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Zong-qi Cai/Chinese Aesthetics

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Prologue

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A Historical Overview of Six Dynasties Aesthetics

Zong-qi Cai

After centuries in which it played at best a subordinate role to historiography, sociopolitical theory, and philosophy, aesthetic inquiry finally emerged in the Six Dynasties (220–589) as a distinct, independent concern.¹ Although Chinese literati did not begin to discuss literature and the arts in their own right until early in the third century, by the end of the sixth century their reflections would evolve into a sophisticated system of aesthetic discourse characterized by its own rhetoric, concepts, and evaluative criteria.

Like Western aesthetics, that of the Six Dynasties is often silent about the ethical, sociopolitical, and utilitarian.² Yet it was precisely these factors that made its birth and rapid growth possible. In particular, the rise of an aristocratic literati culture after the collapse of the Han dynasty (206 B.C.–220 A.D.) was crucial. The evolution of such a culture would more or less shape the trajectory of Six Dynasties aesthetics. For that reason, it seems useful to look at how aristocratic culture influenced the Wei-Jin, (Liu) Song, and Qi-Liang periods, especially as exemplified by works discussed in the ten essays assembled here.³ As I examine the common concerns and themes in these works, I will address the larger issue of aesthetic ideals for these periods and consider how those ideals may be traced to different philosophical sources.

Wei-Jin Aesthetics

The Wei-Jin period witnessed an unprecedented explosion of interest in aesthetic matters. This reflected a profound transformation of the intelligentsia (*shi* 士) from important players in the political arena to detached artists, connoisseurs, and theorists of literature and the arts.

In the Han dynasty, the intelligentsia had emerged as a class powerful enough to rival the eunuchs (*huangguan* 宦官) and the relatives of imperial consorts (*waiqi* 外戚). The ascendancy of the intelligentsia came about from Han court policy, which worked to promote Confucian scholarship and even to secure high official posts for Confucian scholars. For the Han intelligentsia, power and influence were obtainable in two ways. Some capitalized on the lack of public education to make their own households exclusive centers for Confucian study. In that fashion, they tried to monopolize Confucian scholarship and hence entry into officialdom. Over time, these households became de facto aristocratic as high official positions were passed on from one generation to the next. Others, especially those associated with the imperial academy, gained influence from their reputation in Pure Critique (*qingyi* 清議), a late Han forum designed to expose political corruption and assess the moral stature of court officials. The Pure Critique members—often called *mingshi* 名士, or famous scholars—won praise as the “pure stream” (*qingliu* 清流) for their moral courage, while the “intelligentsia clans” (*shizu* 士族) earned the name “turgid stream” (*zhuoliu* 濁流) because of their political opportunism and corrupt practices.⁴

The end of the Han dynasty profoundly transformed both groups. As a result of the Great Proscriptions (*danggu* 党錮), most of the major voices in the Pure Critique were silenced, as political discussion turned into a perilous affair. The suppression of dissent by the Jin rulers only made matters worse. Yet the lofty ideal of the Han *mingshi* refused to die. During the Zhengshi reign (240–248), a new group of *mingshi*, led by He Yan 何晏 (ca. 190–249) and Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249), founded the Pure Conversation (*qingtan* 清談) movement. Avoiding contemporary politics, the Zhengshi *mingshi* focused on abstract cosmological questions and established Xuanxue 玄學 (Abstruse Learning) based on three texts: the *Lao Zi* 老子, the *Zhuang Zi* 莊子, and the *Yi jing* 易經 (Book of Changes). Toward the end of the Zhengshi period, a new group of *mingshi*, known as the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove, transformed Abstruse Learning into a counterculture movement.⁵

Unlike their predecessors, they openly flouted Confucian morality and indulged in unrestrained emotion, drugs, and wine; a disinterested pursuit of the arts; and a quest for physical immortality, as well as spiritual communion with the Dao. To the people of their time (not least the Jin rulers), all of their outlandish behavior seemed a calculated protest against state-sponsored Confucian ritualism. Predictably, the Jin rulers quickly moved to suppress the Bamboo Grove *mingshi* (*Zhulin mingshi* 竹林名士). The execution of their leader, Ji Kang 嵇康 (223–262), and the submission of Xiang Xiu 向秀 (ca. 221–ca. 300) to the Jin court in the same year mark not only the end of their rebellion, but also the end of any public moral conscience as well. For the next several hundred years, there would be no more *mingshi* like Ji Kang who dared to confront a corrupt, repressive government and provide moral leadership for society. Instead, the Jin intelligentsia clans became dominant until superseded by a new intelligentsia who had risen from the “humble clans” (*hanzu* 寒族) to become the royal families of Song, Qi, and Liang. Together, these groups would foster an aristocratic literati culture that was, for all its moral defects, particularly favorable to aesthetics.

To see how the intelligentsia clans virtually monopolized the arts during the Jin, we need only to look at the Wang clan of Langye 琅琊 (Shandong). Thanks to the political accomplishments of Wang Dao 王導 (276–339), his family became preeminent along with the Xie 謝 family of Chen Commandery 陳郡 in Henan during the Eastern Jin. A quick look at the Wang genealogy traced by Susan Bush reveals a long line of noted calligraphers.⁶ In effect, the Wangs practically made calligraphy an exclusive family enterprise. Even when their political power diminished after the fall of the Jin, they continued to wield cultural influence up through the Liang dynasty. Of the later generation, the most prominent are Wang Wei 王徽 (415–453), Wang Sengqian 王僧虔 (427–485), and Wang Rong 王融 (468–494). Significantly, they are better known for what they wrote about painting, calligraphy, music, and poetry than for their accomplishments in these arts.⁷

As shaped by the Wangs, Xies, and other powerful clans, Jin culture represents a superficial imitation of the counterculture of Bamboo Grove *mingshi*. But whereas the Bamboo Grove *mingshi* like Ji Kang and Ruan Ji represented the “pure stream,” these clans certainly belonged to the “turgid stream” of the *mingshi* tradition, criticized for various moral weaknesses.⁸ Some even participated in the brutal repressions of the Jin court in return for protection of their clan privileges.⁹ If

the Bamboo Grove *mingshi* sought to create an iconoclastic movement, the Jin *mingshi* imitation of it was little more than a flamboyant performance in manners, dress, deportment, verbal flair, and, above all, detachment—a performance designed to enhance social distinction.

From a sociopolitical perspective, Jin *mingshi* culture looks trivial, self-absorbed, and indulgent. But for the development of aesthetics, it was profoundly significant. Essentially, the Jin *mingshi* placed abstruse learning, literature, and the arts at the center of their life. These pursuits involved the Jin *mingshi* in a double role as performers and spectators. By observation of one another's "life performances," they cultivated an aesthetic appreciation that would later be applied to literature and the arts. Moreover, this mutual observation and appreciation gave rise to the *mingshi* coteries or "salons" to whom theoretical reflections on literature and the arts would be addressed.

Of all the texts about the Wei-Jin period, the *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語 (A New Account of Tales of the World), compiled around 430 by Liu Yiqing 劉義慶 (403–444), provides the most complete picture of the Jin *mingshi*'s life performances. Most of its thirty-six chapters depict prominent members of the Jin *mingshi*, with the remainder devoted to famous figures of the Han, Wei, and (Liu) Song. Most entries in each chapter follow a common format: a quotation of conversational remarks by *mingshi* figures framed by a pithy and impressionistic evaluation of the central actor.

Focusing on the Jin *mingshi* entries, Wai-yee Li demonstrates the debt of the *Shishuo xinyu* to the earlier discourses of Pure Critique and Pure Conversation. Insofar as its entries focus on the observations of individual characters, this book represents a continuation of the practice of evaluating character begun by Pure Critique. But insofar as it enshrines the ideals of Daoist detachment as the basic criteria for judging behavioral performance, it is squarely in the tradition of Pure Conversation and in fact is considered by many as a later stage of this philosophical discourse. This shift from inner moral qualities to behavioral performance, Li emphasizes, corresponds to a shift in underlying principles from Confucian political activism to Daoist detachment.

