

The Rise of Individual Personhood in Early Medieval China

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Abstract

The term “Early Medieval China” usually refers to the Wei Jin period, also known as the Wei Jin Southern and Northern dynasties (*Wei Jin Nanbei chao* 魏晉南北朝). This era was characterized by extreme sociopolitical circumstances, marked by constant instability, upheavals, wars, corruption, intrigues, external invasions and the exhaustion of the population. These conditions led to significant and unprecedented social and intellectual transformations that profoundly impacted Chinese culture, especially in the fields of philosophy and art. This article explores the cultural and philosophical ideas of the period that contributed to the rise of individual personhood, which emerged as a response to the suppressive and authoritarian Han Confucianism, which was heavily influenced by Legalist doctrines. Neo-Daoism, the most important stream of thought that arose from the political turmoil of the period, provided intellectuals with a refuge during these traumatic times, allowing them to explore new ways of philosophizing and experiencing an aesthetic way of living. The article examines the philosophical inquiries of the School of Profound Learning (*Xuanxue* 玄學) and Pure Conversations (*Qingtán* 清談) movement, which gave rise to self-awareness and fostered new perspectives on individual personhood.

Keywords: Wei Jin Period, Neo-Daoism, Profound Learning (*Xuanxue* 玄學) and Pure Conversations (*Qingtán* 清談), Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove, Individual personhood

Vznik individualne osebnosti na Kitajskem v zgodnjem srednjem veku

Izvleček

Izraz »zgodnj srednjeveška Kitajska« se običajno nanaša na obdobje Wei Jin, znano tudi kot obdobje Wei Jin ter južnih in severnih dinastij (*Wei Jin Nanbei chao* 魏晉南北朝). Za to obdobje so bile značilne ekstremne družbenopolitične razmere, zaznamovane s stalno nestabilnostjo, pretresi, vojnami, korupcijo, spletkami, zunanji vdori in izčrpanjem prebivalstva. Te okoliščine so pripeljale do izjemno pomembnih družbenih in intelektualnih preobrazb, ki so močno vplivale na kitajsko kulturo, zlasti na področju filozofije in umetnosti. Članek raziskuje kulturne in filozofske ideje tega obdobja, ki so prispevale k vzniku individualne osebnosti, ki je nastala kot odgovor na zatiralski in avtoritarni hanski

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konfucianizem, na katerega so močno vplivale legalistične doktrine. Neodaoizem, najpomembnejši miselni tok, ki je izhajal iz družbenopolitičnih pretresov tega obdobja, je intelektualcem v teh travmatičnih časih dajal zatočišče ter jim omogočal raziskovanje novih načinov filozofiranja in doživljanja estetskega načina življenja. Članek proučuje filozofska raziskovanja šole misterijev (*Xuanxue* 玄學) in gibanja čistih pogovorov (*Qingtan* 清談), ki so spodbudila samozavedanje in nov pogled na individualno osebnost.

Ključne besede: obdobje Wei Jin, neodaoizem, šola misterijev (*Xuanxue* 玄學) in čisti pogovori (*Qingtan* 清談), sedem modrecev iz bambusovega gaja, individualna osebnost

Historical Background: Political Turmoil and its Impact on the Intellectuals

The Wei Jin period 魏晉時代 (220–420 CE) began after the collapse of the Han dynasty in 220 CE, which had ruled China for over four centuries. The loss of imperial authority and thus of the central government powers, which was followed by several natural disasters and the Yellow Turban Rebellion during the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220), plunged the Central Plain into a state of war and disorder (Vampelj Suhadolnik 2019, 47) leading to the eventual disintegration of the Han Empire. Following the fall of the Han dynasty, China entered a period of division known as the Three Kingdoms period (*san guo* 三國時代, 220–280 CE), characterized by the struggle for power among three major states: Wei 魏, Shu 蜀, and Wu 吳.

The Wei 魏 and Jin 晉 dynasties were a period of significant change in Chinese history. In economics, politics, military affairs, culture, and the entire intellectual realm, including philosophy, religion, art, and literature, there were pivotal turning points brought about by a second transformation in social structure since the Pre-Qin era. The urban prosperity and commodity economy of the Warring States and Qin-Han periods had declined, but the manorial economy that began in the Eastern Han consolidated and expanded steadily. Thousands of small farmers and industrial and commercial slaves became serfs or quasi-serfs tied to land owned by landlords and held very much in bondage. Conforming to this standard form of natural economy, a hereditary and rigidly stratified class of powerful families and aristocratic clans, each with its sphere of power, now occupied the centre of stage of history (Li 2003, 82).

Within each state, power struggles and intrigues at court were commonplace. Ambitious officials, noble families (in particular, Cao and Sima families), and eunuch factions competed for influence over the ruler, employing tactics of manipulation, bribery, and even assassination to further their agendas. Imperial courts became battlegrounds for political factions vying to control state policies, appointments, and resources. Loyalty to the ruler often took a backseat to personal ambition and self-interest.

The breakdown of the Han Confucian bureaucratic system allowed noble families to consolidate power locally, often at the expense of the imperial authority. They became *de facto* rulers in their respective regions, administering justice, collecting taxes, and raising armies. Inter-marriages among aristocratic families further strengthened their power base, creating intricate networks of alliances and allegiances. This interconnection of elites formed the backbone of the political landscape during this period.

