

A China Focus on the Arts and Human Understanding

理解藝術與人:中國式聚焦

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Abstract

The author's empirical observations of artistic expression as a force of nature are discussed in relation to classical Chinese thought. Correspondence to nature is fundamental to the Taoist and Confucian traditions, both grounded in the idea that *qi/ch'i* (氣, vital energy/life force) is the energetic basis of creative transformation. The principle of *te* (德), spontaneous and authentic expression, is explored in relation to practical approaches to helping people everywhere access their unique and natural creative powers. Thomas Berry's call for "a deep cultural therapy" in restoring a healthy relationship with nature suggests a need for paradigm expansion informing how the creative process and artistic understanding are approached today.

Keywords: artistic understanding, artistic inquiry, transcultural expression, art as a force of nature, creative energy, *qi*, *wu wei*, Thomas Berry

摘要

本文討論了作者對藝術表達作為自然之力與經典的中國思想之間關係的經驗觀察。回應自然對於道家 and 儒家傳統非常重要，兩者堅信“氣”是創造性轉化的能量基礎。關於“德”在自發性和真實表達中的基本原則及其幫助人們隨時隨地獲得自己獨特和自然創造力的實際方法在文中被加以探索。Thomas Berry呼籲的“深層文化療愈”來恢復與自然的健康關係提出了對一種模範擴展的需要來說明我們瞭解創造性的進程與藝術性的理解在當今如何能夠結合。

关键词: 藝術化理解，藝術化探索，跨文化表達，自然之力的藝術，創造性能量，氣，無為，湯瑪斯·貝利

1. Why Pursue a China Focus?

As Tony Zhou and I discussed launching the *Creative Arts in Education and Therapy (CAET) – Eastern and Western Perspectives*, we consistently asked the question: Why pursue a China focused journal for the arts in education, therapy, research, and human understanding?

Here are four reasons:

1. First and foremost, the ancient wisdom traditions of China and their contemporary manifestations are essential to any comprehensive discussion of how art promotes personal and social well-being, communicates the depths of experience, and furthers human understanding.

2. Practically speaking and notwithstanding China's continuity of sophistication in cultural disciplines, the areas of the arts in education, therapy, and research, appear to be just emerging in Asia while they are more established in the West where most of the academic journals are published in English. To achieve a more complete communication between East and West and the 20% of the world's people living in China, it makes sense to create a forum concentrating on it, give Chinese colleagues a voice in English that will impact the broader world community, and build upon the pioneering *Art Therapy in Asia* (Kalmanowitz, Potash, & Chan, 2012) in publishing reflections by both Asian and Western authors.
3. A journal "bridging China and the world" will bring awareness to shared human qualities that pervade the arts while encouraging and respecting the infinite differences of artists and their expressions (McNiff, 2015b). The China focus is not intended to be exclusive to one country or region but rather model how careful study of the various cultural traditions of the world in relation to a broad spectrum of artistic, philosophical, historical, and psychological disciplines will inform practice.
4. As a transdisciplinary forum supporting principles of artistic inquiry the journal will hopefully continue the long Chinese tradition of stepping outside conventional paradigms and encourage more expansive ways of thinking about the role of the arts in society. Every effort will be made to encourage publications permeated with "te(德)," the inherent power of creative acts manifested through authentic and natural expression.

I will address these points by making connections between my experiences with the arts and my impressions of classical Chinese thought. I write from the perspective of my particular history with Chinese philosophy based upon readings and discussions in English. I try to avoid making any factual statements outside this personal sphere realizing that any rich and complex tradition will generate many interpretations of it.

2. A Nature Perspective

Having been closely involved over five decades with the worldwide development of the arts in therapy, education, and research, I can report the significant growth and progress that has been made in these areas and the global appeal of the work. I observe a strikingly common sense that people everywhere have about why a more complete fulfillment of individual and group imaginative expression is good for the human condition. I feel that people know this intuitively from their own experiences with the creative process.

A deeply rooted, visceral, perhaps atavistic sensibility is aroused in reliable ways when drums beat, bodies move together in space, voices join in chant, hands and bodies paint or mold clay, poetry is spoken, emotions are enacted, and when viewing a work of art. Sometimes these expressions are inspirational, igniting the imagination and motivating others to become involved, and just as dependably they are apt to be permeated with resistance and fear evoked by feelings of uncertainty and vulnerability.

