Zeng Tu

Artysta, kurator, badacz w zakresie studiów kulturowych. Wykładowca w Sichuan Fine Arts Institute i dyrektor Art and Society Teaching and Research Section w Department of Experimental Art tej uczelni. Założyciel Dimensions Art Center in Chongqing, zajmującego się – poprzez badania kulturowe i artystyczne – rewizją procesów modernizacyjnych w cywilizacjach wschodniej Azji. W systemie szerokiej współpracy wspiera praktyki artystyczne w typie site-specific oraz festiwale artykułujące potrzeby społeczności, którym stara się pomóc przezwyciężyć rozbicie będące skutkiem gwałtownego unowocześnienia.

1 Journey in the Middle

zwrot etyczny

etyka technologii

tradycjonalne chińskie projektowanie

jedność nieba i ludzkości

struktura mediów

Words often fail, it is better to hold to the middle way.[1]

Laozi, “Dao de jing”

Division and Unity

After the Cold War, with the wave of globalization, the evolution of design, driven by capital and technology, has been expanding to construct interactions in all aspects of human existence. It serves the new global order as a way to produce space, building all interfaces of social life for a new world citizenship with clear hierarchies, precise quantification, and efficient functionality. Western modern design is undergoing a paradigm shift from functionalism to technological aesthetics, with its core shifting from “modern human” to “technological human.”

In the past decade, the rapid iteration of technologies, coupled with the proliferation of capital, has brought us close to a singularity that could profoundly change the coherent narrative of humanity. With media replacing reality, social media forming an algorithmic society, and big data replacing human decision-making, digital technology has deeply restructured human cognition. The more modernized communities become, the more deeply they are bounded to a future interpreted by technology and capital. New communities generated from technological ethics are breaking away from historical and nation-state narratives, becoming a new generation with new production relations and lifestyles based on the digital world. Digital technology as well as the virtual economy are carrying the new generation into the future, leaving the material world unexpectedly exposed. While it was once thought that civilizations would merge and end up forming a utopian globalized world, the reality is that new technologies and capital have constructed a new binary world, where the exchange of information and value between high-tech and low-tech civilizations is blocked, forcing the latter to return to the remnants of their historical civilizations to rethink the future. This crisis inversely showcases that media and technology are merely

intermediaries; while they can influence human cognition, they cannot eliminate and dissolve the diversity of human civilizations as well as the nature. With change of direction toward the future, the relationship between human and the world has the opportunity to return to a more fundamental levels: What is the ultimate value of life? What is the better society? Awakening from the self-hypnosis of "the end of history" theory, we must continue to face the vibrant and diverse historical civilizations.

"The general trend under heaven is that long division must lead to unity, and long unity must lead to division"[2]. As the master said this ancient proverb, he would look at his students and ask: "What have you learned from this?"

Between the experiential world and the real world of humans, there are two creations: culture and nature, one originated from human and another from existence itself. Modern design shares the same genetic impulse as modernity: to integrate culture and nature into a coherent whole, constructing the interface between humans and the world through design, carrying all the interactions, connecting the functions and values of human cognition and action, hoping to achieve the ultimate linguistic expression of human. From the perspective of the interactive interface overall, design links two ends: one is the non-human world, and the other is human. Design, as an intermediary language model, has the ability to interpret, reconstruct, isolate, and deconstruct both ends. Indeed, such ideas are similar to the media theory. If the media in a narrow sense and concept of design are merged into "the grand design," then design can provide the linguistic ontology for media, while media provide the functional justice for design. "The grand design" can thus be seen as the only interface, situated in the "middle" of human and the world. Through this concept of the "middle", also known as "Zhong"(中

- **Middle** (position between two ends): Used in expressions such as the title Journey in the Middle, the term "the middle way," and introduction of the concept.

- **Mean** (halfway between extremes): Found in philosophical classic like The Doctrine of the Mean (《中庸》), as well as descriptions of states between binaries (0 and 1, Yin and Yang).

- **Centre** (geographic centrality): Applied to terms like "the Central State" and Chinese architectural space such as "the central hall."

- **China** (Specifically referred to the country of China) its writing system, philosophical traditions, governance logic, and thousands years of history form a unique civilization, China.

