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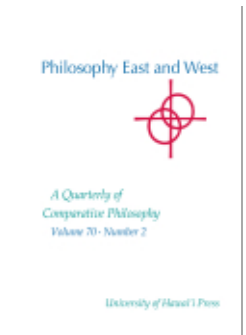
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## CHINESE THING-METAPHOR: TRANSLATING MATERIAL QUALITIES TO SPIRITUAL IDEALS



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The highest good is like that of water. The goodness of water is that it benefits the ten thousand creatures; yet itself does not scramble, but is content with the places that all men disdain. It is this that makes water so near the Way [the *dao*].

*Laozi*, chapter 8<sup>1</sup>

In the field of comparative literature, one of the most important topics of study has been how Eastern and Western traditions organize differently the relationship between humans and things, as articulated in metaphysics and as manifest in literary devices. Cecile Chu-chin Sun, to cite here one of the finest studies, compares Romantic metaphor with the Chinese poetic device *xing* 興, as well as the metaphysical traditions each represents. Sun argues that while metaphor epitomizes the Romantic concept of creation as an anthropocentric transference of concrete things into an immaterial realm of imagination, *xing* envisions a Chinese metaphysical view where a resonance between humans and nature is usually not explicitly stated, but rather intuitively felt. Comparing the relationship between “tenor” and “vehicle” in metaphor on the one hand, where the thing is transfigured to bear the human meaning, and “feeling” (*qing* 情) and “scene” (*jing* 景) in *xing* on the other, where the two affectively correspond, Sun effectively shows how different metaphysical views yield different relations between humans and things in literary expressions (Sun 2006).

The present article follows this methodology to compare unique literary expressions that are charged with metaphysical significance, as a way of showing how the relation between humans and things might differ by culture. Such a methodology takes literary devices not as figures of speech that deviate from literal truth, but rather as patterns of thought that organize our relation to things. They are, in fact, epistemological devices whose origin should first of all be contextualized in philosophical discourses. While the tradition of *xing* has been thoroughly studied by Sun, to which I have little to add, in this article I compare the tradition of *xiang* 象 with Romantic metaphor. I begin by explicating the tradition of *xiang* 象 as theoretically defined in the *Commentary on the Appended Phrases* (*Xici zhuan* 繫辭傳, hereafter *Xici*), which is divided into two parts and is appended to the *Changes of the Zhou* (*Zhouyi* 周易) (section 1 below). Then I will further explicate *xiang* as a rhetorical skill practiced by pre-Qin philosophers, and

as a poetic device through which the poet creatively explores the relations between humans and things (section 2). Finally, I will ask how my study of *xiang* might be useful outside its native cultural context (section 3).

For a working comparison: whereas Romantic metaphor transports a physical thing to the immaterial realm of imagination, *xiang* is a literary device where the material qualities of the thing, while creatively interpreted for human meanings, remain ontologically a strong physical presence. For example, in Laozi's passage quoted in the epigraph above, water, while being a concrete metaphor with its tenor of how the *dao* operates (that it is yielding, humble, receptive, and beneficial), is not, however, transfigured so as to enter the poetic imagination. Rather, water asserts its physical presence with an emphasis on its distinct material qualities—that it always flows around the obstacle and flows downward. Laozi's water differs ontologically from Coleridge's hostile water in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1834), which is transfigured into a witch's burning, slimy oil as it enters into the poet's metaphorical vision: "The water, like a witch's oils, / Burnt green, and blue and white." The physical presence of water is irreducible, just as Sarah Allan sees that, in pre-Qin philosophical works (including the *Analecets*, the *Mencius*, the *Xunzi*, the *Laozi*, and the *Zhuangzi*), a variety of material qualities of water are employed to illustrate abstract concepts, such as the *dao* or human nature:

Water with a source flows continuously, water flows along a course, water flows downward, water carries detritus, [water is] soft and weak, yielding, and uncontenting, water takes any shape, still water becomes level, still water clears itself of sediment and becomes reflective, water is difficult to see. (Allan 1997, p. vii)

François Jullien further notes that water signifies the *dao* with its various material qualities, that it "takes us back toward that which is undifferentiated, that which we cannot see (in isolation) or name (separately), from which everything ceaselessly proceeds, and to which everything ceaselessly returns" (Jullien 2004, p. 170). Whereas *xiang* is conventionally translated as "image," I translate it with a neologism as "thing-metaphor" in this comparative article: for the concrete vehicle, while bearing a human tenor, remains a physical thing. Scholars including Stephen Owen, Wai-lim Yip, Michelle Yeh, Pauline Yu, and Cecile Chu-chin Sun concur that in Chinese literature the thing is not transported into a fictional realm and that, relatedly, the things in Chinese poems either refuse to bear human meanings (as Yip's study of the landscape poems shows<sup>2</sup>), or are evocative agents that encourage humans to express their own thoughts (as Sun's study of *xing* illustrates [2006]). But in my study of *xiang* I argue that the thing can still bear human meanings even without the act of anthropomorphic transfiguration and sublimation. The broader significance of the article builds to a way that challenges the Western dualistic paradigm, in which representational art

must exist as virtual, mental copies of things. Through a discussion of one of Su Shi's 蘇軾 (Su Dongpo / Su Tung-p'ò 蘇東坡) poems from the Song dynasty, I argue that the poet might create through a thing-metaphor the meanings of the thing, or our perspectives of how the self might relate to things.

