

A scholar-painter's diary: response on the contents of the diary of guo bi

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The necessity of ensuring that the upper-class men of ancient China were both trained in the various forms of the arts [i. e. poetry, painting, and calligraphy] as well as the duties involved in official service may be seen as a result of Chinese philosophy's ethical realism. Ethical realism is the belief that there is a dynamic and relational association between man and the world and as such man's duty is to follow the rational and ethical principle which will bring him into harmony with society and the universe (Mei, 1967, p. 150).

This harmony however may only be achieved through the individual's mastery of the arts since the arts are the manifestation of the spirit of conduct. The development of the virtue of conduct, along with the other virtues of righteousness, propriety, and wisdom necessitate the individual's attention to continuous self-cultivation. Since self-cultivation entails the development of the virtue of conduct, it is thereby necessary for the individual to continually develop as well as manifest his virtue of conduct through the contemplation of art and nature as well the creation of his own art works.

The manner in which an upper-class man develops his virtues through the arts is evident in the diary of Guo Bi. Providing a brief description of the events that occurred during his stay at Xinghua from the 12th day of the sixth month, 1309 to the 27th day of the same month in the same year, one notices that the main occupation of Guo Bi, along with his companions, involves the production and contemplation of artworks and the contemplation of nature while drinking wine.

During this period, Guo Bi was able to produce 'twenty wine poems', 'a picture of an impressive stone', 'a calligraphy scroll', 'a picture of orchids', 'calligraphy and bamboo drawings' as well as a calligraphy inspired poem (Ebrey, 1993, p. 199). In the course of his stay in the region, one notices that the various art works mentioned above were used as a means of showing gratitude towards the individual visited by Guo Bi. Artworks, in this sense, may be seen as the material manifestation of conduct towards other individuals in Chinese society during that period.