

A Thesis submitted to the faculty of the  
College of Imaging Arts and Sciences  
in candidacy for the degree of  
**Master of Fine Arts**  
Graphic Design

**The Dao of Graphic Design**  
— A Study of Interrelationship between  
the Daodejing in Chinese Daoism and Graphic Design

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July 25, 2011

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## **Abstract**

The Dao of Graphic Design  
—A Study of Interrelationship between  
the Daodejing in Chinese Daoism and Graphic Design

Dao has been accumulated for centuries and still remains strong and pertinent to the world today. It is a complex and intriguing philosophy that has many branches and colors. This paper is an analysis of the similarities and differences between the principles held in Daoism and Graphic Design. It is also an interpretation from my personal understanding of both.

The concepts derived from my research are presented through several examples, which included the following design principles: Unity, Nature and Wu Wei. The purpose of this thesis is to serve as a bridge, which links concepts of graphic design with Daoism.

This project visualizes the main text of Daoism—Daodejing— and makes this classic literature easier to understand, and to apply the insights from Daoist philosophy to graphic design in order to find new levels of abundance in design solutions. This will allow for young designers to experience the essence of Daoism and experience a new way to approach the design process and understand the potential of good design.

This thesis is formulated especially for those western graphic designers new to the field to experience the essence of Dao and apply it to visual communication solutions. So this thesis is formulated especially for those Western graphic beginners to help them experience the essence of Dao and apply it to graphic designs.

This thesis supports the premise that Ancient Eastern wisdom and Western thought can meet together to break out of old patterns of thinking and behavior to create a new view of design principles and design thinking. Once graphic designers create their own design philosophy, it can help them to create more powerful and effective visual communications. During this learning process, designers may even have a view and attitude of their life. Designers will find their "Dao" around them and find their enlightenments.

**Keyword** *Unity, Nature, Wu Wei, Graphic Design Principles, Dao, Happiness, interaction*



## Table of Contents

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<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1 Philosophical Daoism</b>	<b>5</b>
1.1 What is Dao	5
1.2 Special Qualities of Those Who Follows Dao	6
<b>2 On the Historical Background of Daoism</b>	<b>8</b>
2.1 Daoism in Time	8
2.2 Early Beliefs	9
2.3 Fundamental Concepts in the Daoism	11
<b>3 Scriptures: Daodejing</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>4 Daoist Sage</b>	<b>15</b>
4.1 Laozi	16
4.2 Laozi's Concepts	18
4.3 Zhuangzi	19
4.4 Zhuangzi's Concepts	20
<b>5 The Great Art in Daoism</b>	<b>21</b>

## Table of Contents

---

<b>6</b>	<b>Daoism and Design Principles</b>	26
	6.1 The Great Unity in Daoism and Design	27
	6.2 The Great Nature in Daoism and Design	45
	6.3 The Wu Wei in Daoism and Design	59
<b>7</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>	67
<b>8</b>	<b>Summery</b>	68
	<b>Appendixes</b>	69
	Timeline	69
	Glossary	70

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## Introduction

In ancient China, during the Spring and Autumn Classical Period (700-480 B.C.E) mystical philosophers had begun formulating the principal doctrines of what is now called Philosophical Daoism.

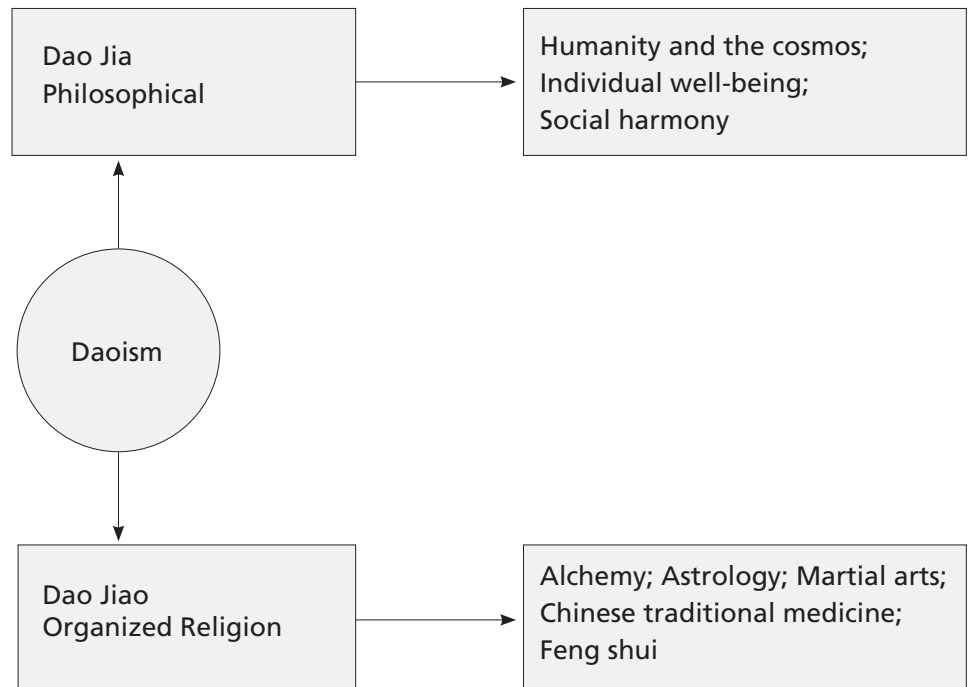
Daoism is essential to Chinese culture. Daoist attitudes, ideas, and values have helped shape the minds and characters of millions of people in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, East and Southeast Asia, Japan, Korea, and wherever Chinese communities have become established throughout the world.



Map from University of Massachusetts Boston Daoist Archives

In spite of its increasing popularity in the West, Daoism remains one of the most poorly understood aspects of the Chinese Cultural tradition. Accounts of Taoist ideas and practices can be found in many writings by Sinologists, and numerous Western-language translations of the Daoist classics are readily available.

Definitions of Daoism are controversial because of the complex twists in its development as it played its role in the long history of China. Even the coining of the term creates ambiguity about what counts as 'Daoism'. Daoism commonly name one of the main pillars of traditional Chinese thought, although it should be obvious that like any "ism," it is an abstraction — what its name is not monolithic but multifaceted traditions with fuzzy boundaries and complex histories and internal divisions. "Daoism," in particular, needs to be handled with care, for it designates both a philosophical tradition and an organized religion, which in modern Chinese are identified separately as Daojia and Daojiao, respectively.



There is a real need today for better understanding of the Daoist tradition, not only because of its importance for the adequate appreciation of Chinese civilization, but also because it represents an approach to life and to the universe that can have immense value for dealing with the problems of the modern world.

Daoism originated from the observation of natural process and formulated by Laozi, which can be traced to Daodejing; a piece of classic literature has provided one of the major influences in Daoist culture for over 2,500 years. The Daodejing to me is more like an object lesson in what it has to teach. By contrast with "Professionalized" philosophy, the daodejing appeals to a rich vein of shared wisdom sedimented into the everyday lives and language of the people. The "natural" disposition of the people that can be tapped for optimum harmony and equilibrium is an aggregate of unmediated feeling transmitted from generation to generation. By invoking sayings that are widely known, and by challenging its readers to make sense of associations that it draws among these sayings, the text simply orchestrates a popular transformation inspired by the internal impulse of the tradition itself.

As a native East Asian and Western-influenced graphic designer, I am curious about the inner-relationship between this ancient Chinese philosophy and the process of Western graphic design. Both Daoism and graphic design promote simplicity (as in the Modernist view) and are concerned about the dynamic interplay of humanity and nature. Both are helping to build a harmonious life, pursuing the unity of the entire universe.

Within my understanding, Dao is a "way" to pursue happiness. Thought it is not talking about happiness directly in Daodejing, but Zhuangzi develop this further. It's when you stop consciously and purposefully pursuing happiness that you will find happiness. Daoism emphasized that happiness, contentment and success will come to people when they stop trying to make things happen and rather devote time to uncovering the natural way to achieve.

Today, thinking about happiness still brings out the relativist in nearly everyone. Everybody knows happiness is about feeling good now, or as soon as possible. But happiness is not a duty. Laozi believed that happiness is achievable when people "go with the flow." So does the design process, "go with the flow" is a higher level that I believe every designer should strive to achieve. It is not limited to 2D or 3D graphic designers. To actually accomplish this is not necessarily a simple thing.

The intent is to discover the parallels between the principles of Daoism and graphic design, which have been hinted at before but never thoroughly explored. Sharing my understanding of the wisdom of Laozi as a graphic designer as well as a general reader; and in so doing to enhance the appreciation and awareness of the interrelationship between them.

## 1. Philosophical Daoism

Philosophical Daoism is based on close observations and studies of nature. It is a fundamental tenet of Daoism that man is an integrated part of the cosmos. That our inner-world (microcosm) operates by the same principles that govern the outer universe (macrocosm), in fact that there ultimately is no difference between the two. Daoism is quite unique among world religions since it doesn't try to hide its natural roots. Nature is in fact seen as the prime manifestation of the creative principle—that lives and expresses itself through all things. Including human beings.

### 1.1 What is Dao

Dao is a word full of meaning. It may mean to speak, or to guide. It may mean a principle, or a system of logic. It also means a way, both in the sense of pathway and in the sense of a method. It is a unity — a principle functioning through life that, once understood, can give significance to all human's experience.

Dao is everywhere. It is literally the movement of all life. It is endless and flows in all directions. Since Dao is the total ongoing process of the universe, it makes sense to go along with it. If we swim in a river, we should make use of its current. (Deng, 1996)

Dao is silent; it has to be experienced. Dao regulates natural processes and nourishes balance in the universe, leading to the belief that one can be satisfied and find happiness in life. Compare to Aristotle's belief of eudaimonia (happiness); that the desire to achieve eudaimonia is a defining characteristic of what it means to be human and it is in a sense of well-being or flourishing; while Daoism presents the universe in a constant change, the constant flow of transformation and change between human and nature. Happiness is internal. It does not depend on what we have but on what we are. It does not depend on what we get but on what we experience.

Daoist thought generally focuses on the relationship between humanity and nature, health and longevity, and wu wei (action through nonaction), which is thought to produce harmony with the universe. Also, Daoists saw all changes in nature as manifestations of the dynamic interplay between the polar opposites yin and yang, two poles is dynamically linked to the other. For the Western mind, this idea of the implicit unity of all opposites is difficult to accept.

### 1.2 Special Qualities of Those Who Follow Dao

#### Simplicity:

Those who follow Dao keep life simple. They conserve their energies; they are content with what they have.

#### Sensitivity:

Those who follow Dao are observant of others, avoid the aggressive, and help those in need. They love nature. Nature is not wholly synonymous with Dao, but it is completely a part of Dao and thus a perfect way to glimpse Dao.

#### Flexibility:

Since Dao holds that everything in the world is relative, it does not espouse any absolutes. Followers of Dao rarely rule anything out, because they believe any choice they make is dependent upon circumstance rather than preconceived notions.

#### Focused:

Those who follow Dao learn an inner direction in their lives. They accept who they are, and they first ascertain and then accept the details to their lives. They accept that each stage of their lives has certain advantages and disadvantages, and they set out to work with those advantages.



### Cultivated:

Since a life of Dao is one of simplicity, observation, and action, people strive to refine themselves in order to follow Dao more perfectly.

### Disciplined:

Those who follow Dao are disciplined. This discipline is not a harsh structure imposed upon one's personality, but the taking of orderly actions towards specific goals. That requires concentration of the highest order.

### Joyous:

Once one gain Dao, there is absolutely no doubt about it. No matter anyone says or does, the experience cannot be erased. So too is it with those who have seen Dao and who live within its flow. They have a joyous sense of the deepest sustenance. They feel directly connected with the source of life.

## 2. On the Historical Background of Daoism

*"Those who know others are wise, those who know themselves are enlightened."*

—Daodejing

*"Small knowledge cannot reach great knowledge, those of little experience cannot comprehend those of great experience."*

—Zhuangzi

### 2.1 Daoism in Time

Daoism's history is obscure. The mist of time covers the beginnings so that only vague, shadowing outlines can be seen. Its founding fathers are enigmatic figures whose biographies are filled with legend, allegory, and mythical events.

