

Introduction

Expressing the Heart's Intent

“Poetry expresses the heart’s intent” (*shi yan zhi* 詩言志) was the earliest definition of poetry in China, and the belief that *zhi* 志—the heart’s intent, wishes, desires, ambitions, and emotions—was expressed in poetry and music, and later in calligraphy and painting, became the foundation of Chinese aesthetics. In over two thousand years of history, however, the meaning of “*zhi*” changed. “*Shi yan zhi*” began as a description of a shamanistic religious experience and evolved into a complex and nuanced notion of the creative use of reason and imagination. This book examines several stages in that development.

Considering the roles played by *zhi* in Chinese aesthetic theory will emphasize and help explain the ways the Chinese and Western intellectual traditions tend to conceive of the relationship between art, religion, politics, and morality in very different ways. The difference is intimately connected to assumptions about the nature of reason and order, assumptions we will consider in more detail in the next chapter. Hall and Ames have argued that order can be conceived of as logical or aesthetic.¹ Logical or rational order moves away from unique particulars to find the general form of the relations holding between them. The Western intellectual tradition often assumes that the task of any serious endeavor—philosophy, theology, science—is to find the logical order of the cosmos: in the physical universe, in Plato’s Heaven, or in the Mind of God. A logical order is typically quite abstract and may be highly mathematical. The scientific ideal of the “GUT,” the Grand Unified Theory of Everything, is one

such order. The Grand Unified Theory is, or we hope will be when we discover it, a series of complex but elegant equations describing the laws holding between the fundamental forces and objects that make up the universe. Given the success of science in finding (or imposing) logical order in the world, Western philosophy has often considered science its closest ally, leading Willard Van Orman Quine to famously, or infamously, remark that “philosophy of science is philosophy enough.”²

In most logical orders, pairs of opposites are generally conceived as a strict dualism; that is, as mutually exclusive categories that cannot overlap: for example appearance and reality, mind and body, objective and subjective, free and determined. This way of conceiving opposites has the benefit of clarity and precision, but faces often insurmountable difficulties when called upon to account for the relationship between the two categories.³

Hall and Ames claim that Chinese philosophy conceives of order as aesthetic, in which novelty is constantly being created and each particular makes its own unique contribution to the whole. In an aesthetic order, pairs of opposites are usually thought of as two ends of a continuum which may merge as *yin* becomes *yang*, and day becomes night; or may be balanced in a mutually interdependent and sustaining (but not static) harmony as in well-functioning ecology where human flourishing depends on the health of the natural environment; or the complementary and mutually supportive relationships between members of a family.⁴ Hall and Ames write:

Aesthetic order begins with the uniqueness of one thing and assesses this particular as contributing to the balanced complexity of its context. Because the aesthetic order celebrates the disclosure of the insistent particularity of each detail in tension with the consequent unity of these specific details, plurality must be conceived as prior to unity and disjunction to conjunction. The focus of an aesthetic order is the way in which a concrete, specific detail discloses itself as producing a harmony expressed by a complex of such details in relationship to one another.⁵

For these reasons aesthetics came to play a role in Chinese philosophy analogous to that played by science in Western philosophy. One of the projects of this book is to explore the implications of a tradition motivated to “express the heart’s intent” rather than to “search for the truth” and in so doing to understand the claim that Chinese philosophy is “aesthetic.”

Classical Understandings of *shi yan zhi**The Canon of Shun*

The phrase *shi yan zhi* first appears in an early section of the *Book of Documents* (*Shujing* 書經) in the section known as the *Canon of Shun*.⁶ In this text the sage King Shun instructs Kui, his music master:

I bid you Kui, the emperor said, to preside over music and educate our sons, [so that they will be] straightforward yet gentle, congenial yet dignified, strong but not ruthless, simple but not arrogant. Poetry expresses the heart's intent (*zhi*); singing prolongs the utterance of that expression. The notes accord with the prolonged utterance, and are harmonized by the pitch tubes. The eight kinds of musical instruments attain to harmony and do not interfere with one another. Spirits and man are brought into harmony.

Oh! Yes, replied Kui. I will strike and tap the stones and a hundred beasts will follow one another to dance.⁷

At first glance, *shi yan zhi* seems to echo the familiar (modern Western) Expressive Theory that art expresses the personal feelings or emotions of the artist. The Expressive Theory, however, relies on certain epistemological assumptions about individualism, in particular that philosophical understanding must begin by considering self-reliant individuals (thinkers, artists, citizens) isolated from their social context.⁸ In conjunction with the assumption of strict dualism that pairs of opposites cannot overlap, Western thought often contrasts what is inner, mental, and subjective, with what is outer and objective. Our inner lives are made up of a complex structure of thoughts, feelings, concepts, beliefs, and desires. The outer world is the objective world of physical objects which are, somehow, connected to the inner realm by language.⁹ In straightforward factual communication, there is generally a publically accessible “fact of the matter,” objectively “out there” which can be stated more or less correctly. Feelings and emotions, on the other hand, are deeply personal and individual. They may be very important to the person experiencing them, but they can be very difficult to communicate, often requiring the language of poetry and art. If “truth” is a property of factual, objective statements, then, if art expresses any “truth” at all, it does so in a very limited and derivative way.¹⁰ Platonists and other lovers of reason are therefore deeply suspicious of works of art

which express something ultimately unverifiable about their creator's inner life. Views like this account for the trivialization of aesthetics in much of Western philosophy—in which truth, the objective truths of science and mathematics, are models of the highest kind of human thought.

