

Qi and the Virtual in Daoist and Zen Literature: A Comparison with Western Vitalist Thought

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Abstract: Driven by a negentropic impulse, this article brings traditional Chinese *qi* theory and yin-yang theory into dialogue with Bergson's notion of *élan vital* and Deleuze's notions of the virtual and the actual. It shows that Daoist spiritual alchemy and Zennist introspective meditation involve an inversion of Bergsonian differentiation or creative evolution. The suggestion is that Daoism and Zen privilege the virtual over the actual, re-formability over form. Therein lies the essence of Daoist rejuvenation and Zen awakening. The claim is that the existence of a virtual double makes a "thing" vital, energetic, and spiritual. The article invokes the reasoning behind the *Yijing* to indicate that hyper-technologization goes hand in hand with spiritual impoverishment, and that spiritual alchemy in our era should help address the spiritual deficit created by technology.

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"[D]ichotomy is the law of life."
— Deleuze, 2004, p. 28

The Chinese term *qi* [chī] 氣/炁 is synonymous with *élan vital* and belongs with the virtual, as distinguished from the actual. In Daoist [Taoist] and Zen literature, the meaning of the term oscillates between "energy" and "breath," and clusters with "emptiness." The closest Greek word is *pneuma*, and the closest Latin one is *spiritus*. The rough equivalent in Sanskrit is *prana* – an energy associated with breath (Watts, 1975, p. 76). Overall, Chinese philosophy places more emphasis on the virtual than the actual compared with its Western counterpart. *Qi* manifests itself in two guises, yin and yang, the interplay of which lies at the root of all changes and forms the basis of the eight trigrams and sixty-four hexagrams of the *Yijing* [I Ching]. If yin *qi*, which has the natural propensity to descend, and yang *qi*, which has the natural propensity to ascend, are meeting and interacting with each other properly and stay in dynamic equilibrium, the cosmos, macro or micro, will be in an optimal state, which is a recipe for harmony, health, and joy. The True Man 真人 nurtures his *qi* and breathes deeply (Watson, 1968, p. 78).

In the West, thanks to the philosophical interventions of Bergson and Deleuze, among others, more and more intellectuals are turning their attention to *élan vital* and the virtual, making it seem as though the West has been retrieving an ancient Chinese sensibility consciously or unconsciously. This impression motivates a reexamination of Daoist and Zen literature on *qi* in connection and comparison with contemporary Western thought on *élan vital* and the virtual. This article is precisely driven by this impulse. As such, it is exploratory in nature and draws no conclusion in advance.

Instead, it follows these intriguing leads without a preformed destination, proceeds in a way that is radically open to surprises, and presents the findings as they deserve to be presented. That is to say, the exploration follows a Daoist approach with a view to revealing some *li* 理 (roughly, grain) between Daoist-Zennist thought and Western vitalist thought in a *wuxin* 無心 (no mind) mode. The article furthers in its own way the emerging line of inquiry called interality studies 間性研究.

Élan Vital

There is a difference in kind between life and mere matter. What makes life life is *élan vital*, namely, life force, life impulse, life energy. *Élan vital* does three things: to desire, to intuit, to become. To be specific, *élan vital* craves only its own intensities; it intuits opportunities for becoming intense; its natural propensity is to differentiate itself in response to the call of meaningful niches in a relational field. Differentiation is a matter of creatively actualizing the virtual. The virtual ramifies or diversifies along divergent lines of actualization in response to relational opportunities in the environment and insofar as it is capable of intuiting such opportunities. Even though each line of actualization implies the closing off of some unpursued potentials and may well lead to an evolutionary cul-de-sac, the process of actualization is not a matter of mere degradation or deterioration since it is creative in nature. Nor is it a matter of linear, teleological progression, since a line of flight may well turn out to be a line of destruction. *Élan vital* evolves creatively, becomes innocently, transfigures itself resiliently and precariously as it encounters *pratyaya* 外緣 (i.e., external conditions), be it by chance or by fate – in a sense, the difference between the two is merely nominal.

Jose A. Arguelles has it right: “In evolution it is not really the species that is ultimately furthered, but the very impulse for life” (Dhiegh, 1973, p. xviii). That is to say, however evolution unfolds, it is always an expression and affirmation of *élan vital*, regardless of whether a species is augmented, rendered obsolescent, or diverges into some other species. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) make a similar point: “What is real is the becoming itself, the block of becoming, not the supposedly fixed terms through which that which becomes passes” (p. 238). As such, the biosphere has a natural tendency toward diversification. Hence the validity of the notion, “one origin, ten thousand permutations” 一本萬殊. *Élan vital* is characterized by openness and responsiveness to a world it is capable of encompassing, namely, its *umwelt*, which is uniquely its own. It makes and is remade by the world it is capable of sensing. Evolution never happens in a relational vacuum. It is always a matter of coevolution or involution, just as becoming always involves double becoming or “a block of becoming.” Becoming is auto-creative, reciprocal, and negentropic. It is a deep play in which the power to affect and the power to be affected are both called upon, in which action and passion are interfused. Becoming is intense. The Deleuzian-Guattarian phrase, “becoming intense,” is usefully redundant.