The trepidation that I see in people everywhere is aroused by an accurate sense that these expressive powers are not completely subject to our control. A second factor is the absence of a broad public understanding, in the West and China, of the benefits of a more egalitarian participation in the artistic process, a condition that results from considerable misunderstanding about both the nature of creative expression and restrictive ideas about talent and who can and cannot effectively participate.

My experience affirms that art is “a force of nature” (2015a) accessible to people everywhere, as natural as breath, elemental body movements, and other sensory acts. I have found that the best way to help people express themselves effectively is to make it clear that they cannot fail if they act naturally, believe in what they do, and let the process of expression emerge. Like nature, the new arrivals and insights of artistic expression are not completely controlled by us so we must trust them, especially when the process becomes difficult, and create with them (McNiff, 1998a).

Although art may sometimes strive to represent nature, this facet can be taken too literally and interfere with a deeper appreciation of how artistic expression is itself a manifestation of nature’s creative energy that moves through every environment. When we trace the history of recorded psychological thought in relation to these reciprocal relations between humans and nature’s creative forces, the search leads to ancient China.

3. Artistic Expression as a Process of Nature

As someone whose life work involves art and psychology I consider myself fortunate to have been first introduced to Chinese wisdom traditions as a young person well before I became directly involved with my ultimate career path. I was drawn to Lao Tzu (老子, a real or mythical figure purportedly b. 570 BC). *The Book of Tao (Tao Te Ching 道德經)*, all 5,000 words of it, closely aligned with my experience and it helped greatly in alleviating my personal angst---while also underscoring the importance of getting to the point in as few words as possible.

Lao Tzu’s cultural lasting power in China and worldwide can be attributed to how his thought corresponds to the expressions of nature that he examined, processes that for me are deeper and different from the more juridical Western notion of natural law. In *The Book of Tao*, XVI he said, “Being in accord with nature, he is in accord with Tao (同於道者, 道亦樂得之),” the way or path (Yutang, 1942, p. 591). Lao Tzu’s timeless philosophy involves harmony with nature, relaxing controls to achieve fluidity, alchemical transformation, spontaneity, authenticity, and appreciation of the mutual relations between tensions and creations. He offers an early Chinese depth psychology of the creative process that suggests how art heals, furthers understanding, and most completely realizes its potential via the paradoxical basis of letting go in order to create in our most natural way through small acts that cohere to make life anew.

It is significant how both Taoist and Buddhist thought originated in response to needs for liberation from the cultural restrictions. Lao Tzu encouraged *te*(德), a more spontaneous and authentic expression in keeping with a person’s natural functioning that may not always fit the reigning institutional “rules” (Watts, 1989, pp. 25-28). Culture confines as well as supports and the restrictions of convention are part of our wiring as humans, presenting fundamental challenges that are not going away.

My current reflections on the process of artistic expression may correspond more closely to Lao Tzu and his ancient practice of biomimicry than to more linear and reductionist Western thought, with the exception of those artists and thinkers who found points of congruence with Eastern traditions. Perhaps, the idea that nature is something other than the innermost qualities of personal experience suggests how we have become separated not only from all things in the nonhuman realm, but from one another, our own personhood, and our essential nature. When we accept this accessibility and naturalness of expression, which cannot be judged by categorical standards, we make it possible for each person to confidently pursue a unique relationship to it. We have so thoroughly tied art to the personal ego, itself a questionable Western construct, that we cannot see how creative and imaginative expression is an organic process and one of the most elemental acts of being.

Chinese philosophical traditions emphasize a dynamic and interrelated world that resonates closely with the following features that I observe permeating the artistic process:

- The movement basis of all expression.
- The engagement of tensions, difficulties, and obstacles as sources of expression that are transformed into affirmations of life.
- The circulation of creative energy (vital energy/ life force of *ch'i/qi* 氣) through our bodies and environments that will treat blocks and manifest the intelligence of imagination operating a few steps ahead of the reasoning mind that takes on the role of a witness responding to what happens outside its controls and plans (*wu wei* 無為).
- The simultaneous manifestation of the most personal and suprapersonal forces in particular artistic expressions permeated with *te*.

4. A Pragmatic Base

When working as an artist, arts therapist, teacher, and researcher, I am always immersed in the immediate actions and perceptions of practice. I do everything I can to reflect upon their essential qualities, what Zen Buddhism calls their “suchness,” and then consider the concepts that may correspond to them but never replace them.

I start with careful reflection on things that I and others do when involved with creative expression. I identify unique qualities together with consistent elements such as those mentioned above—the movement basis of expression; the transformation of tensions; the circulation of creative energy in persons and environments; and the simultaneous presence of individual and transpersonal elements in authentic art expressions—and then consider sources outside my direct experience that speak to these features.