Not only are there a number of difficulties of the Expressive Theory on its own, it is a very poor candidate for understanding *shi yan zhi*. If poetry simply expresses the poet's inner, personal feelings, it is hard to see how it could be as important as Shun, and later Confucius, took it to be in the education of the leaders of China.

The Master said, 'My young friends, why don't any of you study the *Songs*? Reciting the *Songs* can arouse your sensibilities, strengthen your powers of observation, enhance your ability to get on with others, and sharpen your critical skills. Close at hand it enables you to serve your father, and away at court it enables you to serve your lord. It instills in you a broad vocabulary for making distinctions in the world around you.' (*Analects* 17.9)¹¹

Although in early classical texts *zhi* (志) and *qing* (情) emotions, feelings, were often identified,¹² *shi yan zhi* is also translated as "Poetry is product of earnest thought,"¹³ and as "Poetry articulates what is on the mind intently."¹⁴ These translations have been criticized for being too "rationalistic"¹⁵ but they reflect the meaning of *xin* (心), a radical appearing in *zhi* (志) as both the "heart" which feels and the "mind" which thinks. In theories that assume a sharp distinction between thought, which involves reason, and emotions which do not, it is impossible for one thing, *zhi*, to be both a thought and a feeling.

Translations of *zhi* as "intention," or "will" have also been criticized because of the associations these terms have in Western philosophical literature with "free will." Owen notes, however, that if "heart's intent" is taken in the sense of an intense preoccupation, it may be an appropriate translation of *zhi*.¹⁶ Nevertheless, it is important to remember that *zhi* always has both an inner aspect and an outer object which makes translating it as "ambition" often the most appropriate choice. Thus Confucius claimed,

From fifteen, my heart-and-mind was set upon (*zhi*) learning; from thirty I took my stance; from forty I was no longer doubtful; from fifty I realized the propensities of *tian* (*tianming*)

天命) from sixty my ear was attuned; from seventy I could give my heart-and-mind free rein without overstepping the boundaries. (*Analects* 2.4)

And Mencius:

When [a great man] achieves his ambition (*zhi*) he shares with the people; when he fails to do so, he practices the Way alone.¹⁷

A further difficulty in interpreting *shi yan zhi* involves the question of whose intentions are being expressed: those of the author?¹⁸ of the poem itself? of the person quoting the poem to make a diplomatic point at court? of the community at large? The contemporary Chinese philosopher Li Zehou argues that originally it was the latter; in the earliest texts *zhi* referred to the historical, moral, and philosophical principles of the community, principles which grew out of the primitive religious ceremonies of early humans.¹⁹

Kui's reply to Shun, "Oh! Yes . . . I will strike and tap the stones and a hundred beasts will follow one another to dance," supports Li's position. Although Kui might believe that his music will entice actual animals to dance, his remark probably refers to ancient, Neolithic totem dances in which dancers, shamans, wore animal headdresses and tails like those depicted in Neolithic pottery.²⁰



FIGURE 1.1. Pottery bowl found in 1972 in Qinghai Province at the site of the Majiayao Neolithic culture. In the collection of the National Museum of China.

Dancing, accompanied by chanting or singing was one of the earliest social activities of primitive humans, a practice that probably predates the appearance of *Homo sapiens*. Our close nonhuman relatives, gorillas and chimpanzees, engage in ritualized rhythmic movements, shifting their weight from foot to foot, waving leaves and branches, and crying out and shouting, or hooting, in excitement.²¹

Shamanistic dances evolved into ecstatic ceremonies with elaborate costumes, ritual objects, drums, flutes, and magical invocations of mysterious spiritual powers and gods. Pre-linguistic humans used these dances to create intense feelings of unity, compassion, and respect leading to the community solidarity and morality necessary for the survival of truly human societies. A community engaging in repeated ritualized movement creates a sense of group identity, in which individual consciousness is merged into a larger group consciousness. One feels part of something almost infinite, controlled by forces and standards outside of oneself.²² In the dancing and music of these essentially religious ceremonies “spirits and man are brought into harmony.”