Understood as such, *élan vital* is precisely synonymous with the Chinese term “primal *qi*” 元氣, or simply *qi*. Deleuze (1991) points out in *Bergsonism*, “The construction of the organism is both the stating of a problem and a solution” (p. 16). Each life form is the contingent outcome of a peculiar life problem which *élan vital* confronts and to which it has to find a creative solution. The solution is the life form itself. The differentiation of *élan vital* or primal *qi* into yin and yang is not only a peculiar solution to the problem of reproduction, but also a way of creating an inner dynamics or play within the organism. Health or *Gesundheit* is thus a matter of homeostasis or dynamic equilibrium between yin and yang. Morphogenesis as creative actualization of the virtual is motivated by opportunities for entering into contrapuntal or symbiotic relations, so Jakob von Uexküll (2010) indicates (p. 190). This logic applies to yin and yang. The emergence of yin and yang manifests *élan vital*’s intelligence, responsive virtuosity, and auto-creativity. Yin and yang are meant to have a symbiotic relationship with each other. That is to say, the two modes of life energy are supposed to meet and interact with each other. Their communion bespeaks a good state of affairs, and their separation a bad one. The yin-yang principle is “an explicit duality expressing an implicit unity” (Watts, 1975, p. 26).

To use Deleuze’s language, when *élan vital* as the virtual whole differentiates into yin and yang, “each side of the division... carries the whole with it. From a certain

perspective it is like an accompanying nebulosity, testifying to its undivided origin” (Deleuze, 1991, p. 95). As such, there is a halo of yin in yang, and a nebula of yang in yin. For “[d]ifferentiation is always the actualization of a virtuality that persists across its actual divergent lines” (Deleuze, 1991, p. 95). The reasoning here applies to maleness and femaleness, masculinity and femininity. That is to say, there is a halo of femininity in masculinity, and a nebula of masculinity in femininity. There is something entirely and absolutely natural about androgyny. The notion of “a thousand tiny sexes” should come off as no surprise at all. As far as *élan vital* is concerned, the relationship between yin and yang is more a matter of complementarity, co-presence, interplay, mutual generation, inter-transformation, interdependence, and dynamic equilibrium than simple binary opposition. The lotus seed, for example, is yang in nature, but its green core is yin in nature. As a whole, it is well balanced. Although in a way yang is to yin as yes is to no, it is nevertheless a thin simplification to reduce yang and yin to yes and no, or one and zero. Yang and yin are vital and “spiritual” whereas one and zero are technical. Instead of simply canceling each other out, yin and yang depend on each other for existence. Rather than mutually exclusive, they are mutually inclusive and undergo endless inter-transformation, as indicated by the Taiji Diagram. The interplay between yin and yang is inexhaustibly negentropic.

The above speculation, which is Bergsonian-Deleuzian in nature, is well in line with a point made by Zhang Boduan [Chang Po-tuan] 張伯端, the Song Dynasty Daoist spiritual alchemist, in *Understanding Reality* 悟真篇: “The Tao produces one energy from nothingness, then from one energy gives birth to yin and yang” 道自虛無生一氣, 便從一氣產陰陽 (Cleary, 2003, p. 77). Here “energy” is a direct translation of *qi*. If Bergsonian creative evolution goes from the virtual to the actual (e.g., from one undifferentiated energy to yin and yang, from pure yin and pure yang to Fire/Li 離 and Water/Kan 坎, from “the single essence of real consciousness with innate knowledge and innate capacity” to “a division between the human mind and the mind of Tao”), then Daoist spiritual alchemy goes in the opposite direction and seeks to reunite and reintegrate yin and yang, Fire and Water, the human mind and the mind of Dao, in the belief that spiritual elixir will crystallize through the process (Cleary, 2003, p. 67). As Liu Yiming [Liu I-ming] 劉一明, the Qing Dynasty Daoist internal alchemist, puts it, “when yin and yang unite, they produce the elixir and prolong life; when yin and yang are at odds, they turn away from each other, causing loss of life” (Cleary, 2003, p. 58).

Yin and Yang

For Daoist spiritual alchemists, yang connotes the celestial, the primal unconscious mind or the mind of Dao,

whereas yin connotes the mundane, the acquired, and the conditioned conscious mind.¹ As Liu Yiming puts it, “The conditioned human mentality uses consciousness to create illusions, so the natural reality of the mind of Tao is buried away” (Cleary, 2003, p. 80). This Daoist understanding coincides with, or, more precisely, anticipates the Spinozan-Deleuzean understanding that “consciousness is by nature the locus of an illusion” (Deleuze, 1988b, p. 19). The Spinozan-Bergsonian way of putting it is that intuition is superior to the intellect.² For one thing, “the intellect divides everything, intuition unites everything,” as Will Durant (1927) points out (p. 368). A strikingly similar understanding is found in Zen Buddhism: *prajna* is superior to *viññana*; hence the need to transform *viññana* into *prajna* 轉識成智. To couch it in the language of the *Yijing*, the conditioned conscious mind or the intellect is the equivalent of Fire, whereas the primal unconscious mind or intuition is the equivalent of Water (Cleary, 2003, p. 43).

Liu Yiming takes Fire to be based on the body of Heaven 乾 and Water to be based on the body of Earth 坤 (Cleary, 2003, p. 43). This article holds that Fire derives from Earth (pure yin). It is yang on the outside but yin in the belly. By contrast, Water derives from Heaven (pure yang). It is yin on the outside but solid in the belly. According to Zhang Zai 張載, the Song Dynasty *qi*-based monist philosopher, the Fire trigram is a yin trigram, whereas the Water trigram is a yang trigram 離本陰卦, 坎本陽卦 (Zeng, 1991, p. 818). Zhang Boduan teaches: “Take the solid in the heart of the position of water, and change the yin in the innards of the palace of fire: from this transformation comes the sound body of heaven – to lie hidden or to fly and leap is all up to the mind” (Cleary, p. 81). Here Zhang Boduan is referring to the trigrams Water, Fire, and Heaven. The latter is pure yang and therefore desirable. Arguably this verse encapsulates the gist of *Understanding Reality*.