Li also explains the important differences between the *Shishuo xinyu* and early discourses of Pure Critique and Pure Conversation. In the *Shishuo xinyu*, the observation and evaluation of individuals are not intended as "recommendations for offices" (*chaju* 察舉). Thus there is little interest in assessing the political accomplishments of particular

individuals. Nor is there an endeavor to establish general types of human temperament and abilities as Liu Shao 劉劭 (fl. 240–250) had done in *Renwu zhi* 人物誌 (Studies on Human Abilities). Similarly, the abundant presence of Abstruse Learning ideas in the *Shishuo xinyu* does not indicate any interest on the part of either the author or the Jin *mingshi* in continuing He Yan and Wang Bi's abstruse philosophical speculation. There is in fact, Li notes, a deliberate marginalization of Wang Bi, Guo Xiang 郭象 (d. 312), and other early Pure Conversationalists in the *Shishuo xinyu*. What really interested Liu Yiqing was how the Jin *mingshi* translated Abstruse Learning ideas into unconventional modes of speech and behavior meant for aesthetic appreciation by others.

This aestheticization of Abstruse Learning ideas, Li points out, is evidenced by what the Jin *mingshi* actually said about aesthetic observation (*mu* 目 or *timu* 題目), as well as the format of the *Shishuo xinyu*. In each entry, there is either an explicit observer (the interlocutor of the framing narrative) or an implicit observer (in entries where the framing narrative is dispensed with) pleasurably watching a “pure aesthetic spectacle” unfold. Typically, such a spectacle is one of “momentary brilliance,” a dazzling display of the appearance, deportment, wit, and Daoist detachment of the individual character(s) observed.

Since this heightened perception of human characters is purely aesthetic, Li maintains, it is not surprising that many of them are depicted with a string of nature images independent of moral concerns. Unlike the moralistic metaphors or *bide* 比德 (analogues of moral virtues) widely used by earlier Confucian-minded writers, these nature images do not illustrate any definite moral qualities but simply convey the ineffable beauty of manners, action, and thought. They also connote the intense aesthetic pleasure derived from observing human characters through the prism of beauty. Moreover, by conveying the ideals of detachment (*xu* 虛), purity (*qing* 清), and remoteness (*yuan* 遠), they often function to suggest what lies beyond words and images—suprasensory experience with the Dao. This use of nature imagery suggests that, to the Jin *mingshi*, the spectacle of human life and scenes of nature yield intense aesthetic experiences of a similar kind, one that culminates in the observer's “spirit transcending and his bodily form being transported (*shenchao xingyue* 神超形越).”¹⁰ This progression from spoken words to images to suprasensory experience seems an aestheticization of Wang Bi's tripartite scheme of *yan* 言 (words), *xiang* 象 (images), and *yi* 意 (ideas).

The influence of Wang Bi's theory is even more conspicuous in Wei-Jin texts on calligraphy, music, and painting. As Ronald Egan points out, an unprecedented proliferation of nature images first occurs in calligraphy criticism. This verbal amplitude, Egan argues, is an exercise of using images to reveal what is nonverbal or supravocal, clearly guided by the *Yi jing* notion of *xiang* as expounded by Wang Bi. The immediate model, however, is Xu Shen's 許慎 (ca. 58–ca. 147) use of the *Yi jing* notion of *xiang* to explain the sacred origin of writing. According to Xu, the earliest form of writing (trigrams and hexagrams) is born of the sages' imaging of the supravocal cosmic order with the aid of concrete physical images (*wuxiang* 物象). For Wei-Jin calligraphy critics, calligraphy represents the reverse of this process of character creation. Divinely created, writing can enable one to leap from perceptual images (written characters) to "image" the ultimate cosmic order, especially if it is done by a great calligrapher. The verbal amplitude in calligraphy criticism, then, signifies an effort to retrace this process of imaging. The rapid move from image to image reflects a "this is it, this is not it" process in the minds of calligraphy critics. Confronting the limited usefulness of images (metaphors), critics stress that, as Egan says, "calligraphy conveys something that lies beyond images and cannot be approximated adequately by them." Since this conception of calligraphic process is inspired by Wang Bi's view on the leap from *xiang* to *yi*, it is not surprising that *yi* would eventually emerge as the calligraphic ideal in the writings of Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (303–361 or 321–379), the preeminent Jin calligrapher. "Wang Xizhi's *yi*, his calligraphic ideal," Egan notes, "is strongly reminiscent of the 'ideas' in Wang Bi's treatment of the *Yi jing* that are conveyed by images and words but also lie beyond them. But there is a crucial difference between the two. Wang Xizhi's *yi* may be, like Wang Bi's, profound and ineffable, but it is also aestheticized, as Wang Bi's 'ideas' are not."

Turning to Wei-Jin writings on music, Egan again brings our attention to the preponderance of descriptive language and the prominence of the trope of nature in it. If nature images were sparingly used to posit a cosmic analogue for the harmonies of ritual music in earlier Confucian texts, Egan notes, they appear profusely as an analogy or inspiration for all the sonorities of music in Ruan Ji's "Yue lun" 樂論 (Essay on Music) and Ji Kang's "Sheng wu aile lun" 聲無哀樂論 (Music Has No Sorrow or Joy). Moreover, they are genuinely intended to explore the idea of a cosmic origin for human music. In Ruan's and Ji's essays,

there is an ultimate abstract value—called *he* 和 (harmony)—that transcends the art’s affinity with nature, much like the concept of *yi* in calligraphy criticism. In the writings of Gu Kaizhi 顧愷之 (d. ca. 406) and Zong Bing 宗炳 (375–443), Egan finds similar claims of an ultimate value for portrait painting that transcends physical likeness. Called *shen* (spirit), this value is analogous to the calligraphic *yi* and the musical *he*. While formal similitude had been the ideal of painting in Han and pre-Han times, Gu and Zong strove to establish *shen* beyond formal similitude as the ideal and end of painting. In portrait painting, Gu promoted the notion of *chuanshen* 傳神, or conveying the inner life-spirit (of the subject in portraiture). In applying the term “*shen*” to landscape painting, however, Zong meant to denote the ultimate Buddhist *li* 理 (principle) that lies behind landscape and can and should be pleasurably revealed in a good landscape painting. As shown in my own contribution, the term “*shen*” is also fruitfully appropriated by other critics to facilitate their exploration of various important theoretical issues.

In Wei-Jin gardens, Shuen-fu Lin observes a similar determined quest of what lies beyond physical nature. In Chinese gardening, this quest is primarily expressed through the construction of a “paradise” or “an enclosed space of idealized existence” that affords access to the supersensible realm. Unlike Western utopias, Chinese paradises are characterized by an integration of the sacred with the ordinary, the supersensible with the sensible. As the conception of these two realms changed over time, Lin observes, so did the designs and functions of the garden. In the Shang and early Zhou, the supersensible realm was conceptualized as a world inhabited by Shangdi 上帝 (the Lord or Supreme Ruler in heaven) and royal ancestors and ancestresses who from there wielded their influence on the living. The construction of a king’s park was therefore designed for ancestral worship above anything else. The center of such a park is normally an ancestral temple like the Sacred Terrace (*lingtai* 靈臺) of King Wen, a paradisaical spot where the supersensible and the sensible meet and where a living king communicates with the spirits of his ancestors and ancestresses. This ancient notion of paradise as the juncture of the two worlds is also amply reflected in the depiction of the Hanging Garden or Mysterious Garden (Xuanpu 縣圃/玄圃) and the Isles of the Immortals in ancient Chinese legends and myths. In Qin and Han times, the supersensible realm was conceived to be a conscious, moral heaven embodied in the cosmic

operation of yin-yang and five phases (*yinyang wuxing* 陰陽五行), while the sensible realm was seen mainly as the microcosm of this moral-cosmic ordering. Thus, to mirror the greatness and splendor of these two realms became the central theme of Han imperial parks. Masses of fauna and flora, lakes, ponds, and hills, as well as lavishly built palaces, galleries, and pavilions, were organized into a grandiose pattern aiming to match great orders of the two realms. In addition to sites of ancestral worship, the paradisaical spots of Han imperial parks include the recreations of fairy mountains and isles of immortals.