When the Zhou Dynasty replaced the intensely religious Shang Dynasty, shamanistic dances became formalized into the rituals (*li* 禮) of the Zhou court. Perhaps in part because of Zhou suspicion of the overwhelming feelings roused by shamanistic dances, the focus of importance shifted away from dancing to music, song, and poetry. Moreover, as the remarks by Confucius and Mencius quoted earlier indicate, the early religious concern for harmony with spirits changed to a more secular interest in social and political harmony; but this was only a change in emphasis. In addition to its close association with emotions (*qing* 情), originally the emotions associated with religious ecstasy, *zhi* almost always contains a didactic element intimately connected with political affairs and moral education.

Reformulation in the “Great Preface”

Around the first century CE, several hundred years after the *Canon of Shun* was written,²³ the “Great Preface” to the *Book of Poetry* (*Shijing*) reformulated the definition of poetry.

Poetry is where the heart's intent goes.²⁴ What is still in the heart is ‘intent’; what is expressed in words is ‘poetry.’ Emotions (*qing* 情) are stirred inside and manifest themselves in words.

Emotions move within and take form in words. If words cannot express them adequately, we sigh them out. If sighing is not adequate, we sing them out. If singing is not adequate, we unconsciously move our hands to gesticulate, and stamp our feet to dance.

Emotions are discharged in sounds. As those sounds assume a pattern, they are called ‘tones.’ The tones of a well governed state are peaceful and joyful; the governance is marked by harmony. The tones of a time of chaos are woeful and filled with anger; the governance is deviate. The tones of a failed state are sorrowful and contemplative; the people are in dire straits.²⁵

The “Great Preface” elaborates the process suggested in the *Canon of Shun* by describing poetry as moving between inner and outer. People are born with a pre-linguistic human nature (*xing* 性) which is in a state of “equilibrium and silence” but which possesses certain dispositions.²⁶ Mencius’s theory of the four sprouts describes our innate, inborn dispositions to respond to circumstances in certain ways. The “sprouts” are not full-blown traits (or virtues), but can develop into virtues (benevolence, humanity, *ren* 仁; righteousness, *yi* 義; propriety, *li* 禮; and wisdom, *zhi* 智) only if they are nourished by proper education and favorable circumstances.²⁷ External objects or situations rouse our emotions, *qing*, which the heart-mind transforms into intent, *zhi*. Taking a linguistic form *zhi* moves outward in the form of poetry. The distinction between “inner” and “outer” is so fluid, however, that Owen argues that there is “one thing”: when it is “in” our hearts it is *zhi*; when it is outside it is a poem.²⁸

The classical Platonic epistemological metaphor for the relationship between the inner and outer is visual—external objects are mirrored or otherwise represented, by inner, mental forms, concepts, or images. The fundamental Chinese epistemological metaphor is often hearing rather than sight. Like the wind, sound travels invisibly over great distances, passing through barriers impenetrable to sight and causing similarly tuned instruments to resonate with each other across great distances. Relying on the metaphors of sound, waves, wind, and water, a Tang dynasty commentator describes the relationship between *xing* (original human nature) and *qing* (emotions): “*Xing* is to *qing* as a wave is to water. When it’s calm it’s water, and when it’s active, it’s waves. Likewise, when it is calm it is *xing*, and when it’s active, it’s *qing*.”²⁹ A related metaphor, making a political rather than an epistemological point, is found in *Analects* 12.19:

“The excellence (*de* 德) of the exemplary person (*junzi* 君子) is the wind, while that of the petty person is the grass. As the wind blows, the grass is sure to bend.”

In both the *Canon of Shun* and the “Great Preface” expressing *zhi* is relatively involuntary. Poetry, music, and dance are natural results of the interaction between human nature (*xing*) and the world. In the *Canon of Shun* the human response is ultimately religious, a shamanistic dance bringing humanity and spirits into harmony. In the “Great Preface” music, which includes poetry and song, has replaced dance as the most important response. Moreover the response has become more secular. The *zhi* of poetry was to produce, or reflect, the political harmony, or lack thereof, present in a particular society. The “Great Preface” emphasizes the Confucian belief that poetry should always be didactic. In the highly political and moralizing Confucian interpretations of the poems in the *Book of Songs* (and events presented in the *Spring and Autumn Annals*) the role of imagination and individual creativity in art seems to be seriously undervalued.

When the Han Dynasty collapsed under pressure from invading nomadic tribes, the Confucian world order began to disintegrate. In the political division and unrest of the Wei-Jin era (220–420 CE) Confucian certainties lost their power as intellectuals turned to the abstract metaphysical speculations of *xuanxue* or Neo-Daoism³⁰ which focused on individual feelings, thoughts and characters rather than the external realms of religion and politics. As a reflection of this shift, in the Wei-Jin period “poetry originates in emotion” (*shi yuan qing* 詩緣情) was provided as an explanation of “poetry expresses the heart’s intent” with “*shi yan zhi*” and “*shi yuan qing*” interpreted as referring to individual aspirations and emotions.³¹ Furthermore, by the Wei-Jin era Buddhism had begun to shape Chinese thought, giving it, among other things, a complex psychology and philosophy of mind which contributed to the change in the interpretation of “*shi yan zhi*.” At the same time, as we will see in chapter 3, the growing power of Buddhist monasteries had a profound effect on Chinese economic and political arrangements, while Buddhist sculpture transformed the Chinese tradition.

