Mencian Thought: An Approach to Chinese Aesthetics"

Wei-ming on Mencian Aesthetics

“Beauty, like all good and true qualities of human growth, exists as a standard of inspiration... We see beauty in things. In describing it, we move from its physical existence to its underlying vitality and, eventually, to its all-embracing spirit. **The thing...however, is not that of a silent object, but a living encounter and indeed, a ‘spiritual communion’ (*shen-hui*).** This is not simply a form of anthropomorphism...to interpret such encounters [that way]...limits and distorts the **dialogical relationship that underlies the aesthetic experience.** **The idea of the human in *Mencius* is not anthropocentric.**...Instead, it intends to show that self-realization, in an ultimate sense, depends on a mutuality between man [sic.] and nature. As Hsü Fu-kuan points out...**the completion of the self necessitates the completion, rather than the domination, of things.**” (69)

Reading Tu Wei-Ming's "The Idea of the Human in Mencian Thought: An Approach to Chinese Aesthetics"

Wei-ming on Mencian Aesthetics (69)

Aesthetic
experience
as
encounter

background. Beauty, like all good and true qualities of human growth, exists as a standard of inspiration. It informs our sense of sufficiency and reality not as a fixed principle but as a dynamic interplay between the experiencing self and the perceived entity. We see beauty in things. In describing it, we move from its physical existence to its underlying vitality and, eventually, to its all-embracing spirit. The thing can be a tree, a stream, a mountain, or a stone. Its aesthetic effect on us, however, is not that of a silent object, but a living encounter and, indeed, a "spiritual communion" (*shen-hui^{ah}*). This is not simply a form of anthropomorphism, and to interpret such encounters as the imposition of human characters on the external world limits and distorts the dialogical relationship that underlies the aesthetic experience. The idea of the human in *Mencius* is not anthropocentric. It does not subscribe to Protagoras' principle that man is the measure of all things. Instead, it intends to show that self-realization, in an ultimate sense, depends on a mutuality between man and nature. As Hsü Fu-kuan points out, a basic assumption in Confucian thought is that the completion of the self (*ch'eng-chi^{ai}*) necessitates the completion (*ch'eng^{ai}*), rather than the domination (*ts'ai^{ak}*), of things (*wu^{ai}*).¹⁴

Perhaps this is the reason that auditory perception features so prominently in