



KEY CONCEPTS IN CHINESE THOUGHT AND CULTURE

# Aesthetics from Ancient China

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## Aspects of Fenggu

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Yonghao Wang

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*Translated by*  
Jiajun Chu



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# Key Concepts in Chinese Thought and Culture

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Yonghao Wang

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## Foreword: New Idea Coming In—From Physiognomy to Character Judgement

The emergence of *fenggu*—a classic aesthetic genre—is a lengthy and drawn-out process. Its origin can be traced back to physiognomy in the Qin and Han dynasties, and character judgement in Wei, Jin, and the Southern and Northern dynasties. In terms of etymology, *fenggu*, physiognomy, and character judgement are interrelated. In a sense, physiognomy and character judgement, particularly the latter, have had *fenggu* defined. People throughout China’s dynastic history had set out their views on *fenggu*, from which its relationship with physiognomy and character judgement became clear. Of course, *fenggu* under the category of physiognomy and character judgement and *fenggu* as an aesthetic genre have their respective areas of research. It must be said: when the boundary of the former was quite defined in later dates, it was downplayed.

Let’s talk about physiognomy first. As a tradition, physiognomy was significantly developed in ancient China. During the pre-Qin period, the seeds of physiognomy were beginning to sprout along with early witchcraft. The ancient people couldn’t see the difference between physiological and social attributes, which were beyond their boundary of knowledge. They had a vague idea that the unaccountable phenomena in nature or society were derived from the mysterious shadows of the netherworld, and believed that there was always Karma for their actions. This set the stage for physiognomy.



Specifically, in the Spring and Autumn (770–476 BC) and Warring States (475–221 BC) periods, the feudal lords engaged in a battle for the throne, and talents were urgently sought after to help the governance. Against that background, physiognomy became the most popular profession. For example, *Zuozhuan*. *The First Year of Duke Wen* chronicles how Shu Fu told the fortune of Gongsun Ao. *Spring and Autumn of Wu and Yue* chronicles how Zhao Wuxu, who was recognized as Gubu Ziqing, and Tang Ju, told the fortunes of Confucius and Zhao Wuxu, and Li Dui and Cai Ze. Besides, we have records, quite a few, of the strange physical traits of ancient sages, such as the sun horn on the forehead of Fuxi, the dragon face (jutting brows) of the Yellow Emperor, the eight-colored brows of Emperor Yao, and the dual-pupiled eyes of Emperor Shun. Fundamentally, physiognomy was performed in a utilitarian way. The physiognomists would flatter and suit the mood of his client, who put faith in the former in a blind sense. People were deluded by the words of physiognomists and gradually languished, as they always did. In *Anti Physiognomy*, Xunzi launched a scathing attack on this. He said that the ancient scholars had been dismissive of physiognomy, and the wisdom of sages was not governed by their physical form. He put forward the theory that “Compare with the physical form, the inner psyche is more important.” The pity was, no one at the time bought into his theory.

Physiognomy had gained tremendously in popularity during the Qin and Han dynasties. In the Han dynasty, the metaphysical cosmology represented by the theories of *yin*, *yang* and five elements and *qi* monism were in vogue. The philosophy was to examine nature and human affairs through external connections, which touched in varying degrees with theological predestination. In the Han dynasty, physiognomy was performed by inspecting the sinews and bones of people, which was connected with the above-mentioned philosophy and mode of thinking. Physiognomy was juxtaposed with astrology, observing vapors, and *fengjiao* (a Chinese ancient traditional method of divination, using wind direction, wind force, wind speed, wind color, and the time of wind onset to judge good or bad luck), among the various schools of divination and numerology. In those days, there were professional “physiognomists” and “fortune tellers,” and the common people used to decide things of consequence with physiognomy. Both Ban Chao and Deng Tong had their fortunes predicted by physiognomists with much accuracy. The sheer number of practitioners had spawned corresponding text summaries. Xu Fu, Yan Zhu, Wang Fu, and Wang Chong were credited with writing

