Understanding Chinese Philosophy

From Three Simple Words

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ABSTRACT

As one of the leading research objects in my PhD research Art and Text Collisions in Contemporary Chinese Art, the term Contemporary Chinese Text Art combines Western Contemporary Text Art and Chinese written language. This research covers a wide range of academic fields in both China and the West, such as philosophy, philology, art, linguistics, calligraphy and literature. It also relates China’s historical and political context.

With the purpose of introducing a new understanding of the term, several research methodologies and strategies are employed, such as curating, philosophical reflection, comparative analysis, translation and interview. Through my research, I realised that the key to understanding Chinese Text Art is Fu Xi Ba Gua, which is believed as the origin of the Chinese characters and the Chinese civilization. From this perspective, my research analyses the philosophical basis of Chinese characters and clarifies some confusion in Chinese art and philosophy. Furthermore, through a series of art practices, my research explores unique phenomena and textuality of contemporary Chinese text art, as well as innovative art practices including VR text art.

This paper is an extended version of my same titled presentation of my 2018 Postgraduate Research Showcase Conference. By introducing the implications of three simple Chinese words, the paper introduces essential traditional Chinese philosophical concepts, such as Tai Ji, Yin Yang and Ba Gua, which are the foundation of the whole Chinese civilisation. Through further comparison with Contemporary art philosophy, the paper suggests a new interpretation which sees the temporal-spatial nature of Contemporary as a historical-universal unity which has infinite dynamic-static changes in one spacetime.
**GLOSSARY OF KEY CHINESE TERMS**

**Shuo Wen**  
*Shuo Wen* (说文), refers to *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* (说文解字) by Xu Shen (b. 58-148AD, Han Dynasty). It is the first dictionary in Chinese history, written in the Han Dynasty, that categorises characters by its radicals.

**Dao**  
Dao (道), also known as Tao, refers to the principle of the universe, one of the most fundamental concepts of Chinese philosophy.

**Guang Yun**  
*Guang Yun* (广韵), the first Chinese rhymes dictionary that published in 1008 AD, Song Dynasty.

**Book of Changes**  
Book of Changes (易经), also known as *I Ching*, the oldest Chinese classic philosophy book (believed written in West Zhou Dynasty, 11th century BC) on the basis of Fu Xi Ba Gua (伏羲八卦) and Wen Wang Ba Gua (文王八卦). All texts in the book are to interpret the principles of Gua (卦).

**Xi Ci**  
Xi Ci (系辞), refers to Xi Ci Zhuan (系辞传), is a section in the *Book of Changes*, which was believed to be written by Kong Zi (551-479 BC). Kong Zi is the honorific title of Kong Qiu (孔丘), also known as Confucius. He is one of the most famous ancient Chinese philosophers in Chun Qiu Period (770-403 BC) and is the founder of Confucianism.

**Dao De Jing**  
*Dao De Jing* (道德经), also known as *Tao Te Ching*, written by Lao Zi (老子). Lao Zi is the honorific title of Li Er (李耳), also known as Lao Tseu or Lao Tzu. Another of the most famous ancient Chinese philosophers in Chun Qiu Period, the founder of Taoism (道家学派).

**Yin and Yang**  
Yin (阴) and Yang (阳), the basic two measures in traditional Chinese philosophy.

**Yi**  
Yi (易), means changes, it is the original title of the *Book of Changes*.

**Tai Ji**  
Taiji (太极), also called Da Ji (大极). The word means infinity utmost. Here it refers to the concept of the initial state of the universe.

**Liang Yi**  
Liang Yi (两仪), literally translated as ‘two sides’.

**Si Xiang**  
Si Xiang (四象), literally translated as ‘four appearance’. It refers to Tai Yang (太阳), Tai Yin (太阴), Shao Yang (少阳) and Shao Yin (少阴).