Six Dynasty Literary Theory: The *Wenxin Diaolong* of Liu Xie

Liu Xie’s fifth-century text *Wénxīn Dīāolóng* (*The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*) is a comprehensive theory of the origin, nature,

function, and epistemology of literature. Liu explained that “[by] literary mind, I mean the mental exertion in writing,” and that “[to] carve dragons . . . means to treat the art of writing as a matter of greatest seriousness and to cultivate it meticulously.”³² Liu accepted the *shī yán zhì* tradition that the purpose of literature/poetry was to harmonize, but rejected the strong didactic emphasis of the earlier tradition. Moving away from the classical concerns with religious harmony between humanity and spirits, and political harmony between various parts of society, Liu concentrated on the harmony between creative individuals and the cosmic patterns of the universe or Dao.³³

Like the “Great Preface,” Liu’s *Wénxīn Diāolóng* assumes that music, poetry, and song are more significant than dance. However, while the “Great Preface” discusses the sound of poetry and music, Liu explores the role of the visual patterns of writing in achieving harmony between literature, poetry, and the patterns of nature, the Dao.³⁴

It can be inferred that all forms of existence have patterns . . . [T]he sounds produced on the apertures in forest trees resemble music from pipes and lutes; spring water falling on rocks sounds like melodies from jade chimes and bronze bells. Thus with the making of forms, patterns appear; with the making of sounds, writings emerge.³⁵

The *Wénxīn Diāolóng* begins with the cosmological claim that *wen* was born from the primeval *taiji* (太極) at the same time as Heaven and Earth.

Great is the virtue (*de* 德) of patterns (*wen* 文)! It is born together with Heaven and Earth. And how is this? When the blue color parted from the yellow, and the round shape from the square, heaven and earth came into being. Like two inter-folding jade mirrors, the sun and the moon reflect the images of heaven, while streams and mountains are interwoven into earthly patterns like gorgeous damask. They are manifestations of Dao. When earthly patterns and heavenly images take shape, inferior and superior places are established, and two primal powers of heaven and earth are born. Yet only when humans join in does the Great Triad form. Endowed with the divine spark of consciousness (*xingling* 性靈), humans are the essence

of the five elements, the mind of heaven and earth. When mind is born, speech appears. When speech appears, writing comes forth. This is the way of Dao.³⁶

Liu understands *wen* quite broadly. It displays/reveals/manifests the cosmic order, appearing in the patterns of the heavens (the sun and the moon), of the earth (mountains and rivers), the brilliant scales of a dragon, the magnificent stripes of the tiger, and the literature of humanity.³⁷

Rather than asserting a correlation between human language (*wenren*) and the patterns of heaven and earth, Liu makes the stronger claim that the natural patterns of heaven and earth are only complete when there is something to recognize, know, and understand them. Thus, humans as “the mind of heaven and earth” must be part of the great Triad: Heaven, Earth, and Humanity.³⁸ “Mind gave birth to speech/language (*yan* 言); when speech appeared, language/writing developed to make the patterns of heaven and earth clear and intelligible.”³⁹

To make it clear that literature is an essential part of the natural order, not just something humans have “added on” to the cosmos, Liu describes the origin of writing in the markings on the backs of dragons and turtles. These markings were “natural manifestations of the Dao” which the sages clarified to provide moral guidance.⁴⁰ Writing became increasingly important when King Shun “composed a song to express his heart felt feelings (*zhi*).”⁴¹ The tradition continued until Confucius

. . . followed in the steps of earlier sages but outshone them all. By revising and editing the six classics, he brought together the best works up to his time. In the cultivation of human nature and the skillful use of language, his teachings reverberated a thousand *li* like the sound of the wooden bell-clapper. . . . By transmitting the glory of heaven and earth, they opened up the horizons of the people.⁴²

Liu continues to praise the *shī yán zhì* tradition, until his critical history of literature comes to the *Songs of the South* (*Chuci* 楚辭). The imaginative flights of fantasy and eroticism in the *Chuci* provoke his disapproval. He complains that it contains

absurd descriptions such as the dragon-seeds, the cloud-embroidered banners . . . chimerical fantasies, such as the collapse of

the earth when Kang Hui was enraged, the shooting of the suns by Yi the Archer, the nine-headed monster that pulled up nine thousand trees, and the three-eyed earth god. . . . Licentiousness, as shown in the lines: ‘Men and women now sit together, mingling freely without distinction; / Day and night are spent in merry-making and wine.’⁴³

Liu is convinced that the *Chuci* began a decline in literature, ushering in an era when literary elaboration, “lavish and inflated descriptions,”⁴⁴ expressions of emotional intensity, excess, and sensuous beauty began to overshadow the purity, honesty, and sincerity of the *zhi* of the ancient classics.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, Liu insists that “the *Songs of the South* surpasses past and contemporary works in spirit or excellence of language. Its brilliance and exquisite beauty are unsurmountable.”⁴⁶ Liu praises Qu Yuan, the author of many of the *Chuci*, for his *zhi*; but while, as I have noted, *zhi* usually has a political/moral aspect, Liu’s text is lyrical rather than moralistic.

