

Homesickness: From Truth to Aesthetics

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Abstract

This thesis delves into the exploration of transcendental homesickness, the emotional distress experienced when separated from home, extends beyond mere physical absence; it encompasses the profound loneliness that compels us to seek meaning in our existence, understand the origins of everything, and contemplate our destination. Through tea - the cultural lifeblood coursing through the veins of Chinese, this exploration examines how we can elevate our meaning of existence to an aesthetic experience that fosters connections with the external world, the cosmos, and brings a sense of home.

Employing a comparative methodology, the study brings together ancient Chinese thought, Daoism, with early Western thought to modern cosmology and ontology, examining their similarities and differences in addressing the relationship between humans and the external world. As the outcome of the MFA research-creation, the exploration takes a tangible form through the creation of hundreds of drinking vessels and the arrangement of red tea generously contributed by our community with blessings and love, translating our profound connection with the objects surrounding us into a visual language, resonating with our transcendental loneliness as individuals, communities, and human beings.

Acknowledgements

This paper was written in both simplified Chinese and English. It is composed under two distinct language systems, meaning it is not a direct translation of each other. The two versions exhibit notable differences in tone, flow, word choice, and even paragraph arrangement. This divergence stems from the fact that each language is rooted in a distinct cultural and literary system, making a straightforward translation impractical. A direct translation from one language to another may not convey the intended meaning and could potentially be quite misleading.

As a bilingual individual, English and Chinese transcend being merely two languages; they represent two parallel modes of thinking and cultural systems coexisting within my personal worldview. At times, I think in Chinese, and at other times, in English. When contemplating in Chinese, expressing myself in English becomes challenging, and vice versa. It is as if an unseen wall always separates them, each maintaining its place without overly interfering with the other. This experience differs from the intense cultural conflicts and clashes depicted in some traditional literature and films about immigrants. Many of my bilingual friends express that, for us, switching languages is akin to switching personalities. Our way of speaking, tone, expressions, and body language all undergo changes with language shifts. Both language systems are very real to me, tangible, and constitute my flesh and blood. Neither version of this paper is more authentic than the other. If a distinction must be made, I might say that the English version reflects more on my rational thinking, while the Chinese version delves more into my emotional thinking.

I acquired new forms of knowledge over the course of the twenty-five years of English education and years of working as an engineering professional. My proficiency in Chinese stems from thirty-six years of emotional support from my family and childhood friends. To me, English is more precise, while Chinese is warmer.

It has been about twenty years since I wrote essays in Chinese. This paper presents a significant challenge for me, both in terms of language and content organization. It requires the delicate task of accurately and sensibly portraying two parallel cultural systems through words and work.

I intentionally kept my visual creations separate from my thesis paper. Rather than describing my installation work in detail through text, I prefer viewers to experience it in person during the exhibition period. My installation aimed to evoke experiential journeys for both observers and myself. Very similar to the difference between embarking on a journey and merely reading a travel guidebook, I wanted to prevent anyone from mistakenly assuming they have fully comprehended the work without experiencing it in person.

While rational thinking predominates as a Western mode of thought, emphasizing causal logic where everything can be dissected into cause and effect, my approach as a practitioner of Chinese Daoist thinking is centered on recognizing correlations between phenomena rather than mere causation. I resist the reduction of my visual creations to mere outcome or by-product of my paper. They exist independently, each possessing its own significance, yet also sharing a common foundation in their underlying intentions and concepts. As a result, I have included an introduction and documentation of my visual creations separately from the main body of the paper, in the appendix for reference.

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Introduction

My first encounter with Daoist thought was at the age of ten. My mother took me to a bookstore in town and allowed me to choose a book I liked. After wandering around, I stood in front of the classical literature shelf and read the story of Zhuangzi's butterfly dream. "Once upon a time, I dreamt I was a butterfly, fluttering hither and thither, to all intents and purposes a butterfly. I was conscious only of my happiness as a butterfly, unaware that I was myself. Soon I awoke, and there I was, veritably myself again. Now I do not know whether I was then a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly, dreaming I am a man." ("Qi Wu Lun" 92) As a young child, I marveled at Zhuangzi's rich imagination and his free spirit from a thousand years ago. His story shook me, an ignorant young reader, a thousand years later. In these long 1000 years, how many others like me has he shaken? I held the book in my hands, staring at those simple lines, captivated. The sunlight streamed down, and dust particles floated and danced in the beam, quietly. Was I the same as these dust particles? What differentiated me from them? I felt that in the sunlight, I was still, while the dust moved, telling their own stories. There's a self-consciousness that came to me all of a sudden. I started to watch myself as a third person. Before reading this story, I had never thought about who I am and what I am at the current moment. What differentiated me from a butterfly and what makes me distinct from other things in the world? These questions have been around me for 26 years now - I'm still seeking the answer to it, and I will keep seeking it.

I used to sit in the yard at night, leaning against my grandmother on a small stool, gazing at the stars in the sky. Chinese women, who are the age of my grandmother learned about Twenty-Eight Mansions. For many of that generation, the Western Zodiac is not part of their cultural experience. To my grandmother, stars are just distant faint lights in the sky. In my world, they are all part of my ever existence, once moved me, once warmed me.

By contrast, I would talk to the stars, the trees, the grass, and the gentle breeze when they are around. Even if they didn't respond, I knew they were listening. We have our language, and they have their expressions. I never thought I would understand them, but I'm still grateful for their companionship with humanity over tens of thousands of years. The human history to them is so short and brief, so brief that a tree's growth from infancy to childhood spans our entire lifetime, so brief that a star's rotation encompasses the passing of millennia in our world (Kurtz and Holdsworth 17). With our brief existence, how can we possibly engage in understanding and comprehension with this world that is billions of years old? Perhaps some inward exploration of ourselves can offer some support during the hardships in our fleeting lives and shed a glimmer of light when we are lost.

Why am I making?

I asked myself, as an artist, why I create art, hand-building works little by little, and spending so much time and attention on the details when I can easily share and convey knowledge and thoughts with written and spoken language.

Rorty says, "It is characteristic of the Kantian tradition that, no matter how much writing it does, it does not think that philosophy should be 'written' any more than science should be. Writing is an unfortunate necessity; what is really wanted is to show, to demonstrate, to point out, to exhibit, to make one's interlocutor stand at gaze before the world... [whereas] In a mature science, the words in which the investigator 'writes up' his results should be as few and as transparent as possible." (141)

Language is generated and filtered by consciousness by humans to achieve some very specific purposes. It needs to be as precise as possible, so people can get most of what you mean when they have a conversation with you or scan through your text. People like this kind of preciseness to feel concrete and secure when acquiring knowledge, however, this certainty leaves no space for curiosity, possibilities, or imagination.

Regarding how influential language can be on people's judgment, there was a very interesting Buddhism story, "To send pure spring water" in "One hundred fables Sutra" (Suna).

Once upon a time, there was a village located a hundred miles from the capital city. In this village, there was a well with exceptionally clean and sweet water. Consequently, the king commanded the villagers to deliver water to the capital every day for his consumption. The villagers, exhausted from the daily trips, desired to move elsewhere. The village chief got wind of this and promptly convened a village assembly, saying, "None of you should move. I will immediately request the king to reduce the distance from a hundred miles to sixty. That way, it will be much closer, and you won't feel fatigued." The chief swiftly went to request the king, who promptly approved the request, ordering the

distance to be reduced from a hundred miles to sixty. The villagers were delighted upon hearing this, saying that it is much closer now. Henceforth, the villagers firmly believed in the king's words and chose to stay in the village without moving away.

Language can shape our understanding of the world without us even noticing it. The expression in language, coupled with the overlay of culture, distances us further and further from the truth of the world.