Under the powerful influence of Abstruse Learning, garden construction took a drastically different direction during the Wei-Jin period. First, Wei-Jin gardens were radically “downsized,” but ironically that led only to a total “paradisation” of them. Now any scene of nature in a garden, not just certain consecrated buildings or spots, would be considered capable of evoking a flight of the mind beyond the physical world. This new conception of the garden may be observed in a famous anecdote recorded in the *Shishuo xinyu*: “On entering the Flower Grove Park (*Hualin yuan* 華林園) Emperor Jianwen looked around and said to his attendants, ‘the place which suits the mind-heart isn’t necessarily far away. By any shady grove or stream one may naturally have such thoughts as Zhuang Zi had by the Rivers Hao and Pu, where birds and animals, fowls and fish, come of their own accord to be intimate with them.’”¹¹

To strive for “such thoughts as Zhuang Zi had by the Rivers Hao and Pu”—a suprasensory experience with the Dao—is an aesthetic activity that is in essence identical to the endeavors to penetrate the innermost human spirit or to capture the calligraphic *yi*, the musical *he*, or the *shen* of painting. The major difference is that the viewers of gardens contemplate different kinds of images. The images of the garden are those of physical objects—bamboo groves, fish ponds, pavilions, meandering brooks, winding paths, and so on. Arranged into an intricate pattern of yin-yang interplay, these physical objects suggest infinite space (*xu* 虛, *wu* 無) and help the viewers to “image” and commune with the Dao. Although calligraphy, painting, music, and other arts appear in a garden, they are usually inscribed into and hence made part of these physical objects or blended into the ambience created by them.

The siting of gardens in the midst of urban life, Lin notes, is another distinguishing trait of Six Dynasties garden aesthetics. Begin-

ning with the Wei-Jin period, gardens of modest size were increasingly constructed as parts of imperial palaces or high officials' residences located within a city. Thanks to this resiting of gardens, garden owners and their friends could daily contemplate the world of nature miniaturized in the gardens and also enjoy the amenities of urban life. This new direction in garden construction, Lin points out, attests the influence of the new theory of *ziran* 自然 (external nature and self-so-ness) developed by Guo Xiang, the chief exponent of Abstruse Learning after Wang Bi. Ingeniously reinterpreting Zhuang Zi's notion of *ziran*, Guo maintains that to follow *ziran* simply means to lead the life one is born to lead. His theory serves very well to justify and promote the popular practices of *chaoyin* 朝隱 (to be a recluse while serving at court) or *shiyin* 市隱 (to be a recluse while living in urban surroundings) during the Jin. By claiming that the courtly and urban life was what they were born to lead, the Jin officials could style themselves as detached Daoists while indulging in all kinds of worldly pursuits. The resiting of gardens is no doubt a tangible product of the vogue of *chaoyin* and *shiyin* sanctioned by Guo's theory of *ziran*.

As demonstrated by Li, Egan, Lin, and Bush, Wang Bi's cosmological-epistemological theory exerted enormous influence on Wei-Jin aesthetics. In appropriating his theory, however, Wei-Jin critics rethought the notions of *xiang* and *yi* and their relationship in the context of literature and the arts. Whereas Wang Bi conceptualized *xiang* mainly as abstract cosmic symbols of trigrams and hexagrams, they wanted to think of *xiang* as both nature images and cosmic symbols. On the one hand, they identified *xiang* as nature images to be contemplated and presented in diverse artistic mediums. On the other, they availed themselves of the notion of *xiang* as cosmic symbols. If cast in a proper artistic order, they believed that nature images could function as if they were trigrams and hexagrams, enabling one to "image" the cosmic order. Finally, while Wang Bi stressed the gap between trigrams and hexagrams and the ultimate *yi* 意, they earnestly explored the possibility of closing this gap. As if to repudiate Wang's idea of "obtaining *yi* and forgetting *xiang*" (*deyi wangxiang* 得意忘象), they strove to embody the cosmic ultimate in the artistic *xiang*. Such fusion of *yi* and *xiang*, aptly denoted by the term *yixiang* 意象 (a coinage of Liu Xie 劉勰 [ca. 465–ca. 520]), constitutes the aesthetic ideal that informs the Wei-Jin discussions on literature and the arts.

(Liu) Song Aesthetics

In 420, Liu Yu 劉裕 (r. 420–423), a general from a humble clan (*hanzu*) staged a successful rebellion and overthrew the Jin. The new dynasty he founded is called the Song, often referred to as the (Liu) Song to avoid confusion with the (Zhao) Song, a much longer dynasty established about five hundred years later. This dynastic change began a process that would alter the wider political and cultural landscape. From the Song onward, the old intelligentsia clans would gradually lose their political power and their long-held position as the guiding force of culture. At the same time, newly empowered clans of humble, military backgrounds would consolidate their political control, acquire the cultural trappings of new intelligentsia clans, and eventually assume the leadership role in Song culture.¹²

Much of the credit for this shift should go to Emperor Wen 文帝 (r. 424–453), who engineered it largely through peaceful means during his stable, thirty-year reign. He offered few important posts to the old intelligentsia clans, distrusting both their loyalty and their competence, and filled his court instead with officials drawn from humble clans. Keenly aware of his cultural deficiencies, however, he shrewdly courted the old intelligentsia clans by sponsoring literary-cultural activities, offering them minor official appointments, and even proposing marriages between them and members of his court. There are many stories about the difficult efforts by Wen and the imperial Lius to shed their humble origins and gain acceptance by the old elite. Strategic self-deprecation and patience would pay off as they gradually and peaceably assumed the mantle of cultural leadership.¹³

Among the important measures the Song court used to facilitate the transfer of cultural power into its own hands were the reestablishment of Confucian learning and the promotion of the Buddhist faith. They also sought to reign in Abstruse Learning by “professionalizing” it as one of the four branches of learning in the imperial academy and thus turn it from a cultural movement into a pure scholarly pursuit. These measures were calculated to achieve the same goal: to open new routes of intellectual and cultural cultivation, thereby weakening the vogue of Pure Conversation and other *mingshi* pursuits through which the old intelligentsia clans had exerted their cultural dominance.¹⁴

Evidence of fading interest in Pure Conversation is clearly reflected in the transition from *xuanyan shi* 玄言詩 (poetry of metaphysical words)

to *shanshui shi* 山水詩 (landscape poetry; literally the poetry of mountains and rivers). Although few examples of *xuanyan* poetry survive (a dramatic instance of the rapid and thorough decline of a once dominant genre), they clearly testify to the Eastern Jin's intellectual preoccupations. Full of dry, metaphysical language and devoid of nature and emotion, *xuanyan* poetry reads like Pure Conversation in verse. By stark contrast, *shanshui* poetry replaced abstraction with vivid descriptions of nature and the intense emotions of the observer. Landscapes and the pleasures of strolling through them generated a new poetry of aesthetic and experiential process, best represented by the works of Xie Lingyun 謝靈運 (385–433).¹⁵

In his famous essay, “Xu hua” 敘畫 (Discussion of Painting), Wang Wei presents a theory of landscape painting that corresponds to the practice of the *shanshui* poets. He stresses a genuine appreciation of landscape and explores the dynamic interaction between landscape and the mind/heart within the Xuanxue cosmological framework. In her essay, Susan Bush examines the way in which Wang Bi's philosophy shaped Wang Wei's theory of landscape painting. A renowned practitioner of yarrow-plant divination, Wang Wei had an abiding interest in the *Yi jing* hexagrams and was therefore very receptive to Wang Bi's theory. He used Xuanxue terms like *wu*, explicitly compared painting to the *Yi jing* hexagrams, and, most important, employed the “closed interlocking parallel style,” a prose style purportedly devised by Wang Bi for probing the cosmological ultimate (*yi*) through the medium of words (*yan*). By adapting Wang Bi's prose style, Bush observes, Wang Wei admirably demonstrated the complex pattern of interaction between *wu* and *you* 有, landscape and the mind/heart, in the process of contemplating landscape. Born of such intense contemplation, Wang believes, a landscape painting can not only achieve the likeness of nature's outer forms, but also reveal the numinous spirit (*ling* 靈) or the innermost spirit of nature.

