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CHAPTER 4

Determinism and the Problem of Individual Freedom in Li Zehou's Thought

Andrew LAMBERT

LI ZEHOU'S WORK can be understood as an account of a Chinese modernity, a vision for Chinese society that seeks to integrate three distinct philosophical approaches. These are Chinese history and culture, which Li understands as largely Confucian; Marxism, which has exerted such influence on a modernizing China; and Western learning more generally, as expressed by figures such as Immanuel Kant and Sigmund Freud. Li also frequently expresses the hope that a Chinese modernity will be one in which the importance of the individual is recognized and rights and freedoms are upheld.¹ But this stance raises an important question: how are individuality and freedom understood in Li's philosophical system? In this chapter, I examine what resources Li offers to help us conceptualize their place in a modernity with Chinese characteristics. Confucian culture is often regarded as authoritarian and hierarchical, less interested than more liberal traditions in an ideal such as freedom. So how does freedom relate to the Confucian root of Chinese culture, as construed by Li? And is his call for a China that respects individual freedoms a direct consequence of his theoretical commitments, or it is a more personal stance?

Exploring the issues of individuality and freedom in Li's work is important for another reason; it enables us to better understand Li's philosophical framework and how the three major influences noted above are integrated. Specifically, questions of individuality and freedom arise at the intersection of two great philosophical thrusts in Li's work. These are a deterministic thrust, derived from Marxist historical materialism, and his interest in personal free-

dom. Examining the conceptions of individuality and freedom that Li offers will tell us whether he can successfully navigate what appears, at least initially, to be a troubling tension between these two thrusts.

A Tension in Li Zehou's Work

A tension arises from Li's reliance on a deterministic account of the relationship between society and the individual, on the one hand, and his account of the individual as a site of innovation and a starting point for social change. The Marxist component of Li's theory suggests that the final explanation of why society is as it is, and why people act as they do, resides in the technological-social base of society. There is, however, something illiberal about this, since it implies that people's actions are explained not by their own choices but by larger, sometimes unnoticed, social and economic forces. Li attempts to marry this foundation of historical materialism with Kantian accounts of the human psychology and cognitive structures. On the surface this approach is appealing, because it seems to bring with it Kant's concern with freedom—that a person's action—or more accurately, a person's will—is not conditioned by external forces but is the product of that person's own choices. But this amalgam of two influential philosophies brings its own difficulties. Specifically, it is not clear that Li has escaped the problem of determinism that arises when all human action is traced to an external material base. How do we know that the thoughts, feelings, and desires that lead to action are not themselves the product of external material forces, which we do not control?

This tension might also be stated in terms of two chains of causal influence that flow in opposite directions. The first moves from external social forces in toward the individual, while the second flows outward from the individual, bringing about change in the world around the individual. There is a puzzle as to how these two elements of Li's philosophical system fit together, as well as the question of whether he can articulate a viable conception of human freedom built on a deterministic foundation. What follows is an attempt to articulate that tension and to explore possible resolutions to it suggested in Li's work, including the various conceptions of freedom that he considers. Can Li's work bequeath a novel account of freedom—a freedom consistent with Confucian values—or is his work too invested in the kind of social determinism from which liberal reformers wish to escape? We are looking for an account of how the individual in Li's system can be an agent of change in his or her environment while also being the product of that environment.

In what follows, I first outline the tension in Li's work. I describe the social determinism implicit in Li's adaptations of Marxist ideas, in notions such as the cultural-psychological formation (*wenhua xinli jiegou*) and sedimentation (*jid-*

ian). I then explore accounts of individuality and freedom in Li's work, which might provide philosophical justification for contemporary calls for personal freedom and respect for human rights. To anticipate what then follows, I argue that some of those accounts, particularly those that draw on Kant's work on rationality and the will, are problematic; but Li's work in aesthetics does offer a novel account of freedom and a valuable form of individuality with Confucian characteristics. This freedom involves orienting desires and emotions toward shared communal objects and experiences, which allows for the coordination of desires (not merely private desire satisfaction) and the capacity to generate aesthetic goods such as beauty, delight, and a sense of ease. This freedom is something cultivated, not merely possessed as a right, and emerges from a variety of cultivated psychological responses that are grounded in stable social structures and human relationships.

First, however, a clarification is necessary. Li's work is complex and multifaceted. He covers much ground, from Kant, Marx, and Heidegger to, more recently, Michael Sandel's work on justice.² Some have criticized Li for glossing too lightly over major thinkers and their ideas.³ Setting aside this reservation, Li describes his own work as opening up new lines of inquiry and offering suggestive but speculative theories, rather than systematically developing a single theme or idea.⁴ As a result, an attempt such as this to focus narrowly on particular themes or assertions in Li's work is vulnerable to an objection—namely, that Li offers the grounds for a response elsewhere in his vast collection of writings. This possibility cannot be ruled out, although disparate comments and thoughts are not necessarily complete responses. More importantly, I hope that the following discussion will serve to unpack some of Li's valuable contributions to Chinese thought and, as Li himself hopes, encourage more discussion of ideas broached but not fully explored in his writing.

Determinism in Li's Work: Historical Materialism

Li offers a theory of what he calls historical ontology or anthropological ontology. This is derived from Marx' deterministic theory of historical materialism, which Li explicitly commends as a mode of social explanation⁵ but which features important differences. Li shares with Marx the conviction that most fundamental explanation of human existence is rooted in the material and social worlds. Human life is ultimately to be understood in terms of the development of tool use and the evolution of productive forces such as science and technology. In his *On Traditional Chinese Intellectual History*, Li quotes approvingly from *The German Ideology*, in which Marx emphasizes how society and social structure determine the life of the individual, as the following quote illustrates: "*Individuals find their conditions of existence predestined*, and hence may have

their position in life and their personal development assigned to them by their class, and become subsumed under it.”⁶ As Li’s use of this passage makes clear, individual life is conditioned by a more fundamental social reality.⁷ Wanting to understand the nature of human life, we should not start from first-person experience and subjective reflection, for these are merely the outcome of productive forces and social practices. Instead, we must first understand the latter and how they give rise to the kind of consciousness and patterns of thought experienced at the personal and subjective level.

However, Li’s ideas are to be distinguished from classical Marxism in several important ways. First, Li has little interest in class as a unit of social analysis; he focuses more on technology, social practices and their historical origins, and the effects of both on the individual person. Also, while Li’s work retains the notion of historical evolution, he discards the idea that society evolves through discrete stages of history. No objective blueprint or schedule of social evolution can be identified, and history does not progress toward a revolutionary conclusion.⁸ Science, technology, and productive forces do drive the evolution of human society, but their effects are understood, not in terms of broad social categories such as discrete historical epochs, but rather in terms of the psychology of the individual. This focus on the inner life of the individual is arguably Li’s most important difference from Marx. Unlike Marx, who might dismiss first-person experiences as false consciousness or for failing to reflect deeper structural realities, Li grants theoretical weight to the structure of inner experiences. But he retains the deterministic thrust of Marx’ work: changing technology and social conditions generate and structure an individual psychology.