I propose that making art could be an alternative method for exploring ideas and seeking truth in our lives. Ingold proposes that novel objects and artifacts, including artworks, do not arise from humans imposing preconceived ideas onto materials. Instead, he argues that creativity emerges from an ongoing, improvisational interaction between creators, materials, and various non-human elements like tools and the surrounding physical environment. These non-human elements actively influence the thought processes of the creator, and vice versa. The process of creating objects and learning occurs within intricate and reciprocal relationships among these forces (432). This suggests that new objects and artefacts such as artworks, are not produced from humans projecting ready-made thoughts onto the materials as this approach "... leaves out the creativity of the very processes where both things, and ideas are generated. They (the new objects and artefacts) are generated on one hand in the flows and transformations of materials and on the other hand in the movement of the imagination and the sensory awareness...form is the end, death, form making is the life" (00:04:05-00:04:35). Since creativity lies in the process of form comes into being, artworks represent instances of materialized intensity that contribute to forming a broader, expansive, and interconnected network of relationships.

The life of an artwork begins when my hands touch the raw materials. When I create artworks, it's about the experience, not conclusions. I repeat the same process thousands of times while throwing my ceramic vessels, finding peace akin to the feeling of home. Artworks

don't come with user manuals. Following Ingold's philosophy, I don't impose preconceived thoughts onto my materials to create a predetermined knowledge for others to understand.

Certain topics and themes continually fascinate me, I invite exploration and revisitation by the viewers of my work. I eschew conveying a specific message through my works. Instead, I create as my thoughts flow and my hands follow my mind. There's nothing for the observers of my work to understand explicitly, but there is much to experience, feel, remember, and forget—for both viewers and myself. The audience play a crucial role in my work. I see them as an inseparable part of the artistic process with each person bringing in new observations and collectively expanding the meaning of the artworks to an infinitely complex level. Everyone brings their own unique knowledge and experience to the practices of viewing. Therefore, I create artwork that is open to interpretation, thereby inviting others to expand the possibility of meaning in my work.

History of the Dao and its translation

Lao Zi lived around the 580 BCE-470 BCE period, which corresponds to the Ancient Greek period in the Western world. Based on rhetorical patterns and rhymes, William Baxter dates the Dao De Jing to as early as 400 BCE but suggests the early or mid-fourth century BCE as its most likely period of compilation (233, 249).

Daoism's thoughts are fundamental, systematic, and complete. It is the only transcendental thought that originates from China. It includes, but is not limited to, epistemology, cosmology, ontology, and methodology, providing us with a basic perspective to understand the existence of ourselves, the world we live in, and how we can get along with ourselves. This involves maintaining a positive and harmonious relationship with ourselves, including understanding our thoughts, emotions, and personal well-being.

Heidegger and Dao

Rather than a religious text, Dao De Jing is a book of thinking which has never mentioned any specific person, location, or event. It makes it fit a broader context and time.

In a presentation of Heidegger's lecture on "Technology and the Turning" in the Paulus-Kirche in Freiburg, Heidegger said with reference to contemporary ways of thinking: "God can in the light of causality sink to the level of a cause, a *causa efficiens*." Then he added something to the effect that "If you want to prove God's existence by way of any of the traditional proofs, whether ontological, cosmological, teleological, ethical, and so on, you thereby belittle Him, since God is something like the tao, which is ineffable." (Hsiao, 98) While the great French sinologist Marcel Granet had a similar observation "Chinese wisdom has no need of the idea of God." (478)

Heidegger's interpretation of Dao will be further articulated in the context of western philosophy later in this essay.

Issues with Translation

As a classical text, there are numerous translated versions of it in various languages. The original text of Dao De Jing was written in ancient Chinese which leaves ample room for interpretation when translating into any modern language including modern Chinese. "If the interpretive measure of meaning requires the reader to comprehend the real intentions of the author, or the author in her or his full context, then there has never been a European encounter with a classical Chinese text such as the Zhuangzi 《莊子》 or—for that matter—perhaps not yet even a Chinese encounter. There has in this case never been a genuine reception of Chinese philosophy in German philosophy, since all these readings from Leibniz and Wolff to Buber and Heidegger are based on more or less on their own presuppositions, inadequate translations,

and a lack of familiarity with the cultural context and language in which these texts were initially composed and transmitted.” (Nelson, 308)

As Nelson noted, German philosopher Martin Heidegger is one of the few Western thinkers who take a serious interest in the Chinese tradition of Daoism. He once attempted to translate the canonical text *Dao De Jing* into German with the help of a Chinese scholar of philosophy Paul Shih-yi Hsiao. They started from the most difficult chapters which concern the meaning of *Dao*, and ended up finishing only 8 chapters out of 81 chapters of it.

According to Hsiao, one of the most important reasons that they did not finish the translation was their conflict on the interpretation of the text,

“I could not during our work together get free from a slight anxiety that Heidegger’s notes might perhaps go beyond what is called for in a translation. As an interpreter and mediator this tendency unsettled me. Heidegger had essentially inquired—and asked penetratingly, tirelessly, and mercilessly—about every imaginable context of meaning in the mysterious interplay of the symbolic relations within the text. Only the complete constellation of meanings was sufficient for him to dare to determine the outline of a form of thought capable of rendering the multilayered meaning of the Chinese text into Western language in a clear and comprehensible way.’ For example, “The two lines from chapter 15, literally translated, run: “Who can, settling the muddy, gradually make it clear? Who can, stirring the tranquil, gradually bring it to life?” But Heidegger thought this through farther, in saying that clarifying finally brings something to light, and subtle motion in the tranquil and still can bring something into being.” (Hsiao, 100)

It’s very hard to say any interpretation on a text is right or wrong without consulting the author. I ran into similar issues frequently when I try to translate *Dao De Jing* into English or explain the text with some English speakers. The only advantage I have in this process is that I speak both of the languages - English and Chinese, rather than a dialogue between two people,

the translation process happens in my mind instead. Although this mental cross-translation can help avoid the distortion in the message within communication, it cannot be simply achieved by translating and mapping out word by word directly, as it can easily lose the multi-layered meaning and flow of the original text. Historically, the translation of this classical text has become very ambiguous and dependent on the subjectivity to the translators. Instead of translation, I would prefer to refer to it as an interpretation of the original text. This experience is not only limited to translation among different languages, but also within interpretation of any text in any language.

An interesting conversation was once conducted between Heidegger and Hsiao.

“‘Mr. Hsiao, what would you say if people made two contradictory assertions about the same piece of writing of yours?’ Heidegger surprised me with this sudden and somewhat provocative question. ‘How is it possible? The Nazis said of a section of my book *Being and Time*: ‘Herr Heidegger, from what you have written in your book here it is clear that you are not Aryan.’ And now your allies, the French, have presented me with the same passage and said, ‘Herr Heidegger, from what you have written in your book here it is clear that you are a Nazi.’ You see, Mr. Hsiao, what different effects the same passage from the same book can produce. What do you say to that?’ I was dismayed, and could hardly dream that the Europeans could misunderstand their own languages in such a way... one does not need to know the passage from *Being and Time* to be able to say with conviction that either the Nazis or the Allies must be wrong.” (Hsiao,95)

Observation from Derrida

Derrida had a very similar observation, and pointed out that no fixed meanings is a problem for all of the metaphysical texts (48,49). “we want to know if and what God is, what the good is, what our Being is, why we are here... Moreover, we rely on language to tell us the answers. The Western philosophical tradition as a whole insists on chasing objective truth,

demanding certainty in the present; and to achieve this it relies utterly on the connection between the signifier and the signified, between words and their meaning in the text – words which have no gold standard for that meaning but are defined from other words. This is already a problem for the meaning of metaphysical texts, which therefore do not have fixed meanings.” (Sutton, 11) When we try to translate or interpret a text, we need to be extra careful that we are not actually demystifying it. “For this task, demystification, that most popular of practices in critical theory, should be used with caution and sparingly, because demystification presumes that at the heart of any event or process lies a human agency that has illicitly been projected into things.” (Bennett, XIV) I was extra cautious when selecting my references for the Dao De Jing, aiming to find ones that are not overly influenced by personal opinions.