In the present article, and more specifically with reference to my discussion of *xiang*, I use the term "spiritual understanding" to denote the thinker's effort to understand the human condition, that of our place in the universe. And I use the term "spiritual ideal" to denote a successful translation from material qualities of the thing to the abstract meaning of the *dao*, which is at once a metaphysical principle as well as guidance on how humans should lead their lives and comport themselves. I choose the multivalent word "spiritual" as it is one of the few antonyms to "material" in English, and as it can serve as a touchstone that allows me to compare the concepts of creation in German Idealism and in the tradition of *xiang*. In German Idealism, the word "spirituality" is equated with "creation" *only* by virtue of the fact that it is produced or projected by the mind, as Hegel employs the term: "Indeed, considered formally, even a useless notion that enters a man's head is higher than any product of nature, because in such a notion spirituality and freedom are always present" (Hegel 1975, p. 2). In the tradition of *xiang*, however, while "spirituality" likewise denotes what is human as opposed to what is material, it points to a different concept of creation: that of the human effort to translate the *dao* as manifest in materiality in a form applicable to our *self-cultivation*, so as to acclimate ourselves to the workings of things. My usage of the term "spirituality" in the second case aligns itself with Michel Foucault's study on the *aesthetics of the self*: "I think we could call 'spirituality' the search, practice, and experience through which the subject carries out the necessary transformations on himself [or herself] in order to have access to the truth" (Foucault 2005, p. 15). Whereas Romantic metaphor creates a poetic vision of the thing, *xiang* creates a meaning of the thing that, by its claim to the *dao*, compels spiritual transformation. *Xiang* creates not the thing, but the self.

### 1. The Epistemology of Xiang

In the *Zhouyi*, the *dao*, the highest metaphysical principle that generates all things, is conceptualized as the interactions of *yin* and *yang*, the receptive and creative principles. The *Zhouyi*, then, is a comprehensive blueprint of how the operation of the *dao* generates all things in the world, by having the symbols of *yin* and *yang* (a broken line – – and a solid line —) compiled into eight trigrams and then multiplied into sixty-four hexagrams. The trigrams stand, respectively, for four pairs of elements: heaven and earth, thunder and wind, water and fire, and mountain and valley. Each

hexagram is composed of two of the trigrams and is in itself a *xiang*, a manifestation of the *dao* in the phenomenal world (*Xici* II.3). Each hexagram or *xiang* is then accompanied by judgments and commentaries, which tell us what is the *dao* contained in the natural phenomenon that we humans should deduce from the *xiang* and emulate. For example, the Commentary on the Images (*Xiangzhuan* 象傳) illustrates the image of Hexagram 1, *Qian* 乾, as “The action of Heaven is strong and dynamic” (天行健). But following the image is the message that the sage divines from the natural phenomenon: “In the same manner, the noble man never ceases to strengthen himself” (天行健, 君子以自強不息) (Lynn 1994, p. 127; *Zhouyi Wang Han zhu* [hereafter *ZWHZ*], p. 4, in Wang and Han 2016). Often, however, it is difficult for us to decipher the relationship between the hexagram image and the message intuited by ancient sages.

As stated in the *Xici*, when the *dao* is made manifest, it is called *xiang*, which is often associated with the *yang* principle or the heavens. When the *dao* is followed, it may take a certain physical shape (*xing* 形), which is then associated with the *yin* principle or the earth (I.1; I.5).<sup>3</sup> Observing the *dao* and following its dialectics of manifestation and reification, the sage is said to compose *xiang* in the form of hexagram imagery to contain the mystery of all myriad phenomena (*Xici* I.12), as well as to invent tools (*qi* 器) after the hexagrams to make the principle of the *dao* available for human usage (I.10). These are tools fundamental to human habitation—for example the fish net, agricultural tools, clothes, the boat, the bow, houses, and finally a method of notation and of writing (II.2).

More broadly defined, however, *xiang* is this epistemological paradigm in which the sage deduces the *dao* indiscriminately from “the myriad things” (*wanwu* 萬物). In *Xici* II.2, the author states that Bao Xi observes the *dao* from the heavens, the earth, birds and beasts, his own body, and in fact all physical things that are produced by the *dao*. In the passage the author uses the words *fa* 法 (markings or models) and *wen* 文 (pattern) interchangeably with *xiang*:

When in ancient times Lord Bao Xi ruled the world as sovereign, he looked upward and observed the *xiang* in the heavens and looked downward and observed the models that the earth provided. He observed the patterns on birds and beasts and what things were suitable for the land. Nearby, adopting them from his own person, and afar, adopting them from other things, he thereupon made the eight trigrams in order to become thoroughly conversant with the virtues inherent in the numinous and the bright, and to classify the myriad things in terms of their true, innate natures. (Lynn 1994, p. 77, translation modified)

Bao Xi’s observation of the heavens, the earth, and all living and inanimate things in order to deduce the *dao* as a hermeneutical practice is called “observing *xiang*” (*guanxiang* 觀象). While the *Xici* ostensibly claims that

the legendary sages are capable of embodying the *dao* in concrete images, the reverse is even truer—any concrete thing can tell us something about the *dao*, if only we can find the key to metaphorically translate between the concrete and the abstract. What the *Xici* provides here is also a mythical justification for an established epistemological system in which all natural phenomena and man-made artifacts may be taken as *xiang*, from which the *dao* might be interpreted.