Li’s use of the term “psychology” (*xinli*) here is very broad, including diverse aspects of human consciousness such as concepts, emotions, and desires. This direct link between productive forces or social practices, on the one hand, and the mental lives of individuals on the other is captured by Li’s idea of the cultural-psychological formation (*wenhua-xinli jiegou*). In Li’s words, “Human psychology is the product of our human history.”⁹ The exact causal pathways involved are, Li maintains, empirical matters rather than theoretical questions and are difficult to specify in the absence of advances in empirical psychology. Nevertheless, this framework for explaining human consciousness, or “psychology,” illustrates Li’s deterministic account of how society progresses.

The deterministic nature of this framework can be articulated in at least three ways. The first is that all concepts have their origins in external social practices. In this, Li agrees with anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s claim that human nature is the product of history and culture.¹⁰ Even the most fundamental concepts and categories through which humans experience and make sense of the world originate in social practices. These include concepts such as time and causation. Li thus opposes philosophers, such as Kant, who claim a priori

knowledge or categories of experience. Even ideas that seem to us to be commonsense, requiring no education and having no basis in any particular social practice are found, upon correct investigation, to be the product of some social practice (though it might be so ancient that we are no longer aware of the link between practice and thought). There is thus no a priori structure of human cognition or thought that is independent of social context and material forces. The individual mind is entirely rooted in the external world.

A second feature of this system, which ties thought to external social practice, is the tendency toward cultural relativism at both the conceptual and evaluative (moral) levels. The forms of life or social practices determine the conceptual and normative frameworks through which communities and individuals understand the world. For example, those who lived in farming communities would understand the world in terms of those practices that constituted agricultural production. In the case of China, Li explains how a distinctively Chinese cultural-psychological formation can be traced back to Confucian culture and to the primitive agrarian society that preceded Confucius.¹¹ Li identifies in that tradition two particular foundational social practices that structured people's worldview: clan-based hierarchical social relationships and ritual, both of which date from prehistoric times.

Clan structures, which gave rise to stable communities and prized seniority, shaped Confucian moral ideals such as humaneness (*ren*),¹² while ritual was the attempt to codify early efforts to organize human use of tools to meet basic human needs.¹³ But ritual also had a psychological function: participating in ritualized practice served to implant ideas and ways of seeing the world into the minds of participants, bringing about shared social understandings that generated social order. People's attention and thinking were drawn to the same things—such as the practices that produced and sustained crops in an agricultural society; they experienced the same emotions toward those features of the world, and those emotions were also reinforced through joyous, aesthetically striking ritualized songs and dance;¹⁴ and they experienced a sense of unity or harmony as a result of such social and emotional unity. Such shared norms and understandings were then formally codified as laws and institutions. In this way, social practices such as ritual determined subjects' conceptual understanding, emotional dispositions, and sense of what was rational or reasonable.

The role of social practices in structuring individual psychology and judgment can be traced down through Chinese history. Li also offers a similar historical and cultural analysis regarding how beauty evolved within the Chinese tradition and how this form of aesthetic consciousness is different from the kinds of aesthetic appreciation that emerged in non-Chinese cultural traditions.¹⁵

This theoretical approach has several strengths. Li's theory and the theoretical defense of relativism therein allow for the Chinese (i.e., Confucian) tra-

dition to be treated as an independent historical and cultural tradition, not one to be understood through Western historical models (though clearly Li borrows from Marx to some extent). Different cultural traditions can, over time, interact and influence each other, but they do so as equals, such that any “Western” cultural tradition might take as much from China as China takes from it. Another strength of Li’s framework derives from the weight it grants to history and existing tradition in explaining both society and the life of the individual. The socially grounded holistic nature of this theory provides a plausible rationalization of Confucian values, in which history and tradition are so prominent. Li’s historical ontology enables him to defend the Confucian tradition, making the values and claims that define that it appear broadly reflective of truths about underlying reality.

However, the relativism of this framework also creates difficulty for understanding how freedom and individuality fit into it. Given its implicit conceptual and moral relativism, the question arises of whether individuals can conceive of the world in ways independent of the historically rooted practices under whose influence they live. Similarly, the framework suggests that the subject’s normative judgments—what the subject considers reasonable, good, right, beautiful, and so forth—are conditioned by the social environment in which they live. Such a stance does not deny the possibility of critical reflection, but it does suggest that it arises only within a framework rooted in a preexisting social reality. Further, the importance of unity and shared socially responsive emotions raises questions about the relative importance of dissent, resistance, and individuality.

A third deterministic force in Li’s work is his account of human nature as, in part, a biologically grounded human nature. Certain biological needs or dispositions are common to all members of the species and are reflected in certain social practices. The clearest example of this is Li’s account of filial conduct (*xiao*). The importance of this value in Confucian thought stems partly from the fact that it reflects a generic human nature—the affective bond between parent and child. Parents feel love toward offspring, while children feel respect and fear toward parents.¹⁶ The biological reality of this bond is, Li argues, expressed in *Analects* 17.21.¹⁷ Therein, Zaiwo questions the need for three years of mourning for parents; Confucius answers that cultivated persons find “no relish” in “fine food,” “no pleasure” in “music,” and “no comfort” in “lodgings.” For Li, this line is evidence of a deep psychological bond between child and parent that is rooted in biology.

Presenting Confucianism as a form of naturalism, in which generic features of humanity shape the conceptions of ethics that governs human life, is plausible and has a textual basis. However, it raises questions for other parts of Li’s grander philosophical system. Specifically, it raises questions about how such biological forces fit with the cultural and social practices described above, and

the role that each plays in determining individual psychology. Which aspects of that psychology are due to social factors and which are biological? Perhaps this question can be left open as an empirical issue awaiting investigation. What matters is that this form of explanation adds another deterministic element to Li's theory.

We should note, however, that Li himself also claims biology as a source of individuality and uniqueness.¹⁸ He insists that the particular biologically determined differences that arise between people (presumably, differences such as height and even temperament) can never be adequately captured by theory and must be accepted as a form of individuality. To what extent biologically determined differences between people are more significant than biologically determined similarities is a substantial debate that cannot be settled here. Suffice it to say that, given how appeals to biology in settling the question of human nature are inherently deterministic, there is scope for questioning whether Li's appeal to biology further reduces the scope for a theory of undetermined, free human action. Since this is an open question, I will set aside the question of biological determinism in what follows.