Daoism is based, first and foremost, on the experience of this universal Way, the essential reality through which all derivative ways might be comprehended. (Cleary & Laozi, 1993)

Considering the ultimate nature of the Way to be inherently beyond the bonds of human conception, ancient Daoists sought traces of the Way in the patterns of events taking place in the nature world, the social world, and the inner world of the individual psyche. Eventually the scope of the Way led them to undertake the investigation of vast domains of knowledge and experience.

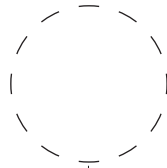
There is so much to Dao because it has endured the changes that come with time. Yet it remains strong and pertinent to the world today. Without the existence of Taoism, Chinese history would have been altered significantly and in turn so would have the history of the world.

### 2. 2 Early Beliefs

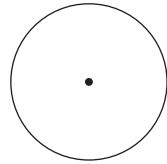
The foundation of Chinese thought is the belief in a single cosmic universe, a Oneness with no beginning or end. Older than any of the schools of Chinese Philosophy were certain basic beliefs that helped the Chinese understand themselves in relation to the world: in the beginning, the world was an endless void called Wuji. It was pictured as an empty circle formed by dotted lines. From this arose activity, expressed as Yang and shown as an empty circle, and inactivity, expressed as Yin, and shown as a black circle. The interactions of activity and inactivity are called Taiji, shown as the famous Yin-Yang circle, half black and half white. (See page 8)

Daoists believe that when the world began, there was only the Dao, a featureless, empty void pregnant with the potential of all things. At this point, the Dao generated swirling patterns of cloudlike energy, called qi (pronounced "chee"). This energy eventually developed two complementary aspects: yin, which is dark, heavy, and feminine, and yang, which is light, airy, and masculine. Yin energy sank to form the earth, yang energy rose to form the heavens, and both energies harmonized to form human beings. Consequently, the human body holds within it the energies of both the earth and the heavens, making it a microcosm of the world. Both yin and yang split further into subdivisions known as the Five Elements, which can be understood through their associations with the elements, seasons, and directions.

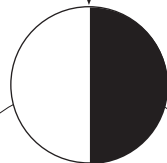
天  
Heaven



Wuji  
(the Void)



the first differentiation

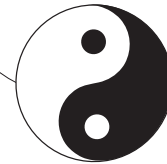
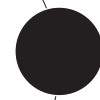


seperation into opposites

Great Yang

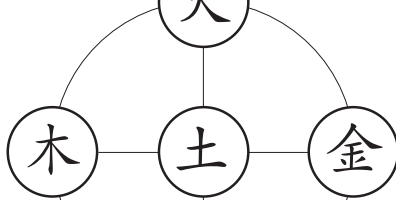


Great Yin



Taiji  
Great Ultimate

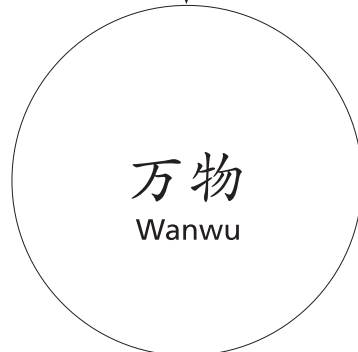
火



Wuxing  
(The Five Elements)

水

地  
Earth



All things in existence

2.3 Fundamental Concepts in the Daoism

	Dao	way, path, guide, principle, route
	De	virtue, power
	He	balance, harmony
	Qi	breath, energy, spirit
	Wu	breath, energy, spirit
	Chang	void, emptiness
	Pu	simplicity, purity, uncarved block

---

無為

Wuwei

the action of  
non-action

---

陰陽

Yin Yang

life-forces of Dao

---

太極

Taiji

great ultimate

### 3. Scriptures: Daodejing

The Daodejing influence on Chinese culture is pervasive, and it reaches beyond China. No book other than the Bible has been translated and read more than Daodejing. What draws so many people to this enigmatic book are the deep meanings that can be culled from its profound words. This book expressed the essence of early Daoist philosophy.

Composed as short, poetic chapters, the words, written in ancient Chinese characters, are laden with possible interpretations. Thus, each translator becomes interpreter, with a seemingly endless variety of understandings, yet we can hear resonance in themes that echo throughout.

According to Sima Qian who wrote about 100 B.C, Laozi put his teachings into writing and the result was a book consisting of some five thousand Chinese characters. The Daodejing is divided into two parts, one on Tao, the mysterious Oneness that guides everyone and everything, and the other on De, the power that is achieved by following Dao. The Daodejing points to the Daoist Way and shows how following it will lead to a fulfilling life. Laozi chose to express the Daodejing through ambiguous, poetic verse that could awaken the intuition of Dao in his readers. He did not presume to communicate its concepts through clearly defined words, for words hide the Dao. Inner essences, to Laozi, are neither communicated nor reflected in words. But then, perhaps that is best; "When it is hidden, it is revealed. Communication is more than words."  
(Simpkins, and Simpkins, 2000)

The oldest manuscripts with versions of the Daodejing, discovered by archeologists in the 20th Century, are the Mawangdui text on silk (dated at 168 B.C.E), and the Mogao Caves text (dated at 270 C.E).



Daodejing text on silk in Mawangdui (King of Ma's Mound)



#### 4. Daoist Sage

Laozi and Zhuangzi were two most important Daoist philosophers who believed that Dao is the universal law of nature. This two philosophers shared similar ideas.

Laozi is the one who cultivated Dao and virtue. And Zhuangzi's writing did explain Laozi's teachings through concrete examples that included historical events, people, animals, etc. However, Zhuangzi's writing was philosophically deeper and more complex than Laozi's. The divergence in their philosophies was made quite clear by the fact that Chuangzi did not share Laozi's belief that soft and weak are superior to hard and strong. In some ways the two philosophers were completely opposed. The relation between the two founding figures of Daoism is a growing puzzle but both of them are important figures in the history of philosophical Daoism.



Laozi (604-? B.C)

Depicted as a Daoist god.  
Author of Daodejing(81 chapters).  
A mystic philosopher of ancient China.



Zhuangzi (369-286 B.C)

Influential Daoist thinker.  
Main article: Zhuangzi(33 chapters).

### 4.1 Laozi

The ancient sages never put their teaching in systematic form. They spoke in paradoxes, for they were afraid of uttering half-truths. They began by talking like fools and ended by making their hearers wise. (Okakura, 1989)

Laozi (604-? B.C), the legendary author of the famous little book *Daodejing*: was a man whose life was shrouded in mystery. According to legend, he was conceived when his mother admired a falling star. He matured in her womb for sixty-two years. One day, she leaned against a plum tree and gave birth to a full-grown man with white hair and long earlobes (a symbol of wisdom). He named himself after the plum tree, Li; proclaimed his first name to be Ear. Much of the literature refers to him as Li Ear, or Lao Tan, but more often he is called Laozi, meaning old mater.

The earliest mention of Laozi's biography was in Sima Qian's *Records of the Historian*. Sima Qian recorded that Laozi was a native of the hamlet of Chujen, village of Li, in the state of Chen, which, in 479 B.C., became part of the state of Chu. Both Laozi and Confucius lived in this area.



*A Bronze Statue of Lao-zi Riding Ox  
Late Ming or Early Qing, 1600-1700s*

Facts fuse with myth regarding Laozi. Researchers through the ages have debated whether he actually wrote the Daodejing, or if he was even a real person. Perhaps it has been difficult to verify the facts of Laozi's life because of the ancient Chinese belief that it was dishonorable to write one's autobiography. Better to wait until death and hope that someone would do the honor. Laozi was given a high position by later generations. Some Daoists considered him a deity, and built a temple on the site of his birthplace.

Laozi was deeply mystical. He believed that the Dao is the source, the inner axis of the universe. The inner nature of the world is mysterious, prior to name and form. That which can be given a name is Dao.



*Lao Zi on an Ox*  
Mid-1500s  
National Palace Museum, Taipei.  
Zhang Lu (1490–1563)

## 4.2 Laozi's Concepts

Laozi's Daodejing expresses concepts that interrelate systematically to give meaning and a basis for understanding. Forces create one another through chain reactions initiated by the energies of opposites. Events in the real world are the result of these forces. Even as a pattern comes into being, it vanishes. Being and no-being are only aspects of each other, mutually caused.

Dao is the source, older than nature. Nature is rooted in Dao. Everything that we know in the world comes from Dao, expressed as Yin and Yang. Thus, anything we do will invariably create its own opposite. Wisdom lies in not contending. Sensitive to the inner nature of self and other, Laozi's way leads through mystery, by returning to the core of life. When you let be, circumstances stop being a problem. They go through their cycle. Allow matters to take their natural course, and the struggle of resistance lessens. Everything then takes care of its own pattern of activation and rest. Yin and Yang represent the natural polarity that inevitably arises. By encouraging the natural, the sage permits Dao to become manifest. Thus, wisdom is found in silence, in quiet, in letting be.

### 4.3 Zhuangzi

*Flow with whatever may happen and let your mind be free. Stay centered by accepting whatever you are doing. This is the ultimate.*  
—Zhuangzi

Zhuangzi(369-286 B.C) stands with Laozi as one of the most well-known and prolific founders of Daoism. His works know as The Zhuangzi, elucidate and illustrate Daoist concepts through colorful stories. Zhuangzi's writings deeply inspired Chinese philosophical, medical, and aesthetic theory in general and Zen Buddhism in particular.

Zhuangzi's real name was Zhuang Zhou. Zhuangzi lived his philosophy, consistent with his principles. He was protective of his time and freedom and therefore chose a simple governmental job that left him plenty of time for fishing and philosophy. He felt that people spent too much time disputing back and forth about every aspect of living. Too much talkin takes people away from the Dao. "Words are like waves acted on by the wind" he said, "the real point of the matters is lost"(Legge, 1962, 214).

Zhuangzi lived during an unstable period in Chinese history, when people were continually disputing politics and philosophy. He believed that all of these arguments were relative. People argue because they have lost touch with the unity underlying the apparent distinctions: Dao precedes any differences.

During the Warring States period. Zhuangzi saw people literally die at any moment because of constant wars. In reponse, he emphasized the importance of life and taught techniques for protecting one's life.



#### 4.4 Zhuangzi's Concepts

An anecdote in the book Zhuangzi describes how some trees grow extraordinarily tall and strong and beautiful, while others are ugly and gnarled. Public opinion would like praise the beauty and usefulness of the former, and pity the latter and consider them pathetic. However, as soon as those "useful" trees reached a certain size, they were chopped down; in contrast, the seemingly pathetic, gnarled trees would never be chopped down and could live forever, precisely because they were totally "useless." Overachievers are in fact harming themselves; in contrast, those who do not desire praise and do not show off their abilities can live happily forever. With no end of war in sight, Zhuangzi developed a "let it go" attitude and a "being one with nature" philosophy that is reflected in the stories about his life.

*I dreamed I was a butterfly, flitting around in the sky; then I awoke.  
Now I wonder: Am I a man who dreamt of being a butterfly, or am I  
a butterfly dreaming that I am a man?  
—Zhuangzi*



Lu Zhi  
*Zhuangzi Dreaming of a Butterfly*  
Ming dynasty, mid-16th century  
Ink on silk  
29.4 x 51.4 cm

## 5. The Great Art in Daoism

The visitor to the Chinese cultural realm will have no trouble finding artifacts that illustrate Daoist concepts, paintings and sculptures of Daoist deities, Daoist talismans, and popular literature that preaches Daoist doctrines, but Daoist cultural expressions are not limited to those that can be clearly identified as Daoist.

Daoism contains many different schemes for categorizing the phenomena in the world. The various schemes may have come from different traditions and are not always easily understood; moreover, they can make Daoism appear unsystematic and inconsistent. Consequently, Daoists are often dedicated to the systematic illustration of Daoist concepts. The Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate, for instance, is an illustration of the oppositional yet complementary and mutually explanatory relation between Yin and Yang, as well as their unity within Dao. (See Chapter 6.1) Prior to the emergence of this Taiji diagram, the Yin and the Yang were symbolized by a tiger and a dragon (or, alternatively, a turtle and a crane, especially in Japanese art).