A sage of old said, “Buddhists cultivate concentration in the chamber of FIRE, Taoists seek the mystery in the domain of WATER” (Cleary, 2003, p. 421). The former means practicing discipline 戒, concentration/tranquility/*samadhi* 止/定, and insight/*prajna* 觀/慧, not allowing sense objects to influence one, so that myriad existents are void. The idea is to get rid of the yin in the center of Fire, or to remove mundane conditioning from consciousness (Cleary, 2003, p. 421). The latter means refining vitality 精, energy 氣, and spirit 神. The idea is to keep the yang in the center of Water, or to preserve the primordial awareness underlying the original vitality of life (Cleary, 2003, p. 421). In actuality, the difference between the two psychosomatic practices is more a matter of focus. One who gets rid of conditioning (symbolized by the yin in the center of Fire) ends up recovering primordial awareness; one who seeks

primordial awareness will have to get rid of conditioning (symbolized by the two yin lines trapping the yang line in the Water trigram). The two sides (i.e., deconditioning and the recuperation of primordial awareness) are important for both spiritual practices. In the eyes of the Sixth Patriarch, the one (the cultivation of concentration) is the substance / embodiment 體, the other (intuiting the mystery) is the function/enactment 用, and there is no duality between the two (Yampolsky, 2012, p. 135).

Although pure yang is desirable, the *Yijing* teaches that nothing lasts. Yang grown old flips into yin, and vice versa. Put otherwise, there is reversibility between yin and yang. What is crucial is that the two energies stay mutually responsive (cor-responding) or resonant. This principle explains why Dui/Lake 兌 (a descending yin line above two ascending yang lines) is joy. The same principle explains the propitiousness of Tai/Peace 泰 (Earth above Heaven), Xian/Reciprocity 咸 (Lake above Mountain, or, young girl above young man), Yi/Increase 益 (Wind above Thunder), and Ji Ji/After Completion/Settled 既濟 (Water above Fire). In the case of After Completion, lines 1 and 4, 2 and 5, 3 and 6 are all mutually responsive, all yang lines are in yang positions, all yin lines are in yin positions. Among all 64 hexagrams, After Completion is the only one in which both line-to-line responsiveness 相應 and consistency between line and position 得位 work out perfectly well. As for the upper and lower trigrams, Water by nature descends but occupies the upper position, Fire by nature ascends but occupies the lower position. Thus they meet and benefit each other.

The hexagrams “Peace” and “After Completion” are important to Daoists and Zennists alike. In his spiritual autobiography, which has strong Daoist overtones, Hakuin Ekaku 白隱慧鶴, the Japanese Rinzai Zen master, explained how, by pushing himself too hard, his heart fire began to rise upward against the natural course, parching his lungs of their essential fluids, leading to meditation sickness. He learned from Master Hakuyu 白幽 that the lungs, manifesting the metal principle, are a female organ, the liver, manifesting the wood principle, is a male organ, the heart, manifesting the fire principle, is the major yang organ, and the kidneys, manifesting the water principle, are the major yin organ. Also, fire is by nature light and unsteady and always wants to mount upward, whereas water is by nature heavy and settled and always wants to sink downward. When the lungs are scorched by the fire in one’s heart, the kidneys are also weakened and debilitated, since there is a mother-and-child relationship between the lungs and the kidneys, the reasoning being that metal generates water.³ Therefore, the person who has arrived at attainment always keeps the heart’s vital energy below, filling the lower body. An average or

mediocre person always allows the heart's vital energy to rise up unchecked so it diffuses throughout the upper body (Waddell, 1999, pp. 76-82). It bears mentioning that Hakuyu simply restated a systems-theoretic understanding of the human body that originated in ancient China.

According to Hakuyu, the Peace hexagram is the configuration of the True Person, whose lower body is filled with primal energy. Coming to the gist of Introspective Meditation 內觀, Hakuyu points out: "the nature of fire is to flame upward, so it must be made to descend; the nature of water is to flow downward, so it must be made to rise. This condition of fire descending and water ascending is called intermingling. The time when intermingling is taking place is called Already Completed; the time when it is not taking place is called Before Completion. Intermingling is a configuration of life. Not intermingling is a configuration of death" (Waddell, 1999, p. 86). Hakuyu's teaching is consistent with the understanding behind traditional Chinese medicine. Jiao Tai Wan/Grand Communication Pill 交泰丸 (the hexagram behind it is Peace) is supposed to produce the same effect as that which is explained in the following quote: "the heart becomes exhausted [of energy] when it tires and thus overheats. When the heart is exhausted, it can be replenished by making it descend below and intermingle with the kidneys. This is known as replenishing. It corresponds to the principle of After Completion" (Waddell, 1999, pp. 86-87). Introspective Meditation is preferable because one can simply practice it and regain health and vigor without taking medicine.

The *Yijing* repeatedly cautions against the ill-advisability of excessive yang and reveals the serviceability and effectiveness of yin forces. The latter is precisely the emphasis of Laozi and arguably Daoism in general. A comparison of the trigrams Dui/Lake and Xun/Wind 巽 (two yang lines above a yin line) is in order here. In both Xun and Dui, the hard and strong inhabits a position of centrality and rectitude. The meanings of Xun and Dui are similar to each other. Yet Dui implies smoothness whereas Xun implies only moderate smoothness. That's because Dui is the doing of yang whereas Xun is the doing of yin. Dui is gentle on the outside and uses gentleness; Xun is gentle on the inside so it's gentle in nature. That's why Xun's smoothness is relatively moderate (Zeng, 1991, p. 1133). The indication is that it's preferable to be strong on the inside and gentle on the outside (this is also part of the message of the hexagram Tai/Peace), although gentleness in nature (i.e., on the inside) also affords a degree of smoothness in its own way. It's arguable whether the *Dao De Jing* celebrates the way of Dui or the way of Xun, or both. Regardless, let's not forget that judo, the style of wrestling profoundly inspired by the *Dao De Jing*, literally means the gentle way.