Cao Cao 曹操, a prominent figure in the late Eastern Han dynasty, wielded significant influence over the imperial court. In 196 CE, amidst political chaos, he took control of the court by manipulating the last Han emperor as a puppet ruler. While outwardly appearing to support the Han dynasty, Cao Cao exerted power behind the scenes in order to validate his authority and expand his own power and territory. Despite never officially deposing the last Han emperor, Cao Cao effectively controlled his actions and decisions. He exploited the emperor's name and authority to further his own interests, thus bending the imperial court to his will. Cao Cao's manipulation of the emperor highlights the corruptive influence and power struggles that defined the late Eastern Han dynasty.

The authority of the ruling Cao family declined notably after the removal and execution of Cao Shuang 曹爽 and his kin. Cao Shuang, a regent for the third Wei emperor, Cao Fang 曹芳, witnessed his influence diminish, with control gradually passing to Sima Yi 司馬懿 and his family from 249 CE onwards.

The last Wei emperors effectively served as figureheads under the influence of the Sima clan until Sima Yi's grandson, Sima Yan 司馬炎, compelled the final Wei ruler to abdicate, and in this way establishing the Western Jin dynasty. In 249, Sima Yi seized the capital Luoyang 洛陽 and prevented Cao Shuang from entering the city. The whole Cao family was captured by Sima Yi and executed, along with several thousand other people. Around half of the scholars supported the Cao family—or were forced to do so—and were executed, and the whole state fell in a state of terror. But Sima Yi knew that he would not be able to stay in power without the support of the scholars, and therefore started a campaign to win over those who were not close to Cao Shuang with threats, bribes and persuasion. Still, this horrible situation has had a profoundly negative impact on Chinese intellectuals, leaving them in a traumatic state of uncertainty and insecurity.¹

1 Ji Kang 嵇康 (224–263 CE), a key figure in the cultural movement known as the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove (*zhulin qixian* 竹林七賢), exemplifies the dangers due to the power struggle between the Cao and Sima families. He was married to a daughter of Cao Pi 曹丕, also known as Emperor Wen 魏文帝 (r. 220–226). When the Sima clan, led by Sima Yi 司馬懿, usurped the throne in 249, they initiated a purge against the Cao clan and its allies, resulting in Ji Kang's execution (Chai 2020, 229).

In general, the Wei Jin intellectuals endured immense hardship amidst the era's political turmoil and social upheaval. With frequent changes in the ruling authorities and civil conflicts, they often found themselves caught in the crossfire of power struggles between rival states, risking persecution or even death if perceived as threats. Fluid loyalties forced intellectuals to navigate treacherous alliances to safeguard their survival. Those unfortunate enough to be on the losing side faced dire consequences, including exile, imprisonment, or execution. Government censorship stifled dissenting voices, with literature, philosophy, and art critical of the regime often being banned or destroyed. Challenging the status quo or advocating for change invited harsh reprisals from officials or conservative factions within the ruling elite. Many intellectuals resorted to self-censorship to avoid punishment. Daoist hermits, Buddhist monks, and wandering scholars were particularly vulnerable, often retreating into seclusion to escape persecution. The era's political instability and warfare exacerbated economic hardship, leading to widespread poverty and social dislocation. Intellectuals, reliant on patronage or official positions, faced uncertainty as government support for education dwindled. Some were compelled to compromise their principles or sell their talents to survive.

The struggle of the intellectuals naturally led them to find alternative ways of survival, while the uncertain political situation rendered conditions hazardous for all individuals. Scholars felt threatened, prompting many to retreat into seclusion, with forests emerging as popular havens for refuge, and the Daoist philosophies of Laozi and Zhuangzi gaining in prominence. Reverting to the Daoist ideal of reconnecting with nature, they embraced a rustic lifestyle, relishing in the pleasures of wine and music while limiting discourse to non-politically sensitive matters—termed *Qingtán* 清談 or Pure Conversations.

At the end of the Han dynasty, the protest movement known as *Qingyi* 清議, or pure criticism, based on fair and unbiased critique towards those in power and initially led by scholar-officials and students of the imperial academy, targeted the corrupt practices of powerful eunuchs. The scholar-officials and students of the Imperial Academy,² who were committed to Confucian ideals of morality

2 The Imperial Academy of the late Han dynasty, also known as the Taixue (太学), was the highest educational institution in China during the Han dynasty. It played a significant role in the intellectual and political life of the period, especially during the Eastern Han (25–220 CE). The Taixue was established in 124 BCE during the reign of Emperor Wu of Han. It was initially intended to train government officials in Confucian classics. The Academy grew significantly during the Eastern Han dynasty. By the 2nd century CE, it had thousands of students, reflecting its importance in the bureaucratic and intellectual life of China. Students were often selected for government positions based on their performance in examinations that tested their knowledge of these texts. This practice laid the groundwork for the later imperial examination system. Graduates of the Taixue often went on to occupy important bureaucratic positions, influencing the administration and