*Two Panels from a Sarcophagus: Tiger and Dragon  
Northern Wei dynasty, c 500/534  
Limestone with traces of pigment and gilding  
Tiger panel 71.2 x 228.6 cm  
Dragon panel: 68.6 x 228.6 cm*

Another form of Taoist art is the writing or drawing of talismans. The words and drawings on Daoist talismans are supposed to contain the fundamental energies of the cosmos and thus have the power to transform reality. In some talismans, the Chinese characters are totally separate from the drawings, while in others some of the strokes of the characters are extended to form part of the drawings. The talisman writer or artist usually finishes the entire drawing in one breath, and the words and drawings are often symmetrical. Talisman writing has become an important branch of Chinese calligraphy.

Among all of these various themes in Daoism art form, Chinese paintings of landscapes have been greatly influenced by Daoist attitudes and ideas—not least of which is their admiration of nature and natural processes.

The often deeply eroded mountain ranges with swirling mists clearly expose the workings of the principle of change. For the Daoists the solid-seeming mountains are as subject to the "winds of Dao" as the more obviously moving mists, clouds and water. The best Dao-influenced Chinese art was defined as "divine class" or "marvelous class," terms that describe works by painters who developed their individual capacities to reveal the spirit of heaven and nature found in everyone."





*Juran*  
*Seeking the Tao in the Autumn Mountains*  
*Northern Song dynasty, 10th century*  
*Hanging scroll; ink on silk; 156.2 x 77.2 cm*  
*National Palace Museum, Taipei*

One work of Juran's that regards Daoism is Seeking the Dao in the Autumn Mountains. His work was highly prized by connoisseurs, like Mi Fu (1051–1107; a famous Chinese painter, poet, and calligrapher in Song Dynasty) who said that his depiction of turbulent water was so lifelike that it would "cause peoples hair to stand on end." Juran was concerned with what his painting said than with what painting methods he used. He attempted to blend into his paintings concepts found in Buddhism and Daoism Juran's works have spiritual themes because he was not only an academic painter but also a Buddhist monk.

*"The title of Juran's Seeking the Dao in the Autumn Mountains fully expresses the meaning of this remote and dynamic landscape. Situated in a ravine, sitting under the eave of a thatched dwelling and entertaining a guest, a recluse contemplates the vital energy (qi) of the mountains that visibly swirls around his retreat. The landscape in this painting is a symbol of cosmic process, and simultaneously a symbol of the inner spirit-landscape of the human body. 'Seeking the Dao' here suggests that the adept is aware of the numinous life-force that creates and gives form to the terrestrial landscape, and of the fact that what seems solids actually in flux—a flux generated by the flow of qi through the earth. These ideas lay at the heart of the Chinese discipline known as fengshui (geomancy)"*

—Stephen Little

The fullness of the earth and the emptiness of the sky are an example of yin and yang, respectively. The mountains are permanent and unchanging whereas water is always flowing and changing. In the painting these elements are balanced. This shows the Daoist goal of balancing yin and yang. This shows the Daoist belief that to be human you have to understand that you fit into a much bigger picture, that humanity is not the center of life and is dwarfed by the universe.



← Yin: Air, Emptiness

← Yang: Mountains, Fullness

← Immortality: Pine tree ability to survive and endure, long life

← Steam or fog: Symbol of Qi. The energy and breathe that exists in nature.

← Water: Symbol of Pu. It flows naturally, is strong even though it is soft.

*Juran*  
*Seeking the Tao in the Autumn Mountains*  
*Northern Song dynasty, 10th century*  
*Hanging scroll; ink on silk; 156.2 x 77.2 cm*  
*National Palace Museum, Taipei*

## 6. Daoism and Design Principles

*Design is not just what it looks like and feels like.*

*Design is how it works.*

-Steve Jobs

*You are what you are seen to be.*

-Erik Spiekermann

There are many ways to get inspired these days. For designers, design is in everything we create, but it's also between those things. It's a mix. I believe both design and Daoism are extremely effective when applied to life. Daoism is not about making our life happy, but rather helping to understand the meaning and purpose of life. Design is not about making our life pretty but about solving problems and changing lives. So this thesis is formulated especially for those Western graphic beginners to help them experience the essence of Dao and apply it to graphic designs.

In today's visual landscape of sensory overload, graphic design is not just about graphic design; design must be the meticulously crafted balance of cultural anthropology, behavioral psychology, creativity, and visual communication. To my understanding, good design may not cause happiness in our life but good design can be an occasion for and manifestation of happiness. How and why this is so true because of our nature. Daoism and graphic design somehow share the same belief of humanity and nature, so there is little doubt that Eastern and Western thought could meet together for the progress of enhancing the quality of life.

### 6. 1 The Great Unity in Daoism and Design

The harmony of Dao is prior, actived by passivity, by inactivity. But as Dao is expressed in being; it generates an interchanging, dynamic play of opposites: Yin and Yang, the manifestation of Dao in the world. They mutually produce each other as polarities that are part of the fabric of existence. Yin and Yang bring a dynamic balance of forces of movement and rest, activity and passivity, so that the balance point returns to center. The unity of opposites emerges. In many applications of Daoism, this unity is the source of guidance, the criterion, the standard by which correctness can be evaluated when reason is brought to bear on things.

According to Zhuangzi, Dao is everywhere: as I walk, Dao walks along with me. Each creature shares Dao—the ultimate reality—and is shaped by Dao, moved by Dao. Dao thereby offers a measure of perfection and perfectibility to everything that exists.

Daoism holds that no individual is isolated or enduring, everything that exists is part of a great and ongoing transformation. The constant flux of the universe ties each individual to all other beings, binding “all things into one, equalizing all things.” (Chan, 1963) All things—all beings—are bound together by this transformation process, by coming and going from the same matter, from one Great Unity (Parkes, 1989).

In the words of Zhuangzi: “Although the myriad things are many, their order is one” “universe and I exist together, and all things and I are one” (Chan, 1963). Humans, and all other aspects of this universe, are part of a much larger whole (Tu, 1989). Daoist philosophy teaches that the great transformation brings about a Great Unity, in which all things are part of one organic whole.



All existing things are really one. We regard those that are beautiful and rare as valuable, and those that are ugly as foul and rotten. The foul and rotten may come to be transformed into what is rare and valuable, and the rare and valuable into what is foul and rotten.  
-Zhuangzi

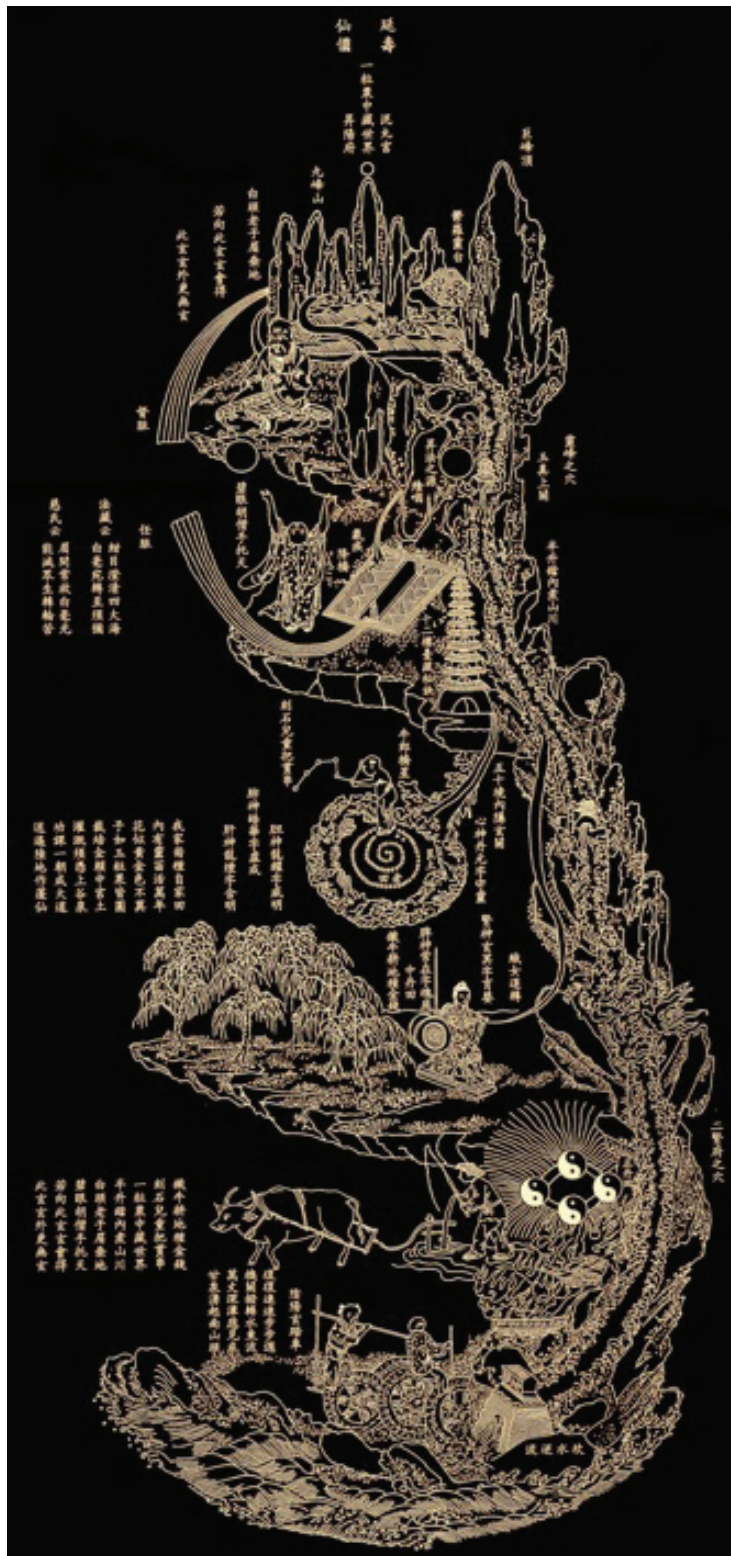


Zhang Huang (1527– 1608)

Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate, from the Compendium of Diagrams  
Ming dynasty, Tianqi reign, dated 1623

Woodblock printed book, ink on paper,

The University of Chicago Library, East Asian Collection



*Illustration of Inner Circulation(1800–1900)*

*Qing dynasty, 19th century*

*Ink rubbing, ink on paper, 133 x 56 cm*

*Richard Rosenblum Family Collection*

*Newton Center, Massachusetts*



*This rubbing expresses the Daoist notion of the transformation of things, for the same forces that manifest themselves as mountains, rivers, celestial bodies, animals, and plants are also viewed as operating within the microcosm of the human body. "The rubbing consists of a diagram of the head and torso, seen from the side. The entire diagram is framed on the right by the spinal cord, which connects the lower torso with the cranial cavity. Within the three major sections of the body—the head, the upper torso, and the lower torso, the areas of the three 'cinnabar fields' (dantian)—complementary images of yin and yang energy are shown intermingling"*

*—Shawn Eichman, in the exhibition catalogue.*

This illustration of inner circulation was never copied for over a couple of hundred years. There was only the original. It was never passed down to the rest of the world because it is so profound and mysterious that an ordinary person would have no way to understand it. It was rediscovered in the library at High Pine Tree Mountain in China suspended from the wall. It was carefully drawn and the printing was clear, so it was eventually reprinted at that time.

Its representation of the human body is outlined on the right by a stream that represents the spinal cord; this stream allows yin and yang energy to flow through the body. Although the head is dominated by a chain of mountains representing yang energy, a stream flows through the mountains, suggesting yin within yang. The monk with raised arms and the old man sitting in the skull also represent yin and yang. The two dots between them (where the eyes would be) represent the sun and moon.

Unlike the head, which is dominated by the yang image of mountains, the lower part of the torso is dominated by the yin image of water. This water is made to flow upward toward the head by a girl and boy on treadmills (yin and yang). The water turns into fire as it rises up the spinal column, representing its transformation into yang energy. An elixir is formed in the lower abdomen, where four interlocking Taiji ("yin-yang") symbols hover over purifying flames.