With the waning of the Abstruse Learning movement, calligraphy became less concerned with the revelation of the supersensible *yi* than with practical ends—that is, financial and sociopolitical gains. This noteworthy change is reflected in the widespread practice of calligraphic copying during the Song. Robert E. Harrist Jr. offers an examination of the financial and sociopolitical as well as aesthetic implications of calligraphic copying. The copying of Jin calligraphic masters became a vogue during the Song period and acquired major financial

and social significance. Collectors spent large sums to acquire elegant copies, as well as autographic works, of the Jin masters that were prized as objects of aesthetic pleasure and as sources of intangible, much coveted cultural capital. Leading this acquisition drive were none other than the royal Lius (and later the royal Xiaos of the Qi and Liang dynasties), who were themselves striving to enhance their cultural credentials. Thanks to their persistent efforts, these collectors managed to amass important holdings of works by Jin masters in their imperial libraries (*bige* 秘閣).

Calligraphic copying, though often financially or sociopolitically motivated, was an undertaking of multifaceted aesthetic significance. To begin with, it gave rise to the discussion of *zhen* 真 (true, real) and *wei* 偽 (false, unreal), an issue central and unique to calligraphy connoisseurship. In *Lunshu biao* 論書表 (Memorial on Calligraphy), by Yu He 虞龢 (fl. ca. 470), and a series of letters by Tao Hongjing 陶弘景 (456–536), the eminent Daoist master and calligraphy connoisseur, Harrist sees the emergence of “*zhen*” and “*wei*” as an important pair of terms in calligraphy connoisseurship. In these texts, the two terms ceased to denote, as they once had, dichotomous moral qualities, such as authenticity versus fakeness, genuineness versus deceitfulness, or naturalness versus hypocrisy. In calligraphy connoisseurship, Harrist points out, “*zhen*” came to mean autographic. While autographic works (*zhenji* 真跡) are always prized, copied works, labeled as “*wei*,” are by no means automatically deemed undesirable. As the terms “*mo*” 摹 and “*lin*” 臨 suggest, copying is an integral part of calligraphic pursuit. During the Six Dynasties, students of calligraphy avidly copied various masters’ works as a way of internalizing earlier styles and developing their own. Even talented calligraphers like Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi 王獻之 engaged in copying others’ calligraphic works for a wide range of reasons—mutual amusement among intimate friends, the preservation of the memory of lost works, the transmission of sacred texts and talismans of the Daoist religion, financial profit, or even a political frameup. This widespread practice of copying by known or unknown calligraphers had an enormous impact on the development of the calligraphic art at the time. The proliferation of copies and recopies of Wang Xizhi’s and other Jin masters’ works helped to preserve and transmit at least the perceptions, if not a close visual semblance, of them. This also helped to make these great works accessible outside small aristocratic circles and thus created a much broader viewer base

for calligraphy. Moreover, a large contingent of calligraphy connoisseurs were trained who commanded a much sharper perceptual power than their contemporary evaluators of human characters, literature, and other arts.

Qi-Liang Aesthetics: The Pursuit of Literature and the Arts

The twilight of the political power and cultural influence of the old intelligentsia clans continued through the Qi, Liang, and Chen dynasties. Like Liu Yu of the Song, Xiao Daocheng 蕭道成 (r. 479–483), founder of the Qi dynasty, was of humble origins. The now imperial clan of the Xiaos, which would continue into the Liang, also had to work to consolidate its political and cultural power.

First, in the sociopolitical realm, the royal Xiaos sought to promote Confucianism, particularly the study of rituals scorned by the Jin *mingshi*. They also promoted Buddhism, claiming it as their personal faith. Whereas the Jin *mingshi* had probed the speculative *prajñā* learning in their quest for *xuan* 玄 (the mysterious), the Xiaos sponsored and participated in Buddhist activities mainly in the hope of personal salvation. Still, they by no means ignored Abstruse Learning, as many of them studied and even wrote commentaries on the three Abstruse Learning classics. For them as for the Lius, however, the study of these texts was merely a scholarly pursuit without much relevance to their sensibilities and lifestyles.

In the cultural realm, the Xiaos of the Qi and Liang dynasties indisputably exercised a leadership role. Especially fond of literature, they gathered prominent literary figures to form coterie, two of which would become particularly well known. The Eight Friends of Jingling (Jingling Bayou 竟陵八友), headed by Xiao Ziliang 蕭子良 (460–494), were very active during the Yongming reign (483–494). This coterie included the famous poets Shen Yue 沈約 (441–513) and Xie Tiao 謝朓 (464–499) and the renowned prose writers Ren Fang 任昉 (460–508) and Lu Chui 陸倕 (472–526).¹⁶ The second literary coterie was the Donggong 東宮 (Eastern Palace) poets under the patronage of Xiao Gang 蕭綱 (503–551), the crown prince living in the Eastern Palace who later became Emperor Jianwen of the Liang 梁簡文帝 (r. 550–551).¹⁷ This coterie was much larger than that of the Eight Friends of Jingling, and it included Shen Yue, Yu Jianwu 庾肩吾 (487–551) and his son Yu

Xin 庾信 (513–581), Xu Chi 徐摛 (474–551) and his son Xu Ling 徐陵 (507–583), and many others.¹⁸

Writing for courtly amusement more than self-expression, the Jingling and Donggong coterie developed two distinct poetic styles: the Yongming style (*Yongming ti* 永明體) and the palace style (*gongti* 宮體). The Yongming style is famous for its fondness for the description of physical objects (*yongwu* 詠物); its creation of a regulated verse (*lǐshī* 律詩) prototype, marked by line reduction and the extensive use of parallelism and tonal patterns; and its aesthetic ideal of the unadorned and refreshing (*qingxin* 清新).¹⁹ The palace style attracts our attention for its sensuous and often erotic depiction of palace ladies, its diverse subjects, and its employment of rich and ornate diction. Together, the Yongming and palace styles constitute the core of the Qi-Liang poetic tradition, which is a significant departure from earlier poetic traditions—such as, for example, the lyrical-allegorical style of the *Shi jing* 詩經 (The Book of Poetry), the mythical-plaintive style of the *Chu ci* 楚辭 (Songs of the Chu), and the heroic-melancholic style of Jian'an poetry from the late Eastern Han. In short, the Qi-Liang poetic tradition may be defined by its narrow interest in cloistered courtly life, withdrawal from overt sociopolitical concerns, pursuit of sensual pleasure, and quest for formal perfection.

François Martin shows us to what extent Xiao Gang and his Donggong coterie transformed poetic practice into a pleasure pursuit. The poems chosen for analysis are “Four Pieces Composed by Turns about the Four Gates upon a Night of Baguanzhai,” composed by Xiao Gang, Shen Yue, and six lesser figures. What deserves our special attention, Martin holds, is a series of stark incongruities. First, there is the incongruity between the occasion and the manner in which the poems were composed. Baguanzhai 八關齋 (the Fast of the Eight Precepts) is a serious occasion for lay Buddhist believers: for one day they live the life of a monk, engaging in religious fare, meditation, and other monastic activities. However, Xiao Gang and the other seven participants went about composing their poems as a pleasurable game to test one another's poetic talent, especially the ability to improvise and the mastery of metric rules. This act of merrymaking was ostensibly incongruous with the serious religious occasion. In fact, one of the eight precepts explicitly forbids entertainment. An even more shocking incongruity exists between the religious occasion and the poems' contents. The eight participants replaced various religious figures with

palace ladies and depicted their sensual beauty with a zest never seen before.