The myth that “observing *xiang*” is the foundation of human civilization gets retold by Xu Shen 許慎 (30–124 A.C.) in the preface to his dictionary *Explaining Graphs and Analyzing Characters* (*Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字) to account for the origin of Chinese characters; and by Liu Xie 劉勰 (466–522 A.C.) in the first chapter of his *Literary Mind and the Carving of the Dragons* (*Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍) to account for the origin of Chinese literature.<sup>4</sup> *Xiang* as a mode of thought—one that deduces meanings from concrete things—is deeply ingrained in Chinese characters. For example, Xu Shen suggested a fascinating theory of what the word *yi* 易 means as the central concept in the *Zhouyi*:<sup>5</sup> the word *yi* 易 is composed of the combination of the radicals *ri* 日 (the sun) on the top, and *yue* 月 (the moon) on the bottom. This combination of the sun and the moon so as to formulate the word *yi* means that the grand Change as a metaphysical principle is deduced from the concrete phenomena of the sun and the moon: how they follow one another and bestow the rhythm of day and night on the earth (see also *Xici* I.11, II.5).

With the epistemological practice of *xiang*, the thinker is capable of deducing the *dao* from any concrete phenomenon. In the *Xici* I.11, the thinker draws an analogy between a door and the *dao*. The thinker then uses language to elucidate the analogy of *xiang*:

This is why closing the door is called *Kun*; while opening the door is called *Qian*. One such closing and one such opening is referred as the *Change*, while the endless back and forth of the boards of the door that allows people to pass through it is called *free flow*. When the *dao* is manifest in the door it is called *xiang* [associated with *yang*]. When the *dao* takes shape in the door it is called the *concrete things* or *manmade tools* [*qi* 器] [associated with *yin*]. When the structure of the door regulates people’s usage of it, it is known as the *method* [associated with *yang*]. When the door is put to use by the common folk to go in and out, without being conscious of the *dao* inherent in it, this is called *the numinous* [associated with *yin*]. (Lynn 1994, p. 65, trans. mod.)

This passage tightly follows a parallel structure of *yin* and *yang*, which I annotate in the brackets. The first four sentences demonstrate a very peculiar exegesis and establish a close relation between the *dao* and the door: each movement of the door can be taken as the transactions between *yin* and *yang*. The following four sentences then tell us four ways of approaching the door: most importantly, if we see the operation of the *dao* in the movements

of the door, such an exegetic practice is called *xiang*. We see the manifestation of the *dao* in the door as the thinker draws an analogy between the *dao* and the door, where the door becomes a *xiang* of the *dao*.

The drawing of the analogy between the concrete and the abstract may be called “establishing the *xiang*” (*lixiang* 立象). The purpose of “establishing the *xiang*” is to explore the concept of the *dao*. Notably, in the *Xici* the concept of the *dao* in a *xiang* is referred to as “the ideas” (*yi* 意), namely the *dao* as the thinker understands it and as mediated by the *xiang*: “The sages established *xiang* in order to express their ideas exhaustively” (君子立象以盡意) (I.12; Lynn 1994, p. 67, trans. mod.). Why a door can stand for the *dao*, and what specific contents of the *dao* that the sage has in mind (*yi* 意) when framing the *xiang*, may be entirely open to the thinker’s interpretation and is made accessible only through language, even as the *Xici* endorses the belief that meanings are inherent in the *xiang*.<sup>6</sup> Wang Bi 王弼 calls this exegetic method *mingxiang* 明象, that is, to use language to elucidate the meanings of the *xiang*: “*Xiang* are the means for ideas to reveal themselves. Words are the means to explain the *xiang*” (夫象者, 出意者也。言者, 明象者也) (Lynn 1994, p. 31, trans. mod.; ZWHZ, p. 262).<sup>7</sup>

In the *Zhouyi*, each hexagram is accompanied by a statement called a “Judgment” (*tuan* 彖). The statement attached to the *xiang* may address all the various material qualities of the *xiang* in an attempt to exhaust its meanings, as Han Kangbo 韓康伯 annotates a statement in *Xici* II.3, “Judgments deal with their materials” (彖者, 材也) (Lynn 1994, p. 80):

*Material* here means “the virtue inherent in the material.” The Judgments address themselves to the material out of which the hexagrams are formed in order to deal comprehensively with the concepts involved. (Lynn 1994, p. 80; ZWHZ, p. 223)

To sum up, the two essential mechanisms of the epistemology of *xiang* are, first, “establishing the *xiang*” (*lixiang*)—to frame an analogy between a concrete image of the thing and the *dao*, and, second, “elucidating the *xiang*” (*mingxiang*)—to use language to explore the meanings of the *xiang*, often by addressing the various properties of the material thing and their correlation with the *dao*. *Xiang* is then the locus of manifestation—but also of a forceful transference that yokes together the concrete and the abstract and mediates between them. *Xiang* is the mechanism that gives things of physical shape metaphysical meanings, meanings that in turn can be of practical usages in everyday tools: “what is prior to the physical shape is called the *dao*, what follows the *dao* to take a given shape is called the concrete object” (形而上者謂之道, 形而下者謂之器) (*Xici* I.12; Lynn 1994, p. 67, trans. mod.). Different from Romantic metaphor, a *xiang* does not transfigure the thing and appropriate it into the immaterial realm of imagination, but rather acquires its meanings from the various material



properties of the concrete vehicle. I call a *xiang* a “thing-metaphor” to emphasize its physical presence while it signifies the *dao*.