**Ba Gua**  
Ba Gua originally means the eight (Ba) categories (Gua) of the natural phenomena or properties in universe. Each Gua refers to one category: Qian (☰, 乾, Sky), Dui (☱, 兑, Marsh), Li (☲, 离, Fire), Zhen (☳, 震, Thunder), Xun (☴, 巽, Wind), Kan (☵, 坎, Water), Gen (☶, 艮, Mountain), Kun(☷, 坤, Earth). Each Gua situates in a particular position as a circle (facing outward).2 shows its category’s property and the relationship with others. In short, Fu Xi Ba Gua revealed ancient Chinese people’s understanding interpretation of the universe. King Yu of Xia Dynasty3 developed Fu

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1. Although each Gua is named with one word which meaning is one particular natural phenomenon, it doesn’t mean this category has only one phenomenon, it refers to all phenomena, objects or properties that belong to this category.
2. Fu Xi Ba Gua’s position is a view like a person drawing around himself, and he stands in the circle. For example, category Sky is facing up, category Earth is facing down.
3. King Yu (大禹), also known as Yu the Great, is the first king of Xia Dynasty (夏朝, 2070 – 1600 BC).
Xi Ba Gua into 64 Gua, which is called Fu Xi 64 Gua. Thus each Gua has 6 levels of Yin/Yang permutations in order to explain more principles. King Wen of Zhou Dynasty (周文王) developed them by combining positions of constellation, made a small change on its position, which is called Wen Wang Ba Gua and Wen Wang 64 Gua. At Chunqiu Period, Confucius edited and wrote annotations for those Gua, thus became the fixed version of Book of Changes. Principles and philosophy from the Book of Changes is the guidance to all latter Chinese culture.

**The Three Talents**
The Three Talents (三才) refers to the Sky, the Earth and the Human Being.

**Fu Xi**
Fu Xi’s name is mentioned in the beginning chapter of almost every ancient Chinese book in every subject. Ancient Chinese historian recorded him living in the era of over 60 thousand years ago (Zheng, 1777). Modern Chinese historians and archaeologists have different perspectives on Fu Xi’s living era. According to historian Wang Dayou’s research, Fu Xi’s era was about 9000 to 7000 years ago (Wang, 2000). According to the latest archaeological findings in Dadiwan archaeological sites, which is believed as Fu Xi’s living area. Archaeological layers of a continuous ancient civilisation at Dadiwan can be defined from 60,000 to 5000 years ago, which as happened, matches ancient Chinese historical records. Related reference see Bibliography: (China News, 2009), (Dadiwan Archeological Site, 2011), (The Gansu Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology, 2006), (Cheng, 2002).

**Tai Ji Graphic**
The method of drawing Tai Ji Graphic referenced:
- Lun Zhang 张, 三图说 (Trans. AX) Interpretation of the Three Diagrams (1572).
- Kuang Xu 徐, (Ming Dynasty: 1368-1644 A.D.), 古太极测 (Trans. AX) Ancient Tai Ji Survey, Digitizing sponsor: China-America Digital Academic Library (CADAL) edn (Contributor: Beijing University Library, 1564)

**GENERAL NOTES**
Chinese Pinyin (汉语拼音) is a common method used to spell Chinese character’s pronunciation. In this paper, if a Chinese name or term is written in Chinese Pinyin, its original Chinese characters are followed in a bracket within the text or in a footnote. This is marked with the following symbol ‘¶’. This symbol is also used in text, footnotes and bibliography to show that ‘this word/term/phrase is composed by Pinyin’.

Quotes from ancient Chinese reference material are given in at least two versions of proof: transcribed original ancient Chinese text and its English translation (which has always been translated by myself). Some important quotes are additionally given their scanned-pages from ancient books.

Each transcribed ancient Chinese quote is

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4. King Wen of Zhou (周文王), the first king of Zhou Dynasty (周朝, 1046 – 256 BC).
5. Chunqiu Period (春秋时期), also known as Spring and Autumn Period, is a period of late Zhou Dynasty (770 – 403 BC)
followed by my English translation, which is marked with the following symbol ‘§’. This symbol is also used in text, footnotes and bibliography to show ‘this English word/term/phrase/paragraph is translated from Chinese’. If the title/term/phrase is too complicated to be translated into similar length of an English title/term/phrase, it is followed with its Chinese Pinyin instead of the translation.