His startling genius sweeps like the wind,
His lofty aspirations (*zhi* 志) soar like the clouds.
Mountains and rivers are endless,
Feeling and thought are infinite.
Gold in texture, pure in form,
His poems exude beauty in every part.⁴⁷

The *Wénxīn Diāolóng* is clearly not consistently critical of deviations from the didactic *zhi* of the classical tradition. Rather than forcing the extravagant and often erotic passages of the *Chuci* into a moralistic straight jacket, the way classical interpretations dealt with similarly troubling poems in the *Shijing* (*Classic of Poetry* or *Book of Songs* 詩經), Liu is delighted with poets who followed the *Chuci* model for their “exuberance and freedom in conjuring new realms of experience.”⁴⁸

Liu is generally more concerned with literature as the result of a private, contemplative, and creative process⁴⁹ than as part of a public religious or political performance, and the most famous chapter of the *Wénxīn Dialong*, chapter 26, *Shensi* (神思), is a psychological study of the role of imagination in literature. *Shensi* is often translated as “Imagination,” but it is also translated as “Spirit Thought,”⁵⁰ or following A. C. Graham, “Daimonic Thinking.”⁵¹ While *shen* (神) originally meant “heavenly spirits,” it came to mean also the human spirit, an active and wise force,

mysterious beyond reason, concepts, or words. In Liu's work both "*shen*" and "*si*" in *Shensi* are polysemantic. *Shen* retains its meaning as a marvelous, unfathomable, mysterious power, but it is also an ability all humans have to see things with the mind's eye that are not there. Imagining and remembering are normal activities for every one's heart-mind. *Si* (思) can mean thought or reflection:

The Master said: 'Learning without reflection (思) leads to perplexity, reflection (思) without learning leads to perilous circumstances.' (*Analects* 2.15)

It can also mean "remember with longing" or "think about things that are not present to us now."⁵²

The chapter begins with a reference to Zhuangzi and a definition of *Shensi*:

Long ago someone spoke of 'the physical form's being by the rivers and lakes but the mind's remaining at the foot of the palace towers of Wei.' This is what is meant by spirit thought (*shensi* 神思). And spirit goes far indeed in the thought that occurs in writing. When we silently focus our concerns, thought may reach to a thousand years in the past, and as our countenance stirs ever so gently, our vision may cross ten thousand leagues.⁵³

The creative process begins with imagination (*shensi*) wandering outward from its home in the heart-mind,⁵⁴ exploring natural phenomenon, colors and sounds, thoughts, memories of the distant past, and the cosmological processes of *yin* and *yang*. In ordinary cases of imagination this may simply result in a fantasy or flight of fancy, but in the process of creating literature the images are infused with emotion and transformed by reason (*si* 思) or concepts (*yi* 意) into the image-ideas (*yixiang* 意象). The *shensi* then brings this vision, or image-ideas, to the writer's heart-mind. The outward journey is controlled by the writer's *zhì* (intent or purpose) and his *qi* (physiological energy 氣).⁵⁵ In the inward journey the writer uses language to reveal what his imagination has seen to others.

When the basic principle of thought is at its most subtle, the spirit wanders with things. The spirit dwells in the breast; intent

(*zhi*) and *qi* control the bolt to its gate [to let it out]. Things come in through the ear and eye; in this, language controls the hinge and trigger. When hinge and trigger permit passage, no things have hidden appearance; when the bolt to the gate is closed, then spirit is concealed.⁵⁶

The imagination's journey resembles the spiritual flights of the early shamans, the Daoist immortals, and Zhuangzi's Holy Man of the Ku-she Mountain.⁵⁷ It is wide-ranging and completely unfettered—flying off with the wind and the clouds. Describing *shensi's* journey, Liu writes:

If at this moment the writer ascends a mountain, his feeling will permeate the mountain. If he surveys the sea, his emotion will overflow the sea. Thus the capacity of his talent will sweep along with winds and clouds.⁵⁸

This experience, however, is only the beginning. In order for *shensi*, imagination, to create literature out of the images and feelings it has gathered in its wanderings, writers must study intensively, experience widely, and cultivate the inner stillness valued in Daoist and Buddhist meditation.