While both Confucian and Daoist traditions share the epistemological practice of *xiang* to deduce the *dao* from concrete things, the conception of the *dao* varies in different schools of thought. Just as an object has numerous material qualities, the *Zhouyi* and the *Laozi* frame different material qualities to argue for different conceptions of the *dao*. That is, we see how the thinkers may argue for their specific concepts of the *dao* through the established exegetic methods of “establishing the *xiang*” and “elucidating the *xiang*.” In the *Xici*, the *dao* is conceptualized as all sixty-four prototypes of how *yin* and *yang* may interact. *Xici* II.2 states that the house is conceived after the hexagram *Dazhuang* 大壯 (Great Strength), which is composed by the *Qian* 乾 trigram below (which symbolizes here the strong roof of the house) and the *Zhen* 震 trigram above (Thunder). The *dao* contained in the house, in this case of all sixty-four prototypes of how *yin* and *yang* may interact, is then about how human civilization is capable of protecting us against the natural elements. In the *Laozi*, however, the *dao* is identified with a primeval potential prior to the differentiation of *yin* and *yang* (chap. 42),<sup>8</sup> whose main characteristic is a humble receptivity that allows for the actions of things. The *Laozi* (chap. 11), therefore, rather argues that a house is useful because of its empty space, which receives humans: “therefore just as we take advantage of what is [namely the strong roof], we should recognize the usefulness of what is not [namely the empty space within the house]” (故有之以為利，無之以為用). *Xiang* is an entirely open system of hermeneutics: by framing different material qualities of the thing and by inventively elucidating it, a house can be conceptualized as the *dao* of human civilization that shelters us against nature, or as the *dao* of receptivity by virtue of its empty space.

## II. Elucidating the *Xiang*, or Creating Subject-Object Relations

To compare *xiang* with Romantic metaphor, I propose a theory of creation—that the practice of *xiang* creates not the thing, but our relation to the thing. Two interrelated ideas are relevant to my thesis: first, as I will demonstrate with a passage from the *Mengzi*, *xiang* as a system of hermeneutics is entirely open, and such is due to the fact that an object has numerous material qualities;<sup>9</sup> therefore a thinker has numerous ways to frame the thing and to attach meanings to the selected material qualities. Second, as I will illustrate with a poem by Su Shi from the Song dynasty, if the thinker’s framing of the thing embodies a human’s own perspective, then *xiang* is the very locus where humans create relations with the thing. In both instances, the human perspective co-evolves along with our *exploration* of the material qualities of the thing.



While in the mythical context of the *Zhouyi* the legendary sages are said to have direct access to the *dao* and can therefore “establish a *xiang*” to reveal it, pre-Qin thinkers after Kongzi (Confucius) and Laozi rarely claim such an authority for themselves. They do not claim to already know the *dao*, but rather they explore the material qualities of a thing in the hope of advancing their understanding of a certain truth. This epistemological method is called “investigating the thing” (*gewu* 格物), as stated in *The Great Learning* (*Daxue* 大學): “Only after things are investigated does knowledge become complete” (物格而后知至) (Gardner 2007, p. 5; Xie 2007, p. 4). In *Mengzi* 6A2 (Lau et al. 1995, 11.2/56/21–26) we see a wonderful example of “investigating the thing”:

Gaozi said, “Human nature is like swirling water. Open a passage for it in the east, and it will flow east; open a passage for it in the west, and it will flow west. Human nature does not distinguish between good and not-good any more than water distinguishes between east and west.”

Mencius said: “It is true that water does not distinguish between east and west, but does it fail to distinguish between up and down? The goodness of human nature is like the downward course of water. There is no human being lacking in the tendency to do good, just as there is no water lacking in the tendency to flow downward. Now, by striking water and splashing it, you may cause it to go over your head, and by damming and channeling it, you can force it to flow uphill. But is this the nature of water? It is force that makes this happen. While people can be made to do what is not good, what happens to their nature is like this.”<sup>10</sup>

Gaozi’s conception of human nature is that it fundamentally concerns our will to survive, our libido drive, and sensual pleasure in the same way as all living animals: “Life is what is called nature” (生之謂性) (6A3; Lau et al. 1995, 11.3/56/28). For Gaozi, such a human nature is indifferent to morality; whether a person would do something good or bad is only shaped artificially by the environment. Gaozi therefore chooses water as a vehicle to illustrate his conception of human nature: that human deeds, just like the flow of water, are always shaped by the environment. Mengzi disagrees with Gaozi’s proposition that humans are by nature indifferent to their moral directions. But then, instead of engaging with his interlocutor on a more direct explication on human nature, Mengzi rather proceeds with his exploration of water, which he implicitly agrees to take as a *xiang*, as a thing that promises to reveal the *dao* through an exegetical procedure. Mengzi, however, reframes Gaozi’s argument by substituting the material qualities involved, from “water flows anywhere on a flat field” to “water always flows downward whenever the land is slanted.” Gaozi’s argument that human nature has no particular moral direction is now forcefully superseded by Mengzi’s statement that human nature is inherently good in the same way that water always flows downward.