In order to reduce semantic loss of translation, when dealing with ancient concepts and interpretations of traditional Chinese, this thesis directly quotes texts from scanned digital copies of ancient Chinese classic books (instead of quoting from other modern Chinese translation or other English translation) and I have translated them into English. Resource of these copies are from public digital libraries supplied by world universal libraries, such as Zhe Jiang University Library or Harvard University Library.

In ancient Chinese books, characters writing sequence is from top to bottom on each line, and line-order is from right to left. Furthermore, there is no punctuation in ancient Chinese text. For ease of reading, I have written these ancient quotes in Simplified Chinese sequence (same as English) and added punctuations into transcribed quotes.

The Dynasty of ancient book (when it was written) and the dynasty of its edition (republished edition that I used as reference) are noted in brackets with the book’s name and its edition’s name. For example, many of the ancient books that I referenced in this thesis are from the Imperial Complete Collection of Four Categories (钦定四库全书) edited and published in Qing Dynasty, but the books in its collection could be written in Han Dynasty.

**PAPER BODY**

Once I argued and bet with a British friend that I could teach him to write three Chinese words in one second, as he thought Chinese is the most difficult language to learn in the world. He bet £5 and I won.

These are the three Chinese words and their translation in English:

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Chinese: 一 二 三
English: One Two Three
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One, Two and Three can be seen as the three simplest Chinese characters. However, these three words implicate essential concepts of traditional Chinese philosophy. The most authoritative dictionary in ancient Chinese history, Kangxi Dictionary (ed. Kangxi Emperor, 1710), summarises the traditional meanings of the three words (Figure 1):

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One.
Shuo Wen: The origin of all. Dao is established from the One. [It] created and divided the Sky and the Earth, [it] created everything in the world. Guang Yun: The origin of numbers, the ultimateness of object. ‘Xi Ci’ in Book of Changes: The Sky is the One, the Earth is the
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7. See Glossary: Shuo Wen.
10. See Glossary: Xi Ci.
Two. Lao Zi’s *Dao De Jing*: Dao creates the One, the One creates the Two.  

**Two.** The origin of the number of the Earth. It is the variant of the Even. *Book of Changes.* [One] divided into two to show the appearance of the Two.

**Three.** *Shuo Wen:* The Principle of the Sky, the Earth and Human Being. It overlays the One (Yang) and the Two (Yin), thus became the Three. Laozi’s *Dao De Jing:* Dao creates the One, the One creates the Two, the Three creates all things in the world.

From the above interpretations, it is clear that One, Two and Three in Chinese written words directly refer to traditional Chinese philosophical concepts. In fact, Chinese philosophy has a very close relationship with specific numbers and their algorithms. Many traditional Chinese cultural principles were established on the basis of those particular numbers (the meanings and algorithms) and the One, the Two and the Three are the foundation of the entire Chinese philosophical system.

In Xi Ci Zhuan section of the Book of Changes (ed. Kangxi Emperor, 1716), it states (Figure 2):

Yi has Tai Ji, thus creates Liang Yi, Liang Yi creates Si Xiang, Si Xiang creates Ba Gua.

The philological annotation to this sentence says:

It is the principle of the nature for One dividing into Two. Yi is the changes of Yin and Yang. Tai Ji is the principle of Yi’s changes. Liang Yi refers to the very first division of the One, which divides into Yin and Yang. It is written level 1.