Translated Versions of Dao De Jing I Referenced To

I have two major references for Dao De Jing. One that is translated from ancient Chinese to modern Chinese - a class I took on Dao De Jing with Fu Peirong, a Taiwanese philosopher and Chinese philosophy scholar, and the other being an English translation from modern Chinese. I had been searching for an English translation of Dao De Jing that meets my understanding as much as possible. My favorite one is “Dao De Jing ‘Making this life significant’: A Philosophical Translation” translated by Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall. To my surprise, Roger T. Ames is a Canadian philosopher and translator, the Humanities Chair Professor at Peking University in Beijing, China, and Hall was a professor in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Texas at El Paso. I felt so encouraged when I found out there are some other philosophers from North America working on Chinese Classics and had such high achievements whose feeling about interpretation aligns with my own.

Truth, Dao

What is the meaning of life? Why does anything exist in the world? Are we as special as we think? The journey of seeking truth is not easy. We may question at the outset: Is there such a thing as truth? What is the truth anyway? How do we know if we find it when we don't even know what it is?

Lao Zi gave a simple answer to this complex question of ultimate truth 2000 years ago, "Dao" - the fundamental and essential concept in his text Dao De Jing.

Way-making (Dao) that can be put into words is
not really way-making (Dao),
And naming (ming) that can assign fixed
reference to things is not really naming.
The nameless (wuming) is the fetal beginnings of
everything that is happening (wanwu),
While that which is named is their mother. (Ames and Hall, ch.1)

This is the very first Chapter of Dao De Jing, which explains what Dao is (the core of Lao Zi's thought). Dao is a term introduced by Lao Zi, which is both the origin and ultimate destination of everything, representing the ultimate truth of the world. People assign names to things to learn, classify, discuss, and understand them. However, Dao lacks a definitive name and cannot be articulated because it eludes human analysis.

While many philosophers delve into the origins of existence, seldom do they explore the ultimate destination. Most of the time, destination is only addressed in religions, not philosophy, as it remains unprovable. In contrast, Daoism, as proposed by Lao Zi, asserts Dao as both the origin and destination of everything—an indescribable yet existent concept.

Nietzsche on Ultimate Truth

Dao, the ultimate truth, can be contrasted with Nietzsche's perspective of truth. Nietzsche posits that truth is a construct that requires interpretation. Each interpretation represents a particular perspective, an observation point that imparts a specific appearance to everything from that vantage point. In other words, truth is interpretation, and interpretation has its distinct standpoint. There cannot be an absolutely correct, universal interpretation (Sec.481). Unlike the transcendental Dao, this "truth" for him is speakable and nameable, constructed by human cognition and limited by human knowledge.

Dao vs Earlier Western Thoughts

However, several earlier thoughts in Western philosophy have similar ontologies that can be compared with Daoism. As early as the Greek philosopher Plotinus (204/5 - 270 CE), the founder of Neoplatonism, unlike systematic writing, Plotinus integrates ethics, metaphysics, cosmology, and psychology throughout his treatises (X). Plotinus outlines three fundamental principles in his metaphysics: "the One" (or "the Good"), Intellect, and Soul (V 1, V 9). "The One" is the absolutely simple first principle, both "self-caused" and the cause of being for everything else in the universe. His primary focus is to elucidate how all reality proceeds in due order from its source - the One or Good. Additionally, Plotinus explores how the human spirit may traverse back to that source, which serves as its goal (X).

In the Late Middle Ages, Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464) introduced the concept of Macrocosm and Microcosm. He posited that each individual entity reflects the entire universe. Human nature, in his view, represents the created nature "more common to the totality of beings" (vol III.3). His observation on the relationship between Micro and Macro resonates with Chapter 52 of Dao De Jing, which states that "Making out the small is real acuity (ming)" (Ames and Hall).

Dao vs Modern Philosophical Thinking

We then fast forward to the 20th century Heidegger, one of the most important philosophers who was deeply engaged with Daoism. “His thinking was so difficult for many of his Western contemporaries to understand, or appeared so sensational. What he ‘brought to language’ has frequently been said similarly in the thinking of the Far East. For example, temporality has always been understood differently in China than in the West. For us the duck does not need any paranormal powers: everything is connected with everything else, and in each moment, there is concealed the entire past and also the open future.” (Hisao, 94)

This “everything is connected with everything else” thinking transitioned to more recent philosophical trends such as Naturalism, and then to even more recent movements like New Materialism. For new materialists, the universe is seen as a unified organic entity, an assemblage. “The culture-of-life movement echoes a claim made by Immanuel Kant, Driesch, and Bergson: there exists a vital force inside the biological organism that is irreducible to matter because it is a free and undetermined agency.” (Bennett, 83) This notion of vital force closely aligns with the immanent property of Dao. In “Zhi Bei You”, a Daoism classic by Zhuang Zi, there’s a conversation about this immanent property of Dao.

Dong Guo Zi asked Zhuang Zi, “When we talk about Dao, where is it?”
Zhuang Zi answered, “In everything.” (“Zhi Bei You”, 574)

Besides the immanent property, the other most fundamental property of Dao was its transcendental property. “Standing alone as all that is, it does not suffer alteration. All-pervading, it does not pause. Everything in the world is changing, but Dao isn’t. Dao is ‘the root of itself’” (“Da Zong Shi”, 181). We cannot describe Dao in words, so we describe it as emptiness, but this emptiness doesn’t mean nothing or void; it doesn’t have a specific form that we can describe.

Dao - Our Transcendental Home

The immanent and transcendent property of Dao makes Daoism fit well in correlative cosmology if we want to refer to it in a western philosophical term. The translation of the title of Dao De Jing is “The Classic of This Focus (De) and Its Field (Dao).” If instead we wanted to emphasize the outcome of living according to this cosmology, we might translate it as: “Feeling at Home in the World.” (Ames and Hall, 72)

Like fireflies with cool lights on their bodies, we navigate the endless darkness in groups, yet we are so small and lonely. We yearn for a home, somewhere secure and warm. The need for a sense of home follows us wherever we go. Humans have ceaselessly sought the ultimate truth—where we come from and where we are headed. To find home, we’ve generated copious knowledge, from languages and theories to philosophy, metaphysics, and science.

Without a purpose for living, lives can be shrouded in confusion, fear, and loneliness. They can be abandoned easily, especially in extreme times. Lukacs termed this experience “transcendental homelessness” and quoted Novalis at the start of his book “Theory of the Novel,” saying, “Philosophy is really homesickness—the desire to be everywhere at home.” Lukacs argues that “That is why philosophy, as a form of life or as that which determines the form and supplies the content of literary creation, is always a symptom of the rift between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, a sign of the essential difference between the self and the world, the incongruence of soul and deed. That is why the happy ages have no philosophy, or (why it comes to the same thing) all men in such ages are philosophers, sharing the utopian aim of every philosophy.” (29)

As Dao serves as a transcendent home for everyone, Daoism is where my spirit rests. It offered me a home which welcomed me, warmed me and gave me confidence at all times. Home to me is a vast, tranquil body of water that accepts all it’s given and remains serene. To be at home means no matter where your body is, you find peace in mind.

Nature, De

The meaning of nature in Dao De Jing is very different from our common understanding of nature. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines nature as: the external world in its entirety; natural scenery; the inherent character or basic constitution of a person or thing, a simplified mode of life resembling this condition; a kind or class usually distinguished by fundamental or essential characteristics; the physical constitution or drives of an organism; the genetically controlled qualities of an organism; a creative and controlling force in the universe; an inner force (such as instinct, appetite, desire) or the sum of such forces in an individual; a spontaneous attitude (as of generosity) (“nature”). We invest so much meaning into the word “nature” today, turning it into a human-constructed umbrella term that is overly laden with significance, often serving political purposes without people even realizing it.