Let us summarize the deterministic strand of Li's thought. Li's theory provides an explanation of how various forces condition individual psychology without themselves being subject to the endorsement of the individual. Following Marx, material forces and technology determine the social practices that constitute society, and these in turn determine the inner lives of people in those societies, including both the conceptual schemes through which they order experience, their emotional responses, and their conceptions of rationality and the reasonable. Further, such processes are understood as arising within specific historical and cultural traditions, and Li's work mainly focuses on the form such forces have taken within Chinese history. This is captured in the much-discussed slogan "*xiti zhongyong*" ("a Western root with Chinese application" 西体中用):¹⁹ a broadly Marxist ontology is applied to Chinese history. This means that Chinese social practices and accompanying psychology have been influenced by a civilization rooted in hierarchical clan and kinship relations and ritual practices. It was from this root in agricultural communities that Confucian thought emerged and sought to refine and respond to such circumstances. So what room does this account leave for individuality, such that a modern China can be the product of the cultural forces that created it, yet also grant greater recognition to individual persons as they emerge against such a background of culturally determined norms, thoughts, and feelings?

Unlike classical Marxism, this account has no transcendental historical narrative or God's-eye perspective that the intellect can draw upon to ascertain the fundamental laws of history—knowledge of which would constitute freedom from the confusion of everyday social life. The direction of social trends

and thus individual psychology cannot be charted in advance. If rational judgments and emotional responses are conditioned by our social lives, then the conceptual space for individual choice, unconditioned by social forces, diminishes.

This suits the Confucian tradition and the idea that all selves are social selves, but it creates challenges for ideals such as freedom and self-determination. For example, in a society in which being a filial son, receptive to parental need and opinion, is highly valued, it becomes harder to explain and positively value a person who does not behave in such a way but, rather, seeks to live a more independent life. As Li often discusses, the Confucian tradition frequently promotes the ideal of a thoroughgoing unity, perhaps best expressed in the idea of *tianren heyi* (unity of the cosmos and humanity). As the *Liushi Chunqiu* states, “Unity brings peace, and differences bring danger.”²⁰ Given such an emphasis on unity, what prospects are there for a Chinese modernity that is molded by earlier social practices but can accommodate greater emphasis on individuality, without abandoning that past?

This is not to claim that Li’s work lacks any responses to this question; rather, the deterministic forces contained within Li’s own theoretical framework present challenges to any account of how the direction of causation and influence flow the other way—from the individual out into the social world. Li hopes to provide such an account by drawing European Enlightenment thought, specifically, on Kant’s notion of the rational and autonomous subject. But how does this work, and is Li successful?

Li on the Power of the Individual to Initiate Social Change

To understand the reverse process—that of the individual subject controlling and reordering the social world—it is useful to understand the point at which human action arises in Li’s system, at least from the subject’s point of view. As noted above, the inner life of the subject, *xinli* (often translated as “psychology”), is one element in Li’s cultural-psychological formation. Although I will use the term “psychology” here for the sake of consistency, it should be noted that *xinli* is broader in meaning than the English term suggests. *Xinli* refers to the point at which a person or subject encounters or experiences the world, and it includes all the reactions, feelings, motivations, and thoughts that a person has when confronting events in the world. Given this psychology, the human subject as active agent is captured by Li’s term *zbutixing*.²¹ This word is usually translated as “subjectivity” or “subjectality” (to underline the difference between it and passive notions of subjectivity). Li writes that *zbutixing* refers to a human person who has “the capacity of an active entity” and who has “an active capability in relation to its environment.”²²

In articulating this active quality of the human subject, Li follows Kant's division of the human subject into the three realms of the intellect (cognition), the aesthetic, and the moral. Li emphasizes that the origin of the active quality lies within that part of the psychological formation that constitutes the moral realm, and the moral will in particular. In his "Fourth Outline of Human Subjectivity," Li writes that "morality is prior to cognition."²³ Thus, despite the critical stance taken in his earlier work on Kant,²⁴ Li in later work is drawn back to Kant's account of the moral realm as a realm of freedom.

In his *Outline of My Philosophy (Zhaxue gangyao)*,²⁵ Li comes to view the categorical imperative, and the capacity to abide by it, as the ability that distinguishes humans qua humans (in contrast to animals, which lack this form of rationality). Li, *pace* Kant, still holds that all ideas and norms have their origin in social practice and experience; but he accepts that certain ideas or principles (including the categorical imperative) are so central to how a person thinks that they appear to be a priori or innate. Thus, although Kant was mistaken about the origins of the categorical imperative—claiming it to be the product of pure practical reason—he was correct in ascribing to it the highest possible moral worth. That is because the categorical imperative indicates a will, a morally good will, which is conditioned in a special and law-like way. At its simplest, the will is a conscious striving to bring about the ends that an agent seeks to realize. But such willing is vulnerable to the vagaries of desire and the emotions and is thus not free. Only a will that is structured by a commitment solely to those ends that could reasonably be endorsed by any rational agent is a truly good will. And in making one's will conform to such universal law-like regularity, the subject attains freedom—from the deterministic empirical world and from the capricious influences of the body and human desire.

The capacity to set one's will in such a way that it cannot be swayed by empirical concerns is also a source of personal worth. Willful fortitude in the face of both the world and one's narrower self-interest bestows the highest worth on human life. If humans are capable, as rational individuals, of obeying the categorical imperative, then they are worthy of respect qua individuals. Understanding the inner life of the human subject in this way would thus provide a theoretical justification for greater recognition of individual rights and individual freedoms in contemporary Chinese society.

Appealing to Kant to develop an account of freedom consistent with the features of the Chinese Confucian tradition stressed by Li faces difficulties, however. Specifically, its relation to other elements of Li's theory is puzzling.²⁶ Furthermore, I believe that Li's work contains other more interesting ideas, which could be developed into an account of freedom without relying on a Kantian framework.

Problems with the Kantian Notion of Freedom

Various problems accompany this attempted merger of Kantian and Marxist thought; here I consider three. First, it is possible to question Li's appeal to Kant's categorical imperative by directly questioning the value of appealing to the categorical imperative as the ground of freedom and individual dignity—that is, by questioning the assumptions made in Kant's moral philosophy. The most direct challenge is to ask why binding oneself to a law, allowing oneself to be constrained by it, should be understood as a form of freedom. Kant's answer was that this law-like structuring of the will was a form of pure practical reason, a higher former of rationality than instrumental reasoning. It insulated subjects from the deterministic forces of the empirical world and allowed the agents to be author of their own laws. But this idea requires belief in this special form of rationality, which many philosophers have rejected. Setting aside this question, there is the simpler objection that the categorical imperative presents a counter-intuitive account of freedom. Rather than consisting of being bound to a law, freedom is often understood as liberating oneself from compulsion and rejecting laws or rules. Arguably, this is a more intuitively plausible and compelling notion of freedom.

Furthermore, there is the objection that the categorical imperative amounts to an empty formalism—it permits too much and thus cannot serve to ensure that personal freedom is protected. Its lack of specificity means that it could be used to justify or permit policies or actions that threaten personal freedoms, since it is unclear whether the policies or actions are “universalizable” or not. As Li himself notes, Kant regarded this ethical commitment as being compatible with the restriction of voting rights to property owners.²⁷ Hence, abstract moral principles alone, despite the well-meant supervisory role of rational reflection, do not guarantee the safeguarding of individual rights and freedoms that Li calls for. Rather than pursue such objections to Kant's moral theory, however, I will focus instead on its relation to Li's philosophical system.