From a historical point of view, these incongruities are the natural consequence of Xiao Gang's double agenda at the Eastern Palace: the promotion of Buddhist beliefs and the advocacy of a purely aesthetic palace-style poetry. But scholars hold different opinions as to why Xiao Gang and the Donggong poets pursued these seemingly incongruous interests. Some argue that this exposes the Xiaos' sexual indulgences and hence the hypocrisy of their Buddhist faith and practice. But such accusations seem perhaps harsh and even simplistic. There is credible evidence that Xiao Yan 蕭衍 (464–549), Xiao Gang's father and Emperor Wu of the Liang, urged the cessation of sexual activities for the sake of Buddhist faith, and there is no historical account of Xiao Gang's own sexual indulgence despite the notorious debauchery within his retinue.²⁰ Considering this, some see the need to moderate the moral condemnation of Xiao Gang and the Donggong poets and read their depiction of palace ladies not as an indication of their depravity, but as a poetic exercise in aestheticizing sensual pleasures. Martin is apparently sympathetic to such a rereading of their palace-style works. To him, neither the sensual depiction of palace ladies nor the blending of such a depiction into a religious poem is problematic, morally or otherwise. Other scholars go even further and argue that there is hardly incongruity at all in the double agenda at the Eastern Palace. Citing the Indian Buddhist practice of depicting beautiful ladies to illustrate the evanescence of all phenomenal existences, they argue that Xiao Gang and the Donggong poets had a similar allegorical intention in their depiction of palace ladies.²¹ If this is the case, they can hardly be faulted on moral grounds for their obsessive interest in palace ladies.

Qi-Liang Aesthetics: Theoretical Works on Literature and the Arts

The Qi-Liang period witnessed a full flowering of aesthetic theory. If we can speak of a common feature, it is the ambition to systematically codify all the arts. So we have a study of the entire literary and critical tradition by Liu Xie; a comprehensive anthology of poetry and rhyme prose by Xiao Tong 蕭統 (501–531); a specialized anthology of palace-style poetry by Xu Ling; a ranking of poets by Zhong Rong 鍾嶸 (ca.

469–518); and, in the visual arts, a ranking of paints by Xie He 謝赫 (fl. 500) and of calligraphers by Yu Jianwu.²²

Of the major Qi-Liang projects of codification, the earliest and the most ambitious is Liu Xie's *Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍 (The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons). In chapters 1–3, Liu conceptualizes the origins and nature of literature as the embodiment of the Dao.²³ In chapters 4–25, he reviews thirty-six major genres of refined writing under two synchronic rubrics: a twofold division of *wen* 文 (rhymed works) and *bi* 筆 (unrhymed prose), interfaced with a fivefold pedigree from the Five Confucian Classics. In the remaining twenty-five chapters, he codifies early critical thoughts on the major issues of practical and theoretical criticism. Explaining the organization of his book, he makes clear that the fifty chapters are meant to match the *Yi jing* numerology of fifty and, implicitly, its grand scheme of codification.²⁴

Neither Zhong Rong's *Shi pin* 詩品 (Grading of Poets) nor Xiao Tong's *Wenxuan* 文選 (Anthology of Refined Literature) can rival Liu's *Wenxin diaolong* in breadth and depth. However, these two works present interesting alternative models of codifying literary traditions. Zhong places his presentation of 123 major poets within a three-tier grading scheme modeled on the one used during the Han to rank human characters. This scheme also seems to be overlaid with a covert codifying scheme based on the *Yi jing*. The numbering of poets in the three ranks neatly corresponds to the important *Yi jing* numbers of 12, 39, and 72. So Zhong may have self-consciously used the *Yi jing* numbers as an organizing grid as Liu had done.

Unlike Liu, Xiao Tong does not codify the literary tradition within the pedigree of the Five Confucian Classics. While Liu holds up Confucian classics as ideal models for refined literature, Xiao excludes them altogether from his anthology. The convenient excuse he uses is that these sages' works allow none of the cutting and selecting required of an anthology.²⁵ But the real reason for their exclusion is his pursuit of a pure aesthetic. In the preface to the *Wenxuan*, he defines literature in purely aesthetic terms: “the depiction of events is born of deep contemplation, and the locus of principles lies in the domain of refined phrases.”²⁶ Since Confucian classics are not valued especially for these distinctively aesthetic features, he sees fit to leave them out of his anthology.²⁷

Xie He's *Hua pin* 畫品 (Grading of Painters) is probably the most important Qi-Liang text on painting. Thought to have been written between 532 and 552, the work is comparable to those of Zhong Rong and Yu Jianwu. Like these authors, Xie begins with a preface and then provides a ranked list of eminent painters interlaced with impressionistic, evaluative comments.²⁸ What has attracted the most interest, however, is not his list but rather his brief preface. Here, unlike Zhong and Yu, Xie offers a summary of theoretical principles—the Six Laws of painting.

Modern scholarship has focused on the *Hua pin* preface largely because of two unresolved issues: the controversy over the punctuation and hence interpretation of the Six Laws (each compressed into a brief statement) and the remarkable parallel between the Indian Six Limbs of art and the Six Laws presented by Xie.

Victor H. Mair approaches these two issues in a fresh and insightful fashion. His strategy is to see them as closely related, so that the solution of one will lead to the solution of the other. He believes that the controversy over punctuation arose largely because of Zhang Yanyuan's misinterpretation of the Six Laws as quadrimers, or four-character phrases. Thanks to the ingenious efforts of William Acker and Qian Zhongshu, the Six Laws have finally been restored to their original syntax: a numeric + a binome + a binome + verbal judgment. Reexamining the Six Laws in the light of the restored syntax, Mair discovers ample credible internal evidence of Indian influence. First, Xie's peculiar use of numeric enumeration is distinctively Indian as no precedent in pre-Buddhist Chinese texts can be found. Second, the second binome in five of the Six Laws matches one particular "limb," while the one in the remaining law resonates with the only unmatched limb. Third, these five binomes are seldom used in Chinese aesthetic discourse, and some of them even look like neologisms. Fourth, the first binome in each of the Six Laws is a familiar term frequently used in Chinese aesthetic discourse. These four discoveries lead Mair to conclude that Xie appropriated the six limbs in a most ingenious way. He recasts the six limbs in new Chinese terms (of his own making in one case) and precedes them with familiar Chinese critical terms in order to iron out the rough edges of these new terms. So even though the first binomes are grammatically the nominal subjects, they actually serve to explain the second, foreign-inspired binomes. In unmasking the Indian origin of the Six Laws

through a rigorous philological investigation, Mair shows that Indian influence is as crucial to Xie's project of artistic codification as to Shen Yue's prosodic codification.²⁹

Six Dynasty Aesthetics: A Retrospective and Critique

As the product of an aristocratic literati culture, Six Dynasties aesthetics was widely criticized for its decadence by neo-Confucian critics from the Tang through the Qing dynasties. In particular, the aesthetic trends of the Qi-Liang period—often depicted as obsessed by “wind and moon, flowers and grass” (*fengyue huacao* 風月花草)—came under especially intense fire. From an early twentieth-century perspective, however, Six Dynasties aesthetics was of great value precisely because of its pure aestheticism (*weimei zhuyi* 唯美主義). To scholars who sought to establish a modern aesthetic discipline in China, that pure aestheticism was no longer a cause for moral censure. Instead, they saw how it might effectively help to legitimate art for art's sake, as well as aesthetic theory. This revisionist stance has largely determined the way Six Dynasties aesthetics has been viewed ever since.

But if we can accept the modern reassessment of Six Dynasties aesthetics on the whole, a comprehensive analysis must also recognize its weaknesses. The first of these is its narrow range of interest. Of those who produced, appreciated, and theorized about art during the Six Dynasties, nearly all came from the intelligentsia clans. Their unparalleled monopoly of the literary and artistic spheres encouraged their tendency to focus on a small number of themes and genres, all of which reflected interests of their own class exclusively. Thus if the major works of the Wei-Jin period embody the Jin *mingshi*'s “elegant interest” (*yaqu* 雅趣), those of the Qi-Liang period point to the “vulgar interest” (*suqu* 俗趣) of the new intelligentsia in sensual pleasure. As a small coterie, it was no doubt hard for the Six Dynasties literati to see beyond their own narrow circle. To an outsider, nonetheless, their work can seem rather decadent. The shallow behavioral concerns of the Jin *ming-shi* often border on hypocrisy, with their narcissistic quest for an idealized *xuan* in stark contrast to their unabashed pursuit of sensual pleasure in real life.