Timothy Morton on Nature

As Timothy Morton mentioned in his interview “ecology without nature”, “Everything else is Nature, and it’s supposed to be somewhere else, other than this human space that we like to think of as exclusively human, an anthropocentric space” (Morton). As we distance ourselves from nature, we are ready for any kind of exploitation of it without any empathy. In contrast, the meaning of nature in Dao De Jing is very simple: the original, inherent character of things, the true nature of them. The word “Nature” (自然) appears five times in Dao De Jing, and it is used with exactly the same meaning each time. In other words, nature is the character of things obtained from Dao. Lao Zi also gives a name to these characters which is “De”, appearing in the title of his text Dao De Jing.

Three Levels of Cognition vs Three Kinds of Knowledge

Daoism is not human-centered; it observes the world from the perspective of Dao. According to Lao Zi, what Dao provides humans, making them distinct from other entities, is the

ability of cognition, which is also one of the most important “De” of humans. For Lao Zi, human cognition progresses through three stages: First, differentiation and discrimination; second, avoidance of adversity; and third, enlightenment. These stages exist in a progressive relationship; everyone begins from the first stage and advances toward the third stage under Dao’s guidance. While it’s evident that only a few individuals will reach the third stage, however, as they progress, they can move beyond the differentiation level, where many of our worries reside, and begin to avoid misfortune as they enter the second level.

These three levels of cognition can be compared with 17th century philosopher Spinoza, who claims in the “Ethics” that there are altogether three ways of knowing or forming ideas of things, that is, three kinds of knowledge: first, knowledge by imagination (first kind); second, by reason (ratio); and third, by intuition (scientia intuitiva).

“I. from singular things which have been represented to us through the senses in a way that is mutilated, confused, and without order for the intellect...; for that reason I have been accustomed to call such perceptions knowledge from random experience;”

“II. from signs, e.g., from the fact that, having heard or read certain words, we recollect things, and form certain ideas of them, which are like them, and through which we imagine the things.... These two ways of regarding things I shall henceforth call knowledge of the first kind, opinion or imagination.”

“III. Finally, from the fact that we have common notions and adequate ideas of the properties of things.... This I shall call reason and the second kind of knowledge.”

“IV. In addition to these two kinds of knowledge, there is another, third kind, which we shall call intuitive knowledge. And this kind of knowing proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the... essence of things.” (477-478)

The first kind of knowledge Spinoza refers to as opinion or imagination, which is the source of confusion for humans. It elaborates on Plato's account of "mere opinion." Spinoza explicitly references the fact that inadequate "universal" notions are commonly formed based on inadequate ideas from perception and imagination, which, according to Lao Zi, represent the first stage of cognition that always brings us confusion and trouble. The second kind, "reason," instead of emphasizing logic, Spinoza preferred the term "Common notions," which are recognized by humans and are "equally present in the part and the whole." This kind of reasoning echoes with Lao Zi's second stage of thinking, "avoidance of adversity." As we move away from the most basic intuitive, mere differentiation and discrimination, we enter the second stage of thinking, which is deeper and involves reasoning that will help us "avoid adversity". The third kind of knowledge for Spinoza is "intuition", knowledge that we receive from God, which is the essence of things. Building upon and presupposing the discipline of the second, it is a "cumulative" rather than "originary" intuition. Similarly, For Lao Zi, the third stage is enlightenment, a stage that one achieves only by following the guidance of Dao. It is also an accumulative process that cannot be reached without stages one and two.

De as Cognition and Desire

Going back to De for human beings. As part of nature, the most important De we received from Dao is cognition that unavoidably brings us differentiation and discrimination. We cognit the difference between us and other living beings, between genders, race, social status, etc. This cognition and differentiation or comparison can easily transform into desires, the desire to possess, to control, to take advantage of other beings, including human and nonhuman entities. If these desires are not controlled properly and not aligned with Dao, which is to say being distant from nature, people may become slaves to these desires and lose the purpose of life. Only proper cognition can bring proper desire, when we say proper, we mean aligned with Dao, be in harmony with the world we are in, avoiding conflicts, which is also the second stage

of cognition - avoiding adversity or dangers. True freedom is not that you can get whatever you desire, but that you can control your desires freely. Many humans are stuck in the first stage of cognition, which is differentiation and discrimination, and struggle with their desires for their whole lives.

Similarly, for Western existentialism, to have is to be had. In reality, the more external possessions you have, the less possibility there is to maintain a sense of self internally. In simple terms, the more you “have”, the less you “are”. Therefore, to be in harmony with the external while maintaining a concrete internal could be very challenging. This requires an individual to control their desires, resist the urge for self-satisfaction, and always maintain internal space and a sense of self. As Bogost noted, we’ve been living in a tiny prison of our own devising, one in which all that concerns us are fleshy beings that are our kindred and the stuffs with which we stuff ourselves (3).

Daoism and Monistic Thinking

The unification between De and Dao, humans and nature, makes Daoism closer to monistic thinking. For a long time, starting from ancient Greek, western philosophy has been dominated by dualism which segregates human culture from the natural environment, depicting them as separate and even opposing entities, privileged humans over the rest of the natural world. During these thousand years of development in philosophy, there are many thinkers seeking to break free from this dualism ontology which impacts very significantly on how we do social inquiry practically.

19th century Romanticism movement, emerging in the wake of the Western Enlightenment, exemplified by figures like Goethe (1749-1832). He extensively explored the idea of a unified organic entity, emphasized that different elements in nature are interconnected and should not be studied in isolation. Although Goethe didn’t use the term Emergence in his work, his thought was the opposite of reductionism, which reduce processes in simple physical

laws of matter. Entire nature was alive for Goethe and it is endowed with life or anima (soul), even physical processes as light was alive for him. He notes in his “Theory of Colours”, that light cannot be fragmented to form colours as Newton thinks that light is the arrangement of seven separated monochromatic rays, without killing the phenomenon of light itself. He says that polarization, as a technique in optics, which separates the beams of light, is an instrumental torture against nature; in other words, this action, for knowing the phenomenon, is the man’s answer, not the nature’s answer as Nature would like to show itself. (338-342)

Daoism and New Materialism

New materialism is another good example of modern philosophy that aims to challenge dualism. It recognizes the affectivity of all matter rather than focus on human agency alone. A good comparison can be made between new materialism and Daoism in the relationship between human and nature. For new materialism, nature world is not another level to social world. When we talk about the social world, we have to include the natural world within our conversation. All matter is affective.

“New materialism is not entirely new in the sense that many of their features actually do recapitulate some of the non-western and indigenous ontologies that cut across nature culture dualism in western philosophy.” (Nick, 00:45:37-00:45:53) It challenges dualism ontology which impacts very significantly on how we do social inquiry practically. The difference is, materialism is about micro sociological process. We are living in a world that is constantly being produced. As underscored by Hannah Arendt, the concept of a ‘pure nature’ is challenged. Instead, humanity finds itself situated within a world profoundly shaped by the preceding actions of humans—a world deliberately crafted and influenced by human agency. Arendt’s profound insight, articulated in 1956, resounds: ‘Against the subjectivity of individuals stands the objectivity of the man-made world, juxtaposed with the sublime indifference of an untouched nature’ (137). On one hand it’s difficult for us to find human untouched nature or pure nature, on

the other hand, as Bennett noted, “Without proficiency in this countercultural kind of perceiving, the world appears as if it consists only of active human subjects who confront passive objects and their law-governed mechanisms.” (XIV). We also cannot consider human society as it is shaped by human only and for human only. We cannot simply explain social problems by the structures or the systems which has been put in place by humans, being lazy and throwing out easy explanations to social issues like it’s the social structure, it’s the capitalism or patriarchy which is the problem.

While both Daoism and new materialism can be viewed through the lens of monist ontology, there remains a subtle distinction between them. In the context of new materialism, monism takes on a sense of multiplicity - the one is multiplicity which consists of a huge number of “differences” that act all together. “When we understand matter, rather than identities, we have to think about differences.” (00:30:11-00:31:06) On the other hand, for Daoism there’s only one transcendental Dao that cause everything in our world which includes all the matters and their differences.