and good governance, found the actions of the eunuchs deeply troubling and thus initiated the *Qingyi* movement to expose and criticize these malpractices. In response to the growing criticisms, the eunuchs orchestrated severe repressions against the *Qingyi* advocates. This included arrests, executions, and the exile of prominent critics. The harsh measures were intended to silence dissent and serve as a deterrent to others who might consider joining the movement. The brutal crackdowns successfully instilled fear among the scholar-officials and students, significantly diminishing the momentum of the *Qingyi* movement which consequently evolved into the Pure Conversation (*Qingtán* 清談) movement, as intellectuals deliberately steered clear of political matters to ensure their own safety. However, with the ascent of the Wei dynasty the emergence of a first wave of neo-Daoism, exemplified by figures like He Yan 何晏 and Wang Bi 王弼, sought novel avenues for reinstating unity and harmony, which had been disrupted by the autocratic policies and coercive governance of the legalistically imbued Han-Confucian state doctrine. Not only was it oppressive politically, but this doctrine also stifled freedom of thought and expression. The interpretation of classical works was confined to Confucian classics, with a prescribed methodology. However, amid the new political climate, characterized by turmoil and disunity, the pursuit of order necessitated freedom from ideological constraints (Chan 2003a, 214).

Consequently, scholars embarked on discussions of metaphysical (*xuan* 玄) topics detached from the exigencies of contemporary reality. Delving into subjects insulated from political implications, they centred their discourse on the theoretical frameworks elucidated within the texts of Laozi, Zhuangzi, and the *Yijing* and thus forming the so-called Neo-Daoist school of Profound learning (*Xuanxue* 玄學). These discussions remained inconsequential with regard to the prevailing events and figures within the political sphere, effectively enabling scholars to evade entanglement in political discord.

The most famous figures of this new intellectual movement were He Yan 何晏, Wang Bi 王弼, Guo Xiang 郭象 and the seven sages of the bamboo grove (*zhulin qixian* 竹林七賢: Ji Kang 嵇康, Ruan Ji 阮籍, Ruan Xuan 阮咸, Xiang Xiu 向秀, Liu Ling 劉伶, Wang Rong 王戎, and Shan Tao 山濤).

policies of the empire. The model of the Taixue influenced later educational institutions in China and other East Asian countries, contributing to the development of a scholarly bureaucracy. The Imperial Academy of the late Han dynasty was more than just an educational institution; it was a cornerstone of the imperial administration and a pivotal player in the intellectual life of the era.

New Intellectual Movement: Neo-Daoist School of Profound Learning (*Xuanxue*) and Pure Conversations (*Qingtan*)

Because scholars could not engage in political matters they turned their focus to metaphysics, and thus problems that have no “real” connection to social and political life. With the rising interest in redefining individual personhood, they searched for new ways to redefine the relationship of the individual to the cosmos, state, moral order, and other individuals (Yu 2016, 147).

While *Xuanxue* (Profound Learning) and *Qingtan* (Pure Conversations) undeniably intersect, their distinguishing feature lies in their methodological approaches to comprehending ultimate reality and individual personhood. In elucidating core Daoist principles such as absence (*wu* 無), presence (*you* 有), naturalness or spontaneity (*ziran* 自然), non-action (*wuwei* 無為), and non-governance (*wuzhi* 無治), *xuanxue* relied predominantly on logical or analytical methods rooted in the Moist School of Names (*Mingjia* 名家 or *Mingjiao* 名教), whereas *qingtan* also pursued experiential understanding of the *Dao* 道, engaging in artistic expression and meditative practices³ aimed at attaining a liberated and harmonious existence in unity with nature.

In the context of the Pure Conversations movement during the Wei Jin period in China, intellectuals engaged deeply with logical methodologies reminiscent of those found in Nominalist and Dialectical traditions. They utilized these approaches in classical disputes to navigate and challenge the constraints imposed by language. Their ultimate goal was to access and experience final reality, transcending ordinary linguistic and perceptual boundaries. This intellectual exercise was part of a broader quest for spiritual freedom and enlightenment, reflecting the era’s characteristic blend of metaphysical inquiry and personal cultivation. (Rošker 2005, 205)

Xuanxue philosophy is notably complex and intricate, and we shall focus solely on its pivotal concepts that directly shaped the emergence of a novel paradigm of individual personhood. Whereas Pure Conversations, as a form of dialectical artistry, centred on disputes and debates often accompanied by artistic performances and drinking wine, Profound Learning drew upon written sources, particularly the works of Laozi, Zhuangzi, and the *Yijing*. It is pertinent to note that Profound

3 In particular, these practices referred to Zhuangzi’s concept of “sitting in oblivion” (*zuowang* 坐忘), which is reminiscent of the meditation techniques performed while sitting down and which lead to the absence of thoughts, the end of conceptual differentiation and unification with everything living (Rošker 2016, 39).

Learning was underpinned by a syncretic fusion of Daoism with classical Confucianism, as well as Buddhist philosophy.

Conversely, the Seven Sages, most notably Ji Kang, vehemently repudiated Confucianism, contending that it encroached upon the innate naturalness of humanity by imposing rules and behavioural norms that ran counter to their intrinsic freedom and self-so-ness (*ziran*).

Although Pure Conversation and Profound learning were both politically detached, the latter nonetheless engaged in discussions regarding methods to reestablish unity and harmony grounded in naturalness. This approach advocates for a form of governance characterized by *non-action*, a principle underscored by Laozi. Central issues that were debated within the framework of both will be elaborated below.