The larger point, though, is that the *Yijing* does not one-sidedly emphasize either yang or yin, but their reciprocity and co-operation. It inculcates a relational, interality-oriented Weltanschauung. Propitiousness is a matter of action or inaction that is time-, position-, and relation-specific. The mutating yin and yang lines are ways of encompassing the configuration of forces in a relational field where impermanence is the only permanence, where all is changing except for change itself, so the gentleperson could fluidly switch from one psychic-social posture to another and respond virtuously to one situation after another. One may choose to associate decorum with Confucianism, and responsive virtuosity with Chan Buddhism, but as far as the *Yijing* is concerned, there is little difference between the two.

One thing the above train of thought suggests is that Daoist spiritual alchemy, Zen Buddhism, Spinozan ethics, and Jungian psychology (which promotes the integration of consciousness and the unconscious) seem to have reached pretty much the same insight, although each speaks a somewhat different language and has its peculiar preoccupation and emphasis. To extend the association a step further, Marshall McLuhan would associate the metaphorical Water with right-hemisphere thinking and Fire with left-hemisphere thinking. Had he dug deeper into the *Yijing*, he would also say that Western civilization, which is predicated upon the phonetic alphabet and operates in an eye mode, is characterized by the Fire sign: firm on the outside but infirm on the inside. Hellmut Wilhelm (1960) confirms this alignment – in effect if not by intention – when he points out that the part of the body associated with the Fire trigram is the eye, whereas the part associated with the Water trigram is the ear (pp. 42-43).

A Deleuzian Take

Deleuze's work gives one the impulse to create a simulacrum out of traditional Chinese yin-yang theory – in the spirit of "the power of falsity" and in the interest of the deterritorialization or becoming-other of concepts (Deleuze, 1995, p. 11). There is such a thing called productive deviation from the original – deviation being a manifestation of *élan vital* in the conceptual realm. One is tempted to propose an analogy: yin is to yang as the virtual is to the actual. Here the virtual is privileged since it betokens the youthfulness and transformability of a "thing," be it a person, an organization, a life form, or whatever. This proposal is in line with the spirit of the *Yijing* and the notion of the ceaseless becoming of becoming. To follow this train of thought, yin and the virtual connote openness, potentiality, and so on. The emphasis is on re-formability instead of form, becoming instead of being. In the case of an organization, to have a virtual double means to have at least a second breath or a second life. The organization's vitality is a function of

the inexhaustibility and ceaseless becoming of its virtual double.

Daoist spiritual rejuvenation means pretty much the same thing. In a sense, the whole point of Daoism is to assist yang with yin, or to assist “things” with interality. There is no difference between nurturing one’s virtue and nurturing one’s virtuality insofar as actual power is the manifestation of potential power. Vitalism is a matter of keeping the virtual functional. It is no coincidence that the Chinese word *qi* 氣 is put in calligraphic form under the chapter title, “Te – Virtuality,” in Watts’s 1975 book on Dao. The indication is that yin means a virtual or spiritual double, with “spirit” to be understood in a primordial sense. Deleuze (1991) articulates a very similar idea in *Bergsonism*: “Life as *movement* alienates itself in the material *form* that it creates; by actualizing itself, by differentiating itself, it loses ‘contact with the rest of itself’. Every species is thus an arrest of movement; it could be said that the living being turns on itself and *closes itself*” (p. 104). To nurture one’s virtual double is to keep the self open. It should come as no surprise for one to encounter this understanding in *Bergsonism* since Bergson’s own work, especially *Creative Evolution*, has strong Daoist undertones. The following idea of Bergson’s, for example, immediately calls to mind Zhuangzi: “The most living thought becomes frigid in the formula that expresses it. The word turns against the idea. The letter kills the spirit” (Bergson, 1911, p. 127). The last sentence, by the way, can be heard as a criticism of literacy or the scriptural economy, or as an affirmation of the Zen sensibility.

In the information age, the primacy of materiality or actuality gives way to the primacy of information, re-inform-ability, *xu* 虛, or virtuality. There is an ascendance of the virtual in all spheres. How do the terms line up, though, with yin and yang? They line up differently depending on whether one is a Platonist or a Deleuzian. For the Platonist, material connotes maternal (the Greek word *khôra* comes to mind) (Zhang, 2017b, p. 2). As such, it is to be dismissed as passive, fashion-able, epiphenomenal, and yin. Information or Form, by contrast, is real, regulating, in-formative, impregnating, and yang. A Deleuzian, however, would see a different alignment: the actual is yang, and the virtual double is yin. The latter is precisely the preoccupation of the interologist 間性論者. The Zennist in Deleuze would say that the virtual undergoes creation, destruction, and recreation *ksana* by *ksana*. Subject to a principle of uncertainty, indeterminacy, and impermanence, the virtual reacts upon the actual and motivates its becoming (Deleuze & Parnet, 2007, p. 148).