[3]) in Chinese, we can more clearly connect to the cultural logic of Chinese civilization.

Zhong Yong: The Doctrine of the Mean[4]

To distinguish it from the earlier systems in the Xia and Shang dynasties, the Yi Jing (易经;Book Of Changes) of the Zhou dynasty[5] is called the Zhou Yi (周易)[6]. The theory of Yin and Yang (阴阳) is the basic framework for explaining the movement of cosmos: Everything originates from the Tai Yi (太一), which refers to the supreme one and its constant . The Tai Yi gives birth to Yin and Yang; within Yin, Yang shall be born, and within Yang, Yin shall be born, forming the Four Images (四象). The interaction of Yin and Yang within the Four Images gives rise to the Eight Trigrams (八卦), and from the Eight Trigrams, all things are born. Joseph Needham, in his *Science and Civilisation in China*[7], introduced the Chinese theory of Yin and Yang (阴阳), arguing that the simple binary division of Yin and Yang cannot fully encompass the complexity of the natural world, and that modern science requires a more refined and diverse explanatory framework. His evaluation of the Yi Jing, viewed from the perspective of scientific methodology, is fair. The black-and-white binary division of Yin and Yang may seem at odds with the holistic thinking of The Philosophy of the Unity of Heaven and Human (天人合一), but in fact, ancient Chinese philosophers introduced a third concept into the theory of Yin and Yang: the observer of Yin and Yang. Only when human observation is involved, can Yin and Yang be fully realized as a epistemology and methodology. This gives rise to the concept of “Zhong” (中), as the third state between Yin and Yang. Thus, the way of heaven (天道) is fully manifested as the dynamic balance of Yang (heaven),Yin (earth) and the Zhong (human), forming the core of The Three Elements (三才).

The so-called “Zhong” (中) exists between all the binary phenomena, between Yin and Yang. This process can be well understood through the binary system: “Zhong” exists between 0 and 1. It is the concept that makes 0 and 1 a binary relationship. Thus, it is non-physical and can only be expressed through 0 and 1. But on the linguistic level in between Yin and Yang or 0 and 1, it is not the “Zhong”. The “Zhong” is a concept and linguistic logic that makes binary what it is, unifying the momentary phenomena with the eternal truth, and the synchronic forms of space with the diachronic values of time. Such a concept even created the “central state” (中央) of the Zhou dynasty to transcend its narcissistic imagination of geographical centrality, explaining why China is called the “Central Kingdom” (中国). The Yi Jing of the Zhou dynasty constructed the source code of Chinese culture for the next three millennia, becoming a model for later generations. For this reason, you should understand that the Chinese worldview places a great emphasis on the integrity and continuity of time and space, more in a quasi-historicist style than an individualistic rationalism, even in modern China.

The “Zhong” is the metaphysical core concept in Chinese quasi-theology, quasi-philosophy, quasi-ethics and quasi-aesthetics. The reason it is called

"quasi" is that the Chinese knowledge system always emphasizes "the middle way" (中道), not the classification phenomena of binary perspectives or their logical deductions and formal structures. Therefore, the "Zhong" is both the ontology of existence and the principle of cognition, as well as the goal of practice. And, at the same time, only through practice can we recognize it and confirm the ontology.

If one holds to the "Zhong" (中) as the source code, the phenomenal world can be generated, which is called "Yong" (庸; constancy). Cultivating the metaphysical "Zhong" and practicing the physical "Yong," unifying thought and action, the inner and the outer, start and end, constitutes the highest pursuit of Chinese cultural intellectuals – the "Zhong Yong" (中庸)[8]. The "Zhong Yong" cannot be decomposed; the "Zhong" is the essence, and the "Yong" is the phenomenon generated by the essence. Those who practice the "Zhong Yong" can only comprehend it through the unity of thought and action (思行合一). Its Inheritance can only be verified by each generation themselves, not through textual language. In fact, mentors throughout history have sticked to the principle of "Passing on Knowledge Without Innovating (述而不作)," believing that language can only truly interact between specific individuals. Once removed from the context of communication, it can become misleading and turn into useless, redundant text or form.