In other words, Dao adapt saw human body as a microcosm of the natural world; as a unity; as a one. Its anatomy was a landscape with mountain, river, streams, lake, pool, forest, fire, stars—a natural harmoniously landscape. The following image is the same version, but with a nice starry blue background which I find quite unique; no trace of where it came from.

*The Dao begot one.  
One begot two.  
Two begot three.  
And three begot the ten thousand things.*

*The ten thousand things carry yin and embrace yang.  
They achieve harmony by combining these forces.*

*-Daodejing Chapter 42*

If we come back to read the Daodejing Chapter 42. It also discuss the main concept of the "One", and extended into the "Two" and the "Three" which are symbolically employed to explicate the process of how the Dao produces the myriad things. It discuss the originality of the Dao and the coming into being of the world. This process is characterized with a transition or evolution from the simple to the complex, which happens to reflect the development of all creation. In this creative process, it is a balancing and harmonizing of extremes that is most productive. Hence, sometimes less is indeed more.

When the Daoist concept "Unity" applied to graphic design, it still works. The Unity of opposites is expressed of Yin and Yang in which white and black mutually depend on each other.

Another interpretation of unity in Daoims is similar to Geatalt psychology. Gestalt psychology formulated a general rule; The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The tendency to form wholes, unities, predominates in perception. We see in unities, not in pieces. The Gestaltists believe that we perceive by contrast, in context. A figure is always in context to its background.

However, the concept of unity in Daoism covers much wider than the "unity" in graphic design principles. Unity exists in variety. It is dynamic and indicates movement or flow behind it. This unity is the source of guidance, the criterion and the standard. The designer's aim is to achieve unity, but a unity that branches out into variations that relieve boredom.

*Unity contributes orderliness and coherency and a civilized state of things generally. Whereas the contrast family are all savages, more or less.*

—William A. Dwiggins (1880-1956)

One goal of graphic design is to achieve visual unity or harmony. Eugene Larkin, in the introduction to his book *Design: The Search for Unity*, writes, "The minimal requirement in visual design is the organization of all the parts into a unified whole. All the parts, no matter how disparate, must be reconciled so they support each other." In other words, elements must be made to work together with the greatest interest to the reader and with the least resistance from the reader.

Unity is the underlying principle that summarizes all of the principles and elements of design. It refers to the coherence of the whole, the sense that all of the parts are working together to achieve a common result; a harmony of all the parts.

There are three ways of relating elements to achieve unity.  
(only for reference)

Proximity (also called grouping or relative nearness):

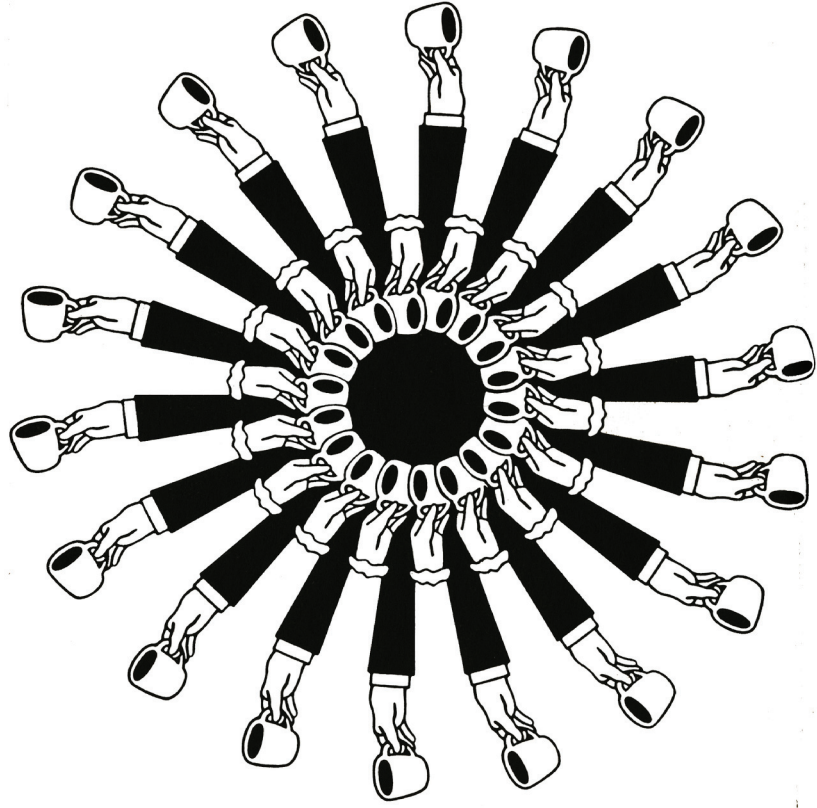
The simplest way to achieve unity. Elements that are physically close together are seen as related. The further apart they are separated, the less they appear to be related.

Similarity (also called correspondence):

Elements that share similarity of size, color, shape, position, or texture are seen as alike. The reverse of similarity is intentional contrast: type or imagery that is bigger is seen as more important. Alignment is an especially significant aspect of similarity in which elements that line up with one another appear related.

Repetition (related to similarity):

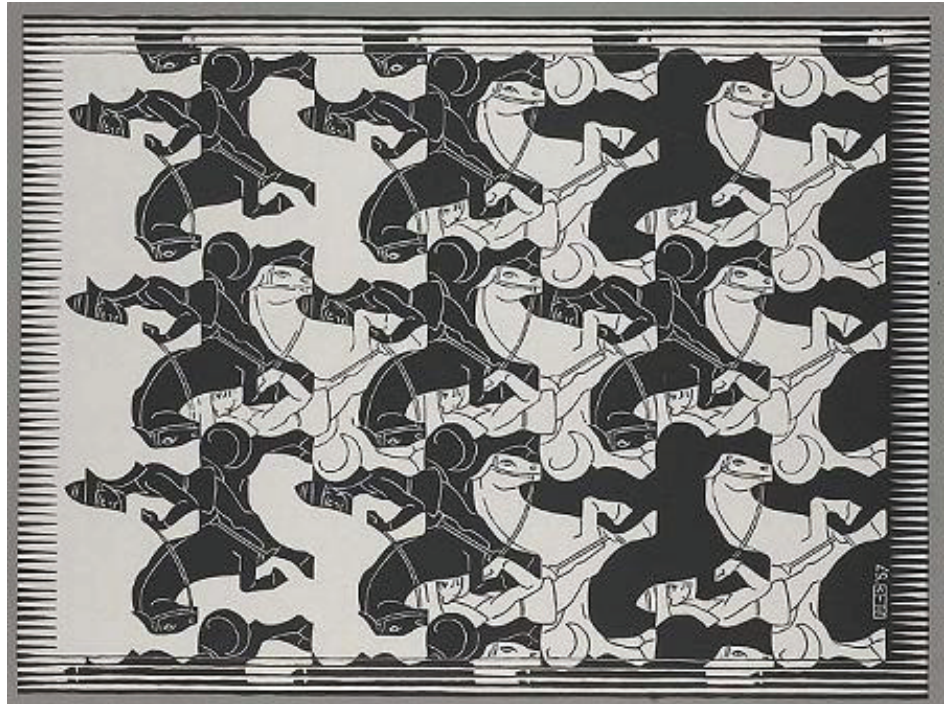
Any idea repeated provides unity. The repeated idea may be positioning, size, color, or use of rules, background tints, and boxes. Theme with variations: simple repetition without variety can become boring in its sameness. Alteration of a basic theme retains connectedness while providing interest.



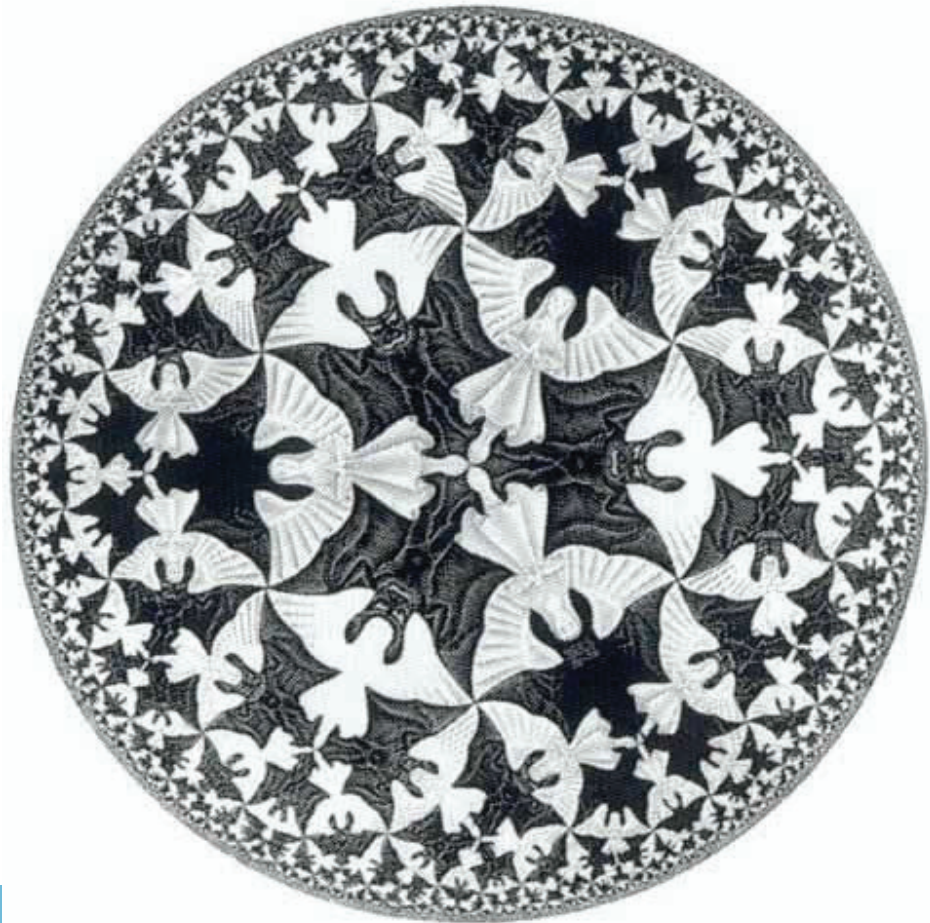
Shigeo Fukuda's illustration



M.C. Escher's illustration



M.C. Escher's illustration





Both Shigeo Fukuda's and M.C. Escher's work is showing the "Dynamic Unity", or "Dynamic One". Just as the concept in Daodejing, the one is not still, it brings a dynamic balance of forces of movement and rest, activity and passivity.

In graphic design field, I am indicating this activity is the strongest unity. These tells more stories than those which is just repeating elements. Using the Shigeo Fukuda's work as an example. Everything returns into a center, and the unity emerges. That's is the reason we could not stop noticing it.

Unity is aslo a constant movement. The same reason of Yin and Yang in Daoism. I can say the being-without-form and being-within-form operates as the dual character of the design unity. Interrelated so closely as the two sides of a coin. To some degree, a great unity work in design demonstrate a dynamic process of the Dao from its invisible state toward its visible state. They share some similarity here.

Yin and yang, in turn, weave together and interrelate to create the design of possibilities. They bring dynamic balance of forces of movement and rest, activity and passivity, so that is the way to keep the balance of a design work.

The contrast are builded into our perceptual process. The contrast is absolutely essential in order for us to be able to notic things. We notice differences. There is good experimental evidence that when we are exposed to sameness, a contrast ot relatively unchanging stimulus over a span of time, we stop noticing it. To be noticed, it has to make a difference. Taoism predicts this, since everything comes into being in relation to its opposite.