To understand the narrowness of Six Dynasties aesthetics, we need only observe the exclusion of Tao Qian 陶潛 (365–427) from the liter-

ary canon. As Kang-i Sun Chang points out, the aristocratic literati recognized Tao merely as a hermit. Since his concerns either opposed or were irrelevant to theirs, they felt little interest in his work. So even though Zhong Rong sees Tao as an excellent poet, he does not admit this anti-aristocrat into the pantheon of the great. The best he can give him is a place in the middle rank. In a similar fashion, the aristocratic literati excluded the *xian* 僊 (transcendents) from aesthetic discourse, despite their prominence in popular literature and religion. The only major Six Dynasties critic to give some attention to the *xian*, in fact, was Liu Xie, who because of his humble background and exclusion from the aristocratic literati circle was in a better position to appreciate popular culture. As Rania Huntington remarks, the Six Dynasties witnessed a great increase in the portrayals of *xian* in both prose and verse. Yet it hardly figures at all in aesthetic theory—a pity because (as Huntington makes evident) it bears on important topics: the literary imagination, allegory, and genre criteria.

The second major weakness of Six Dynasties aesthetics is its superficiality. To Liu Xie, it was very evident: “When the ancient poets of the *Book of Poetry* composed their works, they produced *wen* for the sake of emotion. When the [later] masters of refined expressions wrote *fu* and *song*, they produced emotion for the sake of *wen*.”³⁰ As he saw it, the lack of genuine feelings (*zhenqing* 真情) led to the degradation of contemporary literature. From our present-day standpoint, his diagnosis does indeed seem accurate. Yet while Liu clearly perceived the *buzhen* 不真 (falseness, disingenuousness) of literati culture, even he failed to appreciate the *zhen* (trueness, genuineness) of Tao Qian.

By way of contrast, the life of Tao Qian can help to highlight what Six Dynasties literati culture lacked. As Kang-i Sun Chang has shown, it was highly insightful of Yan Yanzhi 顏延之 (386–456) and Xiao Tong to have recognized how faithful Tao Qian was to Zhuang Zi’s idea of being true to one’s simple, natural self (*renzhen* 任真). Whereas the Jin *mingshi* retired to their country estates to live a life of pleasure, Tao chose to endure the poverty and hardship of farm life. Similarly, while the Jin *mingshi* maintained contact with the imperial court, Tao managed to extricate himself completely from all political entanglements. The contrast between Tao and the Jin *mingshi* has led modern scholars to suspect the “reclusiveness” of *mingshi* life as a self-conscious pose designed to enhance their social status, while the conduct of Tao Qian appears to exemplify a genuine return to *ziran*.

If the life of Tao Qian was expressive of *zhen*, the same was equally true of his work. His poetry revealed a complex spectrum of emotion: youthful ambition, followed by the deep disillusionment of an upright official with political corruption; the relief of retirement from political life; pleasure in the simple vocation of a farmer; moral faith in the face of poverty and hardship; the joviality of a carefree drinker; and, finally, sadness over the transience of human life. The “confessional” mode of Tao Qian’s work (which extended even to the forbidden world of erotic fantasy) leaves little room for doubt about its truthfulness and takes us far away from the calculated poses and self-aggrandizement typical of most Jin *mingshi*.

Significantly, Tao Qian has now become for many scholars a pivotal figure in the assessment of Six Dynasties aesthetics.³¹ Given his outsider role vis-à-vis literati culture and the lack of any theoretical utterances in his oeuvre, we might well ask why. The answer, I would argue, is twofold. On the one hand, we can think of Tao as a critical mirror that reveals the weaknesses of Six Dynasties aesthetics. On the other, we can think of his work as the fulfillment of what the Six Dynasties literati strove for but failed to attain. His finest visionary poems captured the experience of suprasensory communion with the Dao in a way that was utterly unthinkable for contemporary *xuanyan* and *shanshui* poetry, while his “Xianqing fu” 閒情賦 (Rhapsody on Calming the Passions) explored depths of erotic sentiment too elusive for the Qi-Liang court poets. In short, his work brought to fruition the promise of Six Dynasties aesthetics.

Reflections: From Aesthetic Inquiry to Aesthetic Discipline

In many ways, the Six Dynasties period can be said to have achieved a sophistication in aesthetic theory comparable to that of the West. Like their Western counterparts, Six Dynasties critics not only defined every major form, but also attempted to specify its relation to a cosmic order. Their discussion of disinterestedness in art and aesthetic judgment and of how mental images mediate between the supersensible and the sensible all strongly suggest Kant. Moreover, their complex schemes of codification seem more comprehensive and sophisticated than any proposed by Western critics. Thus we find no anthology project that can match the scope of Xiao Tong’s *Wenxuan*, nor any systematizing endeavor

comparable to that of Liu Xie. Indeed, no Western critic has ever explored as many literary genres or addressed as many questions of theoretical and practical criticism as Liu did in *Wenxin diaolong*. In short, by the end of the Six Dynasties, Chinese criticism had all the concepts necessary for an aesthetic discipline except the crucial one of the field itself.

The lack of a comprehensive concept like beauty is at least partly responsible for the treatment of literature and the other arts as disparate genres in the Six Dynasties and all subsequent dynasties. Although commonly translated as “aesthetics,” the term “*meixue*” 美學, or “learning of beauty,” becomes highly problematic when applied to the Chinese tradition. Unlike beauty, the Chinese word “*mei*” 美 refers to pleasurable impressions of order and harmony rather than to any attempt to nominalize these within some aesthetic-cosmological scheme. For proof, I need only mention the absence of a single treatise on *mei* throughout the history of traditional China. Simply put, in traditional China the word “*mei*” did not serve to integrate all the branches of art into a coherent whole. Nor did any other Chinese term do that. Even though poetry, calligraphy, and painting were much more consciously blended in China than in the West, a theoretic study of these arts never coalesced into a systematic discipline in traditional China.

The eventual establishment of an aesthetic discipline in the twentieth century, however, was quite easy and smooth. Once scholars Wang Guowei 王國維 (1877–1927) and Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 (1868–1940) introduced Western aesthetics into China and called for a national “education in beauty” (*meiyu* 美育) an integrated study of traditional Chinese literature and the arts soon followed. The term “*meixue*” gained currency quickly. Although largely neglected from the 1950s to the late 1970s in mainland China, aesthetics has since reemerged as one of the hottest areas of scholarship. With the current explosion of books on Chinese aesthetics, from general surveys to specialized studies in a given period, and a place in the university curriculum, aesthetics has definitely arrived.

As aesthetics comes of age in China, it seems only natural for questions about its conceptual definition to arise. While earlier scholars were happy to identify “*mei*” with the Western concept of beauty, closer scrutiny has shown that for traditional Chinese critics the Chinese term never had the same broad scope. But even if neither “*mei*” nor any other term offers an exact equivalent to “beauty,” that should not pre-

clude our discovery of a concept that might allow us to organize Chinese aesthetics as a field. To that end, Ye Lang 葉朗, a prominent Chinese aesthetician, proposed “*yixiang*” 意象 (idea-image) as a possible alternative.³² While I fully agree with Ye about the semantic inadequacy of “*mei*,” the extensive studies on “*yi*” and “*xiang*” in the present volume demonstrate that either singly or together they address only the interplay between the sensible and supersensible in art without reference to its intrinsic order or its relation to a larger cosmic order. But if “*yixiang*” does not work, is there any other word in Chinese that might?