The *xiang* of water here is a unique epistemological tool employed by Gaozi and Mengzi. In the tradition of *xiang*, where the *dao* manifests in the operation of all physical things (*xing* 形), there is a general faith that such an exploration of a thing can help advance knowledge. The *xiang* is ontologically physical, and its material qualities are where the meanings lie. The *xiang* is also metaphorical in that it bridges and translates—rather than equates through a conventional symbolism—the concrete and the abstract, the natural phenomenon and the *dao*. Such a translation requires that the thinker find the right point of correspondence between the meaning and the thing, the point where the *dao* would reveal itself as a rewarding and impactful truth. The interlocutor can always reject an analogy, either because the proposed meaning does not match with the physical properties of the *xiang*, or, as in the instance of Mengzi 6A1, simply because the interlocutor does not agree with the meaning that the *xiang* suggests. But if both thinkers agree upon a *xiang*, then they are committed to frame it in the way the material qualities reveal desired meanings—while the material qualities of the thing become the measure of their truth value. If Mengzi appears to win the debate here, it is only because he can demonstrate that water does have a nature (he knows the vehicle better), not because he talks conceptually better about human nature.

Once we arrive at the point of correspondence, then the *xiang* becomes a rich mine that promises to reveal further knowledge with further exploration. Mengzi, for instance, proceeds to elaborate the thing-metaphor, and by his subsequent discovery of water he implicitly persuades his audience that he has taken hold of the *xiang*. Water can be forced to flow upward, Mengzi notes, and so can humans be forced to do evil. Hence, Mengzi argues, when humans do evil, they do so against their nature. That water as a physical thing can demonstrate Mengzi's theory of human nature is in itself, in the epistemological tradition of *xiang*, the most powerful rhetorical technique.

Having demonstrated that the material qualities of a *xiang* play a constitutive role in manifesting the *dao*, I now proceed to discuss the second thesis of my argument, that *xiang* is the very locus where humans create relations with the thing, through our framing of the thing and the creation of its meanings. Su Shi's poem "Bright Moon, When Did You Appear: To the Tune of 'Prelude to Water Music'" (水調歌頭：明月幾時有)<sup>11</sup> is an allusion to and philosophical dialogue with Li Bai's 李白 poem "Drinking Alone under the Moon (No. 1)" (月下獨酌其一).<sup>12</sup> Li Bai in the poem claims that he would relinquish "characteristic human inclinations" [*qing* 情] so as to keep company with the insentient moon, which is a metonymy for an indifferent Nature as conceptualized by Laozi and Zhuangzi. This Nature as a summative term of the material world is usually referred to as "the heavens and the earth" in classical Chinese—for example where Laozi in chapter 5

observes that “the heavens and the earth are not humane” (天地不仁).<sup>13</sup> Li Bai in his poem proposes to drink with the moon and his shadow cast by the moon—but then soon realizes that both the moon and the shadow are insentient entities unsympathetic to his thoughts and feelings: “the moon does not know drinking / my shadows follow my body vainly.” Li Bai then figures out how to interact with a senseless Nature on a physical level: “when I sing, the moon lingers in the sky, / when I dance, my shadows swell and shatter.” Li Bai is aware, also, that his connection to the moon for the moment is fundamentally transitory, and will not last after he is drunk and the moon has gone down.

With such a finding, Li Bai claims that he has found a way to get along with an indifferent Nature by mastering—I think the allusion here is clear—Zhuangzi’s key concept of “being without characteristic human inclinations” (*wuqing* 無情), inclinations such as our attachment to loved ones and the desire to be always with them. Zhuangzi proposes that the sage should relinquish human inclinations, which is fundamentally at odds with an insensible Nature because, as Curie Virág explains:

the problem with human *qing* is that it represents a tendency to distance ourselves from how things actually are, and thus to cut ourselves off from the cosmic flow. It is their *qing* that causes people to engage in senseless debates, form attachments, cherish life, and abhor death in a way that brings about frustration and grief. *Qing* is a constitutional feature of human beings that works against the achievement of oneness with the patterns that pervade the cosmos. (Virág 2017, p. 152)<sup>14</sup>

Relinquishing human attachments, Li Bai demonstrates his transcendent perspective in the final couplet of the poem: “Let us wander together—forever without attachment [*wuqing*], and meet again in the distant starry sky!” This couplet is a fictional metaphor (not a *xiang*) of the spiritual freedom Li Bai gains when he gives up human expectations and adopts that of a grand Nature, which feels like the freedom an immortal would enjoy without spatial and temporal limits. The phrase *wuqing* here refers both to the unattached poet and the insensible moon: Li Bai adopts the perspective of the insensible moon so as to enjoy his time with it.

Su Shi, in his poem, shares with Li Bai a similar conception of Nature: that it is constantly changing in a way that is indifferent to human attachment. Such a difficult conception of Nature necessarily requires the human thinker to find a way to *create* a relationship with Nature. Li Bai creates a relationship with the moon by eventually relinquishing human attachment in order to attune himself with the insentient moon, but Su Shi does not agree with such a solution. Alluding to Li Bai’s poem, Su Shi likewise toasts the moon, as we read in the first stanza:

Bright moon, when did you appear?  
 Lifting my wine, I question the blue sky.  
 Tonight in the palaces and halls of heaven  
 what year it is, I wonder?  
 I would like to ride the wind, make my home there,  
 only I fear in porphyry towers, under jade eaves,  
 in those high places the cold wind would be more than I could bear.  
 So I rise and dance and play in your pure beams:  
 What joy on high can vie with this moment in the human world?  
 (Watson 1994, p. 67)

Whereas Li Bai claims that he can be in eternal company with the moon, Su Shi rather sets a contrast between the human perspective and that of the moon: as a human, he cannot comprehend from what age the moon has been suspended in the sky. Su Shi for a moment shares Li Bai's desire to forsake human attachments and to fly up to meet the moon, but on second thought he expresses his misgivings: as a human, if he desires to "enjoy himself and wander beyond the human realm" (遊方之外)—to borrow a passage from Zhuangzi—how would he not feel lonely?<sup>15</sup> This loneliness is encoded in a concrete metaphor: the palaces on the moon, so high up, must be very cold. Like Li Bai, Su Shi also dances with his shadow under the moonlight. Enjoying himself, Su Shi asks rhetorically, how would living high up in the cold palaces on the moon be comparable to living in the human realm?