Problems Integrating the Categorical Imperative into Li's Theoretical Framework

The first issue to be considered regarding integration of the categorical imperative into Li's theoretical framework is how the categorical imperative can be a foundational principle, given that Li rejects Kant's category of the a priori in human cognition. More specifically, given that such a form of rationality is not crucial to the Confucian tradition—a tradition in which, according to Li, pragmatic reasoning (*shiyong lixing*) dominates—then how could it come to hold a dominant place in the psychological formation of a subject immersed in that

tradition?²⁸ It might be a worthy moral ideal, one that all people should adopt, but this does answer the question of how it comes to have authority with the particular cultural-psychological formation that develops within the Confucian tradition.

In fact, Li has an answer to this question, at least in theory. One of the appealing features of Li's system is that the cultural-psychological formation of a group or tradition is unbounded—it is open to all influences, as long as these can be integrated into existing social practices and categories of understanding. Over time and through interaction with other cultures, globalized psychological formations could emerge. The Chinese tradition—as one set of social practices, along with concepts and feelings that make up individual psychology—could absorb other initially alien influences, including the idea of the categorical imperative. In a global marketplace of concepts and ways of thinking and feeling, the categorical imperative could emerge as the acme of reason, something to which subjects feel a strong commitment.

Li seems to present the categorical imperative in this way, as a universal ideal toward which all people or cultures will evolve. This is a possibility. However, for at least two reasons we can ask whether it should be treated as such a foundational, authoritative norm.

First, the appeal of Li's original account was its implicit call for greater recognition of different cultural traditions, each of which might prioritize different moral principles or norms. Importing the categorical imperative into an account of Chinese modernity and freedom threatens to undermine this feature of Li's work. This is particularly relevant in the case of China because, and here lies the second reservation, the Confucian tradition emphasizes commitment to personal attachments and family. Such commitments to nearest and dearest can conflict with commitments to the kind of impartiality represented by the categorical imperative, and such that it is not clear which should take priority.²⁹ Thus, whether or not the categorical imperative will become a global foundational moral principle seems, according to Li's own theory of cultural-psychological formation, to be an open question, one answered only by seeing how social and historical practices do, in fact, evolve.

The Categorical Imperative Obscures Other Elements of Li's Thought Relevant to Freedom

A further reason to resist the temptation to appeal to Kantian moral theory in the context of a Chinese modernity is that it obscures other important aspects of Li's work, which can themselves form the basis of novel conceptions of freedom and individuality. The rich psychological picture of the human subject developed by Li, particularly in his work on aesthetics, differs from the more

restrictive psychology of action involved in upholding the categorical imperative. For instance, Kant famously does not grant any moral authority to feelings in the determination of action. But in Li's psychology, feelings are reliable because they partly derive from and reflect social and historical order. Indeed, Li explicitly disagrees with Kant here: "I think he [Kant] places too great an emphasis on the rational faculties. Many other psychological functions participate in the free play [of ideas]; these include the emotions, sensations, desires, and the unconscious."³⁰ Here Li is talking about Kant's conception of aesthetics, but the comment also applies to the contrast between the two accounts of how human action ideally arises. The Kantian view treats rational action as having a specific form. It is acting according to principle, which involves the willful "overruling" of potentially disruptive impulses. This kind of willful self-control is the grounds of freedom and self-respect. In contrast, Li's "psychology" of rational action is more nebulous, recognizing that a broader array of forces can be the source of reasonable conduct. Li's psychology suggests a sensibility in which action arises from various mental events; these include emotions and intuitions that are not clearly connected to a principle or any systematic conception of action or desired ends. Such actions might merely seem, intuitively, to be appropriate.

In addition to the recognition of different sources of rationality, there is also an issue of rational sensitivity. Emphasizing the conditioning of the will according to a specific principle diminishes sensitivity to the many factors considered irrelevant to that principle. But the psychological subject in Li's work is responsive to a much wider set of influences, since his or her sensitivity is not the product of a single principle and can treat such influences as reasonable or rational. This can be thought of as an aesthetic sensibility, which grants motivational force to emotion, intuition, and even unconscious influences. In fact, it is Li's work in aesthetics that furnishes his most interesting conception of freedom and individuality, one that is consistent with many of the features of the Confucian tradition that Li describes. Before turning to that account, we should note another major development in Li's work that sits uneasily with attempts to elevate Kantian moral theory to a global ideal.

In following Kant, Li has unwittingly accepted a host of cultural assumptions that are implicit in Kant's narrow focus on the will but do not fit the cultural assumptions ascribed to the Confucian tradition. Kant was a puritanical moralist and, as Bertrand Russell notes, Puritanism has produced a morality that places great emphasis on the will—that is, free and knowing personal choice.³¹ But a Puritan morality of personal conduct might be of limited relevance to a tradition infused with Confucian values, which lacks any developed notion of will in the Kantian sense.³² Furthermore, Li has good reason to be wary of any conception of action that conveys religious ideas, such as Puritanism. This

wariness derives from his claim that the Chinese tradition be understood as a “culture grounded in pleasant feeling” (*legan wenhua* 乐感文化), sometimes translated as a “culture of optimism.”

The basic premise of *legan wenhua* is that the Chinese tradition features a “one world” view.³³ There is only one realm from which ultimate human meaning can be derived, and it is the historical and social human world. No higher transcendental realm exists to guide conduct. This is confirmed in the ideal of a unity of the cosmic and the human (*tianren heyi*).³⁴ The Chinese tradition thus contrasts with traditions that derive their ethical and social codes from a creator God. However, the will as the source of human action is important in the Puritanical moral tradition because it is the instrument through which the subject can make himself or herself worthy of entering a divine realm, a second world. It is redolent with self-denial and a flawed human nature (responsible intrusive passions), which is overcome by an appropriately conditioned will. Insofar as Li strongly opposes any suggestion of a transcendent world in the Chinese tradition, he is compelled to reject any construal of a human will derived from such metaphysical assumptions; and Kant’s work emerges from just such a religious orientation.

In addition to making us wary of any account of freedom too firmly grounded in the notion of a moral will, Li’s notion of a culture grounded in pleasant feelings (*legan wenhua*) also serves as the starting point for a different conception of freedom and individuality. This is one grounded in pleasure and the aesthetic sensibility. Li’s idea of *legan wenhua* offers a different picture of the origins of worthwhile human action. Life is short and its hazards many, and such insecure conditions lead to an existential drive to make the most of life in this world, without recourse to a higher realm. Under such conditions, the highest human end is the ability to realize pleasure despite the circumstances; and in the Confucian tradition, such pleasure is primarily realized in the pursuit of the everyday social life and in particular through interpersonal relationships.³⁵ This idea, combined with Li’s nuanced and realistic picture of psychology and rational action, can be used to develop an aesthetic notion of individual freedom that is consistent with Li’s account of the Confucian tradition.