books such as *Physiognomy*, *Physiognomy of Babies*, *Comments of a Recluse Scholar*, and *The Balanced Inquiries*. Here's what *Comments of a Recluse Scholar* (*On Physiognomy*) says: "For the human body, each part has its counterpart sign of correspondent significance, and bones, muscles, and flesh are indications of their owner's life expectancy and salient embodiment of his/her social status." According to *The Balanced Inquiries Phrenology*, "For those who delve into the study of destiny, likening it to an instrument, they discern the essence of life through the examination of bodily structure. Thus, it is through the determination of one's physical form that their destiny is revealed." "It is an unfailing way to tell fortune by observing the bone joints and the texture of skin." Besides, *Han Zhi* ("Yiwenzhi" in *The History of the Han dynasty*) has dedicated 24 volumes to physiognomy (also titled *Physiognomy*). These books are a validation of physiognomy, which advocates the act of feeling the bones to determine one's destiny and predict good or bad fortune. In Wei, Jin, and the Southern and Northern dynasties (AD 266–589), scholars took up the subject of mystic learning, and the focus of character judgement had been the integration of external demeanor, appearance, and conduct. But they still believed that "Destiny and appearance are interdependent. Aligned with the principles of Heaven, they must be in harmony with each other."<sup>1</sup> Sun Shao, Guan Lu, and Pan Tao were "skilled in interpreting fortunes and destiny,"<sup>2</sup> and their prophecies were mostly verified.<sup>3</sup> Cao Zhi and Wang Lang wrote *On Physiognomy*, while Tao Hongjing wrote the preface for *Scripture of Physiognomy*. The Tang dynasty saw the renaissance of physiognomy, when books on the subject were widely circulated. The fashion continued through the Ming and Qing dynasties. Famous physiognomists in history include Yuan Tiangang and Li Chunfeng from the Tang dynasty, Chen Bo from the Song dynasty, and Yuan Zhongwei and Chen Zhao from the Ming and Qing dynasties.

Physiognomy also touched on livestock, particularly horse. Zhao Wangliang, Qin Bole, and Jiu Fanggao were livestock physiognomists "with consummate skill."<sup>4</sup> In the Qin and Han dynasties, the matters

<sup>1</sup> *Master Liu. Fortune Telling.*

<sup>2</sup> *Book of Wei. Original Biography.*

<sup>3</sup> See: *Gu Jin Shi Wen Lei Ju Qian Ji* (*Collection of Literary Works in Ancient and Modern Times*) by Zhu Mu, Vol. 39.

<sup>4</sup> *Master Lü's Spring and Autumn Annals. Appearance Inspection.*

of farming and war were of national significance, and horse physiognomy was popular. Ma Yuan, author of *Assessment of the Bronze Horse*, was very used to the profession. In *Han Zhi-Livestock Physiognomy*, 38 volumes are devoted to evaluating and selecting the six domestic animals.<sup>5</sup> Besides, there are books about dog physiognomy. The 1972 discovery of artifacts from the Yinqueshan Han tombs included a fragmentary copy of *Physiognomy of Dogs*. In addition, there is artifact physiognomy. *Han Zhi-Sword Physiognomy* dedicates 20 volumes to the subject.

The essential point of physiognomy is to see through the appearance to perceive the essence, and predict what the future holds. Physiognomists predict the fortune, social status, lifespan, and luck of people by observing their physical appearance. People used to say that one's fate is determined by Heaven, and there are signs of it on one's body. According to traditional Chinese medicine, the human body, except the five viscera—the heart, lungs, spleen, liver, and kidneys, is mainly composed of five substances: tendons, skin, hair, bones, and flesh. These five substances correspond to the five elements and are responsible for supporting and protecting the body.<sup>6</sup> Humans are born by the combination of *yin* and *yang*, and their life force is passed down from Heaven and Earth. The complexion of a person is believed to be related to the balance of *qi* (energy) and blood in the body. And the facial features and complexion may be a telling clue to a man. Judging a person based on their complexion is unreliable. But the bone, flesh, and physical appearance can reveal their fortune, personality, lifespan, and social status. These were generally regarded as the basis for making judgements, and people were more interested in phrenology and bone structure. Here's what *Introduction to the Classic of Physiognomy* by Tao Hongjing says: "Physiognomists believe that one's destiny is determined by their bone structure, while their complexion indicates their good or bad fortune." But most people would have thought that physiognomy was mainly based on bone structure, with complexion being a secondary factor that could indicate good or bad fortune. "Just as there are different types of plants and trees, each

<sup>5</sup> See: *Book of the Later Han· Original Biography*.