A fundamental concept within new materialism is the notion of “assemblage”. According to Annie Potts assemblages are “a kind of chaotic network of habitual and non-habitual connections, always in flux, always reassembling in different ways.” (19) Every “event” is an assemblage of relations: bodies, things, social formations and ideas. Assemblages produce bodies, society and the entirety of the social / natural world (Nick, 00:45:37-00:45:53). For example, tea ceremony can be an assemblage which emerges from the interacting capacities of host, guest, the tea room people are in, the hot water, tea ware, tea, and all the other relations which make this event happen. If we want to keep counting, we can go as macro or go as micro as we want. This assemblage, similar to Dao, produces the entirety of the world and everything in it. In the Daoist perspective, we can compare assemblage with Dao, which can be the most expansive and infinitesimal at the same time. It is exactly the immanence and transcendence of Dao. Additionally, to new materialists, all matter is affective. Affect act on matter in differing

ways, a capacity to affect or be affected. Capacities on the other hand are the flows of affect within assemblages that produce bodies, identities, social life, history, social institution and discourses which is specific to an assemblage, rather than inherent attributes.

Affects and capacities can be compared to De and harmony. De, as noted before, refers to the original, inherent character of things obtained from Dao. When everything follows Dao, De enables them to work together in harmony. Conversely, if an event fails to adhere to Dao or is not in harmony with it, it may fall apart but can still be reunited until it finds its way to achieve the harmony it seeks, being Dao. There will be no affect and capacities without assemblage, just as there will be no De and harmony without Dao.

By examining the relationship between Dao and De, or affect and assemblage, it becomes apparent that to attain inner peace, one should avoid overly emphasizing one's own existence or engaging in intentional competition with others. Instead, we seek harmony with the environment around us and the broader world.

Aesthetics

Heidegger responded to a question from the Buddhist artist Yau-Wan-Shan regarding his views on religion, stating, "The greatest failing in our world is the laziness of thinking" (Hsiao, 99). While this might seem like a religious answer to a Buddhist, it also resonates with any thinker who seeks to fully engage with and appreciate the world around them. From actively seeking truth to aesthetics, our judgment of value is limited by our cognitive capacity. Not simply distinguishing things with dualism like culture-nature, mind-matter will open up space for aesthetics.

Daoism and Confucianism

Two major thoughts that have shaped Chinese culture today are Confucianism and Daoism, which are almost opposite to each other in ontology. Comparing Confucianism and Daoism can help us understand why aesthetics need to be considered when constructing narratives within the context of Daoism. Confucianism is a human centered thinking which focuses on the relationship between humans and it provides some guidelines for our daily social behaviors. It emphasizes sincerity among humans, “My aspiration is for the elderly to find physical and mental peace, to foster mutual trust in friendships, and to ensure that all children receive the same care and concern from the world as their parents provide.” (Kong, ch.5) If a person is sincere, they will be filled with confidence which will lead to a more grounded life. Differently, Daoism observes the world from the perspective of Dao, from a transcendent view, understanding one’s origin and destination. If we say Confucianism is helping us enter the human centric world, Daoism on the other hand is helping us exiting it, living a secluded life but transcending it, finding our way to aesthetics experience. When the ultimate truth is the core of our lives, it will cultivate an aesthetic sentiment that appreciates everything we encounter. A person truly following Dao will be very tolerant, and values and appreciates everything created by Dao naturally. Putting ourselves into an unlimited space and endless time, we “become one with the light and dust (和光同尘).”

Tea Ceremony & Dao

Tea culture is a vital component of traditional Chinese culture, combining tea art and spirit, expressing tea art through spirituality (Gao, 3). It has been deeply ingrained in Chinese society for thousands of years which has profoundly influenced various aspects of Chinese life, including philosophy, art, literature, medicine, and lifestyle. When we delve into the context of Daoism, there’s no way we can overlook the tea ceremony. In ‘The Book of Tea’, the Grand

Master of Japanese tea ceremony, Okakura Tenshin, expresses reverence for the profound Daoist philosophy with a devoutness. "Tea ceremony is the incarnation of Daoist philosophy... The robust power of Daoist thought has broken through the barriers of other contemporary doctrines, dominating and influencing a series of movements in subsequent eras... We pay our respects to Daoism." (ch.3) The tea ceremony is known as Cha Dao (茶道) in Chinese, with a direct translation being "the way of tea". The Dao in Cha Dao or Tea Ceremony shares the same character as the Dao in the Dao De Jing. In the context of Cha Dao or Tea Ceremony, the concept of Dao is multileveled. On the aesthetics level, it pertains to skills, manners, and methods. It encompasses the appreciation of teawares, water, and tea itself, providing an immersive experience of the ceremony process. As Lao Zi put it in Chapter 16 of Dao De Jing:

Extend your utmost emptiness (Xu) as far as you can
And do your best to preserve your stillness (jing).

On the spiritual level, it embodies the cosmology and ontology of Daoism - seeking for emptiness, stillness and harmony with nature.

Tea ware

When translating philosophical thinking into methodology, I focus on my hands, one of my most frequently used body parts capable of touching, feeling, handling, and creating. Without touching the clay with my hands, I would never truly understand how cold it feels compared to room temperature and my body. There are various ways to conduct post-qualitative research, but St. Pierre rejects 'new materialist methodology' in favour of theory-driven methods. Instead, they encourage each researcher to develop methods based on their own reading of theory. To align closely with Daoist thinking of "humans as an integral part of

nature, the surrounding world,” continuous creation becomes an essential aspect of my research-creation methodology (163-166).

For my thesis work ‘Homesickness’, there are almost 1000 pieces of tea vessels thrown by me on a wheel and fired in the kiln over an 8-month period. Repeating the creation process numerous times brings me closer and closer to my material, allowing me to feel it, listen to it, and follow it better. This repetition represents my deepest appreciation of the material and serves as a starting point for me to break free from human-non-human dualistic thinking and immerse myself in the aesthetic experience of the material I encounter.

As everyone knows, pottery and ceramics have been an important part of human culture for thousands of years. People used them to collect and store food, it's much better than the perishable materials that they used before like animal skin and baskets. So, they could have a more stable food supply and stay home for longer. Pottery can withstand heat, so they revolutionized cooking techniques, allowing us to do boiling, stewing, and baking. This also expanded the variety of foods that we could prepare and eat. Another very important thing is pottery and ceramic ware were valuable not only in the ancient times but also in the contemporary context. It increased trade and exchange between communities, and people not only appreciated their functions but also their aesthetic value. Most potters use whatever clay is available locally, so the pottery from different areas have their own color, texture and decorative patterns. People draw traditional stories, ritual ceremonies, and gods on their pottery, so when we trade pottery, there also happens a cultural exchange. In my thesis work, groups of ceramic vessels were packed with linen ropes as would have been done during trades in ancient times, and hung up at various heights for people to observe from different angles. My hope is that they will remind people of all the great inventions associated with ceramics and a long history of cultural exchange across the world.

In China, tea ware was not separate from eating ware and wine vessels until 2000 years ago, when the word “tea ware” (茶具) first appeared (Zheng,133). “The Classic of Tea” (茶经), written during the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE), is inevitably mentioned whenever we discuss any aspect of tea history. It is the earliest text to meticulously record the names and functions of each type of tea ware, thus clearly distinguishing tea wares from other vessels used for eating and drinking. Chinese people not only love drinking tea but also cherish their own tea ware deeply, to the extent that many individuals carry their own tea ware whenever they travel. In a country that respects and emphasizes traditions, Daoism thinking has deeply rooted in every facet of Chinese culture, and to be integrated with nature has always been the highest goal in our spiritual pursuit. This is why I believe it is very hard for Dualist thinking to take its place even in modern Chinese society due to our common belief in the connection between humans and all their surroundings. There’s always a deep bond between objects and their users. The South Song (1127-1279) poet Weng Juan wrote the line “Poetry bag, tea utensils, always with me” in one of his poems to express his tight bond with his personal items (Weng). This bond is not only limited to tea wares, but also some other very common objects from chopsticks, hand fans, handkerchiefs to a special piece of jewelry that we see as our best friend, a special friend that is connected with our soul.