Freedom and Individuality in an Aesthetic Tradition

In developing his aesthetics, Li again follows Kant, accepting his threefold division of the realms of human experience into intellectual, moral, and aesthetic. While the kind of freedom developed via the categorical imperative resides in the intellectual or rational realm, it is possible to approach freedom through an account of the self as an aesthetic sensibility. The power to reorder and remake the world (freedom) resides not solely in intellectual capacity and conscious

willful striving but also in cultivated and reliable aesthetic responses, allied with practical skill and imagination. Li explains the notion of aesthetics in this way: “Aesthetics is the sedimentation of social entities (concepts, ideals, attitudes, and meanings) onto psychological functions, particularly the emotions and sensory cognition.”³⁶

On this account, freedom consists in a kind of attunement to the social world in which the subjects are immersed, which enhances their capacity for action. An already-existing external social reality permeates and molds inner emotions or, to use Li’s term, humanizes inner nature (*ziran de renhua*).³⁷ The freedom that this process, when coupled with the relevant practical training and skills, enhances is the capacity to contribute to the lives of those with whom one shares everyday life—that is, to lead them to aesthetic experiences broadly categorized as pleasant (*le*). This conception of freedom has strong affinities with a Confucian culture rooted in personal ties and pleasant feeling (*legan wenhua*). It is the logical consequence of a worldview lacking a transcendental realm of value, and it expresses traditional Confucian ideals such as delight or pleasure (*le* 乐), homeliness or repose (*an* 安), and ease (*yi* 逸), which are much discussed in Chinese aesthetics.³⁸

This account of freedom emerges from Li’s account of the cultural-psychological formation, which includes an aesthetic psychological formation.³⁹ The human subject becomes increasingly sensitive to aesthetic experiences in two ways: through the increasingly aesthetic quality of the environment as it is shaped by human activity, and through individual education in, among other things, music and poetry, both of which cultivate an aesthetic sensibility.⁴⁰ The result is an inner nature—thoughts, sensibility, dispositions, and motivations—that gradually harmonizes with external circumstances and social practices. The subjects becomes better able to respond to their environment and produce actions that, in their social milieu, bring about shared delight or, as Li also calls it, beauty. Aesthetic sensibility can serve as the basis for practical action in the social world because “musical harmony is similar in structure to the harmony of human relationships,” an idea rooted in the *Xunzi* and the *Zuozhuan*.⁴¹ The idea is that actions, like music, that powerfully convey sensuous experiences can influence human emotions and desires and thus can direct action and remove conflict.

This conception of freedom as the developing of an aesthetic sensibility, and a practical ability grounded in that sensibility, can be sketched further by examining Li’s gloss on *Analects* 8.8, which reads: “Be awakened by poetry, be established by ritual, be perfected in music.”⁴² According to Li, this passage represents a developmental pathway to an enhanced level of agency or influence in the world. Let us consider each part of this three-part development account of character in turn, for each conveys an important aspect of aesthetic freedom.

The phrase “Be awakened by poetry” echoes Confucius’ exhortation to his followers to read the *Classic of Songs* to develop a richer vocabulary (*Analects* 17.9). For Li, however, “Be awakened by poetry” is a reference not merely to poetry or sung verse but to all literary forms. Reminiscent of a plea for a humanities-style education, it is a call to be well read and familiar with all sources of basic knowledge about the world—politics, history, and so forth. Li describes such learning as “establishing the structure of the intellect,” or the “internalization of rationality.”⁴³ The goal is to acquire a more sophisticated conceptual grasp of the details and subtleties of the surrounding world, within which the subject must live and act.

There are two ways in which such learning contributes to an aesthetic conception of freedom. First, the literature and ideas that a subject acquires are those of a shared tradition, and this shared cultural understanding facilitates practical interactions. Any person embedded in the Confucian tradition will see the world through the common ideas of the classical texts and history, which have shaped the present. Furthermore, these ideas and concepts are not “cold” and inertly factual; they include a “warm” affective and motivating element. For example, heroic figures arouse emotions among all persons who are aware of their deeds. Ideally, a learned person can appeal to and utilize these shared images and motifs in directing the conduct of others, on account of this shared emotional resonance among members of that tradition.⁴⁴ One example is how shared motifs in Confucian poetry consistently arouse certain emotions in the reader, as in a person who consistently feels sadness at witnessing the suffering of others. Li’s quote from Sui and Tang dynasties scholar Kong Yingda is apt here: “What one expresses in a poem is but one’s own personal heart; yet this ‘personal’ heart is actually the heart of the whole people.”⁴⁵ Scholarly learning thus comes to have a practical impact on society.

The second phrase in *Analects* 8.8, “be established by ritual,” expresses a further aspect of aestheticized freedom, one in which practical accomplishments are central. Within Li’s philosophical framework, the rites refer to the social practices that create and sustain a social or geographical community. Ritual is important for three reasons. First, “ritual” refers to the passive training of character and to the internalization of communal regulations.⁴⁶ This might include forming the habit of daily greetings for parents. Habitually complying with norms enables subjects to function within the social practices that constitute their social world.

The second reason is that the Confucian emphasis on ritual also involves an active component, in that a social philosophy based on ritual idealizes practical mastery. The human subject must act in various social settings and so must learn to manipulate the relevant physical objects appropriately; this requires an understanding of how they work and the laws that govern them. Unlike mere

ceremony, the relevant kind of rituals here requires application and practice to master—such as the six Confucian arts, which include charioteering and archery. While such practical learning and knowledge of governing laws is initially directed to objects treated in a ritual context, this basic mode of learning applies to practical conduct in general. It produces people who are able to work with and make use of objective laws of nature—in a manner that is described in Xunzi's naturalistic account of *tian* (the cosmos or heavens).⁴⁷ People must understand the laws that govern the behavior of objects that they use. A subject with such practical and theoretical know-how can, for example, plant and harvest crops successfully, as well as skillfully maintain good relations with others. Ritual is thus a means to being practically effective in the world in general.

A third function of ritual in the classical Confucian account is the molding of a specific set of biologically grounded emotional responses. The emotional lives of humans can be ordered, and their emotional connections with others adjusted, through ritual practice. For Li, humans and animals share certain primitive desires and emotions—as *Analects* 2.7 notes, for example, dogs, horses, and humans all naturally have feelings for their parents. But what distinguishes the humans is the capacity to cultivate and refine such feelings. This is the purpose of ritual, and such refined feelings are constitutive of the Confucian ideal of humaneness (*ren*).

For example, Li understands *xiao* 孝 (filial conduct) as an emotional sensibility, and ritual should refine the natural love of child for parents into the emotions of filial conduct, which he characterizes as respect and fear.⁴⁸ Ritual thus cultivates the emotions integral to family life, enabling individuals to flourish therein. But the task of cultivating the emotions continues beyond the family. In order to become “humane” (*ren*), this emotional engagement must develop into a compassion for others that extends as far as the clan network extends. The key idea here, also captured by Li's phrase “humanization of nature,” is that ritual serves to cultivate the emotional life of the subject. After all, individuals can fail to develop their emotional responses, remaining in tension with or baffled by the practices and emotions in their surrounding social world.