Responding to Li Bai, Su Shi affirms that he is committed to the human abode. Criticizing Li Bai's dream of living high up on the moon, Su Shi argues that transcending human attachment would only leave a human cold and lonely. But then, in the second stanza, Su Shi needs to face his human problem, brought about by his *qing*: he is separated from his beloved brother and he is sleepless. Su Shi already rejects Li Bai's observations about the moon, but he likewise hopes to explore the moon—to frame the right material qualities—so as to learn the *dao* from it:

Circling red chambers,  
 low in the curtained door,  
 you light our sleeplessness.  
 Surely you bear us no ill will—  
 why, then, must you be so round at times when we humans are parted!  
 People have their griefs and joys, their togetherness and separation,  
 the moon its dark and clear times, its roundings and wanings,  
 such is the eternal regret.  
 I only hope we two may have long, long lives,  
 may share the moon's beauty, though a thousand miles apart.  
 (Watson 1994, p. 67, trans. mod.)

Su Shi begins with the assumption that the full and bright moon is a symbol of the union between humans. But such an anthropocentric expectation that the moon would reflect the human mood, neglecting the fact that Nature has its own rhythm of transmutation, would immediately lead to resentful feelings that humans might easily project onto the moon: when humans are lonely, they may well assume that the moon is jeering at them with its shining round shape.

Su Shi is then compelled to frame the material qualities of the moon—the framing of which embodies his own perspective—so as to grapple with the fact that humans live in, and are part of, a world that is constantly changing. Here we see that Su Shi, soliciting meanings from the moon, *broadens his spiritual understanding along with his exploration of the thing*. The physical thing has different material qualities, and the poet's creation is defined by the way the poet frames the concrete metaphor and correlates it with the human perspective. The moon is bright only tonight, Su Shi realizes, but as the moon waxes and wanes, it is a metaphor for the cyclical nature and for the vicissitudes of human life that are part of grand Nature. With this second metaphor, Su Shi revises the meaning of the moon by finding the point of true correspondence where the moon indeed symbolizes the ups and downs of human life, without compromising its physical existence. Unlike Li Bai, who is quick to negate the essential human inclinations, Su Shi sets a harmonious parallel between human inclinations and the vicissitudes of things. And the moon, while being a symbol of the eternal truth of the constant changes of all things, *yi* 易, perhaps still provides consolation by mirroring human sorrow. How, then, can humans sustain themselves in this relentless process of the ebb and flow of things? Su Shi proposes yet a third metaphor, with which the moon is not merely a symbol of the eternal changes but also of human attachment: that despite the fact that people are apart, their hearts might still be connected as they share the view of the same moon. Su Shi knows, for sure, that his brother must also be thinking of him when he sees the bright moon. Here, then, Su Shi transcends the spatial and temporal limits not by negating human attachment as Li Bai does (and Zhuangzi), but by pronouncing that human attachment can transcend physical distance.

In one stanza Su Shi explores the thing of a myriad physical properties by framing the moon with *three different temporal-spatial perspectives*: the moon is round *tonight* when he is parted from his brother; the moon to him, but *through the month*, waxes and wanes; the moon shines *on the earth*, and the same vision is shared by himself and his brother. Su Shi's spiritual understanding co-evolves with his further exploration of the thing, while the thing-metaphor embodies three different *subject-object relations*: that the round moon shows the poet how the world operates independent of human

wishes, and Su Shi wrongly suspects this indifference as hostility; that the vicissitudes of the moon is a metaphor for the grand scheme of the universe, which the poet must understand as the prerequisite of his human condition; that the moon might still serve as a metaphor for human attachment, but only if the poet develops a broader perspective that the moon shines on the entire earth, much beyond himself. Here, the correlation between the thing and the meaning is not a given, but a matter of creation, of spiritual understanding and of transformative cultivation.<sup>16</sup> The poet does not create copies of things in the immaterial realm of the imagination. Along with the poet's exploration of the thing, what is created are human perspectives in the poet's endeavor to acclimate himself to the operation of things.

### *III. Toward a Non-anthropocentric Metaphor*

Having studied how *xiang* as a physical thing promises to reveal the *dao*, and how a *xiang* translates material qualities as spiritual ideals that humans must abide by, I have also argued for a new theory of creation: that the poet creates not the thing, but meanings of the thing, or human relations to the thing. *Xiang*, or thing-metaphor, provides an epistemological ground where the thinkers' framing of the material qualities embodies the human perspective, which may co-evolve with our continuous exploration of the thing. In the final pages of this article, I hope to re-examine the term "metaphor" and to argue that its very definition—transference from the material to the meaningful—might not always be anthropocentric, but might actually be a way where we humans listen to the thing and open ourselves to its bidding. This comparative study would allow the epistemology of *xiang* to have a universal import, and on such a premise I translate *xiang* in English as "thing-metaphor."