The Dao of Graphic Design

*Ikko Tanaka  
Nihon Buyo Poster*



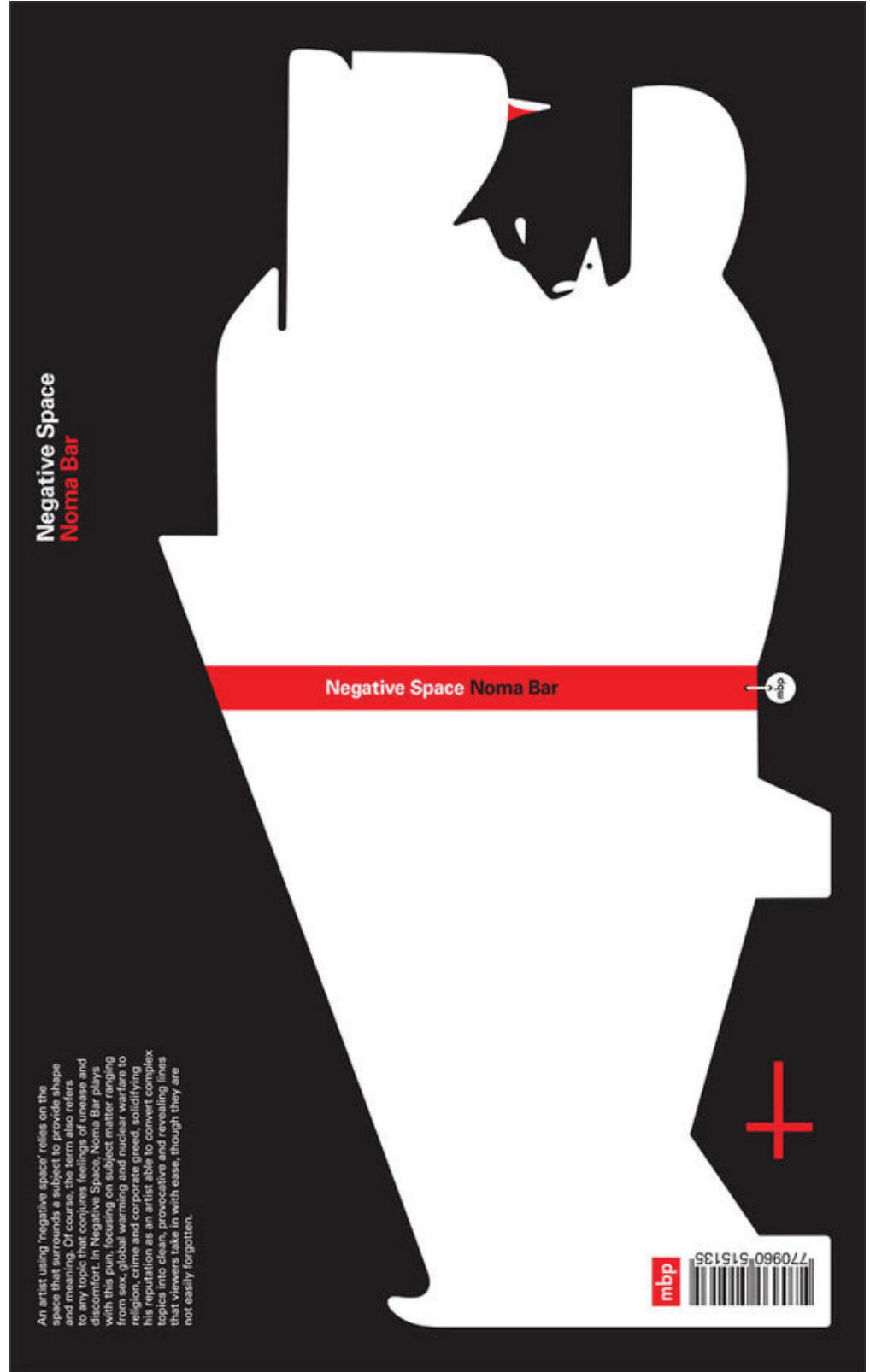
*Saul Bass  
The Man With The Golden Arm*



Dutch Uncle Agency  
Negative Space Book

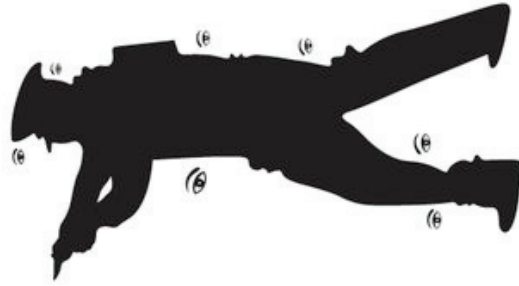
An artist using 'negative space' relies on the space that surrounds a subject to provide shape and meaning. Of course, the term also refers to any topic that conjures feelings of unease and discomfort. In Negative Space, Noma Bar plays with this pun, focusing on subject matter ranging from sex, global warming and nuclear warfare to religion, crime and corporate greed, solidifying his reputation as an artist able to convert complex topics into clean, provocative and revealing lines that viewers take in with ease, though they are not easily forgotten.

Negative Space  
Noma Bar



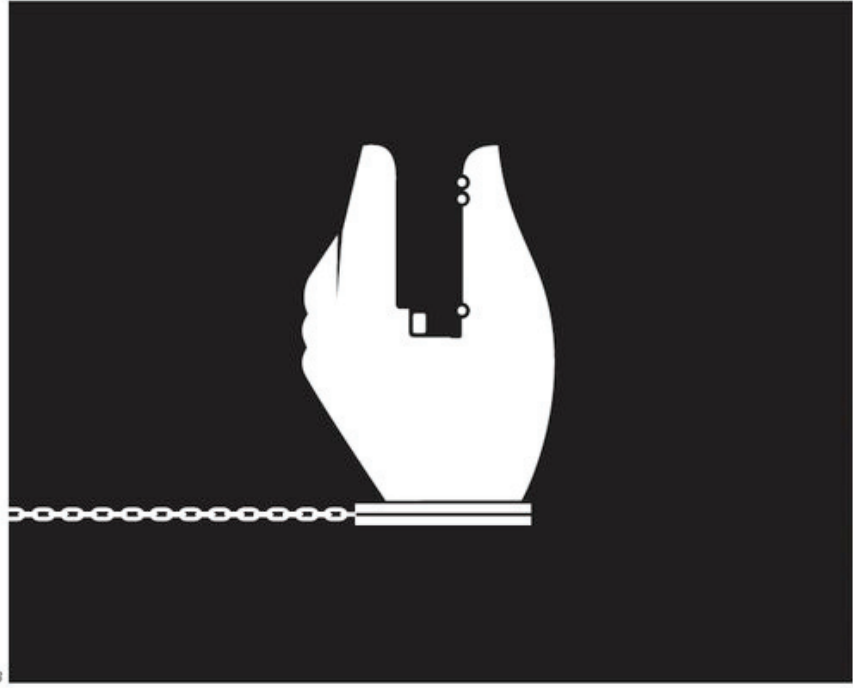
Dutch Uncle Agency  
Negative Space Book

41



We see you but not your crime. In the UK, organized groups of shoplifters sneak havoc on shopkeepers and police.

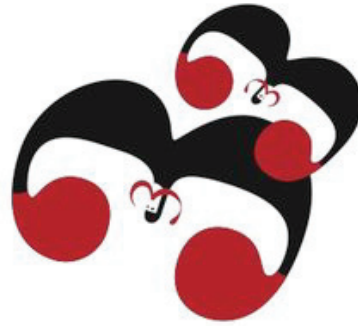
40



We know where you are. Criminals, thieves, business, easily, as quickly as their fingertips. The Airmax-GP is a wireless device that can track any moving object and alert the police to its whereabouts.

Dutch Uncle Agency  
Negative Space Book

104



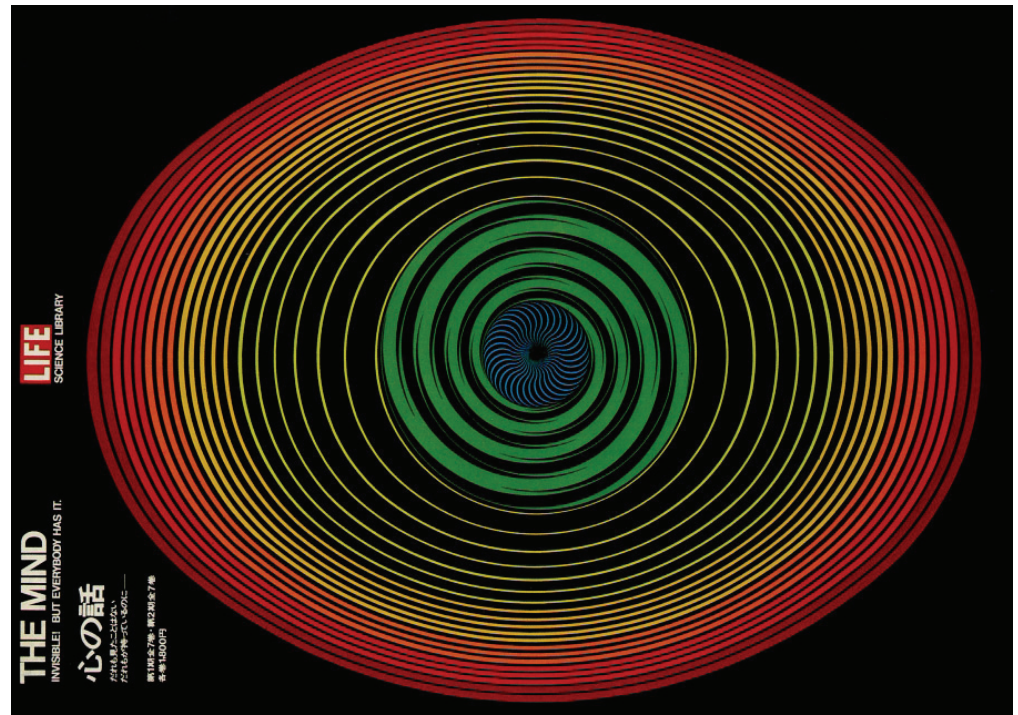
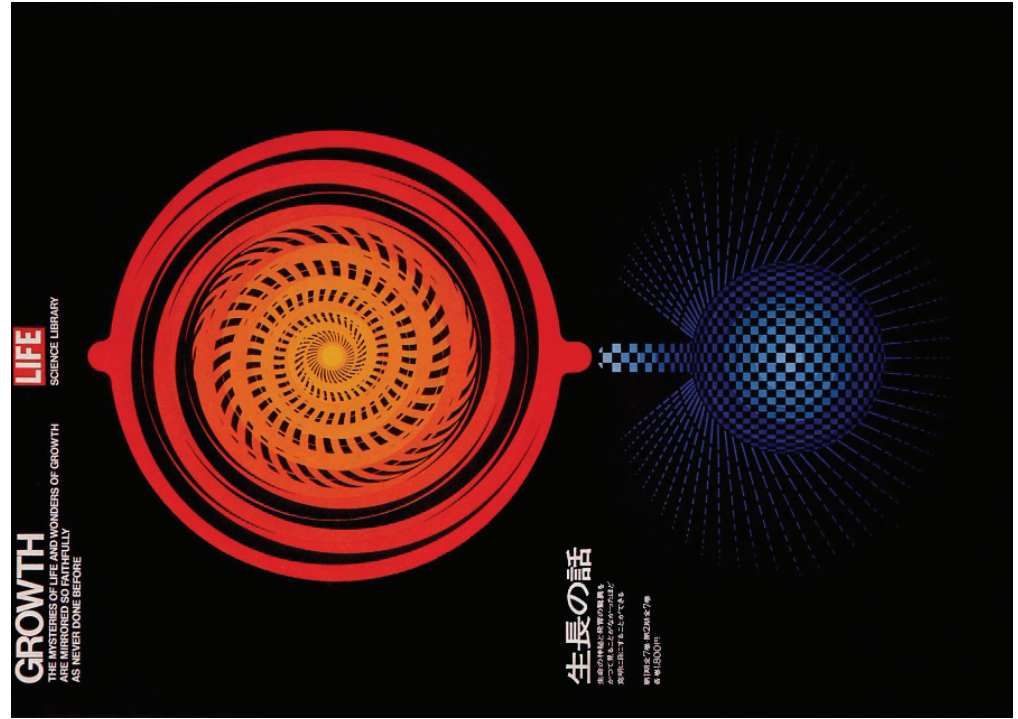
33. Midge: What could save the world? (Cory: Bunch? Deep breathing? Polyester? Giant mirrors in space? How many is that?)