Si Xiang refers to the next level of division, which

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12. See Glossary: *Dao De Jing*.
13. Original Text: 一。《说文》：惟出太始，道立于一。造分天地，化成万物。《广韵》：数之始也，物之极也。《易•系辞》：天一地二。老子《道德经》：道生一，一生二。
14. The Even refers to Yin (– –).
15. Original Text: 二。地数之始。即偶之两画而变之也。《易•系辞》：分而为二以象两。
17. Original Text: 三。《说文》：三，天地人之道也。谓以阳之一合阴之二，次第重之，其数三也。老子《道德经》：道生一，一生二，二生三，三生万物。
18. Original text: 易有大极，是生两仪，两仪生四象，四象生八卦。
19. See Glossary: Yi.
20. See Glossary: Tai Ji.
22. See Glossary: Si Xiang.
23. See Glossary: Ba Gua.
24. Original text: 一每生二，自然之理也。易者，阴阳之变，大极者，其理也。两仪者，始为一画，以分阴阳。四象者，次为二画，以分大少。八卦者，次为三画，而三才之象始备。
divided into Tai and Shao. Si Xiang is written at level 2.

Ba Gua refers to the third level of the division, which is written at level 3. The appearance of the Three Talents starts from this level.

From the above text, it is clear that in Chinese philosophy, the One refers to the initial status of the universe, the Two refers to Yin and Yang, the Three refers to Ba Gua, which represents all things in the world. The principle of changing from the One to the Two to the Three, is the Dao. Then, what makes the changes happen?

The answer can be found in Tai Ji Tu Shuo (太極图说) (ed. Kangxi Emperor, 1717). The author, ancient philosopher Zhou Zi (周子) explains (Figure 3).

Tai Ji creates Yang by motion. Utmost motion led to motionless. Motionless creates Yin. Utmost motionless led to motion again. The motion and the motionless are the foundation of each other. Yin and Yang established Liang Yi.

Therefore, we can see that Yang and Yin refer to two status – motion and motionless. The Book of Changes is basically a book to explain the universe on which the theory is based on the changes of Yang and Yin. It is believed the Book of Changes was written by King Wen of Zhou Dynasty. When he wrote the book there was no text but only a diagram called Ba Gua, which is called King Wen Ba Gua. King Wen’s Ba Gua is the position-changed version of Fu Xi Ba Gua (伏羲八卦). Fu Xi Ba Gua is believed to be created by Fu Xi, the very first Sovereign of the whole Chinese civilisation in Neolithic Era. From the interpretations of Fu Xi Ba Gua in Daily Lecture Textbook of the Book of Changes (ed. Kangxi Emperor, 1776) in Figure 4 (English version see Figure 5 and 6), we can see the order and position of Fu Xi Ba Gua are settled strictly and accurately. It shows eight categories of natural phenomena. The eight categories are written in eight 3-in-1 permutations of Yin/Yang. The order of them shows their relationship and how they influence each other. It is believed that Fu Xi Ba Gua was created to guide ancient Chinese people on every aspect of living and understanding of the universe. Philosophy of Ba Gua has been continuously studied for thousands of years. Ba Gua is also believed to be the origin of Chinese written words.

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25. Tai and Shao refer to the four appearance of Si Xiang. See Glossary: Si Xiang.
27. 周子 (周子), honorific title of Chinese ancient Confucianist philosopher Zhou Dunyi (周敦颐), b. 1017-1073 AD, Song Dynasty.
28. Original text: 太极动而生阳，动极而静。静而生阴，静极复动。一动一静互为其根，分阴分阳两仪立焉。
29. See Glossary: Fu Xi.
30. See Glossary: Ba Gua are ancient Chinese characters.
As time goes by, Tai Ji Graphic (太极图) was developed from Fu Xi Ba Gua, two of them often appear together. Tai Ji Graphic is drawn strictly according to Ba Gua, it uses white colour to represent Yang and black colour to represent Yin, as shown in Figure 7.31

As we can see from Tai Ji Graphic, categories from Order 1 to 4, Yang gradually decreased, Yin gradually increased. The general property of the first four categories is Yang. Categories from 5 to 8, Yang keeps gradually decreasing, and Yin keeps gradually increasing, but their general category is Yin. If we replace the word ‘Yang’ with ‘motion’, and ‘Yin’ with ‘motionless’, then the Tai Ji Graphic shows a continuous changing process (from order 1 to 8) from extreme ‘motion’ status to extreme ‘motionless’ status, which trajectory is like an ‘infinite’ (∞) path. The order of eight categories also shows a continuous process of quantitative change to qualitative change, due to the measurement of motion and motionless.