Although the concept of the "Zhong Yong" originated from the pragmatic and worldly Confucianism, it initially resembled an ethical proposal for cultivating the way of heaven (天道). After thousand years of the merging of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, it integrated the meta-world model of Daoism, the linguistic logic of Buddhism, and the Unity of Heaven and Human of Confucianism, ultimately making it the core principle of Chinese ethics, the main focus of Chinese thought and the core value of Chinese civilization. It signifies the ultimate path to harmony between the momentary human life and the endless void. It is not difficult to see that in Chinese cultural logic, there is no possibility for binary thought to dominate the language. The Yin-Yang method of understanding the way of heaven is always constrained by the third concept – "human." Binary cognition is only seen as a thinking model and tool for facing phenomena, helping the self to externally verify and internally cultivate, ultimately reaching the way of "Zhong Yong". Chinese historical texts are filled with rich imaginations, where binary concepts such as being and emptiness, gods and humans, self and others, birth and death, increase and decrease, and impurity and purity conjure up splendid Chinese imaginations. These literary narratives centered around the middle often make "Zhong Yong" seem invisible, because the true "Zhong Yong" has always been outside the text, in the resonance and comprehension between the author and the reader in the Unity of Heaven and Human. Chinese people who uphold the "Zhong Yong" often introspect, value secular life, yet endlessly pursue such harmony. They call the greatest

joy of secular life “the joy of heavenly relations (天伦之乐)”. They believe that every individual and community should strive to understand the way of heaven. To pursue such harmony is what makes human life worthwhile and justified. Even today, China’s proposals in complex international relations still carry a strong sense of the “Zhong Yong”.

Art and Tech

In Western cultural narratives, the concept of design exists between “Art” and “Tech.” Much has been written about their interplay and differences, so this article will not elaborate further. Chinese culture lacks a direct equivalent to the modern concept of “design,” but the concept of “Art” (艺) and “Tech” (技)[9] have long existed. Their core can be found in a millennia-old Chinese prose “The Oil Peddler” (卖油翁)[10], authored by Ouyang Xiu – a polymath whose influence spanned politics, history, classical studies (quasi-theology) and literature, also pioneered China’s quasi-archaeology of Jinshixue (金石学). By revisiting this story, which is still taught to Chinese children now, we can dissect the meanings of “art” and “tech” in Chinese culture. It unfolds as follows: Chen Yaozi, a high-ranking official of the Song Dynasty, was renowned for his unmatchable archery skills. One day, while practicing in his garden, an old oil peddler set down his load and observed him sidelong for some time. When Chen Yaozi struck nine out of ten targets, the old man merely nodded faintly. Chen asked, “Do you know archery? Is my skill not exquisite?” The peddler replied, “Nothing mysterious – it is merely a practiced skill.” Offended, Chen retorted, “How dare you belittle my art !” The peddler responded, “I speak from my experience in pouring oil.” He then placed a pod on the ground, covered its mouth with a copper coin, and poured oil through the coin’s square hole without wetting it. “I, too, have no mystery,” he concluded. “It is simply a practiced skill.” Chen Yaozi laughed and dismissed him.

In traditional China, the “Six Arts”: rites, music, archery, charioteering, calligraphy and mathematics（礼、乐、射、御、书、数） symbolized the identity of the scholar-official class and embodied the way of heaven in the hierarchy. Chen Yaozi’s archery was a public display of the aristocratic culture in the Song Dynasty. That’s the reason why he thinks the peddler’s technique (技) is not comparable with his art (艺), even though both showcased marvels of existence.

Ouyang Xiu’s era, the Northern Song Dynasty, marked the rise of a secular society in Chinese civilization. The peddler’s theory of a practiced skill dismantled the sanctity of the Six Arts. As noted by Northern Song scholar Xu Han, “Ouyang used this to subtly critique scholars who flaunt their talents while overlooking techniques from the people.” Ouyang’s perspective resonates with modern values: he transcended class distinctions to focus on human’s relationship with the world. By stripping away from politics as well

as limited view of time and space, the Doctrine of the Mean was highlighted. Such concept exists among the entire Chinese history, even early on in stories from *zhuangzi*[11]. Whether aristocratic art or livelihood techniques, both reveal the grand design (大设计) between heaven, earth and human. The ontological distinction between art (艺) and tech (技) in China is ultimately dissolved – not merely by the author's intention, but also by a millennia-old cultural consensus forged through people' resonance. Herein lies the challenge of writing about "Chinese design" for a Polish design journal: to discuss it, one must first "attempt to forget design itself." Such sentence pattern could apply to many Western inquiries into China.