105



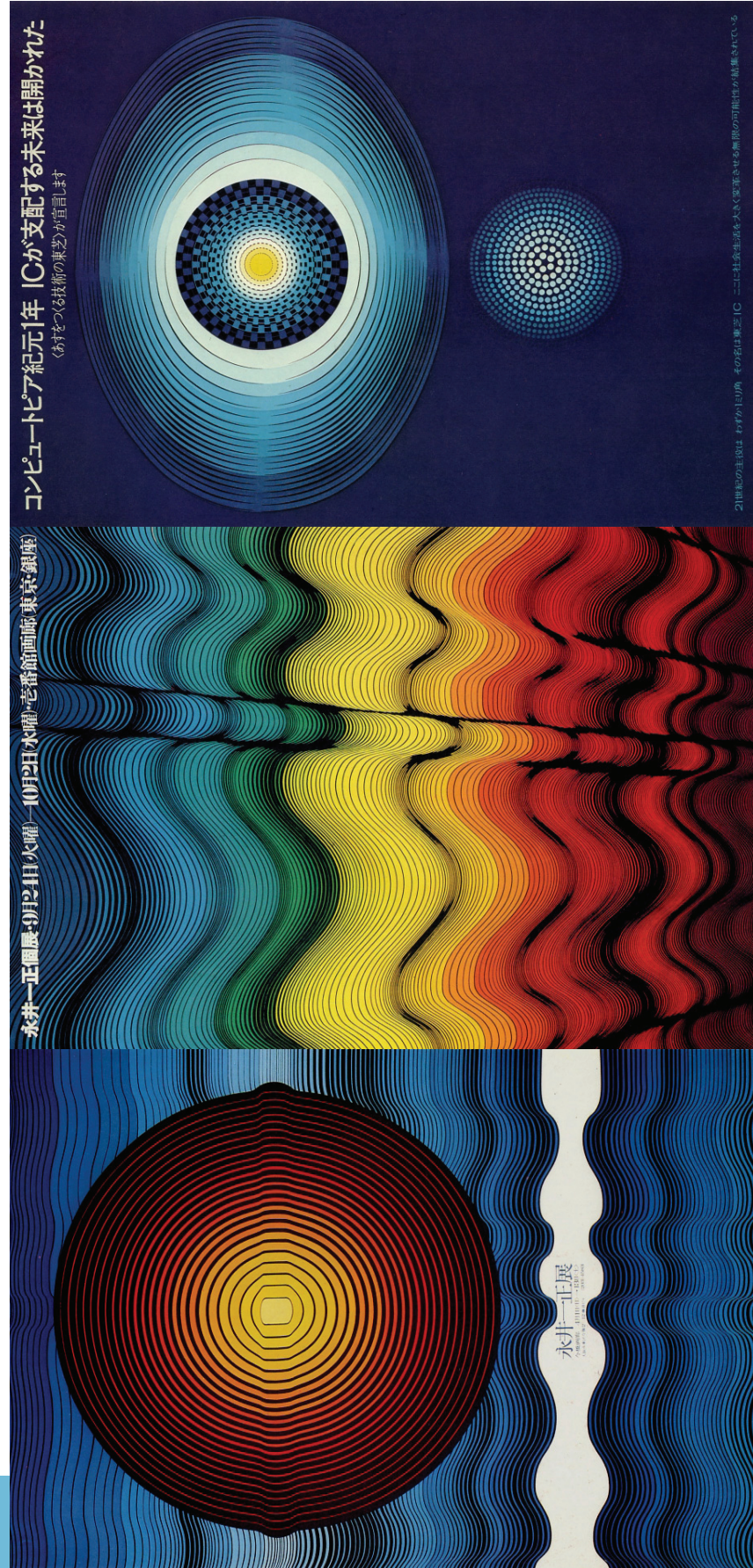
36. Even the wicker table that hides blood maintains a look of innocence even as the wolf entrap her for an article about older men with younger women.

Kazumasa Nagai  
Posters





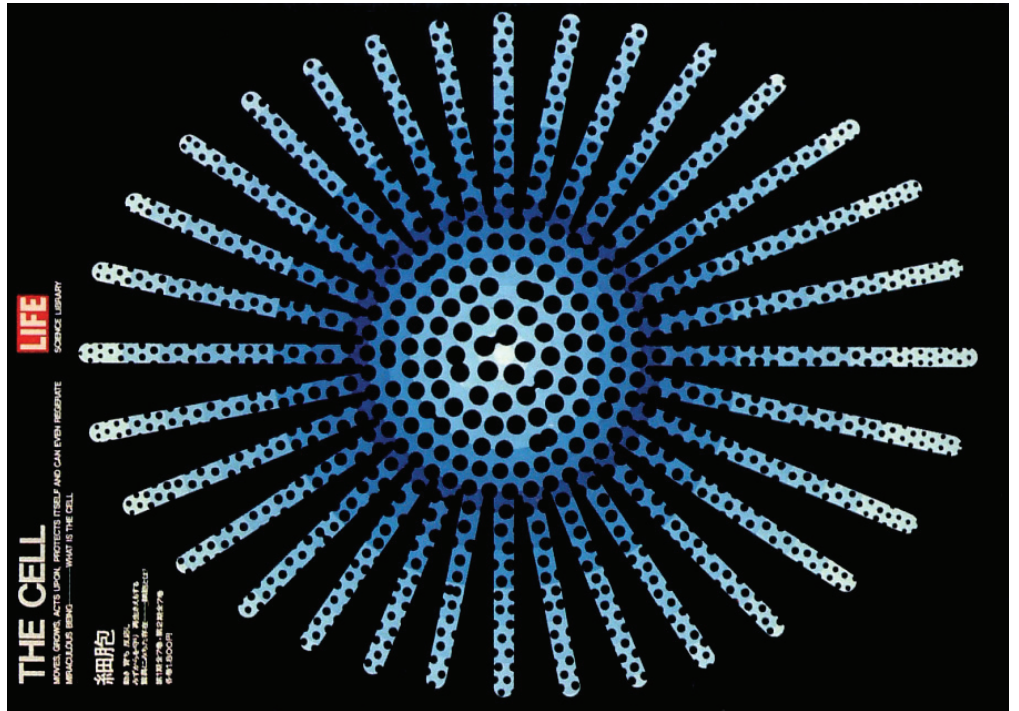
Kazumasa Nagai  
Posters







Kazumasa Nagai  
Posters



*When people see some things as beautiful,  
other things become ugly.  
When people see some things as good,  
other things become bad.*

*Being and non-being create each other.  
Difficult and easy support each other.  
Long and short define each other.  
High and low depend on each other.  
Before and after follow each other.*

*-Daodejing Chapter 2*

These lines point to the duality inherent in perceiving what we think is good. We try to be good. We want people to think both outside look and inside idea of our design work is good. Sometimes we need to work on the opposite side to support the essence we want to present. It is difficult to see a figure unless there is a contrasting background. Were there no background to the figure, the figure would vanish, which is the principle of camouflage. Because of the inseparability of opposites, therefore, you realize that they always go together, and this hints at some kind of unity that underlines them.

Just as the unity is the basis for a philosophy, it is also the basis for design principles. This is an extremely important principle to understand. Unity does not mean everything is in order, disorder will eventually revert to order because there is a force behind the law of Dao. I call it the "Dynamic law of Dao". Just as the Yin and Yang are so bound together that pure yin and pure yang ultimately reverse. It is an interaction, even random motion, from entropy, becomes orderly. Inevitably there comes a point when randomness is evenly distributed. As soon as the extreme is reached, the situation reverts to its opposite. The extreme, the ultimate, is individual and unique to each manifestation.

The development in life is interactive, design shares the same principle, not one way. All are in a mutual interaction in the flow.

### 6.2 The Great Nature in Daoism and Design

As we all know the Dao works by itself. Its nature is to be , as is said in Chinese, Ziran, that which is "of itself," "by itself," or "itself so." Ziran is almost what we mean when we say something happens automatically. We translate this expression in English as "nature".

The Dao expresses itself in nature. So we can be in tune with Dao when we are in tune with nature. The natural way of things unfolds spontaneously. Trees grow, flowers bloom, day passes into night. All living creatures have their instinctual way, guiding their unique character and style of living. Ducks live in lakes and ponds, swim, and drive under water. Birds prefer to fly in the air and perch in trees. All animals, from the smallest insect to the largest whale, if left to live out their lives without interference, will know how to live and what to do. Each expresses its own nature, thereby living in tune with Dao.



*The Pleasures of Fishes, 1291*  
by Zhou Dongqing  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

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## The Dao of Graphic Design

*All things arise from Dao.  
They are nourished by Virtue.  
They are formed from matter.  
They are shaped by environment.  
Thus the ten thousand things all respect Dao and honor Virtue.  
Respect of Dao and honor of Virtue are not demanded,  
But they are in the nature of things.*

*Therefore all things arise from Dao.  
By Virtue they are nourished,  
Developed, cared for,  
Sheltered, comforted,  
Grown, and protected.  
Creating without claiming,  
Doing without taking credit,  
Guiding without interfering,  
This is Primal Virtue.*

*-Daodejing Chapter 51*

This "Primal Virtue" can be looked upon as a special part of the nature of the Dao, and a general spirit embodied in Laozi's philosophizing. In addition, it is, explicitly or implicitly, advocated and advised to be adopted and conducted by mankind as a solution to the crisis of the human condition. And nowadays, it is still insrtuctive to a great extent.



*Awakening, 2002  
by Kim Hoa Tram  
ink and watercolor on paper*



*Therefore, "Dao is great;  
Heaven is great;  
Earth is great;  
The king is also great."  
These are the four great powers of the universe,  
And the king is one of them.*

*Man follows Earth.  
Earth follows Heaven.  
Heaven follows the Dao.  
Dao follows what is natural.*

*-Daodejing Chapter 25*

There is always something that we don't know. This is well illustrated by the elusive qualities of energy in physics: We cannot really define energy, but we can work with it, and this is the case with the Dao. This chapter highlights the Dao as the way of naturalness, and as the ultimate law to be followed by Earth, Heaven and Man. The Dao can be regarded as the hidden measure or determinant of all things in the world. All that is natural operates of itself.



*Still Streams and Winter Pines  
by Ni Zan (1301-1374)*



*"Dao means the course of nature... "Laozi" said the principle of the Dao is spontaneity, and that "the great Dao flows everywhere, both to the left and to the right. It loves and nourishes all things and does not lord it over them." Of course, there is a very great difference between Chinese idea of Dao, as the informing principle of God, and the Judeo-Christian idea of God as Nature's lord and master, because the Dao does not act as a boss. There is no principle that forces things so behave the way they do, and so it is a completely democratic theory of nature."*

—Alan Watts, *The Tao of Philosophy*

Look into the nature is to discover the ways of Dao. Unlike the buddhisim which believe nothing exists; the Dao is not just the emptiness of nonbeing; it is also the fullness of being. Everything we experience in the world is part of this circle.