<sup>6</sup> See: The Yellow Emperor's Internal Canon· *Plain Questions· On the Movement of Five Evolutive Phases*.

with their own characteristics, there are also different types of bone structures that determine one's destiny."<sup>7</sup> "One's social status is determined by their bone structure; Their emotional state is reflected in complexion."<sup>8</sup>

Corresponding to "bone structure," there is "bone *qi*." "Bone structure implies the bone that is readily visible and can be felt by the hands; Bone *qi* implies the bone that is invisible and can be recognized by its essence. Bone structure determines what has happened, while bone *qi* foresees what is going to happen."<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that bone *qi* and complexion, which remain something of an enigma, are not the same. Color and form come from the "void" or "empty" space, and are manifested on the surface of the body; energy or "qi" comes from the "solid" or "real" aspects of the body, such as the bones. As said before, physiognomy also stresses "the relationship between bone structure and flesh,"<sup>10</sup> with bone structure being considered the more fundamental and influential factor. The two are comparable to the lord and his servant. The relationship between the bones (lord) and the flesh (servant) should feature bones and flesh supporting each other. One is in less good shape if the bones are light and the flesh is sluggish. "Flesh should be firm and solid; bones should be straight and upright. If there is too little *yin* energy in the body, it can cause the flesh to separate from the bones; If there is too much *yang* energy in the body, it can cause the bones to become too strong and not allow enough flesh to grow. When a person or a horse is overweight, it puts extra strain on their respiratory system, making it harder for them to breathe. Therefore, it is important to maintain a balance between the amount of flesh and bones in the body."<sup>11</sup>

Bone structure and bone *qi*, as the research fields of physiognomy, had reached the commoners. The official class was much influenced by them, which were also a much-talk-about topic of poets, calligraphers, and painters throughout history. In *Ode to the Goddess*, Song Yu described the goddess as "having distinctive and impressive bone structure, and a noble and distinguished appearance." In *Wen Xuan* (Selections of Refined Literature), "bone" appears in 48 places. Bone is also discussed from the

<sup>7</sup> *Comments of a Recluse· the Principle of Correspondence.*

<sup>8</sup> *Records of the Grand Historian· Biography of Marquis of Huaiyin.*

<sup>9</sup> *Record of the Cave of Moonlit Waves*, Vol. 1, Mingdu.

<sup>10</sup> *Comments of a Recluse· the Principle of Correspondence.*

<sup>11</sup> *Divine Mirror of Great Clarity*, Vol. 5.

perspective of physiognomy. The phrases “bone structure” and “bone and look” appear in Cao Zhi’s *Ode to the Goddess* and *Ode to the Goddess of the Luo River*. In *A New Account of the Tales of the World*, “bone” appears in 10 places. Here’s what *Worthy Beauties* section of the book says: “A person’s bone structure can reveal information about their lifespan.” In *New Songs from the Jade Terrace*, “bone” appears in 6 places with about the same meaning. Since the Tang and Song dynasties, people had been used to evaluating people with physiognomy. For example, Han Yu says in *A Farewell Message to Zhang Duan, A Government Official Who Was Leaving Shaozhou*: “Long have I admired your literary talent, and I lament that my bone structure is not like that of Yu Fan”; here’s what Lu You’s *Spontaneous Poem at A Spring Night* says: “By physiognomy, there’s no noble bone in me. I’m predispose to alcoholism.” *To Commemorate the Famous Poet Li Jing’an* by Xie Wuyi reads: “The common flow lacks bones but has flesh; The toad dares to compete with the radiance of the dragon.” (Some content may appear ordinary and mediocre, but it can still touch people’s hearts and evoke resonance.) Here’s what *The Wise Ruler’s Guide* by Xing Chunfu says: “The bone structure of celestial beings is unique, way above the capability of artists on earth.” Here’s a phrase from *The Song of Duliao General* by Huang Zunxian of Qing dynasty: “It is said that good bone structure is equivalent to nobility, but I am born before my time in the war era.”

Physiognomy also appears in books, paintings, and poetic criticisms. Gu Kaizhi said of *Annals of Zhou* in *Painting Criticism*: “...has a complex and layered composition, with a well-defined bone structure.” In Guo Ruoxu’s *Illustrated Chronicles of Paintings and Observations*, bone structure is juxtaposed with “spirit,” “clothing texture,” and “orientation” as the Four Skills of physiognomy. It is second only to “spirit” in significance. Here’s a phrase from *Hua Jian*, a book on painting written by Tang Hou: “Admiring a painting is like admiring a beauty. The spirit and bone structure go beyond the physical appearance.” In the *Secret of Portrait Painting*, Wang Yi said with a bluntness that “For portrait painting, understanding of physiognomy is required.” In the Qing dynasty, there were still many scholars who used physiognomy in painting criticism. For example, in Shen Zongqian’s *Jie Zhou Xue Hua Bian* (The Mustard Seed Boat: A Compilation of Painting Studies), there is a chapter titled *Xiang Shi* (Physiognomy). In other works, references to “phrenology” can also be found. In terms of literary criticism, for example, Chen You’s *Fu Xuan Ye Lu* describes Yu Zhongfang’s