“The Classic of Tea” categorizes tea utensils into eight major types, including utensils for making fire, frying tea, roasting and crushing tea, storing water and salt, serving, cleaning and storing tea utensils, totaling 24 types and 29 pieces of tea utensils (Zheng,134).

The pursuit of aesthetics is pushed to the extreme in the development process of tea ware.



Figure 1. Zheng, Guojian, Ming Qing Tea Pot, Cha Shi, 2016, p.161



Figure 2. Huang, Liansheng, 36 common type of tea cup for tea ceremony host, Zhuangyuan Wang Ceramic Research, 2021

The figures above (see Fig. 1 and Fig. 2) are just a small sample of the extensive system of Chinese tea ware. The evolution of every curve and decorative pattern tells of the Chinese people's pursuit of aesthetic perfection over thousands of years.

The shape of tea ware also varies according to the tea brewing method, from boiling to brushing to brewing. Glass tea wares are used for green tea, while ceramics are typically used for black tea and oolong tea. For my thesis work, ceramic vessels were specifically chosen to complement the black tea donated by a family-owned Chinese restaurant that couldn't survive during the COVID-19 pandemic (2021~). Following their preference, their name remained anonymous throughout the research-creation process.

Water

Water is viewed as a highly spiritual and symbolic element in Chinese traditions. Chapter 8 of Dao De Jing is a chapter that focuses only on water.

The highest efficacy is like water.
It is because water benefits everything (wanwu)
Yet vies to dwell in places loathed by the crowd
That it comes nearest to proper way-making (Dao) (Ames and Hall, ch.8)

“The intensity and expansiveness of water is an appropriate analogy for such efficacy since it gives the gift of life without discrimination, and flows everywhere disdaining nothing.” People project many aspirations for virtues onto water and use it to refer to generous people whom they admire.

In an era without processed tap water, the source of water became crucial for tea brewing. Zhang Da Fu from Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) emphasized the importance of water to tea in his “short prose from Plum Blossom Cottage”, “The nature of tea must be brought forth by water. With level eight tea and level ten water, the tea becomes level eight as well; with level eight water and level ten tea, the tea remains at only level eight” (Zhang). Ancient Chinese people had put a lot of imagination into the water used for brewing tea. Water from rivers and creeks, snowmelt, rain, and even morning dew was used in tea brewing and today, some still

use lotus stems to filter water for making tea. Collecting water for tea became a very poetic moment filled with great appreciation for water and the natural world.

In “Dream of the Red Chamber”, Miaoyu once used the crystal-clear dew on the freshly picked orchid petals in the morning to brew tea for everyone. The fragrance of the tea was intoxicating, and its taste was crisp, smooth, and refreshing (Tsao, Ch.41). In his work “Kaojiayushi: Choosing Water”, Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) scholar Tu Long even compared the rain in the plum rain season, summer, and autumn, believing that in the autumn, with its high sky, crisp air, and less airborne dust, the water has a “clear and refreshing” taste, making it the finest among rainwaters. Snow water and rainwater from the sky are both seen as heavenly springs for tea brewing (Tu).

The ancient concept of selecting water for brewing tea emphasized reverence for nature, purity, and vitality, which perfectly aligns with Daoist beliefs in the virtues of human beings: natural, pure, and vital.

For tea brewing in modern times, spring water is still preferred for its rich and crisp taste. Water sourced from different areas carries distinct tastes due to variations in mineral composition. While some prefer purified or distilled water to neutralize these differences, I enjoy using local water, relishing its unique taste, which always adds additional flavors to my tea. As steam ascends from the kettle and the bubbling sound surrounds us, our tea journey begins with water.

Bonds

A complete tea ceremony can be quite lengthy. Time is often a luxury in our fast-paced lives, but during the Tea Ceremony, we deliberately slow down, relishing each moment within this unhurried pace. Many people spend the entire day in the tea room or tea house, immersing themselves in the experience. Every delicate detail of the tea ceremony, refined over thousands of years, is executed with the utmost respect and care.

- Daoist principles, including reverence for guests, the tools, tea wares, and the surrounding environment, are infused into every gesture of the tea ceremony.

- Preparing the Tea Set: The host carefully selects and arranges the teaware, which typically includes a teapot, tea cups, a tea pitcher, a tea tray, and sometimes a tea pet (a small ceramic sculpture that is watered by tea from time to time). As mentioned in the “tea ware” section, different teaware was used for different tea. Glass is used for green tea, allowing us to appreciate the bright green color of the tea water, while ceramic is preferred for black tea and oolong, as it helps to keep the tea warm for a longer duration.

- Warming the Teaware: Hot water is poured over the teapot, tea cups, and other utensils to warm them and remove any impurities. With a balance between the internal and external temperature of the teapot, the tea leaves will unfurl in their best form. If you understand tea and give it the best care, the tea will reciprocate with the finest taste. Tea is grateful in this way.

- Measuring and Adding Tea Leaves: The host measures the tea leaves with a bamboo or wood carved measuring spoon and places them in the teapot. Metal spoons are avoided since it may affect the taste of the tea. The amount of tea used can vary based on the type of tea and personal preference. Tea leaves are shown to the guest before they were measured. The guest may pick up the tea leaves, examine their colour and shape, smell their fragrance and feel them with their hands. The tea leaves have a diverse and colorful appearance. Some common teas are selected to be shown as examples in the figure below.



Figure 3. Zheng, Guojian, *Form of tea*, Cha Shi, Feb. 2016, p.40

- Rinsing the Tea Leaves: Hot water is poured over the tea leaves, and the water is immediately poured out. This helps to awaken the tea leaves and remove any dust or impurities.
- Brewing the Tea: Hot water is added to the teapot, and the tea leaves are allowed to steep for a specific amount of time. The first infusion is often discarded, as it is used to help open up the tea leaves and has less flavor.
- Pouring and Serving: The brewed tea is poured into the tea pitcher, also known as the “Fair Cup” (a direct translation of the Chinese words “Gong Dao Bei” “公道杯”), and then distributed into the tea cups to ensure uniform flavor in each cup. The host serves the tea to the guests in a specific order, often starting with the eldest or most esteemed guest.

– Appreciating the Tea: This step invokes all the senses. Guests take a moment to appreciate the color, aroma, and flavor of the tea. Tea water also comes in various colors, ranging from vibrant green and yellow to various shades of red. Some common types of tea water are selected to be shown as examples in the figure below.