*The great Dao flows everywhere.  
It may go left or right.  
—Zhuangzi*

In the Daoism concept, they always believe the water is the symbol for the nature. Water has many special properties that make it unique. Zhuangzi also mentioned in his book that "Calm represents the nature of water at its best." Water conforms to whatever shape contains it yet water does not change its inner nature. It is always water, whatever it follows a riverbed or fills a cup. Similarly, Dao is formless, and yet it conforms to all things. Like water, Dao flows effortlessly, changing its expression according to circumstance, without giving up its inner nature. "Be like water: formless yet resolute, soft yet relentless, clear and still, seeking the lowest to achieve the highest" (Simpkins & Simpkins, 2000)



Sound of Water  
by Gao Zhiwen  
from Taoist Music of Green-Ram Abby 2005

*Nothing in the world  
is as soft and yielding as water.  
Yet for dissolving the hard and inflexible,  
nothing can surpass it.*

*The soft overcomes the hard;  
the gentle overcomes the rigid.  
Everyone knows this is true,  
but few can put it into practice.*

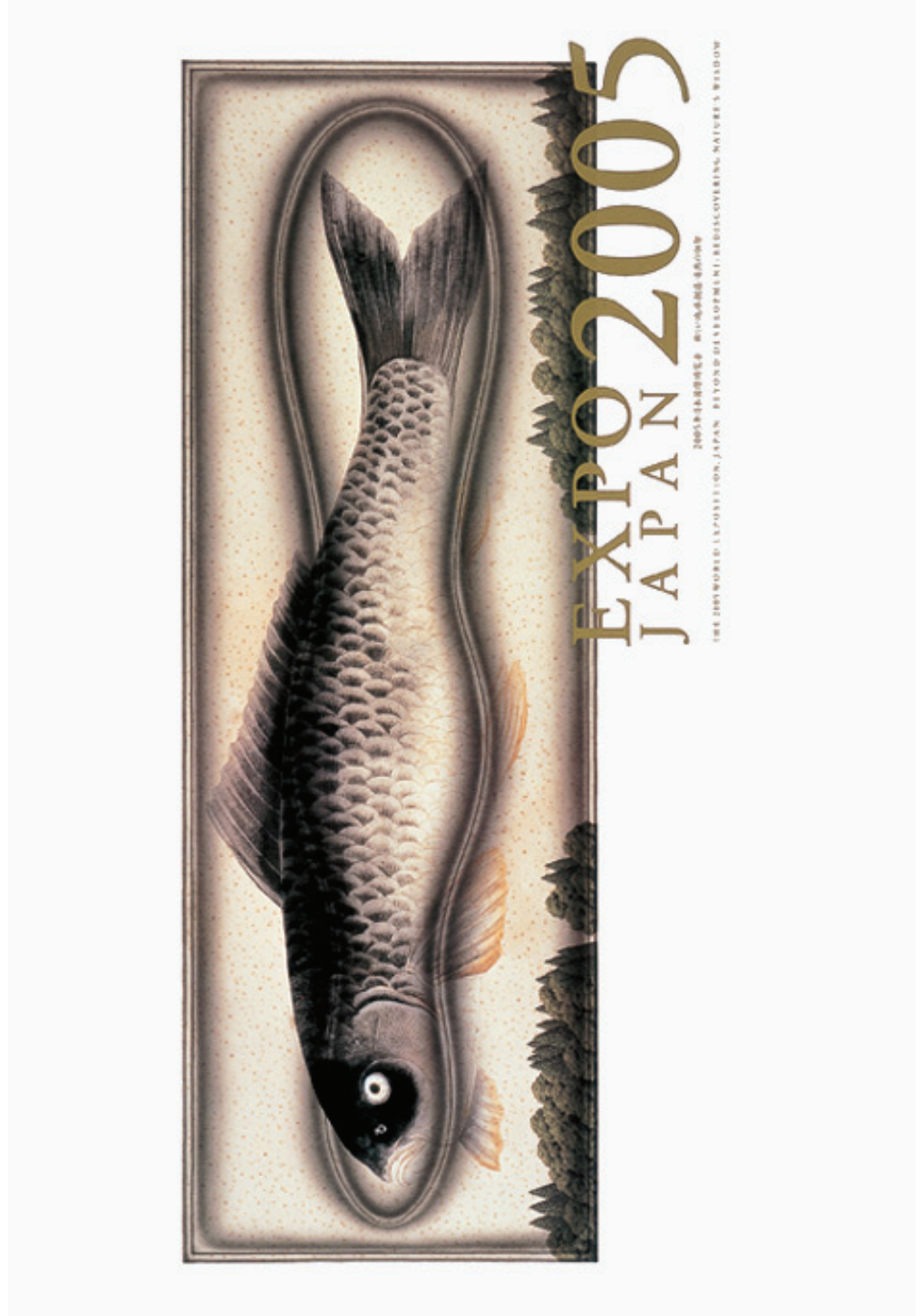
—Daodejing, Chapter 78

Just as the water goes along of itself. So does the nature of Dao. It cannot be controlled, what we should do is to be in the nature and follow it. We cannot get outside of nature to be the master of nature.

Nature is the supreme master of design, too. Studying in nature can lead to better design. Although the designer principles are rules created by human but their roots can be found in patterns of natural growth and order. Let nature take its course. For example, one should allow a river to flow towards the sea unimpeded; do not erect a dam which would interfere with its natural flow. As a designer, it is very important to see life as a whole and to assign to it a sense of order. It is always good to follow the "Nature" direction.



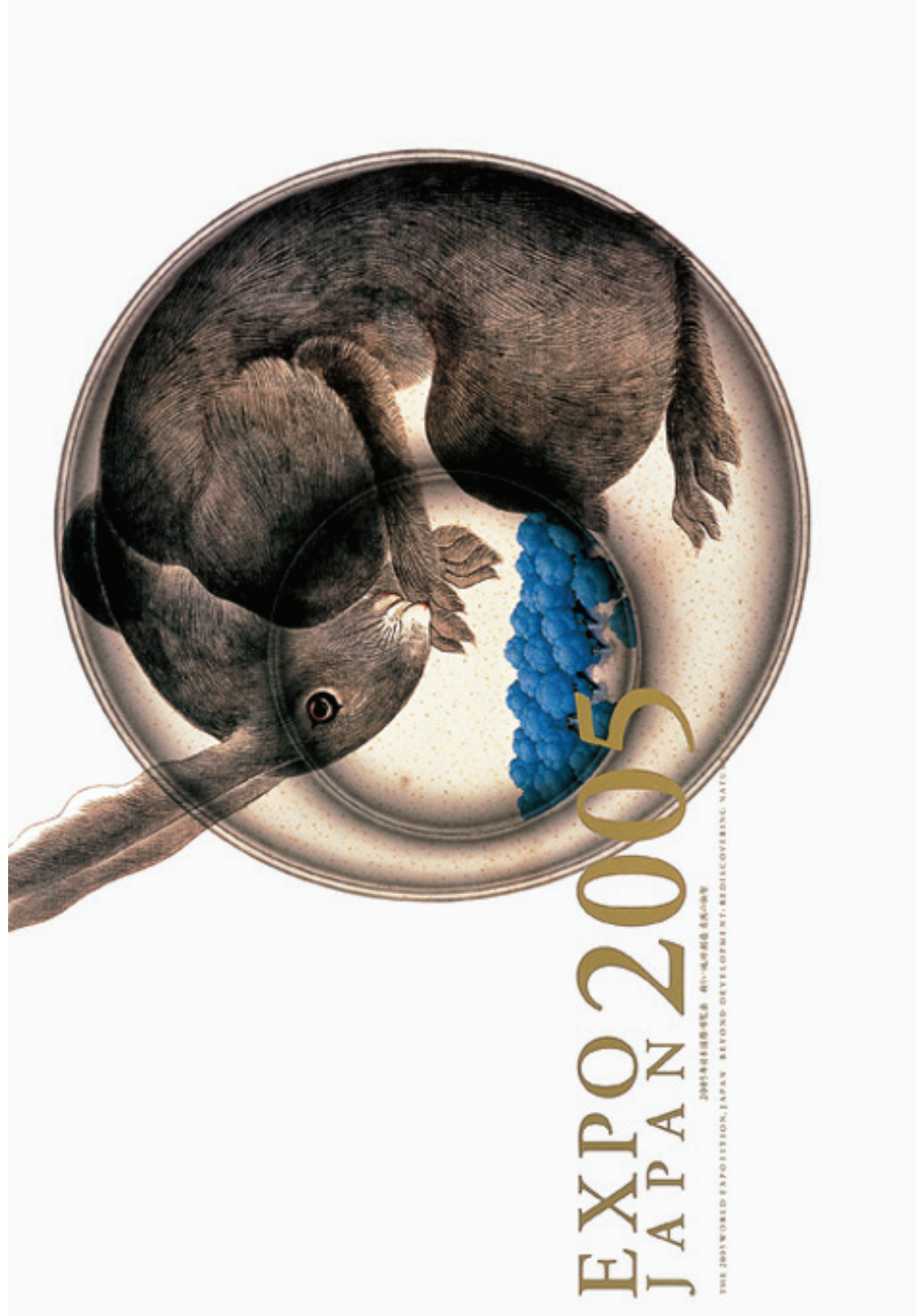
EXPO 2005 AICHI  
Posters by Hara Design Institute



EXPO 2005 AICHI  
Posters by Hara Design Institute



EXPO 2005 AICHI  
Posters by Hara Design Institute

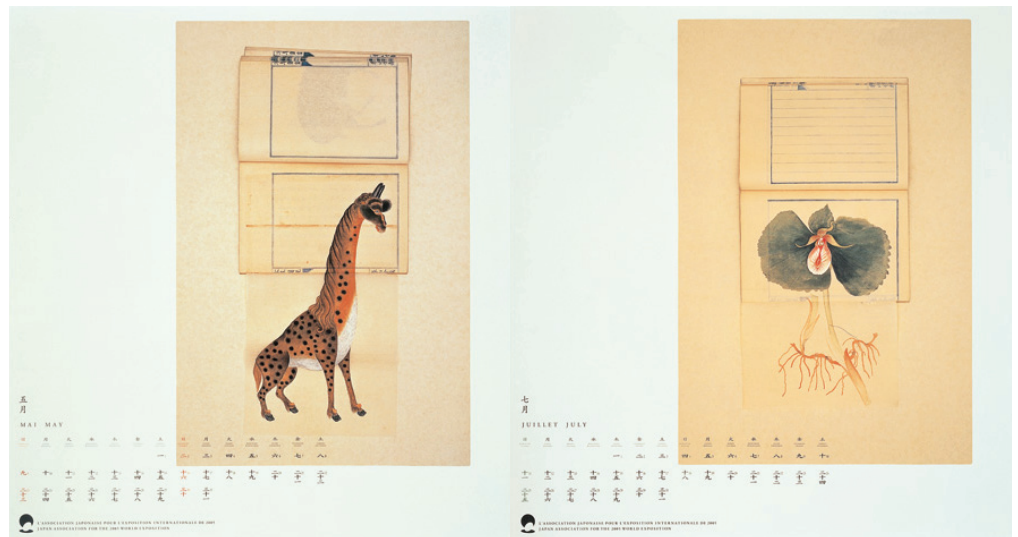
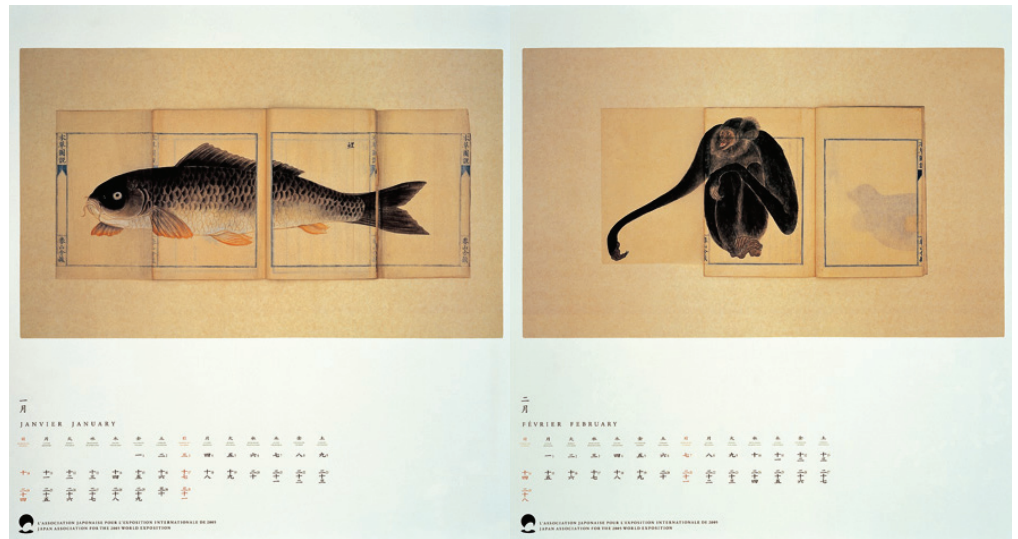




EXPO 2005 AICHI  
Posters by Hara Design Institute



# The Dao of Graphic Design





EXPO 2005 AICHI  
Tapes by Hara Design Institute



EXPO 2005 AICHI  
Tapes by Hara Design Institute



These series of designs were created by the Hara Design Institute and Nippon Design Center under the art direction of Kenya Hara. The client was "Expo 2005 Aichi," which is the Japanese branch of an annual world exposition that Japan participates in. The main theme of the 2005 World Expo was "Beyond Development: Rediscovering Nature's Wisdom."