Everything is grounded in the particulars of practice. For example, in my studies of the artistic healing practices of indigenous communities throughout the world beginning in the 1970s (McNiff, 1979, 1981, 1984, 2004) I observed a common tendency to approach illness as a loss of soul that is retrieved and reunited with the body, a principle that corresponds to what I experience in the art therapy studio. When speaking to Rudolf Arnheim (2004; McNiff, 1994), my mentor in the psychology of art, about common

qualities of artistic expression that I perceived in my early practice of the arts in therapy, he said we humans are united in our biological nature. In considering whether this common human nature applies to psychological experience we discussed how Hans Prinzhorn, who studied early 20th century visual art of people living in asylums throughout Europe with no contact with artistic culture, concluded that there are fundamental emotional urges and needs for psychic expression and making connections with other people (1972, pp. 12-13). Similarly Rhoda Kellogg's collection of half a million children's drawings from throughout the world showed consistent patterns and expressive qualities (Kellogg, 1970). When we examine the particular features of artistic expression, we discover evidence across cultures affirming both uniquely personal and suprapersonal characteristics.

As I reflect on what I first experience empirically, I see how principles described by Chinese philosophical traditions correspond to what I do. I have never been consciously directed by them. When working I focus on the basic physical elements of art making rather than ideas. And as Alan Watts said about his studies of Zen Buddhism, he never forgets that he is a Westerner---I do the same even though I am attracted to Diogenes of Sinope's (404/412-323 BCE) idea of being a citizen of the world.

When I make art and help others with their expression, I operate in my particular place in the world and with my unique personal style, history, and interests but I consistently see that I am part of a creative process that is larger than me. I rekindled my earlier studies of Chinese thought after concluding through experience that artistic expression is a force of nature. The pre-eminently practical psychological and philosophical traditions of China based on correspondences between human experience and the more comprehensive forces of nature affirm what I do and observe in the artistic process and they help me understand it better.

In advocating for the arts in all sectors of life, it has always made sense to document and emphasize these transcultural and essential human tendencies reliably manifested in the most practical aspects of the work, an empirical and pragmatic orientation that contrasts to the idiosyncratic ways in which psychological disciplines have often reduced artistic expressions to highly speculative ideas that do little more than project the attitudes of the people who use them. These tendencies to view the world within the current institutional and dominant cultural paradigms with no awareness of their shadows are alive and well today.

5. A “Deep Cultural Therapy” Informed by Chinese Traditions

In writing my most recent book, *Imagination in Action* (2015) and reflecting on my history with Chinese and Asian thought, I did an internet search on my college teachers who first introduced me to these ideas. I was surprised to see how one in particular, Thomas Berry (<http://www.thomasberry.org/> accessed 28-8-15) with whom I did not maintain contact after graduating, went on to write books that are close to the spirit of my work, especially his way of studying indigenous world cultures to hone personal understanding, beliefs, and practice.

I mention Berry here because he models how East and West can inform one another in this journal's effort to offer a China focus on the arts and human understanding. And perhaps even more importantly his writings offer insights into the creation of a new depth psychology of the creative process that resonates with nature.

Berry was profoundly informed by his studies of China, and particularly the Confucian tradition. Those of us prone to dismiss Confucius (Kongzi, b. 551), commonly associated with social hierarchy and proper behavior, might look again from the perspective of Berry's progressive application of the Confucian belief in the sacredness of all things to the most pressing contemporary problems. Known to carry a well-worn copy of *Black Elk Speaks* (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/sep/27/thomas-berry-obituary>, accessed 28-8-15) during his travels, Berry helps us appreciate how Confucian thought converges with Taoist and Chinese Buddhist traditions as well as worldwide indigenous beliefs in a common commitment to the care of the earth; how living with a sense of correspondence to elemental processes of nature furthers innate knowing, love for all things, authentic cultivation of one's true nature, and service to the community (Tucker, 2014).

As a cultural historian and author of books on *Buddhism* (1989 [1967]) and *Religions of India* (1992 [1972]), he went on to write *The Dream of the Earth* (1988a), *The Great Work* (1999), and other texts that made him a leading international figure in the environmental movement advocating for the interdependence of all forms of life as expressed by his signature idea-- "The universe is a communion of subjects" (2006, p. 17). He demonstrates how our concepts and cosmologies can lose contact with reality.