work by saying, “His compositions exhibit new ideas and smooth brushwork, with both bold and delicate strokes. However, the overall structure lacks solidity and falls short of proper bone structure, resulting in a lack of coherence”; in Xiang Mu’s *Elegant Words on Calligraphy*, it is mentioned that characters should have a proper balance between thinness and thickness. “Just as in people’s judgments of physical appearances, being too thin and bony or too fat and fleshy is not considered ideal”; in the *Twin Oars of the Broad Arts-System*, Kang Youwei states that people from Southeast Asia and those from the Central Plains are vastly different. “However, in terms of bone structure, the uniqueness, refinement, compactness, and distinctiveness are still the same. The same can be said for calligraphy.” In terms of poetic criticism, Liu Zai’s *Epitaph for Mr. Zhao Zhangquan* quotes Yang Wanli’s praise of Zhao Fan’s poetry, stating that “it has a demeanor of humility and harmony, without carefully revising and refining.” The poem possesses a clear and vigorous spirit, without the gaunt and austere appearance of a mountain dweller. In *Preface to the Anthology of Zhao’s Poetry*, Yang Weizhen states that “the evaluation of poetry is no different from the assessment of a person’s character. Just as a person has their face, bones, temperament, and spirit, poetry also has its own levels of beauty or ugliness, and greatness or mediocrity”; in Shen Deqian’s *Shuo Shi Zui Yu*, he refers to Xu Zhenqing, stating that “Xu is not on par with other poets in terms of grandeur or heights. However, he possesses a clear and refreshing style, with a distinctive bone structure, allowing him to stand out and establish his own unique style—the Wu school of poetry.”

Of course, these are just simple references to phrenology, and they do not ascribe any aesthetic significance to it. When discussing the origin of the term *fenggu*, merely citing the above examples without further explanation is not sufficiently conclusive. Telling fortune by bone structure is, after all, based on the tangible, physical existence. To transform it into an abstract and spiritual judgement, it requires individuals with a deep understanding and aesthetic insight to make the connection. The emphasis on bone structure in physiognomy suggests that bones are the essential framework of the body and should possess qualities such as clarity, smoothness, length, and delicacy, which should be in harmony with the flesh both internally and externally. If the bones are heavy and coarse, and the skin and flesh are thick, it is considered a sign of impurity. On the other hand, if the bones are firm, upright, lightweight, and the skin and flesh are thin, it is associated with coldness. Generally

speaking, a good physique is characterized by an upright posture, without any tilting or protrusions, and a harmonious alignment with the flesh.<sup>12</sup> The perspective on bone structure has offered an insight into character judgement since the Han and Wei dynasties. It has subsequently created a foundation for the transformation of physiognomy into the aesthetic realm, specifically in terms of the concept of *fenggu*. In the Han and Wei dynasties, character judgement was no longer limited to physiognomy. It emphasized inferring a person's inner temperament and qualities through the observation of their skeletal structure, believing that this external physique can reflect their character, courage, and demeanor. For that reason, the ties of character judgement to physiognomy are dimly perceptible. Art criticism also follows a similar pattern. Physiognomy, with its emphasis on the bones as the core foundation of a person, values strong and upright bone structure, which in turn manifests in a dignified appearance, graceful posture, and beauty in physical features. This works on the same principle as poetry, calligraphy, and painting with specific techniques and artistry. In its nascent stage, the principles of physiognomy were applied by its proponents. This trend continued into the Ming and Qing dynasties, when traces of such shift could be detected in the discussions among scholars.

Let's turn the conversation to character judgement. As far as we know, the Han dynasty commenced the *chajuzhi* (commandery quota system). Scholars were put forward by the Prime Minister, Marquis, Provincial Governor, and Prefects. They would be chosen by sitting state sponsored examinations, including *xiaolian* (filial piety and incorruptibility) and *xianliang fangzheng* (virtuousness and talent). Officials in the capital, like the Three Ducal Ministers, and local officials, like provincial governors and county magistrate, might have their discretion in selecting subordinates before recommending them to the imperial court. Thanks to the implementation of *chajuzhi*, the whole society believed in the value of moral integrity. This accelerated the rise of character judgement. However, the practice was overreaching, and there were instances of nominal officials who were not truly qualified. In response to this, the view on name and reality began to draw attention. Xu Gan's *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way* and Zhong Changtong's *Chang Yan* argue that an official is supposed to have practical abilities that live up to his title. Liu

<sup>12</sup> *Zhao Dan Jing*, Vol. 1, on Bone.