Here I would suggest “*wen*.” Both in semantic scope and in history of use, “*wen*” and “beauty” seem very close. Like “beauty” in Western languages, “*wen*” has gradually acquired a broader significance. For the Zhou, it was used mainly in reference to the moral and sociopolitical order. In the Han, it was increasingly employed to describe the order of graphic signs. During the Six Dynasties, it came to signify order in words, sounds, music, and images from literature and the arts. The Tang and Song returned its emphasis to the sociopolitical, as neo-Confucian scholars habitually paired it with the (Confucian) Dao, an association that has continued into the twentieth century.³³

Given these circumstances, we can expect some major Chinese critics to have made use of “*wen*.” The most prominent of these is Liu Xie. In *Wenxin diaolong*, he deftly exploited the full range of “*wen*” as a principle of order for the cosmological, religious, sociopolitical, psychological, and artistic spheres: as coextensive with the cosmic order and hence as the source of literature (chs. 1–3); as prominent in both belletristic and nonbelletristic genres (chs. 4–25); and as vital to literary creation and reception (chs. 26–49). Thanks to its multiple significances, “*wen*” allowed Liu Xie to unify his diverse remarks into a highly coherent critical system, one that would apply not only to literature, but to all the other arts as well.³⁴

Yet the potential of “*wen*” to become an organizational principle for all the arts was never realized. After Liu Xie, few literary critics would exploit “*wen*” as self-consciously and exhaustively. Those who theorized about the nonliterary arts were reluctant even to make use of “*wen*,” probably because they felt it had become too closely associated with refined literature, especially prose. Since the twentieth century, that association has been reinforced (so that “*wenxue*” now refers exclusively to the study of literature), while the broader cultural resonances Confucius had in mind have been largely lost. Translation of the West-

ern notion of “literature” as “*wenxue*” served to complete the process. The fact that “*wen*” was not essentially subjective may have played a role as well. Its lack of a prominent subjective element precluded the sort of analytical study within a cognitive or idealist framework that would help to make aesthetics a coherent discipline in eighteenth-century Europe. But even if the prospect of a unified concept for Chinese aesthetics has for the moment disappeared, the potential is still there. The history of the term “*wen*” persuasively attests to it. Clearly, the sort of creative process envisioned by those who employed the concept of “*wen*” was quite different from that of the West. Instead of a notion of creativity that went back to the concept of God as maker, we get a concept of order based on a belief in the possibility of communion with the Dao as the cosmic principle. Thus the paradigm behind “*wen*” and, more broadly, Chinese aesthetics is ultimately different from that of Western aesthetics. But that should make a comparative perspective on Chinese and Western aesthetics only more fruitful.

NOTES

I would like to thank Robert Ford Company, Wolfgang Kubin, Rania Huntington, Shuen-fu Lin, and Victor Mair for their valuable comments. I am especially grateful to my friends Leon Chai and Cara Ryan, who meticulously read through the essay and offered extremely useful comments and suggestions for stylistic improvement.

1. The term “Six Dynasties” is generally used to refer to the Wu (222–280), Eastern Jin (317–420), (Liu) Song (420–479), Qi (479–502), Liang (502–557), and Chen (557–589) dynasties. For all of them Nanjing (then called Jiankang) was the capital. Thus defined, “Six Dynasties” covers the time span from 222 to 589, with the conspicuous omission of the Western Jin (265–317). In an effort to restore this period, some scholars use the term to mean the six successive dynasties from the Western Jin through the Chen, thereby excluding the Wu and shortening the Six Dynasties period by forty-three years. Currently most scholars use the term simply as a designation of the historical period from 220 to 589, subsuming under it all the dynasties that appeared during this period, including the Wei (220–265), Shu (221–265), and Western Jin, as well as the five Northern Dynasties that controlled northern China from 386 to 581. We have adopted this usage here.

2. Is it appropriate and advisable to apply “aesthetics,” a term of Western origin, to the Chinese tradition? Can we speak of “Chinese aesthetics” and (under it) “Six Dynasties aesthetics,” “Wei-Jin aesthetics,” and so on? These

are questions we must answer at the very outset. Although the study of Chinese aesthetics has already come of age in China, such questions are still being raised by some scholars of Western aesthetics. For instance, writing the “aesthetics” entry for *A Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory*, Gregory Elliott raises doubt about the validity of applying “aesthetics” to the Chinese tradition, notwithstanding his warm praise of a famous ninth-century Chinese text on painting:

The philosophical sophistication of such reflection in Ancient Greece is attested by Plato’s *Hippias Major* and Aristotle’s *Poetics*, which were formative texts for the Western tradition, but until very recently there was nothing in this tradition comparable to the level of Chinese reflection on painting reached in a text such as Chang Yen-yüan’s *Li-Tai Ming-hua Chi* (*Records of Famous Paintings*). Yet it would be extremely imprudent to collect these and other examples of reflection on art and beauty under the title of “aesthetics.” The latter is not only of modern origin, but its preoccupations, direction of analysis, and consequently its internal system of division and classification are specifically European and should not be applied to either premodern or non-European materials (in *A Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory*, ed. Michael Payne [Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996], p. 16).

To determine whether we can speak of Chinese aesthetics depends largely on how one interprets the term “aesthetics” itself. As noted by Elliott, “aesthetics” is a term of modern European origin, coined from the Greek *aesthesis* by the eighteenth-century thinker Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten to designate contemporary studies of art and beauty as a distinct discipline of systematic, scientific inquiry. By the late eighteenth century, aesthetics had become not only a firmly established discipline but a central part of philosophy. If “aesthetics” refers exclusively to this modern European discipline, of course, one would have to allow Elliott’s disqualification of Chinese aesthetics.

However, in addition to its historical designation of a modern, philosophy-related discipline, “aesthetics” is now often used as a broad reference to all Western philosophies of art and beauty, including those developed in premodern times. This broadening of the meaning of “aesthetics” is entirely logical. After all, the establishment of the modern aesthetic discipline does not mark an abrupt departure from earlier reflections on art and beauty, but rather a culmination of them. If we use “aesthetics” in this broadly defined sense, the argument is easily made for extending it to non-Western traditions. Just as art and beauty are universal human phenomena, so reflection on them is not unique to a particular geographical or cultural sphere. As long as there are serious practices and theories of art in any given tradition, we can speak of the aesthetics of that tradition.

3. Since there are neither important literary or artistic innovations nor major theoretical works during the Chen dynasty, I shall not include the Chen in this historical overview.

4. On these two groups of the Han intelligentsia, see Qian Mu 錢穆, *Guoshi dagang* 國史大綱, 2 vols. (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1994), vol.1, pp. 149–191.

5. On the lives and works of these two groups of *mingshi*, see Luo Zongqiang 羅宗強, *Wei Jin Nanbeichao wenxue sixiang shi* 魏晉南北朝文學思想史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1996), p. 74.

6. The most prominent of them are Wang Dun 王敦 (266–324), Wang Dao, Wang Yi 王異 (276–322), Wang Qia 王洽 (323–358), Wang Mi 王謐 (360–407), Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (321–379), and Wang Xianzhi 王獻之 (344–388).

7. Wang Sengqian recorded the family tradition of calligraphers, and Wang Rong studied musical harmony and the tonal rules of verse with Shen Yue 沈約 (441–513). Their senior, Wang Wei, earned his reputation through treatises on painting.

8. Members of this “turgid stream” will be collectively called “Jin *mingshi*” below.

9. On the flawed moral character of the Jin *mingshi*, see Cao Daoheng 曹道衡, *Nanchao wenxue yu Beichao wenxue yanjiu* 南朝文學與北朝文學研究 (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1999), pp. 125–144, and Luo Zongqiang, *Wei Jin Nanbeichao wenxue sixiang shi*, pp. 75–84, 126–142.

10. Liu Yiqing 劉義慶, comp., *Shishuo xinyu jiaojian* 世說新語校箋, ed. Xu Zhen'e 徐震堦 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984), 4.76, vol. 1, p. 140.

11. Adapted by Shuen-fu Lin from Richard B. Mather, trans., *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü: A New Account of Tales of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976), p. 60.

12. For a case study of one such parvenu clan, see the appendix on Shen Yue and his clan in Liu Yuejin 劉躍進, *Menfa shizu yu yongming wenxue* 門閥世族與永明文學 (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1996), pp. 325–350.

13. See Cao Daoheng, *Nanchao wenxue yu Beichao wenxue yanjiu*, pp. 136–144.

14. On the waning of Abstruse Learning during the Song, see Luo Zongqiang, *Wei Jin Nanbeichao wenxue sixiang shi*, pp. 172–183.