Deleuze displays a sophisticated understanding of yin in a short piece entitled “Hot and Cool.” As he points out: “when the medium is hot, nothing circulates or communicates except through the cool, which controls

every active interaction” (Deleuze, 2004, p. 250). This quote needs to be understood in a philosophical or metaphysical, rather than technical, sense. Yin affords thoroughness 通. Besides, things owe their lines of flight and becomings to yin, interality 間性, and virtuality, in the same way they owe their dramatic identity, which is a matter of transient permutation, to their relationality. All is to say, yin is virtual, spiritual, and, insofar as “spirit” connotes *qi* (i.e., *élan vital*, vital energy), vital. These words are dear to Chen Tuan 陳搏, the Daoist sage known as the “Sleeping Immortal,” who summarized his spiritual alchemy in terms of refining vitality into energy/*qi*, refining energy into spirit, and refining spirit into virtuality 煉精化氣, 煉氣化神, 煉神還虛 (Cleary, 2003, p. 111). The terms vitality, energy, and spirit, although not synonymous, definitely belong together. The Daoists call them the three treasures 三寶. It is interesting to see that this train of thought, which involves the becoming-perverse of the concept of yin, has led us back to Daoism.

A Rhapsodic Reiteration

As long as the three inches of *qi* is still there, one can put it to a thousand different uses 三寸氣在千般用. Zhuangzi teaches us that there is such a thing called the usefulness of the useless or unused. A city’s *qi* can be exhausted through overdevelopment. Urban clutter renders a city spiritless (Zhang, 2017a, p. 39). A person’s *qi* can be depleted through busyness or mental clutter. Hence Zhuangzi’s notion of the fasting of the mind 心齋. Laozi makes a similar point: the scholar gains day by day whereas the Daoist loses day by day 為學日益, 為道日損. The nurturance of emptiness is the Daoist’s lifetime dedication. For Zennists, emptiness (i.e., *sunyata*) is the ground out of which all things emerge and to which all things return. Form is impermanent and, at a fundamental level, no different than emptiness 色不異空. Individual creatures take and lose form as the right conditions arise and demise.⁴ Form is to emptiness as the actual is to the virtual. Actualization is a matter of dependent co-arising – contrapuntality or symbiosis motivates morphogenesis or the creation of form. Counter-actualization is a matter of returning to the virtual, which becomes the starting point for another round of actualization and counter-actualization. This line of reasoning brings us close to the Buddhist notion of reincarnation. The four stages of life known as formation, existence, decay, and emptiness 成住壞空 should form a circle instead of a line.⁵ Nirvana is a matter of staying in the realm of the virtual, which is beyond life and death.

There is a tradeoff between actuality and virtuality. Nothing is gained without a loss. We gain actuality at the expense of virtuality. By becoming a specialist, one gives up the opportunity to be a “gentleman” or a spiritual

aristocrat.⁶ Vilem Flusser (2013) points out that the First World is rich in actuality but poor in virtuality; by contrast, the Third World is poor in actuality but rich in virtuality (p. 161).⁷ Put otherwise, the Third World has more *qi*. Paul Virilio (1999) indicates that present-day technologists have the impulse to use up the available spaces inside the human body so humans are loaded up with micro technical objects, so life is augmented (p. 55). Daoists and Zennists have the opposite aspiration. The last thing they want to do is load life down with material possessions, load the body down with technological extensions, or load the mind down with intellectual acquisitions. They are privy to the wisdom that, to recover the mind of Dao, one needs mental tranquility. Pure yang emerges out of pure yin. Insight 觀 emerges out of concentration 止. Adequate ideas grow out of a clear, uncluttered mind, a mind that is not preoccupied. Sagehood is defined by not having psychological blind spots. The average person can consult the *Yijing* to reach a state of mind in which one is totally aware of the virtual regardless of the actual. The virtual affords change and becoming.

The uninitiated may think that the Zen affirmation of *sunyata* or emptiness betrays a nihilistic impulse. The opposite is the case. To affirm *sunyata* is precisely to promote vitalism. For perishability is the very essence of life. The cherry-blossom-loving Japanese people are not the only people privy to this understanding. As a spiritual practice, Zen conserves and recovers the virtual, *élan vital*, or *qi*. So does Daoism. The undifferentiated Virtual Whole differentiates into the actual and a virtual double, or into yang (the actualized) and yin (the unactualized). When yin is exhausted, the ten thousand things lose their flexibility, vitality, youthfulness, and *joie de vivre*. Apparently, the digital age is characterized by the superabundance of virtuality. This appearance needs to be critically analyzed and dispelled. Digital media colonize and contaminate the unconscious. Besides, one can be trapped in layers of dreams almost forever, to invoke the theme of the movie, *Inception* 盜夢空間. Virtual reality is a misnomer. As a medium, it is the outcome of excessive actualization, even though at the level of content, it is rich in indeterminacy. Social media deplete people's mental energy. Let us remember that energy means *qi*.

Viewed from a different angle, *élan vital* differentiates into the intellect and intuition. There is a halo of intuition around the intellect, and a nebula of the intellect around intuition. Together they make the mind of Dao. To use the language of the *Yijing*, the intellect is to intuition as Fire is to Water. The nature of Fire is to flame upward, and the nature of Water is to flow downward. The Fire of consciousness is an inadequate figure surrounded by the sea of the unconscious. For Aldous Huxley (1990), the former is the narrowed human

mind, and the latter "Mind at Large" (pp. 23-24). Spiritual alchemy informed by the *Yijing* entails driving the descending Water of intuition up and directing the Fire of the intellect down so the two could intermingle. This practice is well in line with a key understanding of Jungian psychology, according to which it is important for the culture to reintegrate its unconscious materials. Jung is not the only thinker who emphasizes the unconscious, though. For D. T. Suzuki (1956), the Zen doctrine of no-mind (*wuxin* 無心) is based on a fundamental trust in the superior wisdom the unconscious alone has (pp. 157-226). Deleuze and Guattari see the unconscious as "a mechanism of desire," or as the locus for the production of desire (Deleuze, 2004, p. 232). Desire, it needs to be reemphasized, is the manifestation of *élan vital*. To use a Whiteheadian formulation, life craves only its own intensities; life desires. As the outcome of cultural conditioning, consciousness tends to negate life. It is a notorious naysayer. The unconscious is where *élan vital* retains its innocence, integrity, primal energy, will to power, and power to intuit.