Interestingly, the concept of dynamic-static changing in ancient Chinese philosophy Ba Gua is similar to Western Contemporary Art philosophy. British philosopher Peter Osborn points out:32

Contemporary art is ‘post’-conceptual to the extent that it registers the historical experience of conceptual art, as a self-conscious movement, as the experience of the impossibility/fallacy of the absolutization of anti-aesthetic, in conjunction with a recognition of an ineliminably conceptual aspect to all art. [...] art is necessarily both aesthetic and conceptual. (Osborne, 2010)

From my understanding of Osborne’s statement, if we consider Art as an entirety, then ‘conceptual’ and ‘aesthetic’ are the two forces in Art. Every artwork embodies both conceptual and aesthetic. Conceptual is the force of movement

31. See Glossary: Tai Ji Graphic
32. Peter Osborne, British philosopher, art critic, Professor of Modern European Philosophy and Director of the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy in Kingston University.
in art, it is the concept of artwork; aesthetic is the force of conservation in art, it is the form of the artwork. If we see ‘conceptual’ as Yang, then ‘aesthetic’ as Yin, then Zhou Zi’s explanation (Figure 4) also fit the relationship of conceptual and aesthetic. Of course, ancient Chinese philosophy and Contemporary Western art philosophy are not the same. What I want to suggest is, there is a common aspect on the concept of dynamic-static relationship.

Another interesting point is, during my research practice on VR (virtual reality) Text Art, I found a new kind of ‘immersion’ of text-reading in this type of new media art — a sensible immersion of reading in the virtual world. However, the whole VR environment is composed of texts of computer language. As we all knew, computer language is based on the binary system, which utilises the numbers 0 and 1. The inventor of binary arithmetic, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (b.1646 – 1716 AD), announced that he was inspired by the concept of Fu Xi Ba Gua (Leibniz, 1703). In his article ‘Explanation of Binary Arithmetic, which Uses Only the Characters 0 and 1, which some Remarks on its Usefulness, and on the Light it Throws on the Ancient Chinese Figures of Fuxi’, Leibniz replaced Yang and Yin with 0 and 1 in Fu Xi Ba Gua. From my perspective, the connection between the new technology and ancient Chinese philosophy in VR Text Art delivers a sense of time travel.

In Contemporary philosophy, a core concept of contemporaneity is globalisation, which suggest trans-categorial temporal-spatial communication of the whole world. It considers the world is a whole ‘globe’. On Davos 2018, Klaus Schwab, the founder and executive chairman of World Economic Forum suggested in his speech,

Over the past decade, the concerted international effort to deliver quantitative easing to our economies has been successful in rescuing us from the worst excesses. This time, to create a shared future in a fractured world, we must focus on the qualitative impact of our decisions. What we truly and urgently need is a new social contract that provides real “qualitative easing” for all those who have been left behind. We have it in our power to address the perils of a fractured world, but we will succeed only if we join our forces and work together – as joint stakeholders in our global society. We come here together representing different cultures and nations, and we work together with a collaborative spirit and mutual respect. (Schwab, 2018)

What Schwab suggested is to overcome the ideological struggles and consider all countries as a whole unit (beyond geographical boundaries) and consider all human being as a whole unit (beyond boundaries of ideologies, races, religions or cultures). This concept is largely compatible with the traditional Chinese concept of harmony between human and nature (天人合一), which means, the harmonious relationship between the Three Talents –the One, the Two and the Three. When the harmonisation/globalisation is complete, the whole world would become The One. But what will happen after the world becomes the One? Will the world be Utopia? Will humans build the Tower of Babel again? Maybe, the force of changing will immediately lead us to the next category, just as the Contemporary is a critical temporal point of the radical movement of Conceptual, any forwarding from Contemporary is a back ward from its conceptual status.

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