Hegel's account of metaphor helps us see that metaphor has a bodily basis, which provides a blueprint for all post-Romantic thinkers—including Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, and, one might add, Lakoff and Johnson—to critique Western rationality as well as imaginative creation as a continuous process that eliminates the physical origin of thoughts:

( $\alpha\alpha$ ) In the first place, every language already contains a mass of metaphors. They arise from the fact that a word which originally signifies only something sensuous is carried over into the spiritual sphere . . . .

( $\beta\beta$ ) But gradually the metaphorical element in the use of such a word disappears and by custom the word changes from a metaphorical to a literal expression, because, owing to readiness to grasp in the image only the meaning, image and meaning are no longer distinguished and the image directly affords only the abstract meaning itself instead of a concrete picture . . . .

( $\gamma\gamma$ ) This being the case, the invention of new metaphors, expressly first constructed by poetic imagination, is necessary. The natural and sensuous is

imagined in the form of spiritual phenomena and therefore is elevated and ennobled. In this sense it is quite common for us to speak of '*laughing fields*', '*angry flood*', or to say with Calderón 'the waves *sigh* under the heavy burden of the ships.' (Hegel 1975, pp. 403–405)

In the first stage—such as when we use the sensuous term “to grasp” as a conceptual metaphor for “to understand”—metaphors are closest to things when concepts are conceived in, but not yet separated from, the concrete images. Lakoff and Johnson’s work accentuates the existence of this stage to emphasize that our conceptual thinking has a bodily basis. For the second stage, Hegel argues that Western civilization progresses in a way that humans soon understand sensuous metaphors only as abstract concepts. For Nietzsche, this movement from metaphor to proper meaning is the product of the human will to power, a fundamental impulse that appropriates the sensuous things into the protective, anthropomorphic edifice of reason: “The entire apparatus of knowledge is an apparatus for abstraction and simplification—directed not at knowledge but at taking possession of things” (Nietzsche 1968, p. 274, aphorism 503). Likewise, Derrida comments that philosophy operates as “a rude obliteration” of the sensuous thing when “the metaphor [that circulates in philosophical discourse] is no longer noticed, and is taken for the proper meaning” (Derrida 1974, p. 9).

In the third stage, the individual poet invents original metaphors via the power of poetic imagination. Hegel here ponders at length the reasons and the aesthetic values of the original metaphor—it might well be a rhetorical technique that seeks to impress the audience by “sensuous exaggeration” (p. 406), or “a subjective caprice” that seeks “to escape from the commonplace” (p. 407). But the most important function of metaphor aligns itself with Hegel’s project of Romantic art, where the poet’s spiritual power exerts itself by transfiguring the physical thing and therefore claims its victory against the external world. In this dialectical process, the metaphor is eventually no longer a physical thing, but ontologically a sensuous presentation of the poet’s inwardness and individuality:

A second reason for metaphor lies in the fact that, when spirit is plunged by its inner emotion into the contemplation of cognate objects, at the same time it still wishes to free itself from their externality, because in the external it seeks *itself* and spiritualizes it; and now by shaping itself and its passion into something beautiful, it evinces its power to bring into representation its elevation above everything eternal (407).

Western thinkers generally agree that Romantic metaphor is a process that internalizes things for imagination, although their valuations of such an act differ. Nietzsche, with his heightened awareness of the human will to power, is excited that we might make things the mirrors of our imagination: “the states in which we infuse a transfiguration and fullness into things and poetize about them until they reflect back out fullness and joy in life”



(Nietzsche 1968, p. 421, aphorism 801). Heidegger, by contrast, values the inner plenitude of physical things, and laments that such a plenitude is replaced by our thoughts: this “transmutation of things into what is inward and invisible” “replaces the frailties of things by the thought-contrived fabrications of calculated objects” (Heidegger 2001, p. 127)<sup>17</sup>

Heidegger’s post-Romantic critique, however, provides a new way of thinking about metaphor, which converses well with my theorization of Chinese thing-metaphor. For Heidegger, the difference between metaphors of the first and third stages is one of ideology or of attitude: while for him Romantic metaphysics transports things “into what is inward and invisible” because “man is wholly absorbed in nothing but purposeful self-assertion” (Heidegger 2001, p. 127), it is also possible that metaphor of the first stage serves as an ethical device that bids us to listen to things. In Heidegger’s later thought, the process of metaphor where we attentively open ourselves to things so as to acquire meanings from them encapsulates the essential human activity, what we call *thinking*:

If we take thinking to be a sort of hearing and seeing, then sensible hearing and seeing is taken up and over into the realm of nonsensible perception, that is, of thinking. In Greek such transposing is called μεταφέρειν. The language of scholars names such a carrying-over ‘metaphor’. (Heidegger 1996, p. 47)

Appropriation, or thinking to ourselves what a thing means, then, is not always an act of selfish assertion but can be an act of our existential openness: “Man and Being are appropriated to each other. They belong to each other” (Heidegger 2002, pp. 31–32). Heidegger rewrites Hegel’s unconscious first stage and solicits from it the possibility of conscious engagement, as the poet opens up the self to the unknown depth of things. For Heidegger, the very act of thinking what things mean for us, the very metaphorical translation between perception and meaning, bears the ontological significance of our being-in-the-world—that the world will reveal us and transform us as we are open to it: “But man’s distinctive feature lies in this, that he, as the being who thinks, is open to Being, face to face with Being; thus man remains referred to Being and so answers to it. Man is essentially this relationship of responding to Being, and he is only this” (ibid., p. 31).