To risk being redundant, a counterintuitive point needs to be restated here. In accordance with the logic of the *Yijing*, Water is a yang trigram, whereas Fire is a yin trigram. One can make the opposite argument but the larger point is that one needs to combine, through spiritual alchemy, the one yang line in the middle of Water with the two yang lines on the outside of Fire to derive Heaven, which is pure yang. Daoist spiritual alchemy is a psychosomatic practice. There is no duality between the psychic aspect and the somatic aspect. By driving the Fire of the heart downward toward the field of elixir so it intermingles with the Water of the kidneys, one not only achieves bodily *Gesundheit* but also mental Gestalt. The psychic and the somatic are simply flip sides of the same coin. The mind and the body are one. Not only is there such a thing called the wisdom of the body, in vast nature, intelligence does not rely on there being a brain. If pure yin and pure yang are two unadulterated modes of *qi*, then Fire and Water are two adulterated, derivative modes of *qi*. All derive from the undifferentiated *élan vital*. If *élan vital* has the intrinsic tendency toward differentiation and dichotomization, then spiritual alchemy is a matter of reintegration, a matter of recuperating *élan vital*'s openness and potential for becoming.

In our era, evolution has become hyper-technologized. The human body-mind is at once freed up and loaded down by its technological extensions and implants. To be occupied is to be preoccupied. A sword in hand entails sword-like thoughts and affects and constitutes a sword-like person. As much as the sword extends the person's nails, it also turns the person into its servomechanism. One risks losing one's aspirations when playing with things. The word "aspiration" has

spirit or *qi* in it. Technical objects consume people's *qi* or virtuality. Our ethical situation today is defined by lack of freedom from technological conditioning and machinic enslavement, now that the difference between the vital and the technological is being transcended by the machinic, which takes up both and points in the direction of "post-evolution" and a machinic vitalism (Zhang, 2016). Virilio regards this from a dromological perspective as a fatal coupling (Virilio & Lotringer, 2008, p. 150). Human technology is fundamentally human. The prehistoric (technically, before the invention of writing) emergence of technology marked a fateful differentiation of *élan vital* as it was trapped in the life form known as humanity. From that point on, the human Gestalt was no longer complete without its technological components. The fact that we cannot retrieve a phone number nowadays without checking our smartphones is simply a contemporary symptom of that fateful development.

Spiritual alchemy today involves reintegrating somehow the vital in us and the technological about and within us. With the acceleration of technological advances, there is an aggravating spiritual lag or deficit. We pay a spiritual price for technological empowerment. Technology enhances our efficiency but also saps our *qi*, *spiritus*, or primal energy. Spiritual alchemists today cannot withdraw into deep mountains and maintain their personal integrity in a secluded environment. Instead, they need to think up and try out updated ways of addressing today's spiritual deficit. The heuristic behind the Fire and Water trigrams remains relevant. Fire is to Water as technology is to biology. Again, the Fire trigram is a yin trigram. Technology embodies the ingenuity and philofolly of humanity. Our capacity to spiritualize technology and thereby ameliorating our technologically induced breathlessness and spiritlessness is challenged like never before, now that humanity is confronted with what seems to be another technological break boundary. Machinism as a *Weltanschauung* reveals a functional arrangement but does not bring into focus, let alone address, our spiritual problem, which is a problem of spiritual reintegration and reconciliation. The question is, can we synchronize our breath and that of our myriad technological spouses, thereby eliminating the rhythmic dissensus in between? Is it worth trying in the first place? More importantly, can our technologies evolve in a way that enriches our virtuality or *qi*, instead of impoverishing it? How are we supposed to take account of the *qi* proper to machinic assemblages? What does a technological or machinic vitalism feel like? These are burning questions for spiritual alchemists in the age of machinic assemblages. They also evidence the relevance of the discourse of *qi* and the discourse of *élan vital* now and in the immediate future. Both discourses need to be updated, though.

Bodies without Organs: An Alchemical Speculation

For Deleuze and Guattari (1987), the egg is a body without organs (BwO) par excellence (p. 164). It is characterized by disarticulation (i.e., the absence or dissolution of partitions) or undifferentiation, and loaded with the potential to become. The BwO manifests a minimum degree of actualization and contains a maximum amount of virtuality. It is full of primal, undifferentiated, unexpressed *qi*. In a lucky encounter with Hsien-hao Sebastian Liao 廖咸浩, the redologist 紅學家, poet, and English professor, he explained how practicing *qigong* [*chi kung*] turns one into a BwO. He shared a bunch of impressions: after experiencing a series of breakthroughs in one's practice, the organs seem to disappear and the body enters a state of holistic oneness, with *qi* circulating smoothly, unimpeded by energy jams 滯; one is still conscious but no longer an individual, having turned into a pre- or post-individual singularity; the barrier between self and nature melts away, allowing for free communication of *qi* in between, making it unnecessary for one to absorb energy from food, since, to use Hakuin's language, one's vital inborn energy is combined with the primal energy of heaven and earth whence it derives (Waddell, 1999, p. 85). Put differently, interior and exterior have fused with each other on a plane of immanence (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 156). This psychosomatic state is a state of thoroughness, which is the very essence of *Gesundheit*.