As Chan notes (2003a, 215), one of the most important debates in Profound Learning was the question of interpretation, and thus hermeneutics stepped to the forefront of Chinese philosophy. In this respect, the main philosophical problem was about the relation between words and meaning expressed in the famous phrase “words cannot fully express meaning” (*yan bu jin yi* 言不盡意), first elaborated by Xun Can 荀粲 (212–240) and further developed by Wang Bi. However, the debate on words and meaning derives from the *Yijing*, where Confucius questions whether words can fully disclose meaning which lead to investigation of the nature of understanding itself since words often fail to express intense emotions or complex ideas (*ibid.*).

子曰：書不盡言，言不盡意。然則聖人之意，其不可見乎。子曰：聖人立象以盡意，設卦以盡情偽，繫辭以盡其言，變而通之以盡利，鼓之舞之以盡神。(Yijing n.d., Xi Ci I/12)

The Master said: “The written characters are not the full exponent of speech, and speech is not the full expression of ideas; – is it impossible then to discover the ideas of the sages?” The Master said: “The sages made their emblematic symbols to set forth fully their ideas; appointed (all) the diagrams to show fully the truth and falsehood (of things); appended their explanations to give the full expression of their words; and changed (the various lines) and made general the method of doing so, to exhibit fully what was advantageous. They (thus) stimulated (the people) as by drums and dances, thereby completely developing the spirit-like (character of the Yi). (Trans. by J. Legge)

For Xun, meaning transcends the limiting confines of language, whereas for Wang Bi, although meaning is expressed by words, they must be forgotten before meaning can be understood. This forgetfulness enables one to reach the underlying world of ideas, where a deeper meaning resides.⁴ This phrase also became a central concept in the aesthetics of that period, and will be explored in more detail in the last section.

The School of Profound Learning focused on the ontological question of the origin of *Dao*. Inspired by the *Yijing*, *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, they discussed issues concerned with the nature of reality and the human condition. Wang Bi's position that *Dao* and all that exists originates from absence (*wu*) derived from his interpretations of the *Yijing* and in particular from the *Laozi*. Referring to the famous 40th chapt

天下萬物生於有，有生於無。

All under Heaven is born of presence, presence is born of absence (*Daodejing* n.d., 40)

Wang Bi interpreted absence as the basic principle of existence:

天下之物，皆以有為生。有之所始，以無為本。(Wang n.d., 40)

All things under Heaven are born of presence. But the beginning of presence, its origin, is absence.

For Wang Bi and He Yan, presence (*you*) originates from absence (*wu*), but for Guo Xiang, arguably the most important commentator on the *Zhuangzi*, this position does not explain the origin of being. *Wu* or absence is for Guo something entirely conceptual and abstract, and as such cannot bring forth being. Within the framework of the problem of a created natural order, he posited that it came into existence spontaneously, and that the origin of existence can be understood only in terms of a process of self-transformation (*zihua* 自化) (Chan 2003a, 216).

However, the vibrant ontological debate between valuing absence (*wu*) and exaltation of presence (*you*) laid basis for a *Dao*-centred ethics and political philosophy. In spite of certain differences among School of Profound Learning philosophers, they sought order in naturalness and spontaneity based on the concept of

4 A poem may depict actual objects or events, but the sense is not limited to these referents, and the meaning of the whole transcends the identity of its parts. This position was in sharp contrast to the Han hermeneutical model, which assumes that meaning is defined by external referents, and brought a new hermeneutical perspective in which they strove to recapture the core teachings of the sages (Chan 2003a, 215).

wuwei, or non-action, attributed to Laozi and the Sage King Shun, which was undoubtedly in sharp contrast to Legalist policies of the Han dynasty based on punishment and political domination (ibid., 217). Nonaction or non-interference in the natural order enables the myriad things to flourish by elimination of wilful intervention, and thus enabling simplicity and freedom from desires.

He Yan and Wang Bi died at the end of Zhengshi's reign (240–249) in the Wei dynasty, marking the first phase of Neo-Daoism. During the Wei Jin transition when the Sima family came to power, the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove represented the voice of the School of Profound Learning. The most important figures of the Grove were Ji Kang and Ruan Ji, who advocated for naturalness (*ziran*) as the basis for renewal (ibid., 218).

Basically, the debates in the School of Profound Learning revolved around naming (*Mingjiao*) and naturalness (*ziran*). While the former was concerned with the doctrines of propriety and government—in other words with social institutions, norms and rituals—the latter focused on classical Daoist concepts of nonaction, transcendence and freedom from mundane world.

However, for Wang Bi and Guo Xiang these two concepts were not in opposition but were rather intertwined. In this regard, Wang and Guo synthesized Confucian and Daoist philosophies. For Wang Bi, government and society should ideally conform to nature. Guo Xiang argued that the norms and rites that define civilization are not foreign to nature, but flow spontaneously from it (ibid.).

The Seven Sages, however, were convinced that *Mingjiao* impinges on nature. They saw a contradiction between maintaining inner purity and transcendence and being involved in a normal life. Genuine freedom is possible only if one aligns completely with naturalness. They were primarily engaged in interpretations of Laozi, Zhuangzi and the *Yijing*, striving to embody Zhuangzi's ideal state of freedom and authenticity called *xiaoyao you* 逍遙遊, or free and easy wandering.