The third phrase of *Analects* 8.8, “be perfected in music,” indicates the final element of a freedom that is rooted in the aesthetic realm: music. Li notes, “If the self-cultivation of the gentleman does not include the study of rites and music, it is impossible for him to become a complete person [*cheng* 诚].”⁴⁹ How does music contribute to an account of freedom?

The simplest answer is that it cultivates an emotional responsiveness—one who is exposed to and appreciates music has a fuller range of emotional responses.⁵⁰ Furthermore, the coordination and attunement that musical mastery involves—appreciating which notes, rhythms, and melodies fit together; coordinating between music, voices, and instruments—is functionally similar

to the workings of the emotional realm. Someone who appreciates musical harmony will also appreciate how emotions relate to and transition into each other and can find harmony among them. Consequently, the inner life of the “complete person” is characterized by heightened or more intense emotions, especially delight.⁵¹ The figure of Confucius illustrates this ideal, saying of himself, “This is the kind of man he is—so enthusiastic he forgets to eat, so joyful he forgets his sorrow, and totally unaware that old age is coming” (*Analects* 7.18).

This education in affective coordination and complementarity, cultivated through musical training, translates to the human social world, where the same challenges of coordination and finding appropriate arrangements arise. Affective states cultivated by music become the foundation of thought and action. That is, the complete person’s practical responses to the world arise from emotional sensibilities and yet are reliable, or “on the mark.” This is partly because the emotional realm, although a higher realm of human experience, is not separated from the intellectual and practical dimensions of human cultivation but builds on the achievements of these other two realms. Li writes, “The aesthetic is purely sensuous but at the same time comprehends a history of rational sedimentation; it is natural but at the same time incorporates the accumulated achievements of society.”⁵² Cultivated persons in some sense embody the forces that Li identifies as driving social progress in general. Their rational sensibility reflects the sedimentation of traditional knowledge and social practices; they have achieved practical mastery, and their emotional reactions are structured by those social practices, enabling them to find beauty therein. This highest state of cultivation is what Confucius was referring to in *Analects* 2.4 when he declared that, at age seventy, he was able to “follow the desires of the heart without overstepping the bounds of right.”

This achieved state, as Li notes, is a form of freedom.⁵³ The emotions are unforced and spontaneous and yet have been successfully socialized so that they harmonize with practical and social norms. Further, someone with this degree of refinement can sense the mood of others, can identify practical needs, and has the skills and training needed to transform the mood or emotions of those with whom he or she interacts. The emotional impact of such practical skills is analogous to the effects of poets on their audience, although the latter work solely with words and not actions.

This capacity to transform social interactions is one part of *legan wenhua*, a culture grounded in pleasant feeling. Further, in the Confucian tradition, this capacity is often understood to function in a specific context: kinship and human relationships. Li writes that “life’s significance emerges only in the context of interpersonal relationships within real-world society”⁵⁴ and that what mattered most in Confucius’ intellectual milieu were “considerations of time-bound interpersonal relationships and human emotion.”⁵⁵ It is against such an

understanding of the most fundamental aims and purposes of human life—the creation of shared delight within networks of human attachment—that the value of such freedom becomes clear.

Summarizing the Aesthetic Conception of Freedom

Li's account of aesthetic cultivation and his interpretation of *Analects* 8.8 shows that there is a robust notion of individual freedom in Confucian thought, one that can inform how individual worth and dignity are understood in a Chinese modernity. It treats the diverse practical motivations of the human subject's psychological formation (*xinli jieyou*)—including emotions and intuitions—as reliable and on an equal footing with narrower conceptions of rationality, such as self-consciously acting according to a principle. The rationality resides in the cultivated sensibility of the agent and the effectiveness in realizing aesthetic ends of beauty, ease, delight, and so forth. In his work, Li consistently stresses the role of the unconscious (*wuyishi* 无疑) in determining action.⁵⁶ However, “unconscious” here often refers to the fact that reasonable action can suggest itself to the subject, producing beneficial social results, without the subject understanding why that course of action presented itself when or as it did. This sense of the unconscious thus refers simply to what is not directly available to consciousness or what cannot be articulated.⁵⁷ The lack of detailed justification for action does not imply a lack of freedom. Subjects must first understand the tradition—the many rituals and social practices that constitute it—from which their psychology emerges, while conditioning their psychology in the manner indicated by *Analects* 8.8; only then are their psychological responses trustworthy. But at the same time, because the lives of all members of a tradition are conditioned by the same technologies and social forces, the emotional responses of a properly trained subject can resonate with others. Such emotional responses are thus not capricious, irrational, or challenging to an otherwise free and rational subject, who must willfully resist them; their grounding in shared social practices bestows on them a veridical quality.

Furthermore, when the Confucian tradition is understood as a culture in which this-worldly aesthetic goods such as pleasure are a primary aim, realized through networks of clan or human relationships, then understanding and creating what brings pleasure to others who share a social world is of utmost value. This involves the increasingly effortless capacity to put others and oneself at ease, guided by a rich array of psychological prompts—intuitions, emotions, practical knowledge. The ability to realize such a higher quality of interaction in everyday social life, particularly as shared pleasure, thus becomes an important conception of freedom.

Arguably, such pleasures are not simply hedonistic and transient feelings

of pleasure but are feelings that emerge as a result of deeper forms of accord and successful interaction between people. This is powerfully expressed in *Mencius* 4A27, which seems to suggest that the fruit of humaneness, the most powerful manifestation of it, is a musical expression of pleasure or delight that arises when human relationships are successful: “The most authentic expression of humaneness [*ren*] is serving one’s parents; the most authentic expression of rightness is following one’s elder brother. . . . When they come to the point where they cannot be stopped, then, without realizing it, one’s feet begin to step in time and one’s hands begin to dance.”⁵⁸

Evaluating Li’s Account of Aesthetic Freedom and Its Place in a Chinese Modernity

Conceptualizing freedom in the aesthetic realm, while incorporating the definitive characteristics of the Confucian tradition, produces a nuanced account of freedom. This freedom is not understood as the mere absence of constraint or as crude desire-satisfaction. Rather, freedom becomes a capacity that is acquired only through effort and cultivation. A strength of this account is that aspects of Confucian social philosophy that initially appear conservative and constraining—the demandingness of, and need for attention to, personal attachments and roles—are recast as necessary ingredients of a more meaningful freedom. This account also suggests that a person might be most free when actions have a specific and limited focus—the local social world and the human relationships. It is here that a person’s actions have the most tangible effect and are most “meaningful”—as the emotional impact that accompanies the creation of memorable and moving shared social events.

How does this conception of freedom compare with others? Clearly, it is a positive notion, requiring that a subject receive support to develop positive capacities. It thus contrasts with accounts of negative freedom that focus solely on noninterference. Li’s account suggests that a freedom that prizes noninterference is an empty freedom because it ignores substantive questions of what human nature is, how this arises through interaction with technology and social practices, and how this limits what a person can find satisfying. An individual’s thought can fail to track such a nature, and dissonance can arise between what a subject thinks will bring happiness and what, in fact, does. Libertarian ideals of freedom as isolation or independence are thus opposed at the level of metaphysics and foundational accounts of the self.