In a state of thoroughness, the BwO may undergo a functional delocalization. "The body entire is hands and eyes" 通身是手眼, as the Zen phrase has it (Hori, 2003, p. 207). In his spiritual autobiography, Hakuin invokes the voice of Su Dongpo 蘇東坡 to explain the benefit of sitting and counting one's breath: "By the time you have counted a thousand breaths, your body should be as firm and steady as a rock, your heart as tranquil and motionless as the empty sky. If you continue to sit like this for a long period, your breath will hang suspended. You will no longer inhale or exhale. Your breath will exude in clouds, rise up like mist, from the eighty-four thousand pores of your skin" (Waddell, 1999, pp. 89-90). The thoroughness is so thoroughgoing that the nose and the lungs are no longer called upon for respiration. The skin ends up serving that function instead. The fact that the lungs and the skin are developmentally homologous makes Su Dongpo's claim sound more or less credible. Similarly, Guattari is interested in the delocalization of sex from the genitals. For one who has gone through resingularization, the entire body wakes up, becomes sensitive all over, and feels like a generalized sex organ (Guattari, 1996, pp. 204-214). There is something of this nature in courtly love: "[t]he slightest caress may be as strong as an orgasm" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 156). In a sense, queerness is more about singularization than anything else, just as homosexuality is "a means of access

to the demonic” or mystery (Guattari, 1996, p. 208). Whether *Nymphomaniac* is pornography passing as art or art in the guise of pornography is only a secondary question. The larger issue is that the film barely involves any delocalization of sex. It reinforces a narrow understanding of sex even as it disrupts the parameters of proper sexual relations. As such, it is very straight, conservative, and pedestrian.

The sex drive is probably the most direct manifestation of *élan vital*. There is something Confucian or Catholic about sex strictly tied to procreation. The Daoists are more imaginative in the sense that they have transformed sex into a means of life experimentation, androcentric as it is. The Daoist puts emphasis on the conservation of vitality 守精, and holds that one can have an equally intensive experience without ejaculation. The sentiment is fairly close to that of the Balinese sexual economy, which privileges intensity over orgasm, favors “a thousand plateaus” instead of a climactic catharsis. Hence the title of the rhizomatic book coauthored by Deleuze and Guattari. As a textual body, the book constitutes a BwO. It is characterized more by the free flow and inexhaustibility of textual *qi* 文氣 than by conformity to formal conventions. It has countless entrances and exits in the same way an infinite number of apertures open up in the *qigong* practitioner’s body. The writing was driven by short-term memory. As such, it captures “thought thinking” rather than “thought thought.” Hence its fresh, non-abiding 無住, and in-the-moment 當下 quality. In this sense, *A Thousand Plateaus* constitutes a Zen artifact. It performatively overcomes the rigidity of literacy by taking literacy to a bursting point, creating a symphonic effect (Shostakovich’s *Leningrad Symphony*, with its subtle, haunting ritornello and all that, does come to mind). The trajectory of textual *qi* is nonreplicable in the same way the wild cursive 狂草 script of Huaisu 懷素 is nonreplicable. Reading the book gives one the sensation of thoroughness and plenitude.

An intensive (i.e., continuously orgasmic), negentropic inter-mind emerged between Deleuze and Guattari when they practiced collaborative writing. Torrents of mental energy/*qi* circulated in between their minds, creating an inter-cerebral smooth space. Their *modus operandi* was interological in nature. The praxis is veritably the mental equivalent of bedroom alchemy or sexual yoga. As an affective and spiritual praxis, bedroom alchemy is not just about the interpersonal transmission of *qi*. The coupling of a yin body and a yang body motivates and augments the circulation of *qi*, and literally creates synergy in between. The smooth circulation of *qi* dissolves both personalities, turning the duo into a single BwO whose mode of being is defined by nothing other than the circulation of *qi*, or simply thoroughness. For the Daoist spiritual alchemist, the great health advocated by Nietzsche either means thoroughness

or means nothing. A passage by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) is in order here. This is the only place in *A Thousand Plateaus* where yin and yang are discussed:

A great Japanese compilation of Chinese Taoist treatises was made in A.D. 982-984. We see in it the formation of a circuit of intensities between female and male energy, with the woman playing the role of the innate or instinctive force (Yin) stolen by or transmitted to the man in such a way that the transmitted force of the man (Yang) in turn becomes innate, all the more innate: an augmentation of powers. The condition for this circulation and multiplication is that the man not ejaculate. It is not a question of experiencing desire as an internal lack, nor of delaying pleasure in order to produce a kind of externalizable surplus value, but instead of constituting an intensive body without organs, Tao, a field of immanence in which desire lacks nothing and therefore cannot be linked to any external or transcendent criterion. It is true that the whole circuit can be channeled toward procreative ends (ejaculation when the energies are right); that is how Confucianism understood it. But this is true only for one side of the assemblage of desire, the side facing the strata, organisms, State, family... It is not true for the other side, the Tao side of destratification that draws a plane of consistency proper to desire. (p. 157)

This praxis is idiomatically known as “drawing on yin to enhance yang” 採陰補陽. The rationale is very similar to that of introspective meditation, or the reasoning behind the Peace and After Completion hexagrams. The main difference lies in whether the meeting of yin and yang happens endogenously or exogenously, and whether the BwO is apparently single-bodied or double-bodied. Awakened Daoists and Zennists do not go beyond the quotidian to practice the Dao. They do the same things everybody else does: breathing, sleeping, sitting 坐亦禪, walking 行亦禪, pissing, making love, and so on, but decodify and spiritualize everything they do, giving it a nomadic, singular quality. Further ethical considerations are in order, though, if we take machinic assemblages as BwO’s, especially where humans are taken up as constituent elements. As integrated world capitalism has an interest in turning the entire globe into a BwO, so machinic assemblages have an interest in encountering minimum human resistance. There is a fine line between machinic autopoiesis on the part of humans as ethical agents on the one hand and machinic enslavement of humans on the other hand. “Thoroughness for whom” is not an idle question.