Berry felt that our attitudes toward nature are in need of "deep cultural therapy" (1988a, p. 206) and I would more specifically apply the therapeutic urgency to how we think about artistic expression and culture itself. In his seminal 1978 essay, *The New Story* (1988b), he contrasts tribal societies initiating children by "absorbing into their own beings...deeper powers of the natural world" (Ibid., p. 131) to the more recent attitude, in the planet's long history, that the earth's resources are here for the benefit of humans who tend to focus on moving onto another life in another place. While respecting the advances of science in the tradition of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1959) and accepting how its historical purpose pursued objectification and quantification while disregarding subjectivity, he emphasized how recent science has "a growing awareness of the integral physical-psychic dimension of reality" (1988b, p. 133). In Berry's writing I found a close correspondence to my sense of the need for the most personal forms of artistic expression amplified to a more comprehensive earth and universe vision that is interdependent with the small acts of art making.

6. Actualizing *Te* in Art and Paradigm Expansion

Contemporary obstacles to advancing psychologically deep and empirical studies of creative expression informed by the power of *te* result in my opinion from an over-reliance on narrow and increasingly institutionalized concepts shaping perceptions of reality and practice with little criticism of their dominance. I will describe two areas in need of paradigm expansion, perhaps guided by features of historic Chinese thought.

The first is the growing tendency, especially in the West, to look almost exclusively at cultural differences with little consideration of the companion aspect of transcultural phenomena and Berry's "communion of subjects" that I view as a basis for an imaginative and inclusive depth psychology. The concentration on difference is generally driven by respect for varied traditions and the correction of social disparities and ethnocentrism, positions that I share. However, I believe that artistic expressions convey cultural conditions and more. There is a new form of reductionism at work, an arguably ethnocentric over-emphasis on cultural categorization that goes contrary to nature's perpetual change and creation, the ongoing creation of cultures within cultures, and endless complexities and varieties within an individual human being or artwork, all of which exist as unique entities within an interdependent human creation. We study what other peoples and societies do to deepen our understanding of what it means to be human, to appreciate what the artistic process does, and how we can perfect what we do. Each of us, whether in Beijing or Boston, ideally creates our unique ways of working where good ideas and practices often transcend separations.

Explorations of these basic sensory and psychic functions of artistic expression can be expanded into the growing appreciation of how all forms of nature, including the arts, support one another, need each other, and in their infinite uniqueness create the whole of life.

The second threat is the exclusive use of standardized social science methods to justify what we do in serving others and the world through the arts. The studies often do little more than reflect the Western corporate academic culture on which they are based and their particular technical intricacies and jargon, exactly the kind of institutional mentality from which the early wisdom traditions of China sought liberation. The insistence that only science, which has been so successful in many realms, can be used to study and justify how to further human experience, diminishes the complementary powers of the creative imagination and institutes a one-dimensional hegemony and bland scientism that we see so often today.

In advancing the discipline of art-based research (McNiff, 1998b, 2011, 2013, 2014a), I have called for freedom to pursue studies that look, feel, and sound like the arts (2014b). It makes sense to engage the primary intelligences of creative expression to research the phenomena of art rather than having to translate artistic processes into institutional forms of inquiry that do not resonate with them. The language being used today, especially in therapy has what might be called a *te deficiency* (無德). For example, the ubiquitous and not so subtle authoritarian emphasis on "interventions" (to come between, interrupt, which is sometimes required to guide and protect when we truly intervene but not as a term describing all therapeutic processes) and "directives" (orders, instructions prescription) by therapists, ironically used while advocating for greater sensitivity to power inequities, goes contrary to the holding and trusting that foster creative expression and the engagement of the unknown. Taoist attitudes of supportive non-interference are closer to what is needed to cultivate the intelligence of the creative process.

We might consider relaxing the compulsion to direct and concentrate more on how to support and witness the deep and transformative movements of Psyche as part of

nature (McNiff, 2015a), a process Lao Tzu likened to water's fluid power that will change anything that is rigid.

I have tried to show how classical traditions of Chinese thought can help us treat our current alienation from the intelligence of the creative process. My hope is that this journal will not only further appreciation of distinctly Chinese practices and traditions but also guide those of us living and working in other places in deepening our understanding of our personal experience by discovering elements we share. The China focus is a starting point toward a more informed world community. Although significant in terms of its history and place in the world I do not see China as an exclusive base for East-West dialogue. It offers a model and focus that can be continuously expanded to other cultural perspectives from Polynesia to sub Saharan Africa, the Kabballah to Sufism, and everything present and past. Based on my experience, these studies will certainly present fascinating differences and unique features while also furthering the common stream that shapes us all.

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