A similar objection arises to the classic picture of freedom as being able to act on one’s desires. When freedom is understood in such terms, it ignores the origins of those desires and whether a person is really free in acting on them. The account of freedom derived from Li’s aesthetics suggests, for example, that

cruder, biologically rooted desires might be modified, transformed into socially responsive desires that are structured around stable external social practices and human relationships. Failure to cultivate one's sensibility, acting instead from biological desires, is a failure to attain greater freedom. Since cultivated desires lead to greater shared pleasure and to the personal satisfaction in being able to direct and contribute socially, they are "higher" desires, indicative of greater freedom. Also, this alternative freedom brings with it a stronger sense of duty than is recognized on the classical liberal account. On the aesthetic view, freedom involves a commitment to social interaction and exchange, for this is the arena in which the aesthetic goods of beauty, ease, and pleasure are realized. This sense of obligation is not necessarily oppressive, however, but is an essential condition of realizing these shared affective goods.

In the context of a modernity with Chinese characteristics, how does this notion of freedom fit with the contemporary calls for individual freedom and rights in China? It is not possible to address this question fully here, but take the example of freedom of speech. In the liberal democratic tradition, freedom of speech is sometimes understood as having the right to say whatever one wants. Clearly, the free exchange of ideas brings many benefits, such as the promotion of technological and economic progress. At the same time, even within liberal traditions the ideal of free speech is qualified, from the simple cases of prohibiting the shouting of fire in theatres to the more nuanced questions of whether hate speech should be permitted. Arguably, this aestheticized notion of freedom can contribute to the debate about the limits to free speech—and the kinds of goods it might conflict with. An approach that begins from the capacity to create ease and pleasure in everyday social networks suggests that speech should be treated as a social tool used to positively affect people's aesthetic and emotional lives. The use of speech to bring about ease and delight thus imposes restrictions on how speech can be used, since it could bring about the opposite effects—increasing anxiety, animosity, and so forth.

Unrestrained speech undoubtedly has many advantages, but focusing on the aesthetic realm of human experience reminds us that it is not the only human good, and there are times when a variety of human goods are available that cannot all be realized at the same time. Perhaps the sense of ease, homeliness, and a life imbued with a sense of *le*—pleasurable delight—can sometimes be a good to rival the ideal of unrestrained speech. Any claims in this area must be made with caution, but an honest and speculative extrapolation of the Confucian tradition into the present and future is exactly what Li Zehou has striven to promote.

There are drawbacks to thinking of freedom as the skilled ability to generate and enjoy pleasure in networks of human relationships. Most obviously, focusing on the aesthetic realm and the subject's immediate social world does not address broader political questions. For example, people could expend their

energies on family and friends while living in an unjust social system and never directly confronting questions of political organization and human rights. The aesthetic in Chinese culture has sometimes been a refuge for writers who were prevented from addressing more substantive political questions of social organization. Li himself is mindful of this, citing it as a possible reason for the “aesthetics fever” that gripped China in the 1980s.⁵⁹ However, against this concern, it seems entirely reasonable to claim that what most concerns people is often not abstract questions of rights and political systems but how their own lives—understood as local, limited affairs that are largely constituted by personal attachment and social interaction—can go as well as possible. And if this is the most basic existential question, as Li suggests, then the aesthetic conception of freedom is, after all, worthy of further exploration.

I have argued that Li Zehou’s work on aesthetics offers a valuable notion of freedom, one in which the individual emerges from material and social forces but is not fully determined by them. This is not a freedom construed intellectually, something rooted in clarity of reason and the form and strength of the moral will. Rather, it is a freedom that emerges through education and gradual mastery of the concrete social practices that constitute the everyday life and interactions of the subject. The fruit of such training and enhanced sensibility is the capacity to create and share aesthetic goods. This is only one conception of freedom, and its importance must be assessed by placing it alongside other accounts of freedom, especially political freedoms about which this account has little to say. The scope of action for this freedom will be more limited than more individualistic notions of freedom as desire-satisfaction, but it is less prone to conflict and more easily made to serve a common good. The account is worthy of further investigation because of its innovative integration of aesthetic life and freedom and because of strong affinities with the Confucian tradition—a tradition that any viable vision of a Chinese modernity must address.

Notes

1. See, for example, Li Zehou, *Four Essays on Aesthetics: Toward a Global View*, trans. Li Zehou and Jane Cauvel (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2006), 182.

2. Li Zehou, “A Response to Michael Sandel and Other Matters,” trans. Paul J. D’Ambrosio and Robert A. Carleo III, *Philosophy East and West* 66, no. 4 (2016): 1068–1147.

3. John Zijiang Ding, “Li Zehou: Chinese Aesthetics from a Post-Marxist and Confucian Perspective,” in *Contemporary Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Chung-ying Cheng and Nicholas Bunnin (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

4. See, for example, Li’s mea culpa to this effect in the afterword of *On Traditional Chinese Intellectual History (Zhongguo gudai sixiang shilun)* (Beijing: People’s Press, 1985), 341–344; English translation by Andrew Lambert (forthcoming).

5. For example, see Li, *Four Essays on Aesthetics*, trans. Li and Cauvel, 171.
6. Li, *On Traditional Chinese Intellectual History*, 66. Italics added.
7. The best-known formulation of this proposition is in Marx' 1859 "Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*": "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness." In Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Selected Works*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Moscow Foreign Language Publishing House, 1950), 329. For discussion of Li's use of Marx and of Hegel, see Xin Gu, "Subjectivity, Modernity, and Chinese Hegelian Marxism: A Study of Li Zehou's Philosophical Ideas from a Comparative Perspective," *Philosophy East and West* 46, no. 2 (1966): 205–245.
8. However, arguably, Li does retain the ideal of humanity evolving toward a final, higher state. This state is one in which human psychology evolves to the point that beauty is recognized as the highest guiding value. See Li, *Four Essays on Aesthetics*, trans. Li and Cauvel.
9. *Ibid.*, 171.
10. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 47; Li, *Four Essays on Aesthetics*, trans. Li and Cauvel, 56, 101.
11. Li, *On Traditional Chinese Intellectual History*, chap. 1.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Li, *Four Essays on Aesthetics*, trans. Li and Cauvel, 177.
14. Li holds that Confucian society grew out of shamanistic culture, in which charismatic figures led emotional rites and ceremonies, unifying and galvanizing the community (see his *On Traditional Chinese Intellectual History*). In its earliest forms, this culture also included petitioning deities for favorable natural conditions, such as rainfall.
15. Li Zehou, *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, trans. Maija Bell Samei (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009).
16. Li, *On Traditional Chinese Intellectual History*, 13–17.
17. Li Zehou, *Reading the "Analects" Today (Lunyu jindu)* (Tianjin: Tianjin Academy of Social Sciences Press, 2007), 305.
18. Li, *Four Essays on Aesthetics*, trans. Li and Cauvel, 176.
19. This is a modification of the early twentieth-century reform movement's slogan *zhongti xiyong* (a Chinese root with Western application). See Li Zehou, "The Western Is the Substance, and the Chinese Is for Application (Excerpts)," *Contemporary Chinese Thought* 31, no. 2 (1999–2000): 32–39.
20. Quoted in Li, *On Traditional Chinese Intellectual History*, 82.
21. Li, *Four Essays on Aesthetics*, trans. Li and Cauvel, 40–42.
22. Li, "The Western Is the Substance," quoted in Ding, "Li Zehou: Chinese Aesthetics," 247.
23. Quoted in Ding, "Li Zehou: Chinese Aesthetics," 255.
24. Li Zehou, *Critique of Critical Philosophy: A New Key to Kant (Pipan zhaxue de pipan: Kangde shuping)* (Beijing: Beijing People's Press, 1979).
25. Li Zehou, *An Outline of My Philosophy (Zhaxue gangyao)* (Taipei: Fengyun Shidai, 1990).
26. This is not to claim that the categorical imperative is a bad ideal to adopt regarding ethical issues; nor is it necessarily incompatible with Li's other philosophical commitments.