Concluding Remarks

This article is of a piece with a recent article by Peter Zhang (2016) entitled “The Four Ecologies, Post-Evolution and Singularity.” Both are preceded by the work of Yan Fu 嚴復, the premodern translator of Thomas Henry Huxley’s *Evolution and Ethics*, who saw evolutionism in Zhuangzi. The line, “As the one energy/*qi* circulates, things naturally change/evolve” — 氣之行, 物自為變, sums it all up. Yan Fu’s work, however, has preoccupied the Chinese mind with Darwinism, as distinguished from Bergsonism. Deleuze’s rigorous, lucid interpretation of Bergson’s work opens up the possibility for us to revisit Zhuangzi’s work and Daoism in general through the lens of Bergsonism, and vice versa. Comparatively speaking, Darwinism, in spite of Darwin, puts an overemphasis on competition among species.⁸ Bergsonism, by contrast, draws our attention to relationality and contrapuntality as the motive force behind differentiation and morphogenesis. For the sake of efficiency, the latter understanding has been couched in the language of Peter Herschok and that of Jakob von Uexküll. Huineng, the Sixth Zen Patriarch, reached a similar understanding much earlier, as evidenced by the line, “Living things all have their own ways and therefore they do not hinder or afflict each other” 色類自有道, 各不相妨惱. Herschok (2012) reveals the positive truth behind this negative formulation by pointing out how species in nature are different not only *from* each other but also *for* each other (p. 50). The same symbiotic relationship exists between yin and yang, which have derived from one and the same *qi*, or *élan vital*.

At a fateful moment over the span of human existence, the human Gestalt differentiated into biology and technology, which, like yin and yang, are interdependent and mutually constitutive. Up until modern times, the Chinese philosophical and spiritual predilection for the undifferentiated virtual whole not only translated into efforts to keep yin and yang in harmonious balance but also kept technology from [d]evolving into a domineering force against nature and humanity itself. The chopsticks, for instance, betoken a very different approach, affect, and mental posture than the fork — to hold with mental equanimity versus to hold down and stab possessively and aggressively. As with food, so with everything else. The phonetic alphabet entails a radically different cultural spirit than the imagistic pictograph and the suggestive ideograph, among other strategies for making scripts. The civilized West has been preoccupied with transcendence, efficient causality, the abstracted figure, Euclidean geometry, the actual, and what amounts to an entity orientation. By contrast, the differentially civilized “Far East” has retained its predilection for immanence, biogenerative causality, the total situation, topology, the virtual, and

what amounts to an interality orientation. Granted that the West is to the East as Fire is to Water, spiritual alchemy today entails driving up the cultural humor of the East while keeping down the cultural heat of the West so humanity stands a chance of taking the yang line in the heart of Water to replace the yin line in the belly of Fire and thereby attaining the mind of Dao. That is where the discourse of *qi* and the heuristic of yin and yang leave us.

Notes

1. The Zen notion of *wuxin* (no mind) is a matter of not letting the conditioned conscious mind interfere with the spontaneous functioning of the primal unconscious mind, and trusting in the adequacy of the latter.
2. Bergson (1946) points out: “an absolute can only be given in an *intuition*, while all the rest has to do with *analysis*. We call intuition here the *sympathy* by which one is transported into the interior of an object in order to coincide with what there is unique and consequently inexpressible in it. Analysis, on the contrary, is the operation which reduces the object to elements already known, that is, common to that object and to others” (p. 190).
3. Evidence in medicine indicates that lungs and kidneys work together when there’s a disturbance. If the lungs fail, the blood gets too acidic and kidneys try to excrete the excess of acids. It’s called metabolic compensation of respiratory acidosis.
4. This essentially Buddhist understanding is seen in Deleuze (1988a), too: “It is obvious that any form is precarious, since it depends on relations between forces and their mutations” (p. 129).
5. The original sense of the four terms in Buddhism is the periodic gradual destruction of a universe over the course of four eons, i.e., the eon of formation, the eon of continuation, the eon of decay, and the eon of nothingness.
6. Confucius’s voice is being invoked here: “A gentleman is not an implement” 君子不器 (Waley, 1938, p. 90).
7. The same reasoning is found in Bergson (1911): “Probably the effort of the animal kingdom resulted in creating organisms still very simple, but endowed with a certain freedom of action, and, above all, with a shape so undecided that it could lend itself to any future determination. These animals may have resembled some of our worms, but with this difference, however, that the worms living today, to which they could be compared, are but the empty and fixed examples of infinitely plastic forms, pregnant with an unlimited future, the common stock of the echinoderms, molluscs, arthropods, and vertebrates” (p. 130).
8. Darwin himself was well aware of symbiosis, as evidenced by the following narrative found at London Zoo: “When presented with a Madagascan orchid with an unusually long nectar chamber (up to 30cm), Darwin predicted that there must be a moth with a

proboscis long enough to reach the nectar inside. Darwin was fascinated with the relationship between plants and animals, and he realised that the orchid and its pollinator must have co-evolved, gradually elongating over time. After Darwin died his theory was proved when the Morgan's sphinx moth was discovered, with a proboscis up to three times its own body length."

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