For Ruan Ji, absence (*wu*) was not the ontological basis of the classics, but instead the starting point for philosophical reflection flows from the plenitude of nature in which diverse phenomena function in harmony, and depends on one's transformation of the vital *qi* energy that pervades the universe. The fulfilment of *ziran* is possible only in emptiness, quietude, nonaction and in the state of being without self-interest and desires. Ji Kang, unlike most of his contemporaries, followed the religious dimension of Daoist teaching, aiming for longevity or even immortality based on self-cultivation, breathing exercises, dietary control and lifting one's spir-

it with the help of drugs⁵ to maximize the limits of one's natural endowment and bring about rejuvenation and a long life (*ibid.*, 218).

For Ji Kang, self-cultivation was essential for restraining one's desires or any form of emotional disturbance, since these do not serve the interests of personal well-being with regard to achieving calmness and emptiness of the mind. In his essay "On Nourishing Life" (*Yangsheng lun* 養生論), he emphasized that such practices are not only a matter of health and longevity, but are also used to attain a more authentic mode of being, characterized by dispassion (*ibid.*).

Regarding the problem of emotions or feeling which was in the centre of debate among neo-Daoists, Ji Kang's famous essay "Sounds Do Not Have Joys or Sorrows" (*Sheng wu ai le* 聲無哀樂) argues that emotions and desires are not intrinsic to nature, and since sounds are naturally produced, it cannot be the case that music embodies sorrow or joy. Subjective feelings and cognitive responses are the things that produce joy or sorrow, and they should be distinguished from what is natural and objective (*ibid.*, 219). This position, however, was in sharp opposition with traditional Chinese music theory, in which the function of music was to mould and harmonize one's emotions.

However, the expression of emotions was a crucial topic among the Seven Sages in the context of an ethical life. Apart from Ji Kang, who advocated for dispassion, many saw a display of strong emotion as a sign of authenticity and expression of individual personhood. Wang Rong, another of the Seven Sages, did try not control his grief when his son died, and although a sage should be able to leave behind emotions he argued that "in people such as ourselves, this is where feelings find their deepest expression" (*ibid.*).

The unrestrained expressions of emotions and individual personhood exhibited by the Seven Sages were in stark conflict with the established norms and behaviours of Han Confucianism. For instance, when Ruan Ji's mother passed away he consumed alcohol and meat before the funeral, thereby violating the moral code

5 The use of drugs and alcohol was widespread among these scholars, often denoted as Neo-Daoists. One of the most popular choices was a psychoactive substance known as Cold-Food Powder (*hanshisan* 寒食散) or Five Mineral Powder (*wushisan* 五石散) accompanied by drinking of yellow wine (*huangjiu* 黃酒). He Yan and Wang Bi propagated the consumption of the drug in their philosophical circles to achieve greater spiritual clarity and physical strength. Ji Kang and Ruan Ji, who were considered as the most prominent of the Seven Sages, were enthusiastic users of the drug, using it to prolong life and forget spiritual anguish. The drug caused a rapid rise in body temperature, making users want to drink lots of fluids and eat cold food. It was believed to make people feel calm, improve their aesthetic sensitivity, and boost energy. Users wore loose and lightweight clothes to stay comfortable, which became a signature style of the Wei Jin period, while the drug became a hallmark of the free thinkers of the age.

of filial piety and ritual propriety. Similarly, Liu Ling, another sage known for his excessive drinking, was often seen carrying a bottle and even naked.

The unconventional behaviour of the Seven Sages was tolerated primarily because they were perceived as existing outside the boundaries of conventional society. However, as renowned intellectuals of their time they eventually faced constraints imposed by the ruling elite, leading them to abandon their unorthodox lifestyles and accept positions at court.

The Seven Sages intentionally defied established moral codes and rituals to express their naturalness and individuality. This defiance also served as a silent protest against the political degradation, violence, and corruption of their era.

The Rise of Self-awareness and Individual Personhood

Another major debate within Neo-Daoism focused on the nature of sages and emotions, with Wang Bi, He Yan, and Guo Xiang presenting opposing views. He Yan and Guo Xiang shared the opinion that sages are without emotions or feelings (*qing* 情), arguing that a sage's extraordinary constitution of pure being excludes emotional disturbances. The sage can rule the world without being enslaved by emotions. Wang Bi, on the other hand, posited that the sage is not without emotions but differs from ordinary beings in spirituality and understanding. With feeling, a sage is able to respond to things, but because of his clear understanding he is never burdened by them:

應物而無累于物 (Wang Bi, cited in Feng Qi 2001, 1488)

(He) feels things and reacts to them, but does not become attached.

For Wang Bi, it is logically invalid to conclude from the absence of attachment an absence of emotions (Chan 2003a, 217).

This is important in our disposition of the individual personhood in early medieval China. The awareness of individual personhood that came forth in the Wei Jin period was predominately focused on the characteristics of human beings with all their attributes, with emotions being a crucial or integral aspect of humanity. The Sages of the Bamboo Grove in particular were advocates of expressing and philosophizing on their emotions or feelings within the scope of their artistry in music, poetry, calligraphy and painting.