15. See Kang-i Sun Chang, *Six Dynasties Poetry* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 47–78.

16. The remaining three members were Wang Rong 王融 and two other Xiaos: Xiao Yan 蕭衍 (464–549), who later founded the Liang dynasty, and Xie Shen 蕭琛 (478–529). For an in-depth study of the Jingling coterie, see Liu Yuejin, *Menfa shizu yu yongming wenxue*, pp. 27–70.

17. For studies on Xiao Gang and his Donggong coterie, see Chang, *Six Dynasties Poetry*, pp. 153–157, and Fusheng Wu, *The Poetics of Decadence: Chinese Poetry of the Southern Dynasties and Late Tang Periods* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), pp. 41–75.

18. It is noteworthy that Xie Tiao, Wang Rong, and Wang Bao 王褒 (fl. 531–560)—members of the once preeminent Xie and Wang clans—now needed the patronage of the royal Xiaos. Employed as “professional” writers at the Qi and Liang courts, they and other members of the old clans lost much of the creative freedom their *mingshi* forefathers had enjoyed. Their literary achievements now served to improve the cultural standing of the Xiaos instead of enhancing the power of their own clans as an independent cultural force. The subordinate status of Xie Tiao, Wang Rong, and Wang Bao betokens the final cultural triumph of the Xiaos over the old intelligentsia clans.

19. Interestingly, the change from *qingyuan* 清遠 (pure and remote) to *qingxin* mirrors the reorientation of poetry from the quest of *xuan* to the pursuit of pure aesthetic pleasure. On the Yongming-style poetry, see Liu Yuejin, *Menfa shizu yu yongming wenxue*, pp. 103–152.

20. See Luo Zongqiang, *Wei Jin Nanbeichao wenxue sixiang shi*, p. 418.

21. See Wang Chunhong 汪春泓, “Lun Fojiao yu Liangdai gongti shi zhi chansheng” 論佛教與梁代宮體詩之產生, *Wenxue pinglun* 文學評論 (May 1991), pp. 40–56.

22. Qi-Liang writings on calligraphy, like those on literature and painting (to be discussed below), are mostly projects of codification. Whereas their Wei-Jin predecessors had focused on calligraphic imagination and execution, Qi-Liang calligraphy critics preoccupied themselves primarily with the less sublime task of codifying the calligraphic tradition. In his *Gujin shuping* 古今書評 (Comments on Ancient and Contemporary Calligraphy), Yuan Ang 袁昂 (461–540) lists 25 prominent calligraphers; each entry is followed by pithy comments or a cluster of nature images to characterize the distinctive features of the calligrapher’s works. Xiao Yan’s *Gujin shuren youlie ping* 古今書人優劣評 (Comments on the Merits and Demerits of Ancient and Contemporary Calligraphers) is very similar, expanding the list to 32. In *Shu pin* 書品 (Grading of Calligraphers), however, Yu Jianwu attempts something more ambitious. He begins by tracing the history of calligraphy from the invention of characters to his own time and then presents 123 calligraphers, arranging them within nine ranks, obviously an adaptation of the nine-rank system of officialdom (*jiupin* 九品). The evaluative comments made by Yu and other Qi-Liang calligraphy critics are unmistakably modeled on the impressionistic remarks on human characters in Liu Yiqing’s *Shishuo xinyu*.

23. See Kang-i Sun Chang, “Liu Xie’s Idea of Canonicity,” and Zong-qi Cai, “The Making of a Critical System: Concepts of Literature in *Wenxin diaolong* and Earlier Texts,” both in *A Chinese Literary Mind: Culture, Creativity, and*

Rhetoric in Wenxin diaolong, ed. Zong-qi Cai (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 17–31, 33–59.

24. Among the issues thoroughly discussed are rhetoric (chs. 33–35, 37–39), general compositional principles (ch. 44), the creative process (ch. 26), and literary history (chs. 29, 45). For studies of Liu’s theoretical insight into these issues, see Andrew H. Plaks, “The Bones of Parallel Rhetoric in *Wenxin diaolong*”; Ronald Egan, “Poet, Mind, and World: A Reconsideration of the ‘Shen si’ Chapter of *Wenxin diaolong*”; Shuen-fu Lin, “Liu Xie on Imagination”; Stephen Owen, “Liu Xie and the Discourse Machine”; and Wai-ye Li, “Between ‘Literary Mind’ and ‘Carving Dragons’: Order and Excess in *Wenxin diaolong*”—all in Cai, ed., *A Chinese Literary Mind*, pp. 163–173, 101–126, 127–160, 175–191, 193–225.

25. See Guo Shaoyu 郭紹虞 and Wang Wensheng 王文生, eds. *Zhongguo lidai wenlun xuan* 中國歷代文論選, 4 vols. (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1979), vol. 1, p. 330. Cited hereafter as *ZGLD*.

26. See *ZGLD*, vol. 1, p. 330.

27. In explaining his exclusion of non-Confucian philosophical works, he is more honest and forthright: “The writings of Lao [Zi] and Zhuang [Zi] and the likes of Guan [Zi] and Mencius have the primary goal of establishing their philosophical ideas, and literary competence is not essential to them. Therefore, they are also omitted from the present anthology.” See *ZGLD*, vol. 1, p. 330.

28. The scope of his ranking is quite modest—27 painters, as opposed to 123 poets in Zhong’s *Shi pin* and 123 calligraphers in Yu’s *Shu pin*. Arranged in six ranks, the 27 painters are all of recent times (from the Wu, Jin, Song, Qi, and Liang dynasties), while the lists of poets and calligraphers in the other two texts extend over a much wider period. Xie’s six-tier ranking falls between Zhong’s three-tier and Yu’s nine-tier schemes.

29. See Victor H. Mair and Tsu-lin Mei, “The Sanskrit Origins of Recent Style Prosody,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 51, no. 2 (December 1991), pp. 375–470. The authors show that the general idea of prosodic defect (*bing* 病), formulated by Buddhist-minded scholars under the leadership of Shen Yue, was inspired by the concept of *doṣa* in Indian poetry criticism. Similarly, many specific tonal infelicities in Chinese poetry were codified and named by analogy with metrical blemishes in Indian poetry. The authors also explain how Shen Yue’s theory of four tones and *pingze* 平仄 (the division of the four tones into level and oblique) resulted from the reflections of Chinese scholars on Indian prosody and hymnody.

30. Zhu Yingping 朱迎平, ed., *Wenxin diaolong suoyin* 文心雕龍索引 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1987), 31/61–64 (i.e., chapter 31/sentences 61–64).

31. In most Chinese-language histories of Six Dynasties aesthetics, we can find long chapters devoted solely to him. See, for instance, Li Zehou 李澤厚

and Liu Gangji 劉綱紀, *Zhongguo meixueshi: Wei-jin Nanbei chao pian* 中國美學史：魏晉南北朝篇, 2 vols. (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1984), vol. 1, pp. 363–384, and Wu Gongzheng 吳功正, *Liuchao meixue shi* 六朝美學史 (Nanjing: Jiangsu meishu chubanshe, 1994), pp. 580–596.

32. See Ye Lang, *Zhongguo meixueshi dagang* 中國美學史大綱 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1985), pp. 1–16.

33. I discuss the changing concepts of “wen” in my book, *Configurations of Comparative Poetics: Three Perspectives on Western and Chinese Literary Criticism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2002), pp. 49–70.

34. Liu writes, “There are three categories involved in the creation of *wen*. The first is *xingwen* 形文 (graphic pattern), made up of the five colors. The second is *shengwen* 聲文 (sound pattern), made up of the five sounds. The third is *qingwen* 情文 (emotive pattern), made up of the five emotions. The mixing of the five colors produces brilliant beautiful embroidery. The harmonizing of the five sounds creates the Shao and Xia (music of high antiquity). The expression of the five emotions brings forth elegant works of writing. All these are concrete manifestations of the spiritual principle” (*WXDL*, 31/18–29; translation taken with modifications from Vincent Yu-chung Shih, trans., *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* [Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1983], p. 337).