Yi's *Zheng Lun* (Political Discourses) even dedicated a section—Proper Names, to discuss the subject. However, with Confucianism falling from grace and the emperors' obsession with diverse arts and dubious talent, scholars were encouraged to break free from the inhibitions of Confucianism for relief. As a result, morality was no longer the most important thing for character judgement. That, combined with the chaos and instability in the late Han dynasty, forced many distinguished families to leave their ancestral lands. "The social fabric became fragmented, making it challenging to thoroughly assess or scrutinize individuals' backgrounds or qualifications."<sup>13</sup> Evaluating individuals based on their moral conduct and qualifications was impossible. Therefore, it is essential to determine if someone's temperament surpasses their talents and intellectual sensitivity. Thus, people are evaluated based on their spiritual wisdom and innate abilities, setting a prevailing trend in character judgement.

Discussions on this topic are found in various books, such as Cao Pi's *Standards for Scholars*, Yao Xin's *New Book on the Conduct of Scholars*, and *New Book of Yaos*, Lu Yu's *Discussions on Figures of China*, Jiang Chang's *Biographies of Notable People from Chenliu*, Yu Fachang's *Discourses on Figures*, Guo Song's *Discussions on Distinguished Figures*, and Liu Shao's *Records of Figures*. Unfortunately, apart from *Records of Figures* and fragments of *New Book on the Conduct of Scholars*, the rest of these works have been lost. From Liu Shao's work, it is evident that although the discussion is based on name and reality, his actual interest lies more in the spiritual essence, intellectual reasoning, and inherent talents or nature of individuals. Liu Shao also places emphasis on bone structure and often connects bones, tendons, *qi*, muscles, and blood with the five elements, thereby extending the concept to five qualities that are related to spiritual essence, intellectual reasoning, and inherent talents or nature. These qualities are known as the "Five Constants." Evidently, his discussions are derived from physiognomy. Influenced by the prevailing cultural atmosphere of the time, Liu Shao's understanding of the concepts of "bone," "*qi*," "spirit," and "strength" became more interconnected. He states, "When bones are straight and *qi* is pure, a distinguished reputation is born. When *qi* is pure and strength is vigorous, an illustrious reputation is born." He also mentions, "When bones are rooted and yet flexible, it is called magnanimity. The determination of strength or weakness lies

<sup>13</sup> Du You: *Comprehensive Statutes Election II-Political Systems Throughout Dynasties*.



in bones, while the determination of restlessness or calmness lies in *qi*.” Here, bone not only refers to the physical structure but also to the bodily constitution and the strong demeanor that emanates from it. However, considering Wang Chong’s earlier statement that “A person’s qualities are not merely determined by their wealth or social status, but are also influenced by their character and conduct,” and that “Just as fate is governed by bone structure, character and personality are also governed by bone structure.”<sup>14</sup> The emphasis on bone structure and phrenology transitioned towards the judgement of spiritual essence, intellectual reasoning, and inherent talents or nature. People no longer focus solely on the configuration and strict appearance of bones but also consider the connection between bone quality, bone rooting, *qi*, and strength. They hoped to explore the spiritual essence, intellectual reasoning, and inherent talents or nature, or even natural and ethical temperaments through the relationship between bone structure, spiritual energy, and vital strength. This transition allows the concept of bone structure and phrenology to break free from the initial confines of physiognomy, opening up a higher level of character judgement in the development process. It creates a mature semantic environment for character judgement that focuses on spiritual understanding during the Wei and Jin periods. However, overall, it has not completely transcended the realm of physiognomy.

In Wei, Jin, and the Southern and Northern dynasties, character judgement shifted from “a focus on physical appearance” to “a discussion of inner qualities and spiritual attributes.”<sup>15</sup> This trend is different from the traditional understanding of physiognomy and character judgement in the Han and Wei periods. In a sense, it had moved away from moral judgement and ethical criticism. This shift towards appreciating the charm, charisma, and personal allure of individuals, placing greater importance on inherent intelligence and elegance rather than mere physical beauty, and emphasizing overall harmony over individual refined details, brings it closer to aesthetic contemplation and artistic appreciation. For example, Shi Dao’an, despite having a physically unattractive appearance, gained fame due to his profound understanding of Buddhist teachings. He was

<sup>14</sup> *The Balance Inquiries Phrenology*.