The political crisis took place in the realm of moral codes and social relationships, and led to a dissolution of the so-called Three Bonds and Six Rules (*san-*

gang liuji 三綱六紀). The Three Bonds refer to the relationships between ruler and subject, father and son, and husband and wife, whereas the Six Rules refer to those between paternal uncles, elder and younger brothers, other relatives of the same surname, maternal uncles, teachers, and friends. This strict hierarchical relationship dynamics shifted towards a more relaxed atmosphere (Yu 2016, 135). Women expanded their roles beyond the confines of the household and actively engaged in society, participating in various social gatherings, particularly informal mixed parties where they indulged in conversation, drinking, and music alongside men.

Personal relationships between husband and wife, father and son and especially among friends were characterized by “closeness” (*qinmi* 親密) or “intimacy” (*qin-zhi* 親炙). In this regard, emotions and feelings became one of the central topics of the Wei Jin period.

The breakdown of Confucian ritualism at the end of the Han dynasty was closely linked to the rise in the self-discovery and self-awareness of the individual (*ibid.*).

The classical Daoist idea about the importance of an individual life was rediscovered in the second century, with singularity (*yi*) becoming a positive value. A personality would be judged favourably precisely because it was singular, different, and extraordinary, even eccentric. On the other hand, the idea of identity, or sameness (*tong*), was held in contempt (*ibid.*, 139).

By the late second century the art of character appraisal⁶ (*Renwu zhi* 人物志) had evolved into an independent discipline, though it continued to play a role in the official recommendation system during the Wei Jin period. It is particularly noteworthy that their approach to character appraisal was not solely physiognomic but also psychological, aiming to capture the individual’s spirit (*shen* 神). This is clearly demonstrated in Liu Shao’s 劉紹 (early third century) “Treatise on Personalities” (*Renwu zhi* 人物志), the only characterological work from this period that has survived. Liu’s treatise begins with an analysis of human feelings (*qing* 情) and inborn qualities (*xing* 性), which he considers the foundations of personality. In terms of physiognomic observations, the focus was on transcending physical appearance to reach a person’s spirit. This process culminated in

6 Character appraisal began in the Later Han era as a method for selecting officials for bureaucratic posts, with leading local scholars evaluating and recommending candidates based on Confucian moral criteria. During the Wei-Chin period, character appraisal gradually moved away from its political focus and evolved into a comprehensive study of human nature. This practice sparked intense competition among the gentry, fostering a heightened self-awareness that emerged from the collapse of Han Confucian moral codes. This self-awareness enriched character appraisal with a variety of personalities, steering its development towards psychological and aesthetic considerations (Qian 2001, 6).

the study of the eyes, which uniquely convey a person's spirit. Liu Shao wrote that every person has a body, and each body has a spirit. He emphasized that no one can study a person exhaustively without understanding their spirit (Yu 2016, 140).

Furthermore, both character appraisal and self-awareness found their theoretical foundation in the School of Profound Learning, accelerating the systematization of this new scholarship. This involved a reinterpretation and re-evaluation of Han Confucianism through the lenses of Daoism and the newly imported Buddhism. The School of Profound Learning elevated character appraisal and self-awareness from concrete concerns about individual traits to an ontological, psychological, and aesthetic exploration of the subtle, elusive aspects of human nature (*ibid.*).

While the Han dynasty focused on moral categories and the Han - Wei transition emphasized abilities, the Wei Jin period considered individuals from all possible angles. This included *de* 德 (potency, potentiality, efficacy), *cai* 才 (innate ability, talent, specialty), *xing* 性 (inborn qualities, temperament, disposition, temper), and *qing* 情 (feeling, emotion, passion) (Qian 2001, 9).

The profound emphasis on the complexity of emotions, particularly leaning towards sadness and introspection, became primary forms of expression. The Sages of the Bamboo Grove in particular were advocates of expressing and philosophizing on their emotions and feelings within the scope of their artistry in music, poetry, calligraphy and painting. As mentioned earlier, for Ji Kang self-cultivation was essential for restraining one's desires or any form of emotional disturbance, since they do not serve the interests of personal well-being in achieving calmness and emptiness of the mind (Chan 2003b, 791). While Ji Kang valued emotional restraint, others viewed strong emotions as authentic expressions of individuality. The music and literature of the Wei Jin period notably explored themes of sadness, grief, and regret, reflecting the widespread sense of alienation among the literati amidst societal unrest and dynastic shifts. Increased self-awareness not only deepened people's comprehension of their identities, but also profoundly influenced their artistic expression. This newfound liberty in self-expression was crucial in moulding Wei Jin aesthetics, prompting a move towards individualized creativity and guiding the evolution of aesthetic principles.

The Expression of Individual Personhood and Subjectivity in Aesthetics and Art

As mentioned above, one of the most important topics in neo-Daoism was a debate on the relation between words and meaning. Wang Bi's argument that words cannot fully express or convey meaning brought about new hermeneutics as well as the significance of contextuality and subjectivity. As he posits:

盡意莫若象，盡象莫若言，言者所以明象，得像忘言，象者所以以存意，得意忘象。

Nothing can express a meaning more fully than an image. Nothing can express an image more fully than words. It is the words that make the image clear. When this happens, the words are forgotten. The image is the place where there is meaning. When meaning is achieved, the image is forgotten (Wang, cited in Li 2003, 87).