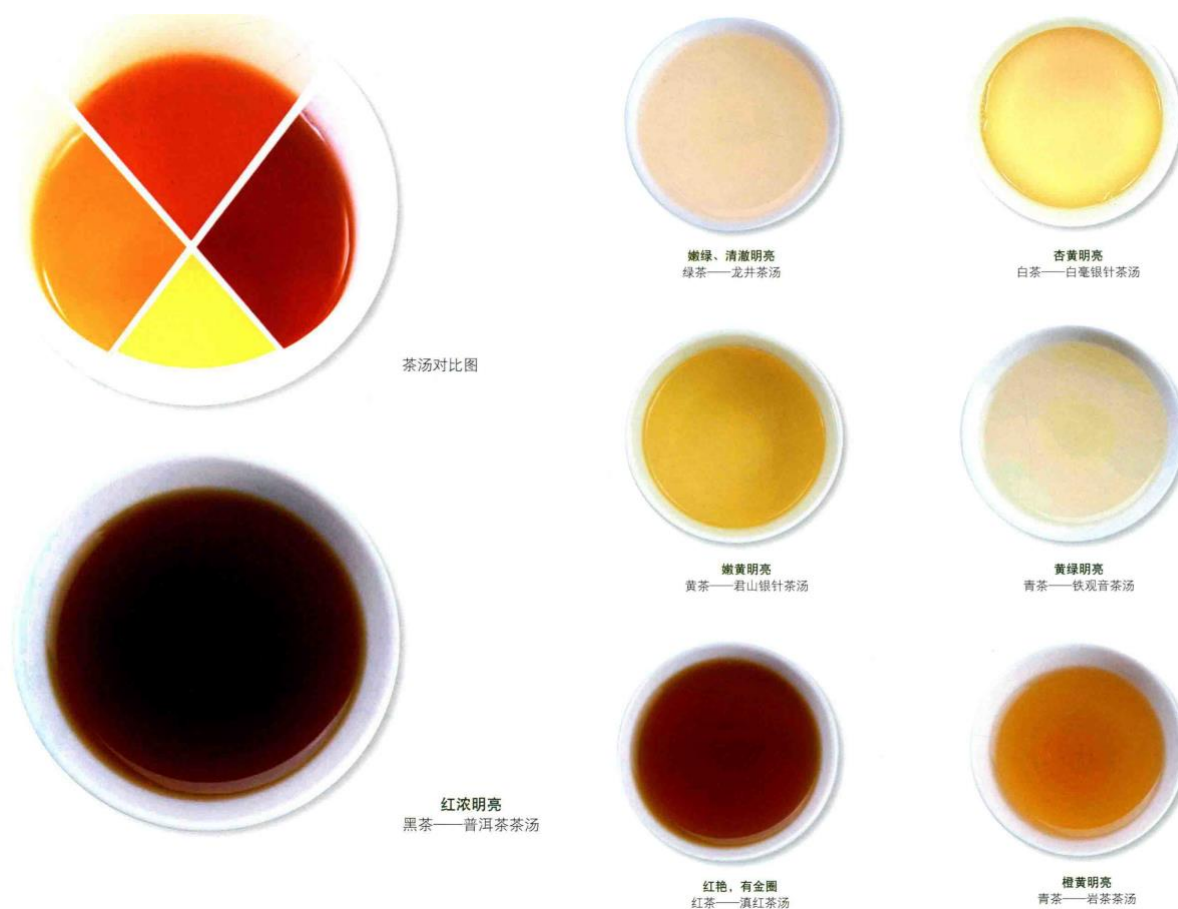


Figure 4. Zheng, Guojian, *Colour of tea water*, Cha Shi, 2016, p.42.

– Multiple Infusions: Depending on the type of tea, the process of brewing and serving the tea may be repeated multiple times, with each infusion offering a unique flavor.

– Cleaning and Closing: After the tea ceremony is complete, the teaware is carefully cleaned and rearranged. The tools and tea wares all receive as much care as possible

throughout the entire tea ceremony. We always treat them as old friends who participate in the tea ceremony with us.

Different regions in China have variations in the tea ceremony, and different types of tea have specific rituals associated with them. What is similar among these ceremonies is the mindfulness, appreciation of the moment, and the connection among the host, guests, and nature through the shared experience of tea. From boil water, warm the teapot, warm the cups, rinse the tea to brew and savor, each infusion is like different stages of life, evolving from the initial greenness to maturity, from anxiety to tranquility.

Time unfolds leisurely in tea. The tea cakes (compressed tea leaves), crafted with microorganisms, can surprisingly last for over a hundred years. When friends visit me, they often bring me tea as a gift. I stored them in different containers labeled with the approximate date of picking and the person's name from whom I received it. I value tea too much, so even after it's brewed, I don't want to throw it away. It makes perfect material for tea dye on fabric and also as beautiful and smooth ink for drawings.

As a Chinese-born artist, I carry the fragrance of tea flowing in my bloodstream, reminiscent of precious moments spent with family and friends, sharing tea and conversation. Holding a cup of hot tea during challenging and fragile times makes me feel secure and settled, like a warm hug from my hometown, offering prolonged strength. At a material level, we make the tea; at a spiritual level, the tea nurtures us.

In the End

Under the influence of Daoist thought "harmony with nature", tea drinking has transformed from a daily habit into a pursuit of aesthetics and spiritual solace. Its subtle beauty gently comforts tea people who are wandering in every corner of the world. The profound homesickness naturally flows within the warm tea water. Every tea leaf, with its beautiful color

and fragrant aroma, every tea ware meticulously crafted with fine details, along with every refined and elegant movement in the tea ceremony, narrates the authenticity and confidence that have been precipitated by time, those qualities we gain by transcending our worldly desires. In this high-pressure and busy modern life, we are grateful for the Daoist thinking bringing us such a sanctuary, a tranquil place where our soul can rest.

With tea leave, tea ware and water, my installation work is an abstract translation of the spirit of the tea ceremony that speaks to our long desire of a place of belonging, a home.

As a social gathering, the tea ceremony is certainly an experience that anybody can enjoy and share. Yet, as a cultural practice, it's worth noting its deep cultural roots and philosophical underpinnings, which bind and console numerous people in our world.

Many Western modern philosophies have attempted to interpret and draw inspiration from other thought systems, such as indigenous or Eastern thoughts, but with limited success. It has been challenging for them to do so because these thoughts are fundamentally different in historical context, linguistic discourse, and worldview. This is also why this essay comes in two versions, in two different languages. If you read both languages, you will notice two completely different ways of constructing literature. The structure, word choice, rhythm, and flow are all distinct. There has never been, nor will there ever be, a direct translation from one to the other.

Although there have always been barriers between languages and cultures, I believe that all these sparkling human thoughts will eventually come together in new forms. Each of us is like a single star in the darkness. Without fusing any of them together, when we look at them from a far enough distance, we will see a starry night sky shining bright.

Comparison between Chinese and Western cosmology and ontology allow us to put Chinese thought into a broader context, aiding us in understanding and appreciating Chinese philosophical thought and traditions with more awareness. This comparison doesn't aim to determine which is superior to the other but rather highlights how we share similar perspectives and a common goal (the steady, peaceful, long-term development of human culture and society)

as human beings. We may not have answers to everything yet, but these philosophical thoughts relayed through this short period of human civilization offer us moments of reflection and shed light on our ways of seeking the ultimate truth.

As lonely and insignificant human beings, we have never stopped seeking home, in search for a sense of belonging. Perhaps it is those overlooked presences that consistently surrounded us, giving clarity to the meaning of life. We cherish and value our cognition, as it is the most precious gift we received, embracing our destiny with a rationale. By standing in a higher and farther place to view our world, we attain a genuine experience of freedom and liberation.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Context and Creation Process of the Installation

About Me

My childhood memory is actually a memory about two women, my mom and my grandma. I was born in a small city in Northeast China, where winters were very cold, even colder than Toronto. Snow would often pile higher than a person, and we had no motorized tools, so we shoveled the snow little by little with small metal shovels. It took hours to open up a snow tunnel and connect to the main street. The winter winds were always so cold and strong, freezing our faces, hands, and feet. But no matter how cold we were, I always know that my mom with her warm tea would always warm us back to life. I could see her busy with housework behind the window covered with tea steam. She loved black tea, and the whole kitchen would be filled with the sweet, honey-like smell of black tea when she was there. My thesis work downstairs, as you may notice, carries that sweet smell of black tea, which always reminds me of my mom and the cold winter days in that small city in China.

The other woman I must mention is my grandma. I lived with her in the countryside from birth until I was three years old. My mom had health issues back then and couldn't take care of me. Almost every year until I started middle school, I spent a few months with my grandma in the summer. It was a small house with a huge backyard covered in grapevines in the summer. Instead of water, she drank hot, strong oolong tea all day long. When I was old enough to drink tea, she added extra water to it in the teapot so it wouldn't be too strong for me. On summer nights, my grandma boiled water on a wood stove, and we carried our teapot and two cups to the rooftop to enjoy under the night sky. I always fell asleep on her lap, while I was watching the stars within the fragrance of tea and cozy smell of wood stove. Oolong tea is still my favorite tea today; its fresh, flowery taste always reminds me of those starry nights.