<sup>15</sup> Ge Hong: *Baopuzi. Mirror of Clarity*.

praised by Emperor Wu of Jin as possessing “great wisdom, comprehensive knowledge, and a distinguished charm.”<sup>16</sup> In connection to this, the terminology used by people during that time shifted from literal descriptions to figurative metaphors. On the one hand, various vivid descriptions were employed to portray the demeanor and grace of individuals. On the other hand, characters such as “*shen*” (spirit), “*ya*” (elegance), “*yun*” (charm), “*qing*” (purity), “*shuang*” (radiance), “*kuang*” (openness), and “*jian*” (simplicity) were endowed with richer connotations and meanings. The term *feng*, another origin of *fenggu*, emerged during this period. It, along with *gu*, was endowed with unprecedented aesthetic attributes. Through combinations with words such as “*shen*” (spirit), and “*ya*” (elegance), it created new and rich meanings that captured the essence of aesthetic appreciation.

Regarding the term *feng*, its original meaning refers to the movement of *qi*. For example, in *Guangya· Explaining Words*, it states that “*Feng* means *qi*.” *Zhengzitong* states that “*Feng* comes from the atmospheric *qi*.” The annotation in *Master Lü’s Spring and Autumn Annals· Analysis of the Times* explains that “*Feng* means the movement of *qi*.” The commentary in the *Book of Songs· Bei Shan* explains that “*Feng* means release, the dispersal of *qi*.” Here, the terms “*yun*” (movement) and “*fang san*” (release and dispersal) clearly reveal the dynamic nature of *qi*. *Phonology* states, “The heavens and the earth make the *feng*.” *Mandarin Phonology* states: “The *feng* moves all things.” Although these sources do not explicitly mention *qi*, they are referring to the same concept. *Explanation of Names· Heaven* provides a more specific explanation, stating that “*Feng* means a flowing movement, with its *qi* flowing widely and causing motion in living beings.” It is clear that the ancients used this term to illustrate the continuous transformative nature of *qi*. This aligns with the statement in *Zhuangzi· Discussion of the Equality of Things* that “the Great Block is filled with *qi*, and its name is *feng*.” It signifies the powerful force that is constantly at work, stirring and enlivening all things.

During the Wei, Jin, and the Southern and Northern dynasties, people adopted and applied the term *feng* to character judgement, using it in conjunction with *qi* to refer to the exceptional temperament and vigorous spirit of individuals. For example, in *A New Account of the Tales of the World· Rendan*, there is mention of “*feng qi yun du*” (the charm and

<sup>16</sup> Hui Jiao: *The Memoirs of Eminent Monks*, Vol. 5.

aura of one's character). In *Worthy Beauties* section, there is mention of “*lin xia feng qi*” (the temperament in the woods). In *Appreciation and Praise* section, there is mention of “*gao shuang you feng qi*” (having a lofty and spirited character) which is quoted from *On Writing*. In *Book of Song· Biography of Yuan Shu*, there is mention of “*shao you feng qi*” (having a rare and exceptional character). Here, “*feng qi*” refers to the material essence of individuals with abundant spirit and vitality. While it retains an air of grace and elegance, it also exudes a vibrant life force that sets them apart from the ordinary. Furthermore, it is often associated with words such as “*shen*” (spirit), “*yun*” (charm), and “*ya*” (elegance). For instance, in *A New Account of the Tales of the World· Appreciation and Praise*, there is mention of “*feng shen qing ling*” (clear and elegant spirit). It quoted the saying in *Biography of Wang Cheng* of “*feng yun mai da*” (exceeding charm and elegance). In *Book of Song· Biography of Xie Hui*, there is mention of “*mei feng zi*” (beautiful bearing). *A New Account of the Tales of the World· Speech and Conversation* quoted the saying in *Sequel to the Chronicle of Jin* of “*feng qing jian su*” (simple and refined demeanor). In *Book of Wei· Biography of Wang Huilong*, there is mention of “*feng yi qing xiu*” (graceful bearing). In *Book of Wei· Prince of Pengcheng*, there is mention of “*feng biao cai qi*” (distinguished talent and ability). In *Book of Song· Author's Preface*, there is mention of “*wen ya you feng wei*” (gentle and elegant with distinctive charm). In *Baopuzi· Xing Pin*, there is mention of “*feng ge jun qiao*” (stark and rugged style). In *Book of Southern Qi· On Literature*, there is mention of “*shao you feng gai*” (rarely seen demeanor). In *Book of Song, Biography of Liu Ze*, there is mention of “*sui fa feng hua, xing shen qiang zhi*” (though lacking elegance, character is exceedingly upright). In *Book of Song, Biography of Liu Xiuzhi*, there is mention of “*ye shuai wu feng cai*” (uncultured and lacks sophistication). *A New Account of the Tales of the World· Speech and Conversation* quoted the saying in *Buddhist Monastic Code* of “*feng qi gao liang*” (high-minded fortitude). At this moment, their vigorous and ambitious character underwent a transformation due to the infusion of the connected meanings of words. In essence, these words were integrated together, referring to individuals who possess outstanding talents, keen intelligence, and profound understanding, surpassing ordinary qualities and being filled with enthusiasm. This, in turn, generates an extraordinary charm and vibrancy that emanates from their nature, abilities, and extensive knowledge. It also carried connotations of refinement and culture,

but these aspects are unrelated to character judgement and thus are not discussed in this context.