Thus in shaping and molding literary thinking, what is highly valued is emptiness and tranquility, whereby one dredges clear the inner organs [five viscera] and washes the spirit pure. One must accumulate learning to build a storehouse of treasures, immerse oneself in reason [principle *li*] to enrich talent, investigate experience to exhaust observation, and tame one's inner state to spin out words.⁵⁹

Even when writers are full of energy and concentration, however, they cannot express everything they have experienced in the “exuberant and indistinct vision” their *shensi* has created.⁶⁰

When he finishes writing, he finds himself only half expressed. Why? Because ideas (*yi* 意), being intangible [empty and formless], rush in like a miracle; words, being concrete [are verified against reality], are hard to make artful. . . . [Thus] instead of racking his brains [working for firm control], a writer should nourish his heart and cultivate his art.⁶¹

Thus, although the chapter begins with the *shensi* freely wandering and with a number of references to Zhuangzi, it ends with a concern for control of the images by the writer's conscious intent (*zhi*), and by reflection (*si*), study and language.

Although the energy (*qi*), study and cultivation of great writers may be distinctly their own, *shensi* is not an idiosyncratic trait unique to a particular artist. It is the ordinary imagination that allows us to share the vision of writers across the ages. Liu writes

In reading a work of literature . . . one opens a text and penetrates the feelings [*qing* 情] [of the author]. . . . Although we cannot see the faces of writers of a remote age, we may look into their words and immediately see their minds (*xin* 心).⁶²

Thus, literature not only allows us to communicate with people distant from us in time and space, it helps anyone with enough experience and knowledge understand the basic principles of the cosmos or the Dao itself.⁶³

If one's mind is set (*zhi*) on the mountains and rivers . . . a zither can express his feelings. What is more, when the tip of a writing brush brings things into form, where [can] the basic principles remain hidden? ⁶⁴

The *Wenxin Diaolong* is a work of literary criticism, but if *zhi* can be expressed in the patterns of writing created by “the tip of a writing brush,” it was only a matter of time before scholars recognized that the other arts of the brush, painting and calligraphy, could do so also.

Thus by the sixth century the *shi yan zhi* tradition had evolved into a sophisticated theory about the use of reason or reflection (*si* 思) and imagination that could be extended to include all of the arts.

The *Wenxin Diāolóng* and the Expressive Theory of Art

As I argued earlier, the classical understanding of *shi yan zhi* is very different from the Expressive Theory of Art. On the other hand, the *Wenxin Diaolong* seems to have moved closer to the modern theory. In his classic work on the English and German Romantic critics M. H. Abrams summarizes the Expressive Theory:

A work of art is essentially the internal made external, and embodying the combined product of the poet's perceptions, thoughts, and feelings. The primary source and subject matter of a poet, therefore, are the attributes and actions of the poet's own mind; or if aspects of the external world, then these only as they are converted from fact to poetry by the feelings and operations of the poet's mind.⁶⁵

Although Liu Xie's theory of poetry and the Expressive Theory require observation, study, and discipline, both theories focus on the emotions of the poet and the creative processes of individual artists rather than on moral content or audience response. Given Liu's conception of *zhi* (expressing the heart-mind's intent) his use of the phrase "*shi yan zhi*" comes very close to Mill's claim that poetry is "the expression or uttering forth of feeling" or Wordsworth's definition of poetry as "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings."⁶⁶

Of course, emotion (*qing*) has always been part of Chinese aesthetics, beginning as it did in the intense ecstatic feelings roused in shamanistic dances; but in the classical (Zhou Dynasty/Confucian) tradition emotions were controlled and organized by *wen* (文) and *li* (禮). Poetry and music expressed emotions, but wild and unrestrained expressions were not considered appropriate. When Liu praised the *Chuci* (*Songs of the South* 楚辭) without insisting on a didactic, moral interpretation of its eroticism and exuberance, he seemed closer to Wordsworth's view of poetry than to the Confucian admonition that the lewd music of the Zheng should be banned.⁶⁷

The Romantic theorist perhaps most closely resembling Liu is Samuel Taylor Coleridge.⁶⁸ Like Liu, Coleridge is concerned with the role of imagination in poetry, and provides a psychological study of imagination. Coleridge makes several important (if not completely perspicuous) distinctions: between Fancy and Imagination, and between primary and secondary imagination. He claims that Fancy and Imagination are disparate mental faculties, and describes Fancy as a passive mechanical ability that takes images from memory and uses "the law of association" to connect images that are close together in time or space, are like or dissimilar, or are logically or causally related.⁶⁹ Imagination, on the other hand, is an active, creative agent which may begin with images provided by Fancy, but whose operation is more like the growth of a plant or other living thing, developing along lines set by the organism's inner structure and

ultimate form, rather than the association of images for reasons external to the images themselves.