I left home and attended a Canadian international school in China since middle school. Most of my teachers were Canadian, and all classes were taught in English except for Chinese literature. Despite being in an almost exclusively English-speaking environment since then, I never gave up my interest in and study of Chinese classics. I admire the graceful of classical Chinese language and how concise and clear it can be with very minimum words.

Daoism vs Western Philosophy

I was not a popular child in my school; I only had very few best friends who lived in the same dormitory with me. I spent most of my time reading, both in English and Chinese. Sometimes, I looked at myself from a third-person point of view and wondered, 'Who am I? Why am I here? What about all those things around me? Are they real?' I began my journey with Western Philosophy and Chinese traditional thoughts, starting with these "useless" questions. I learned that different philosophers or thinkers from different time periods all had their own understanding of the world and human society. I realized that I wasn't the only one who felt lonely and confused. The more I read, the more I discovered that Western philosophy and Chinese thinking share many ideas, despite the differences in culture and lifestyle. From ancient

Greek thoughts to new materialism and object-oriented ontology. You can always find something very similar or comparable to traditional Chinese thinking.

While discussing Chinese thinking, I focused on Daoism because it is the only transcendental philosophical thought that originated in China. Some may ask about Confucianism. However, Confucianism, as Hegel mentioned, is more like moral laws than philosophy. It prescribes what you can do to fit yourself into the society and how to be a good person that everyone likes.

I've always wanted to compare and contrast Western Philosophy and Traditional Chinese thinking; this thesis essay is my first attempt. I look forward to developing it further in my future studies and research.

Making Process: A World of Coincidence

To create my work, I learned throwing from scratch in a ceramic studio. I have incorporate Daoist thought into my making process. I have been suffering from anxiety and depression for years and am on medication right now. Almost every night, lying in bed, I can't help but review the day and think about how I can improve in almost everything. It's very similar to a post-game analysis, seeking ways to enhance performance all the time. This needs of controlling my own life could be very stressful. However, the throwing process forces me to let go. There are too many ways to fail: pieces may collapse, crack, or break during throwing, firing, trimming, transportation, or installation. It's entirely unpredictable, and one must accept whatever comes. I've found that I slept better after making a whole box of crap.



From a Daoist perspective, this world is made of coincidence. I am alive right now only because I coincidentally haven't die yet. I must face all the possibilities and accept that change is the only constant thing in our world.

After a year of intense throwing, after all the frustrations and muscle pain, I still love it, and I love it even more. I've developed a bond with my material. I refer to it as 'my material,' not to claim ownership but to signify an intimate relationship with it, like my relationship with my parents and friends. After being together for a whole year, they have become my best friends, and I value and appreciate them from the bottom of my heart.

Ceramic Making & Community

I created over seven hundred ceramic vessels within a year, throwing wherever I went. Whether in my own apartment—a small rental place in Markham—or at my parents' home, throwing became a constant practice. The ceramic studio was my favorite place for this craft. It was there that I connected with most of the Chinese potters in the area. Ceramics provided a profound way to engage with the local Chinese community in Markham, as pottery-making remains a cherished tradition in China today. It was very easy to find Chinese enthusiasts who shared this interest. Although I can do it alone at home, I prefer to do it with the community. We chat all the time about techniques, exhibitions, pottery markets, and life, and I felt I was immersed in Chinese culture at those moment.

Once, they gave me a cake in a cup with chopsticks attached to it, which is the photo in the middle, and it was being sold in the vending machine. They told me it's a very popular way to sell freshly made cakes in China, Japan, and Korea because people are too busy in those countries. They need to grab and go and save some time even when they are enjoying their dessert. It tastes really good though.



Tea & Natural Dye

Natural dye is also an important part of my practice. I dyed some vessels that I used in my exhibition with red tea to provide context about the usage of these vessels and to introduce an earthy color tone in various shades into my work to enrich the viewers' visual experience. I love exploring natural materials and discovering their potentials. They serve as food, drink,

medicine, dye, and even friends. Red tea is a traditional natural dye in China. Women used to gather together in the village, sitting on open ground, to dye fabrics with the brewed leftover red tea. They would sit and chat all day, turning it into more of a gathering event. For the red tea I used in my exhibition, they will be used as natural dye and ink for my works in the future.



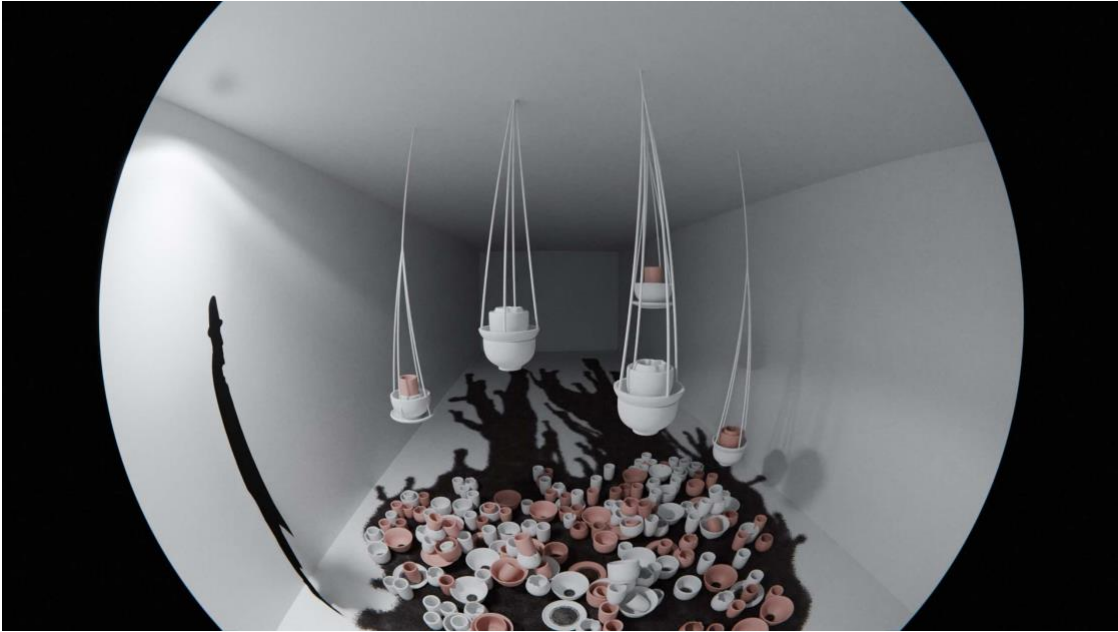
Development of Ideas

I love making drawings. All my ideas start from a piece of blank paper. It is shown in the photos below that the idea for this installation has changed and developed a lot with the help of Natalie and Laura. The one in the top right corner was the final plan for this installation. I came up with this idea when I spilled my tea one day, and I had this image in my mind right away, so I quickly drew it on a piece of paper towel before cleaning everything up. The blue area represents the ceramic vessels, and the red area is the red tea. The black dots on top represent the hanging parts of it.



I always create renderings on my computer after sketching out a plan. They help me visualize the lighting, the size of each element, the viewing angle, the overall composition, and the division of space. They are also very useful for estimating material usage, including determining the number of ceramic vessels and the amount of red tea I would need.





This installation serves as a narrative of my life's journey, weaving together elements of my childhood memories, hometown, cultural heritage, philosophical reflections, my happiness and struggles, and my belief in a solidary future of human civilization.

Appendix B: Exhibition Documentation











Appendix C: Thesis Exhibition Poster



Home sickness | 乡愁。

MFA THESIS EXHIBITION
BY ZISHUO LI
@zis_li

19 - 24 APRIL 2024
GALLERY HOURS 11-5
CLOSING RECEPTION APRIL 23
5-7pm

EXPERIMENTAL MEDIA ROOM
205 RICHMOND ST. W.
TORONTO, 1ST FLOOR

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