Regarding the term *gu*, it retains the meaning of bone structure and physiognomy while also extending beyond those concepts. When combined with many expressive words, it refers to a certain spiritual character of individuals. For example, in *A Eulogy of the Famous Ministers of the Three Kingdoms Period*, there is mention of “*tian gu shu lang, qiang an gao yi*” (used to praise someone’s remarkable and distinguished physical attributes). In *A New Account of the Tales of the World: Appreciation of Praise*, there is mention of “*lei kuai you zheng gu*” (built like a solid block with proper bones). In *Grading Excellence* section, there is mention of “Ruan Sikuang’s *guqi* (courage) is not as good as that of the Right General,” and “*gu li bu ji*” (the bone structure is not as good). In the commentary on *Rong Zhi* (Grace and Demeanor), there is a quote from the *Annals of Wu* that says “*gu ti bu heng*” (the character’s physique is inconsistent). In *Book of Song: Biography of Kong Ji*, there is mention of “*gu geng you feng li*” (possessing a strong and forceful character). In *Book of Liang: Biography of Qiu Chi*, there is mention of “*qi gu si wo*” (having a temperament and character similar to mine). Compared to *feng*, *gu* is not known for its vibrant and energetic demeanor but rather for its strong and upright character. As Ge Hong mentioned in *Baopuzi: Shen Ju*, “A person may have a grand and dignified bearing and an impressive appearance, but if their mind is empty and lacks substance, their character may fall short.” This generally highlights the distinction between the two terms.

The combination of *feng* and *gu* exhibits strong word-building capability and is commonly seen in character judgement. This provides possibilities for their own combination, and the rich connotations derived from their inherent meanings, which encompass both exceptional charm and vibrancy as well as strong and resilient qualities, ensure the stability of this combination in the practice of evaluation. For example, *Book of Song: Biography of Emperor Wu* describes Liu Yu as “a man 7 *chi* and 8 *cun* in height, with extraordinary *fenggu*. Poor but ambitious, he didn’t engage in petty and dishonest acts.” It further quotes Huan Xuan’s comment on Liu Yu, saying, “I saw that Liu Yu’s *fenggu* is inconsistent, but he is indeed a remarkable person.” *A New Account of the Tales of the World: Appreciation and Praise* quoted the saying in *Emperor An of Jin* that Wang Xizhi has “clear and exceptional *fenggu*.” In *Biographies of Eminent Monks*, it mentions: “Wang Xizhi visited Zhidun’s hermitage to observe

his ‘*fengli*’ (spiritual power).” *History of the Northern Dynasties· Biography of Liang Yanguang* describes young Liang Yanguang as “having extraordinary qualities and great virtues, and his father often said to his acquaintances, “This child has *fenggu* and will bring glory to our family.” This usage was continued by Tang dynasty writers. For instance, the *History of South Dynasty· Annals of Emperor Wu of Song* refers to Liu Yu as having “extraordinary and majestic *fenggu*, not engaged in petty and trivial matters.” The *Book of Jin· Biography of Helian Bobo* describes Helian Bobo as having “excellent discernment and a remarkable *fenggu*.” *History of South Dynasty· Biography of Cai Zun* describes Cai Zun as “having firm and upright *fenggu*, with an impressive temperament.” In line with the discussions by writers of the Six Dynasties, *fenggu* generally refers to the spirited and energetic spiritual bearing and demeanor of individuals. However, it should be noted that, just like *feng* and *gu* that have not divorced from their original meanings, *fenggu* is still connected to the idea of bone structure and physiognomy. For example, *A New Account of the Tales of the World· Qingdi* includes the phrase “the old look of Marquis Han Kang lacks *fenggu*.” The same article quotes the saying of Fan Qi, stating that “Marquis Han Kang looks like a plucked duck.” *Grading Excellence* section says in the words of Cai Shuzi that “Although Marquis Han Kang lacks a strong and upright physique, he still stands out.” Here, *fenggu* is discussed from a practical perspective, highlighting the requirements of physical beauty under the influence of physiognomy.