In this context, Wang Bi elaborated on Zhuangzi's theory, echoing his metaphorical language. Specifically, Wang employs Zhuangzi's popular analogy of the fish and fishing basket, suggesting that once we have captured a sufficient quantity of fish, we can discard the basket from our consideration. Words and symbols serve as aids in comprehending meaning, yet paradoxically, if we become excessively fixated on them they can hinder our complete understanding of meaning. This raises a significant hermeneutic concern, particularly emphasized by Wang, when interpreting the classics (Rošker 2005, 147).

The debate on words and meaning, however, is rooted in the classical discussion on names and reality (*ming* 名 and *shi* 實). In transmitting the meaning (or truth) of the classics or poetry, the words act as a referent and are not able to fully present the reality. Wang suggests that symbols function as tools of cognition, aiding our comprehension of meanings, whereas words act as descriptors, facilitating our understanding of symbols. Nonetheless, the amalgamation of these elements falls short of fully encapsulating meaning, and instead they merely gesture towards it, as meaning itself transcends verbal and visual expression (*ibid.*).

Given that Wang wrote commentaries on a Confucian classic grounded in symbolism, he was inevitably compelled to address the interplay between symbols and meaning. However, by introducing the term *xiang* 象 (image) to denote symbol, he injected fresh perspectives into the classical discourse on the relationship be-

tween names (*ming*) and reality (*shi*).⁷ His ideas had a significant influence on subsequent developments in aesthetic thought, centred on the pursuit of profound meaning unveiled through the experience of tangible images of reality. Equally impactful was his contribution to the conceptualization of “visualness” (*ibid.*, 148), or vivid depiction.⁸

The relation between words or symbols and meaning is another manifestation of Wang Bi’s ontology with absence (*wu*) as the basis of existence (the so-called root, or *ben*), and being or presence as the branches or physical manifestation.

In the Wei Jin era, both art and aesthetics were profoundly shaped by Wang Bi’s ontology, which delved into the pursuit of infinity or boundlessness (*wuxian* 無限) by transcending limitation or finitude (*youxian* 有限) within the philosophical discourse of presence (*you* 有) and absence (*wu* 無). As we have seen, Wang Bi posited that the *Dao* and all existence originated from absence, forming the basis of his ontology known as “absence is the root of existence”.

The essence of the *Dao*, synonymous with nature, infinity, purity, and truth, remains nameless. The moment it is named, it vanishes, reflecting Wang Bi’s perspective. His ontology revolves around the binary concept of roots and branches (*benmo* 本末), where roots signify the origin and source (*Dao*) of all existence (*wanwu* 萬物), while branches represent their tangible (physical) manifestations. Wang Bi defines beauty as the embodiment of the infinite and boundless, transcending limitations and forms, colours, melodies, and sounds to symbolize a state of absolute freedom of spirit.

7 *Xiang* 象 serves as a pivotal bridge that traverses the realms of the visible and invisible, the concrete and abstract, the actual and imagined, as well as the interplay between imitation and creation. The establishment of *xiang*, denoted as an “image” or a “symbolic image”, as a paramount aesthetic term, found its roots in the profound influence of Wang Bi’s epistemological interpretation of the intricate interweaving between linguistic components—words (*yan* 言), symbolic images (*xiang* 象), and meaning (*yi* 意)—within the *Yijing*. While “form” (*xing* 形) encapsulates an object’s physical shape, and thus is worthy of imitation, “*xiang*” represents the construct that must find its place on the canvas of painting. It encapsulates the mental imagery that materializes when one keenly observes tangible forms, skilfully processing their diverse qualities through a meticulous curation involving selection, editing, and rearrangement. As a term intertwined with artistic discourse, “*xiang*” first made its appearance within the literary and painting theories of the Six dynasties or Wei Jin era, subsequently maturing into a profound aesthetic concept during the Tang dynasty (Kang 2022, 33).

8 The “vivid depiction” school of thought in Chinese painting diverged from conventional methods by prioritizing the capture of a subject’s spirit or soul rather than an accurate physical likeness. This shift placed greater emphasis on emotional depth and artistic interpretation, leading to the emergence of new directions in Chinese painting. It became a cornerstone of various art disciplines such as figure painting, landscape painting, and the painting of birds and flowers, highlighting a humanistic approach in creative practice and reshaping the artist-subject relationship (Bao 2023, 17).

These ideas are reflected in fundamental aesthetic concepts such as “words cannot fully convey meaning”, “depiction of the spirit through form”, and “harmonious creativity”, which were widely discussed in theoretical works of the Wei Jin period. Such ideas established a new aesthetic notion of suggestiveness (*xieyi* 寫意) which embodied a poetic meaning within a work of art. This quality manifests in poetry through metaphorical language, drawing from nature’s imagery, while simultaneously directing attention to a realm of meaning that transcends words and images. Rooted in Wang Bi’s notion that words cannot fully convey meaning, Chinese aesthetics encapsulate concepts such as “meaning beyond words” (*yan wai zhi yi* 言外之意) and “image beyond images” (*xiangwai zhi xiang* 象外之象) to articulate this fundamental quality. In the realm of painting, this quality became indispensable and led to the emergence of landscape painting (*shanshui hua* 山水畫).