As a post-Romantic thinker Heidegger conceives of metaphor as a device by which we listen to things, and such a conception bears a striking resonance to the tradition of *xiang* that I have outlined.<sup>18</sup> Admittedly, Heidegger’s project focuses more on the being of individual things, while the *Xici* states that all material things embody the *dao*. But Heidegger’s conception of art helps articulate a theory for Su Shi’s exploration of the moon: it is to constantly, renewably, reframe and reveal the inward depth of things along with the process of our spiritual understanding and subjective

transformation. Borrowing a few words from Heidegger, we might recast the Chinese hermeneutic tradition of “elucidating the *xiang*” as a theory of art. In his famous essay “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Heidegger proposes a theory of art: art functions to bring forth the inner being of the physical thing.<sup>19</sup> A work of art serves to frame and therefore to bring forth the inner being of things; for example, a Greek temple might bring forth the firmness of the rocky ground it stands on and the violence of the storm it sustains (Heidegger 2001, p. 41). Like a Greek temple that frames—and gives us a certain perspective of—the infinite earth and the sky, so does a metaphor use language to draw out a meaning of the thing in our continuous exploration of it. The meanings of the thing, as I have demonstrated with Su Shi’s poem, bear the metaphysical import of how humans might relate to things. In this article, I argue that *xiang*, or, outside the Chinese cosmological context, thing-metaphor, provides us a way of thinking how art might create not the virtual copies of things, but our perspective in the act of listening to and thinking with things. Metaphor can be an act of self-cultivation: we create anew our perspectives as we explore the inexhaustible thing.

## Notes

I am deeply indebted to Michael Ing for his conscientious and insightful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

- 1 – Except as otherwise noted, all English translations of the *Laozi* are by Arthur Waley. Since all chapters in the *Laozi* are short, I provide only the chapter number but not the page number. The Chinese text is edited by Yu Peilin. See [Waley 1958](#) and [Yu Peilin 1973](#).
- 2 – Yip argues that “these [landscape] poems are nonmetaphoric and nonsymbolic: the objects presented are nothing more than objects themselves. The poet does not step in, but, rather, he allows the scenery to speak and act itself out” ([Yip 1993](#), p. 72).
- 3 – All Chinese texts from the *Xici* are quoted from the *Zhouyi Wang Han zhu* [ZWHZ]; I provide only the part and section numbers. See [Wang and Han 2016](#).
- 4 – For discussions on Liu Xie’s conception of literature as patterns of the *dao*, see [Owen 1992](#), pp. 184–194, and [Cheng 1985](#).
- 5 – The word *yi* has multiple etymological origins, many of which are recorded by Xu Shen (see [Xu 2004](#)). For all etymological explications of the word *yi*, see [Gu 2006](#), pp. 108–110.
- 6 – See Ming Dong [Gu \(2006\)](#), who argues for an open hermeneutics of the *Zhouyi* (chaps. 3 and 4).

- 7 – The quotation is taken from the chapter titled “Elucidating the *Xiang*” (*Mingxiang* 明象) from Wang Bi’s *General Remarks on the Changes of the Zhou* (*Zhouyi lueli* 周易略例), which is also included in the ZWHZ and Lynn’s translation. Lynn translates the chapter title as “Clarifying the Images.”
- 8 – For a discussion about how the *Laozi* identifies the *dao* as an inexhaustible potential, see [Moeller 2006](#), pp. 9–11.
- 9 – My ideas on the object are inspired by Graham Harman’s object-oriented ontology. See [Harman 2011a](#), [2011b](#), and [Harman 2018](#).
- 10 – All translations from the *Mengzi* are by Irene [Bloom \(2009\)](#), while I only provide the passage numbers. The Chinese text is quoted from [Lau et al.’s Concordance \(1995\)](#).
- 11 – *Xin yi Su Shi ci xuan* ([Deng 2008](#), p. 299).
- 12 – *Xin yi Li Bai Shi quanji* ([Yu Xianhao 2011](#), vol. 3, p. 1268; my translation).
- 13 – Among all scholarly interpretations of Laozi’s dictum, I follow that of Franklin Perkins in translating the word *ren* 仁 as “humane.” See [Perkins 2014](#).
- 14 – I also follow Virág’s lead to translate *qing* in the *Zhuangzi* as “characteristic human inclinations” (p. 151). For more discussion on Zhuangzi’s conception of *wuqing*, see [Perkins 2011](#), pp. 86–88, and [Slingerland 2007](#), pp. 180–182.
- 15 – *Zhuangzi* 6/18/11 (see [Lau et al. 1995](#)).
- 16 – To argue that subject-object relation is a matter of creation rather than of a given truth leads to debates about how truth is understood in Chinese metaphysics. See [McLeod 2015](#) for such a discussion.
- 17 – In chapter 3, “What are Poets for?”
- 18 – Chung-yuan Chang argues that Heidegger’s attention to Being departs from the Western tradition and that “for Heidegger, the event of Appropriation is *Tao*” ([Chang 2013](#), p. 25). For a recent book-length investigation of Heidegger’s dialogue with Eastern thought, see [Ma 2007](#).
- 19 – Heidegger’s language in this essay is sometimes difficult to understand. Most interestingly, he calls the material thing “the earth,” and the human perspective that reveals a facet of the thing “the world”: “The setting up of a world and the setting forth of earth are two essential features in the work-being of the work” ([Heidegger 2001](#), p. 46).

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