The rules of the Imagination are themselves the very powers of growth and production. The words to which they are reducible, present only the outlines and external appearance of the fruit.⁷⁰

Coleridge's theory of imagination is deeply influenced by his reading of Kant.⁷¹ He notes that everyone is born with the faculty of imagination and identifies primary imagination as the "living power" that makes perception possible.⁷² Coleridge describes secondary imagination as differing from primary imagination only in degree and in its ability to operate by conscious choice, intention, or purpose. Secondary imagination is the "magical power" of poetic creation which

dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate: or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead.⁷³

However, while poetic imagination is "organic," in contrast to the mechanical operation of fancy, Imagination is free to develop creatively in ways that natural organisms are not. "Could a rule be given from without, poetry would cease to be poetry, and sink into a mechanical art. It would be *morphosis*, not *poiaesis*."⁷⁴ The freedom and mystical creative power of imagination leads Coleridge to assert that human imagination is nothing less than a finite echo of divine creation. "The primary Imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM."⁷⁵

One of the most striking analogies between Liu's *Wenxin Diaolong* and Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* is the cosmological significance of literature. The power of Imagination and *wen* were both there "in the beginning." Nevertheless, Liu and Coleridge have distinct conceptions of the origin of the universe. Coleridge gives imagination a primary place in the Creation *ex nihilo* by the omnipotent and infinite Judeo-Christian deity (I AM). For Liu the imagination (*shensi*) is associated with mysterious and powerful spirits (*shen* 神), but it is the pattern or form of things in

the universe, including literature (*wen*), not the human imagination, that is “born” with Heaven and Earth and out of the primeval substance. In both cases, however, human mental powers (imagination and understanding) are cosmically and religiously meaningful.

The *Wenxin Diaolong* and the Expressive Theory of art also seem to place great importance on the imagination of individual artists. The meaning of “*shensi*” and the ordinary conception of “imagination” seem quite close. They both imply flights of fancy; of remembering or creating images of things not present physically. Both terms are strongly visual and important in poetic creativity.⁷⁶ However, “imagination” and “*shensi*” have rather different connotations. “Imagination” has a long and complex history in Western philosophy and literature. Beginning with Plato’s association of it with illusions and deception, “imagination” often suggests fictions—fantasies and fairy tales; and is frequently contrasted with “objective facts,” “reason” or “intellect.”⁷⁷ The tendency to think of art (literature, works of imagination) as “not serious” or trivial is grounded in these associations.

Although the first sustained discussion of the role of *shensi* in poetic creation was in the *Wenxin Diaolong*, Liu’s theory of *shensi*, is also rooted in a long intellectual tradition, one that involves shamanistic dances, Daoist mysticism, the evolving conceptions of *shen* as magical and powerful forces, human and otherwise, and of the role of *si* (reflect, deliberate, long for 思) in intellectual, moral and emotional cultivation. Given the Chinese conception of duality as a pair of terms at opposite ends of a continuum that are mutually entailing, that often merge, and must be in harmony with each other, there is no sense of tension between *shensi*, reason and emotion anywhere in the *Wenxin Diaolong*.⁷⁸ The images the *shensi* brings to the poet’s mind are always tinged with emotion, but must be controlled and shaped by mind and reason (*li* 理, *zhi* 志 and *si* 思) in order to be put into words.⁷⁹

A particularly striking difference between Liu Xie’s theory of poetry and the Expressive Theory demonstrates that although Liu has moved away from the classical *shi yan zhi* tradition, he has not completely abandoned it. In one version of Romantic Expressive Theory, the audience is irrelevant. Wordsworth still believed that poets wrote for other people, but Keats, Shelley, and Mill believed that the poet is writing only for himself. Mill wrote, “All poetry . . . is of the nature of soliloquy.” Keats claimed, “I never wrote one single line of Poetry with the least Shadow of public thought,” and according to Shelley, “A poet is a nightingale . . . who sits

in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds; his auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician.”⁸⁰

To simplify a great deal, proponents of the Expressive Theory believed that the highest level of poetic creativity was the work of a special kind of person, a Genius, whose works could only be appreciated and admired, from a respectful distance, by properly talented readers.

Shensi, however, is not an idiosyncratic trait unique to a particular artist. It shares something with ordinary imagination and allows us to share the vision of writers across the ages. Not everyone has the energy (*qi*), intense dedication (*zhi*) and willingness to work and study that is required to write poetry; but once a poet has written, we can, with a certain amount of effort, share his thoughts and feelings. Liu has widened the scope of the thoughts and feelings that can be shared from community religious and political values, to more personal emotions and beliefs, but he remains in the *shi yan zhi* tradition that the purpose of art is to share the thoughts and feelings, the *zhi* of the artist, to explore the nature of the cosmos and to understand what it means to be part of the human community.

In the Ming Dynasty, however, the *shi yan zhi* tradition faced a serious challenge. Partly in response to the urbanization and commercial prosperity of the age, literature was no longer the exclusive property of an intellectual elite steeped in Confucian proprieties. Vernacular literature took up the topic of desire, particularly sexual desire. Li Zehou argues that literature which openly expresses sexual desire encourages the growth of the kind of individualism that would destroy the ancient aesthetic tradition.

