

Nature and Human Expression through *Ch'i*

自然与人通过“气”表达

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Ch'i is a generative/creative force. It cannot be separated from our daily lives. In Hong Kong, we have frequent typhoons in the summer season. Typhoons can be perceived as an intensification of the flow of *ch'i*. Although they are often highly destructive forces, on the other hand, might we also be able to harvest constructive experiences from them? Both calm and wild expressions are natural and have their place as forces of nature. And if our artistic expression is a force of nature, might all of our creative actions including “rough and smooth” and “choppy and fluid” be generative, as mentioned in McNiff’s article *Ch'i and Artistic Expression: An East Asian Worldview that Fits the Creative Process Everywhere?* -

Recently, I used the occurrence of a typhoon as the theme for a workshop in Hong Kong and asked the participants, “Can you share an experience of satisfaction, such as a delightful moment of nothingness (I was almost tempted to say *wu-wei*), during the time off from work and being homebound because of the typhoon yesterday?” People laughed. The interruption of the routine of our lives, in this case, resting at home instead of rushing through tasks at the workplace, caused by the fierce/free flow of *ch'i*, let us witness the range of expression of nature from stillness to chaos through the typhoon *Haima*. In the studio, perhaps parallel to the storm, we experienced a glimpse of the complete range of human expression through the expressive arts activities. After speaking about the experience of satisfaction, the participants carried that sense of satisfaction while wandering in the studio space. They practiced *wu-wei* by simply following the natural vertical spread of their spines--- the fifth bow of our human bodies (the other four are our arms and legs), as the ancient Chinese called it. This non-violent expression naturally created the inner flow of *ch'i* in the body. They walked as if carried by the *ch'i*, and they sensed a lightness of moving and being. Now, they were ready to express the free-flow of *ch'i* outside themselves, so they were encouraged to recreate the gentle and fierce flow of their “typhoon” *ch'i* in the space. Through blowing and throwing around different objects, the participants did indeed intensify the flow of air in the studio! Through this structured play of chaos, they were immersed in the chaos made from their satisfaction. They were expanding not only their spines but were in fact widening the whole body’s range of experience.

Now in the midst of the in-between-ness, I encouraged them to let themselves be thrown into the “typhoon of life.” In order to let it happen, I invited them to walk in the

space and encounter the objects as obstacles so that they could experience friction and resistance when they were approaching them. Could resistance be a part of the flow? Experientially, it prepares us to pause—away from willful movement and towards collaborating with the objects. In order to re-search their range of expression, they again immersed themselves into the space with the same objects. However, I offered them a different choice in which they encountered the objects as road signs so that they may flow around these “guides” when approaching them. Flow. Almost instantly, I witnessed a dance of improvisation; they spontaneously created another experience of satisfaction in the middle of chaos—in this case the potentially-destructive flow of *ch'i* during a typhoon. From their performance-in-typhoon, I knew the potential for creative human expression in the release of the creative energy of *ch'i* from its “dark side.”



The dance was made up of moments of an exchange of breath that substantiated the interweaving of the inner flow of *ch'i* in their bodies and the outer flow of *ch'i* of the typhoon-scape. I invited the group to make visual images of their dancing through chaos. As I witnessed them painting, it reminded me of how James Hillman approached soul as a deepening of perception, as quoted by McNiff. In order to further deepen their perception and soul experience, I invited the participants as a group to engage in a ritual of passage from witnessing their en-souled images to moving their en-souled bodies:

Spread your fifth bow again and locate that experience of satisfaction ...
 Breathe with this experience ... Freely let the lines, shapes, forms, and colors lead you through the artwork as if this is your en-souled body ... Where is the “spine” in the image? Maybe you can start from there and witness how it is expanding around the spaces and how you might be attracted by different “body” parts of the artwork. Eventually, stop at a detail in your artwork. You need not explain it ... See how you are being moved by its relation to

the “spine.” Wu-wei as an act is akin to staying with the experience, the tension (roughness/smoothness) of the spreading of the bow without an arrow to shoot. It is non-violent.

Through breath, blow into the artwork, make it dance ...

And then let your body respond.



The artwork and our bodies are portals to *ch'i*-beauty. When they work together, we can be thrown into the interchange of *ch'i* among the triad of the body, artwork, and the space between them. The creative energy flows to generate meanings that we breathe in as a felt-sense of “I know ...”

In order to embody their learning, I urged the participants to find a partner to witness their aesthetic response in the form of movement to the images they had made. On the side of the witnesses, they were encouraged to explore how their souls were being approached and moved by the dancers-of-soul. To complete the process, the two persons were connected through the range of human expression from chaos to satisfaction until both were comfortable.

Ch'i is embodied in our lives through *wu-wei*. In the aforementioned expressive arts therapy studio, the participants were moving not in order to meet any external measures; they were instead moving graciously through the roughness/smoothness of chaos, clarity, satisfaction, and the sense of completeness. Throughout the dance, they did not impose anything on nature and at the same time they were not being imposed upon by nature. The experiences involved being satisfied and completed by the flow of *ch'i*, even

in its seemingly destructive form. *Wu-wei* becomes the praxis of our sensitivity to non-violent human expression in relation to nature's creation as is in the season of typhoons in Hong Kong.

About the author

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