It is very obvious that the combination of the simplicity of the lines, colors, and space on the paper, and the complexity of the illustrated nature forms, work together to communicate the balance of simplicity and complexity in nature.

As the core idea of Dao that we cannot approach nature as a thing to be mastered but as a partner in a relationship. The goal is to become natural part of the original order. The way to discover that original order is to turn to nature.

Nature has always been a source of inspiration for the design of the human environment, but in recent years this relationship has grown even more intense. "Nature as model" has influenced the most diverse possible concepts and developmental processes and is revealed in a large spectrum of forms and functions. We cannot deny the truth that there is nothing more beautiful in a creative design that imagery inspired by nature. Let's just follow the nature and designing natural things naturally.



### 6.3 The Wu Wei in Daoism and Design

*The Dao does nothing, and yet nothing is left undone.*  
—Zhuangzi

*Use what is naturally useful; do what you spontaneously can do... This is the most easy matter of nonaction. When you are in accordance with the principle of nonaction, your life cannot but perfect*  
—Zhuangzi

The literal meaning of Wu Wei is "nonaction" or "without action." Wu Wei has also interpreted as the art of letting be, or creative quietude. This does not mean a laziness of action or a dullness of the mind; rather it is an alert and effortless determination to obey the rules of the way.

In Daoism, we are not picking things, instead, we drop things. Choosing nonaction means we choose to empty ourselves and go with the flow rather than fight the current. Nonaction does not mean not doing, stopping the natural progression of events; instead, nonaction means to follow nature's course without fighting, striving, or resisting change. We are like water, like the empty vessel, formless and nameless. We do nothing and, in so doing, accomplish everything.



*Dao of Photography*  
by Andy Ilachinski



In the original Taoist texts, Wu Wei is often associated with water and its yielding nature. Although water is soft and weak, it has the capacity to erode even solid stone.

*The softest thing in the universe.  
Overcomes the hardest thing in the universe.  
That without substance can enter where there is no room.  
Hence I know the value of non-action.  
Teaching without words and work without doing  
Are understood by very few.*

—Daodejing Chapter 43

It seems a universal rule that the strong conquer the weak, and that the hard overwhelm the soft. However, Laozi thinks in reverse—from a dynamic and dialectical perspective. He grounds his philosophy of keeping to the soft and tender upon his empirical observation of natural changes. Plain and simplistic as his thinking maybe, his method of reverse speculation remains fairly instructive even today.

*"Daoism encourages working with natural forces, not against them. Daoism teaches the path of Wu Wei—the techniques of mastering circumstances, not trying to control them. Teachers of the Dao often use examples of the bending reed or grass blowing in the wind to illustrate this important point. A Daoist would encourage an individual to work with obstacles and problems instead of fighting adversity at every turn."*

—Taoism (Pacific University, Matschushita center for electronic Learning;)

Wu Wei is a delight in knowing that everything will be all right. It is not refusing to do anything, it is refusing to do insignificant things. Wu Wei is efficiency-like water.

Laozi who spoke of water as the weakest of all things in the world, and yet there is nothing to be compared with it in overcoming what is hard and strong. You can cut water with a knife and it lets the knife go right through, yet water alone cut the Grand Canyon out of solid rock. It is the strength of weakness.



*Designing Design  
by Kenya Hara*

MUJI Poster  
by Kenya Hara



MUJI Poster  
by Kenya Hara



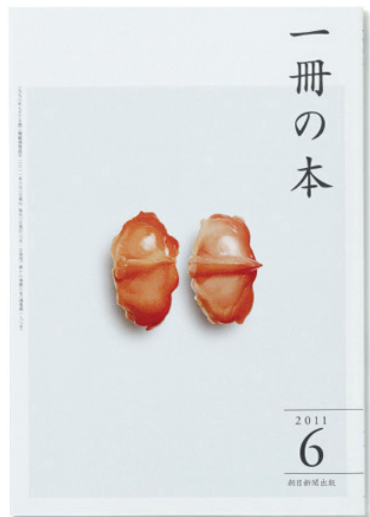
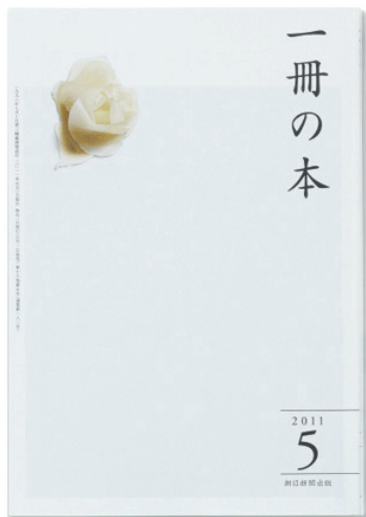
These series of posters (page 62-63) is designed by Kenya Hara, the Creative Director of Muji. The name Muji is derived from the first part of Mujirushi Ryohin, translated as No Brand Quality Goods on Muji's European website. It is a Japanese retail company which sells a wide variety of household and consumer goods. Muji is distinguished by its design minimalism, emphasis on recycling, avoidance of waste in production and packaging, and no-logo or "no-brand" policy.

The Muji which is holding close this kind of power all the time. If we translate Wu Wei into a design term, that will be close to emptiness and minimalism. Wu Wei is like a practice process with the observation in nature, flow with nature. Breathing the wisdom in nature. Muji is running based on a no-brand brand policy which is their core design philosophy, but just like the concept of "nonaction" or Wu Wei, Muji are now one of the strongest retail brands in the world which is somehow ironically.

As the art director said: "MUJI is an empty vessel." There is a traditional Asian aesthetic that sees the utmost richness in what is extremely plain. This plainness is different from the Western notion of simplicity. It is just the same idea of "water in Daoism", water indicated the Wu Wei which is calm, essential, always nearby, giving us rest and richness. It has not the brilliance of liquor nor does it attract us like perfume, but pure and constant, it helps us maintain normal, natural health. Calm water wears away even mountains over many millions of years and sometimes exudes an erosive power strong enough to grind massive boulders into sand, manifesting itself as an immense mainspring of natural power.



The Dao of Graphic Design



The Dao of Graphic Design



## 7. Conclusion

At the completion of this research, I gained a great idea of understanding about the inter relationship between Chinese Daoism and graphic design.

Dao itself is a principle, which can help us understand the relationship between the world and nature better. As graphic designers, we should see through this relationship and express our belief with our understanding in the harmony between human life and nature. The more we understand, the more essence we will bring out to our audience. And we will be well-qualified to lead the way to greater understanding and better communication in today's world.

Special thanks to my committee members Nancy Ciolek, Lorrie Frear and Brian Schroeder who play an important role in helping me finish this thesis and wish everyone will enjoy the journey this paper takes you on and be wiser for it.

## 8. Summary

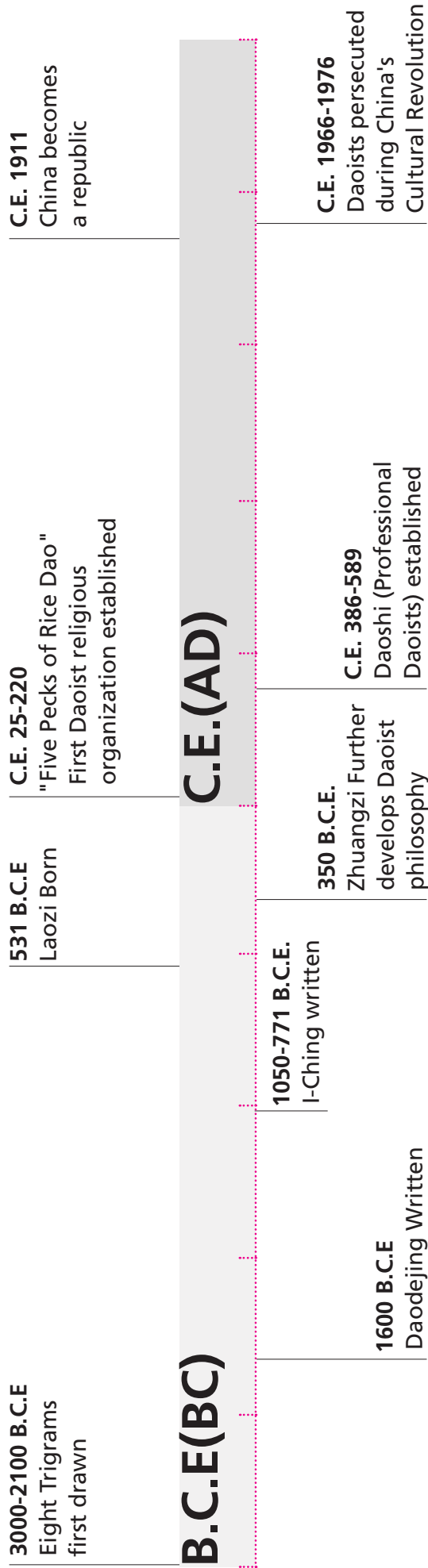
Now we all have better understanding that everything is a unity of opposites after some of the major concepts being discussed in this thesis; everything exists because of its opposite. There is yin because there is yang; there is white because there is black. Sometimes if it does not work, just try reversing it. Often, there is a whole new dimension you have to consider. This is what we call "thinking outside the box." And the interrelationship between Daoism and Graphic Design can be summarized as follows:

The principles in both Daoism and Graphic Design are concerned with human and his environment; helping presenting a more harmony life and believe in the unity of the world.

Dao and Design surround everyone and therefore everyone should look to find an enlightenment, especially in the nature, nature is a great teacher and a lot of design processes are based on natural growth and order.

Interaction is the core for both Daoism and Graphic Design; good designers are aware of the importance of the emptiness(nonaction).

Both Dao and Design have two aspects, they are both static and dynamic, there is always a motion behind the still state. A good graphic designer should train his/her eye to find out the variation underneath the so called unchanging state.





## Glossary

### **Daodejing(tao te ching)**

Commonly translated as the Classic of the Way and Its Power. It is the single most revered scripture in both philosophical and religious Daoism, and is traditionally attributed to Laozi, though some scholars think it was written by a group of thinkers.

### **Laozi(Lao-tzu)**

*Six century B.C.E*

Thinker who lived in the Spring and Autumn period. Believed to be the author of the Daodejing, he is commonly honored as the founder of Daoism and is deified by Daoists. The Royal families of the Tang Dynasty traced their ancestry to him.

### **Mawangdui**

Mawangdui or "King of Ma's Mound" is an archaeological site located in Changsha, China. The site consists of two saddle-shaped hills and contained the tombs of three people from the western Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E–9 C.E). The tombs belonged to the first Marquis of Dai, his wife, and a male who is believed to be their son. The site was excavated from 1972 to 1974.

### **Wuxing(Wu-Hsing)**

Chinese word for the Five Elements: Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, and Water. There exist mutually enhancing and mutually weakening relationships among the five. Daoists used to understand the natural and human phenomena in the world in terms of these five categories. The Five Elements theory is one of the bases for feng shui.

### **Yijing(I-Ching)**

Scripture commonly translated as the Book of Change. It explains the meaning for every line of each of the sixty-four hexagrams, which are formed by putting the Eight Trigrams on the top of each other, Both Confucians and Daoists honor this scripture as one of their sacred texts.

### **Zhuangzi(Chuang-tzu)**

*Traditional dates: 369-286 B.C.E.*

Thinker living in the Warring States period. He is generally regarded as the second most prominent figure in Daoism, philosophical or religious. The book Zhuangzi, otherwise called Nanhuajing, is ascribed to him.

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