In the Han dynasty, physiognomy was inclined to place emphasis on bone structure and facial complexion when speculating about one’s destiny, fortune, and lifespan. When Han was giving way to Wei, there was a slight shift towards the consideration of spiritual qualities. In Wei, Jin, and the Southern and Northern dynasties, *gu* was directly combined with *qi* and *li*, and the term *fenggu* emerged to refer to the spiritual demeanor of a person, which went beyond their physical appearance. It integrated a person’s physical features and their talents and demeanor, providing a distinct appreciation that went beyond moral judgement. This shift was rooted in the changing cultural and intellectual climate of the time. From the Han and Wei dynasties to the Wei, Jin, and the Southern and Northern dynasties, there was a transition from unity to division in the political scene, as evidenced by the succession of periods of order and chaos. Intellectually, there was a shift from the dominance of Confucianism to a broader range of intellectual pursuits, as seen in the

saying “Families abandoned Confucian classics, while individuals valued diverse arts and sciences.” This brought about significant differences in philosophy, scholarly methods, ideals of life, and attitudes towards the world compared to the previous era. In terms of philosophical pursuits, there was a greater emphasis on the metaphysical aspects of the cosmos over its creation, and the study of metaphysics took precedence over classical studies. In terms of scholarly methods, there was a focus on understanding the underlying principles rather than being confined to specific texts. The emphasis was on egalitarian gatherings and intellectual exchanges, rather than adhering strictly to hierarchical relationships and traditional transmission of knowledge. In terms of ideals, the aspiration shifted from being immortalized on stone tablets or bamboo scrolls to seeking freedom in the bamboo groves and leisurely wanderings in the Golden Valley. These changes also influenced attitudes towards worldly affairs. There was a disregard for external appearances and a pursuit of inner truths, a longing for a carefree and liberated existence that transcended the constraints of social norms. However, this also led to some individuals indulging in frivolous and decadent behaviors. It was the combined effect of these factors that led to a shift in the evaluation of individuals, as described in the *Baopuzi·Qingjian*, where the focus shifted from outward appearances to the profound use of spiritual qualities. In essence, it guided people towards a sense of freedom and liberation.

During the Han dynasty, Confucianism flourished, but it was criticized by later generations of scholars after the Wei and Jin dynasties. They felt that Confucianism lagged behind in its concern for the inherent value of individuals, which had already been realized. In their view, a person’s worth resided within themselves and did not depend on fame, wealth, or official position. In pursuit of this freedom and the development of an independent personality, they began to attach unprecedented importance to human nature and individuality. The rejection of strict moral conduct and a focus on self-cultivation reflected their true aspirations. They emphasized the combination of inner cultivation and external grace, without relying on moral judgements or utilitarian considerations. Furthermore, the ontological reflections on the world by metaphysics opened up infinite possibilities for the spiritual world of humans. This deepened their self-awareness and greatly enriched their capacity for perception, including the appreciation of beauty. It transformed the traditional physiognomy into a more refined and intriguing form of spiritual

appreciation, surpassing the Han and Wei dynasties' character judgements, which were primarily focused on practical considerations related to bone structure and character judgement. This independent and self-contained aesthetic judgement created its own linguistic sources and theoretical framework.

Furthermore, influenced by the traditional cultural spirit of harmony, nature, society, and humanity, the Chinese have always sought to understand the essence of beauty from the perspective of human nature. During the Wei, Jin, and the Southern and Northern dynasties, character judgement focused on the appreciation of people's spiritual essence, endowing them with spiritual grace. This appreciation extended to their words, versatile expressions, and literary talents, reflecting the embodiment of this tradition. Due to their approach of appreciating individuals from an aesthetic perspective, there is a connection between *fenggu* and the sensuous forms of beauty, as a summarization of the ideal way of life for human beings. This connection began to emerge in the late Han dynasty and experienced significant development during the Wei and Jin periods. For instance, in Liu Shao's *Record of Figures*, people are endowed with qualities such as "simplicity and plainness, keen insight, and outward brilliance, strong and steadfast disposition, clear voice and cheerful countenance, and upright and straightforward demeanor." If we apply this kind of observation and expectation of individuals to literary and aesthetic criticism, there is no difficulty in understanding. During the Eastern Jin dynasty, people widely emphasized personal cultivation and aspired to have a dignified and refined demeanor, conveying their distinct sentiments different from prevailing customs. Therefore, when these thoughts were expressed in words and crafted into articles, they also adopted a form that aligned with the reverence for individual life. Moreover, the content they sought to convey through language and writing precisely embodied this way of life, further blurring the boundaries between the two. Consequently, the evaluation of individuals based on *fenggu* became a common expression in artistic and literary discussions, forming a stable and distinctive aesthetic category. It naturally extended to the criticism of books, paintings, and poetry, becoming an integral part of artistic appreciation.