. . . [D]esire highlights the existence of the individual. The individual here is no longer defined only as a member of an ethically defined relationship or as an element of a cosmic system. Rather the individual is an unrepeatable, irreplaceable, and totally unique sensuous life. This life no longer functions as a stand-in for the significance of life in general, or for a generalized attachment to mortality. Instead, it is a real flesh-and-blood ‘self’ with desires and needs.⁸¹

However, rather than celebrating “the triumph of individualism” so highly valued in our society, Li argues that when the community loses value, the value of individuals is also threatened.⁸²

Zhi in Contemporary Aesthetics

Li Zehou's aesthetic theory is an attempt to meet these threats by reviving the *shi yan zhi* tradition. Li's theory informs much of the chapters that follow, and his complex and multilayered aesthetic theory draws on the insights of contemporary psychology, sociology, anthropology, and philosophy to deepen and continue the ancient tradition. At the same time Li follows Liu Xie in celebrating both the emotional intensity of poets like Qu Yuan and the role of creative imagination in aesthetic experience. Li describes aesthetic experience as *yue zhi yue shen* 悅志悅神, "pleasures of lofty aspiration (*zhi*) and moral integrity (*shen*)"⁸³ or "pleasures of the will and spirit."⁸⁴ His use of the terms "*shen*" and "*zhi*" signal his intention to build on the ancient association of aesthetic experience with religious ones, and to argue that although philosophers have often understood religious experiences to be the most significant ones a person can have, aesthetic experiences are even more meaningful.

Since the next chapter will explore Li's views in some detail, only a brief sketch of his theory will be presented here. Li claims that aesthetic experience begins when we perceive something—a beautiful sunset, a piece of music, a building, a poem—which provokes a strong emotional response of delight, joy, even ecstasy.⁸⁵ As Liu Xie might put it, as our *shensi* roams about the world the images it encounters are infused with emotion. Li Zehou notes that while these feelings are immediate and intuitive, they are usually quite temporary. Occasionally, however, the experience demands a more active response. The work of art forces us to return to it and pay closer attention to its sensory form—the way the parts of a painting are arranged, the sounds and tones of music and poetry. In much the same way the visions (image-ideas) created by a poet's *shensi* are controlled by his mind and intention (*zhi*), this stage of the process intensifies and organizes emotions of joy, sadness, anger, fear, and delight, broadening and structuring our imaginations, teaching us new emotional concepts and ways of looking at the world.⁸⁶ While the process is to some degree cognitive, it always involves a great deal of emotion and pleasure and may culminate in an aesthetic experience which includes sensory, intellectual, and spiritual pleasure, but goes beyond all of them. In Li's understanding of aesthetic experience (*yue zhi yue shen* 悅志悅神), *zhi* (heart's intent, will, or lofty ambition 志) retains all of its historical associations with religious ecstasy, social and political morality. Thus, Li

concludes that aesthetics plays the role in Chinese philosophy that religion has played in the West.

If religion and science are seen as completely antithetical, Li's view is inconsistent with my earlier claim that aesthetics plays a role in Chinese philosophy analogous to that played by science in Western philosophy. However, noting that modern science and the Abrahamic religions are equally grounded in the belief that the cosmic order is a logical order may mitigate this conflict. If religious and aesthetic experiences both express an almost universal human "yearning to transcend finiteness in pursuit of the infinite,"⁸⁷ the goal of the Grand Unified Theory to provide an abstract and elegant explanation of the entire cosmos, appears to express a similar yearning for transcendence.

Plan of the Book

In a deep sense, this book is modeled on Li Zehou's historical introduction to Chinese Aesthetics, *The Path of Beauty*. This magnificent book presents an historical narrative of the development of Chinese aesthetics from the rituals and magic of Neolithic China to the highly sophisticated art and literature of the Ming and Qing Dynasties. Li's insightful account touches on the social, philosophical, and economic conditions under which art was produced. The book ends with a quotation from the poetry of Mao Zedong referring to the heroes of the past and looking forward to a glorious future.⁸⁸

The present book attempts to fill in some of the details suggested in Li's account. With the exception of the second chapter, each of the following chapters will describe the development of a particular tradition in Chinese aesthetics. These chapters will attempt to mirror and elaborate on the general development of Chinese aesthetics presented in *The Path of Beauty*. Unlike *The Path of Beauty*, however, this book does not present a straightforward historical narrative. Nevertheless, except for the second chapter, the chapters proceed in a roughly chronological order. The introduction focused on ancient classical texts. The third chapter describes the influence of Buddhism on the Chinese sculptural transition from early in the second-century CE through the Northern Wei (386–534). The fourth chapter explores the tradition of Chinese horse painting that began in the Tang Dynasty (618–906). The book ends with a discussion of the poetry of the Song Dynasty poet, politician, farmer, and philosopher,