Rather, focusing on it leads to the neglect of more fecund and suggestive aspects of Li's work, which I address in the next section.

27. Li Zehou, *What Is Morality? (Shenme shi daode?)* (Shanghai: East China Normal University Publishing, 2015), 51.

28. Some attempts have been made to understand Confucian ethics as similar to Kantian ethics, structured by a sense of duty and, arguably, instantiating something like a categorical imperative as a foundational moral commitment (see, for example, Sandra A. Wawrytko, "Confucius and Kant: The Ethics of Respect," *Philosophy East and West* 32, no. 3 [1999]: 237–257). There are several reasons why this interpretation of Confucian ethics is misleading. Here I note just two. First, the Confucian emphasis on a consciousness of duty does not equate to the duty associated with the categorical imperative. There are many sources of duty—such as psychology and social obligation, both of which do appear in Confucian texts such as the *Analects*—but the duty associated with the categorical imperative is a rational duty, to uphold certain standards of reasoning, and there is no indication that the Confucians prioritized that form of duty. Second, while canonical texts such as the *Analects* recognized something like the Golden Rule ("Do unto others as you would have them do unto you"; cf. *Analects* 15.23), this kind of rational or practical consistency is not identical with the demands of the categorical imperative. Kant himself insists that the categorical imperative and the Golden Rule are distinct (Li, *Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, 48) and that the former is more demanding—the Golden Rule permits lying or a lack of benevolence as long as one accepts others will do likewise, but the categorical imperative prohibits lying while benevolence is an imperfect duty.

29. A helpful illustration of the depth of the conflict between impartiality and commitments to friends and family is provided by Marcia Baron in "Impartiality and Friendship," *Ethics* 101, no. 4 (1991): 836–857. In her example, a family member in South America is on a waiting list for a major medical procedure. Given the waiting list, it is unclear whether the patient will die before the operation. However, another member of the family knows senior administrators at a hospital and can enable the patient to jump the queue and receive treatment ahead of others and ahead of the patient's rightful turn. The question is, should the family use its connections with hospital administrators to jump the queue? It is not clear that the categorical imperative is the most fundamental ideal in this situation; nor, to repeat the earlier point, is it clear that it will offer any conclusive judgments even if it is applied.

30. Li, *Four Essays on Aesthetics*, trans. Li and Cauvel, 174.

31. Bertrand Russell, *The Conquest of Happiness* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 55.

32. The term *zhi* 志 appears in classical Confucian texts such as the *Analects* and is used to emphasize individual resolve and application. See, for example, *Analects* 1.11, 2.4, 4.4, 4.9, and 5.26. But as noted earlier, this general idea of striving or determination is quite different from the will conditioned in the way Kant envisaged.

33. Li, *On Traditional Chinese Intellectual History*, 322–333.

34. *Ibid.*, 329.

35. Li writes, "Life's significance emerges only in the context of interpersonal relationships within real-world society," in his *Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, 55.

36. *Ibid.*, 7.

37. Li, *Four Essays on Aesthetics*, trans. Li and Cauvel.

38. The idea that aesthetic education was of primary importance to a Chinese modernity was widely discussed by reformist thinkers such as May Fourth intellectual Cai Yuanpei. For details of Cai's call for aesthetic education to replace religious teachings, see Liu Kang, *Aesthetics and Marxism: Chinese Aesthetic Marxists and Their Western Contemporaries* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000), 27–35.

39. Li, *Four Essays on Aesthetics*, trans. Li and Cauvel, 89.

40. *Ibid.*

41. Li, *Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, 20.

42. *Ibid.*, 49. Li also refers to *Analects* 7.6 to illustrate the “humanization” or socialization of incipient emotions and capacities: “Set your intention upon the Way, rely on its Virtue, lean on humaneness, wander in the arts” (*ibid.*, 47).

43. *Ibid.*, 49–50.

44. *Ibid.*, 32.

45. *Ibid.*, 33.

46. *Ibid.*, 49.

47. Li, *On Traditional Chinese Intellectual History*, 107–124.

48. *Ibid.*

49. Li, *Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, 49.

50. Here Li draws on the close connection between music and emotions found in the *Xunzi* chapter “On Music,” in which particular tunes or notes are credited with being able to induce particular emotions in listeners, leading to the shared experiencing of an emotion or mood. Li is skeptical, however, about whether music correlates directly with the emotions such that, for example, a particular note codes for a particular emotion. See *ibid.*, 18.

51. This practical teleology in which pleasure or delight constitutes the highest goal is expressed in *Analects* 6.20: “To know something is not as good as to esteem it, and to esteem it is not as good as to take joy in it.”

52. Li, *Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, 50.

53. *Ibid.*, 51.

54. *Ibid.*, 55.

55. *Ibid.*, 54.

56. For example, he references Freud approvingly in relation to primitive instincts (see Li, *Four Essays on Aesthetics*, trans. Li and Cauvel, 147) and makes use of Carl Jung's account of the collective unconscious (*ibid.*, 87).

57. This idea is illustrated in Li's account of Zhuangzi and how rejecting the many social rules of the Confucians and returning to nature could result in a more spontaneous and freer way of acting. Further, as Li notes, such a view was not ultimately distinct from Confucian thought but, rather, was incorporated into it (Li, *Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, 105–116).

58. In addition, the Confucian classics refer to *le* (pleasure), albeit only fragmentarily, as the product of successfully integrating into a cosmic metaphysical order. In the *Mencius* 7A4, for example, we find this: “The ten thousand things are complete within me. There is no greater delight than examining one's person and finding oneself to be fully integrated [*cheng*].”

59. Li, *Four Essays on Aesthetics*, trans. Li and Cauvel, 23.