Under the influence of the art of characterology, Gu Kaizhi 顧愷之 (317–420 CE) the famous painter of the Wei Jin period, introduced a new aesthetic idea, i.e. the transmitting the spirit (*chuanshen* 傳神) as the main criteria of figure painting expressing its individualistic style. Artists aimed to capture the spiritual uniqueness of the human subject. The central challenge in portraiture thus became how to “convey or transmit the spirit” (*chuanshen*) effectively, and the artistic representation of the eyes became pivotal in this endeavour:

四體妍蚩本無關於妙處，傳神寫照正在阿堵中。

Whether the four limbs [parts of the body] are beautiful or not is not a standard. What is crucial is the representation of the spirit transmitted through the eyes. (Gu, cited in Li 2003, 88).

Gu claimed that the crucial meaning in the art of painting is precisely the author’s portrayal of spirit (*chuanshen xiezhao* 傳神寫照⁹) and its representation via the external form. This kind of representation is what we are able to see, while the spirit belongs to the unseen, but can be felt. The spirit (*shen* 神), however, referred to the essence of human beings and the specific characteristics of every individual. Gu Kaizhi promoted the idea of integrating the subject’s feeling into an object, so that the spirit of the object could obtain an artistic image. Such an aesthetic image thus embodies the life spirit of the object (Zhu 2022, 236). The image serves as the vessel through which the spirit expresses itself, with the spirit being the essence behind the image’s purpose. The image gains its life and energy from the spirit, and

9 In traditional Chinese painting, the verb to write or describe (*xiehua* 寫畫) was often used instead of the verb to paint (*huihua* 繪畫), because painting, as an artistic genre actually evolved from calligraphy (Xu 2002, 85).

in turn the spirit depends on the image for manifestation. The synergy of image and spirit is essential for art to align with the principle of nature (*Dao*) (ibid., 115).

According to Xu (2002, 19), the aesthetic criteria of transmitting the spirit (*chuan-shen* 傳神) was later upgraded by the famous painter and art critic Xie He 謝赫 in the fifth century, a man best known for his “Six Principles of Chinese Painting” (*huibhua liufu* 繪畫六法). He introduced the concept of *qiyun shengdong* 氣韻生動, translated mostly as spiritual resonance and life motion. The binary category of *qiyun* represents a harmonious fusion of the complementary cosmic forces of *yinyang* 陰陽 with their attributes such as hardness and softness (*gangrou* 剛柔), emptiness and fullness (*xushi* 虛實), nearness and distance (*jinyuan* 近遠), clearness and murkiness (*qingzhuo* 清濁), and so on that creates a life-like or vivid representation of the painted scene. Consequently, *qi* 氣 as the breath-energy or creative vitality became the central concept in Chinese aesthetics.

In this context, *qi* 氣 referred to the human creative potential that forms the basis of artistic creation. This potential is closely linked to the emotions, feelings, and imagination that emerge through the perception and comprehension of the world through the sense organs. In the aesthetics of the Wei Jin period, *qi* reflects the profound beauty of human inwardness and the unique attributes of individual personhood. The representation of this inner world constituted the fundamental goal and aesthetic criterion in Wei Jin period art, emphasizing the intricate interplay between the individual’s inner life and the external world.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article is to elucidate the factors that contributed to the emergence of individual personhood during the Wei Jin period. The transformation of the concept of the subject and its individuality was shaped by various political and social factors, most notably the decline of the unified Confucian state doctrine of the Han dynasty, which included many autocratic, Legalist elements.

The disintegration of the normative moral code, rituals, and rigid social hierarchy facilitated a reorganization of social relations and, more importantly, the liberation of the individual. This liberalization of the subject provided new insights into the human mind, emphasizing the complexity of humans as holistic beings, particularly their emotional perceptual world and their interconnectedness with the cosmos. Scholars of the Wei Jin period predominantly drew upon Daoist philosophy, and within the framework of Neo-Daoism they reinterpreted the ideas of Laozi and Zhuangzi, and the cosmology of the *Yijing*.

Despite the general spirit of the Wei Jin period being permeated with themes such as the transience of life, anxiety, pain, death, and loneliness due to the social and political situation, scholars of the Wei Jin period created a new conception of the human subject based precisely on the integration of these deepest aspects of human existence, liberated from the constraints of the Confucian state doctrine, which incorporated many Legalist elements. The breakdown of the moral code based on a strict social hierarchy enabled considerable freedom in social life and thinking, leading to immense creativity in the realm of philosophy and art, and reflecting new comprehensions of individual personhood.

The philosophical and artistic production of the Wei Jin scholars always served as a model and inspiration during periods of suppression and stifling of intellectual freedom. For us in today's globalized, AI-integrated, and alienated world, their works and thoughts demonstrate that art and philosophy can act as a therapeutic salve for societal traumas, offering new modes of expression, reflection, and connection. Such inspirations empower individuals to transcend their traumatic experiences, encouraging resilience and hope. Exploring the creative aesthetics and philosophies of this ancient era can provide contemporary societies with fresh perspectives and alternative approaches to the intertwined economic and political challenges facing humanity today.

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