Zhong Tang: The Central Hall

The "Zhong," as the starting way of time and space, manifests in human space as the "central hall" (中堂). "Central hall" is a polysemous term, encompassing architecture, official titles, art, and cultural symbolism. Most often, it refers to the core space of traditional Chinese residences. The living and productive spaces of a Chinese family all revolve around the central hall. Important family matters, formal meetings with guests as well as the Ancestral Ceremony are all conducted therein. The Ancestor's Shrine, which serves as idols of heaven, witnesses and records the momentary values of human life, making them part of the world. In a way you can perceive the central hall as China's "sacred space," connecting the mysteries of existence, integrating individual life with family history and their meaning of existence. If Western civilization has gone through different periods of theological era as well as humanistic era, then the cognitive ontology of the Chinese people is not a binary opposition between gods and humans, but instead it's always the unity of heaven and human. Therefore, the pursuit of Chinese aesthetics is called "harmony" (和), and aesthetic behavior is called "concord" (谐), together forming "harmony and concord" (和谐). Just as Huawei named its digital platform. By the way, the Chinese meaning of Huawei is: China's thought and action.

Figure 1: The image generated by Chinese KLING AI with the prompts: A central hall enshrining the Five-Character Mantra.

The Five-Character Mantra[12]

In the past, the central hall enshrined the idols of heaven – the Ancestor's Shrine. More often, large families would build a separate central hall, known as the family ancestral hall. In smaller family units, the central hall often took on different spatial forms to connect with its meaning. Enshrining the five characters: Heaven, Earth, Monarch, Ancestors and Mentor (天地君亲师) in the central hall was a common practice.

The literal meanings of the Five-Character Mantra are as follows:

- Heaven (天): Represents the ultimate order of nature and moral, the source of rules and blessings in the cosmos.
- Earth (地): Represents the cyclical and sustainable physical world and natural resources, symbolizing the material forces that sustain human life.
- Monarch (君): The mediator between heaven, earth and human, the enforcer of justice in secular politics, symbolizing the maintainer of harmony and justice in the nation, society and communities.

- Ancestors (亲): Represent the family and ancestors, symbolizing the bloodline and cultural continuity derived from the nurturing power of the land.

- Mentor (师): Represents the inheritor of human education and the values of time and space, the guide of morality and wisdom.

However, the logical structure of this five-character is neither parallel nor hierarchical. Based on the cognition of heaven, earth, and human, it can be seen as a three-dimensional cognitive framework.

1. Heaven: Heaven is the highest dimension, seen as the first cause of time and the sole source of space. Thus, it can be viewed as a separate dimension, with the remaining four characters derived from it.

2. Heaven, Earth, and Human: The “Zhong” is born, and around it, Yin and Yang are born. Subsequently, heaven and earth, symbolizing Yin and Yang, and their observer, human, are also generated. This is the highest dimension of thought and the meta-model of ethical order of heaven, which influences the structure of the human world below.

3. Monarch, Ancestors and Mentor: The cosmic order of heaven, earth, and human manifests in the human world as the monarch, ancestors, and mentor. You can understand it as heaven + human = monarch , earth + human = ancestors, and human + human = mentor. Thus, the heavenly order and human ethics unite to form the complete order of the unity of heaven and human.

Figure 2: the Unity of Heaven and Human: the dimensions of The Three Elements

The Five-Character Mantra is a concrete expression of the concept of the "Zhong Yong" both simple and profound. Even by interpreting it literally, one can gain some insight, allowing the deep meaning of the "Zhong Yong" to reach the most grassroots communities and families. In times of war and displacement in history, people may have lost their hometowns and ancestors, but they could always rely on these five characters to rebuild the central hall and return to the harmonious middle way.

Contemporary Chinese academic writing also produces categorized works such as *History of Chinese Art*, *History of Chinese Design*, and *History of Chinese Sculpture*, aimed at participating in international cultural exchange. However, historical writing is always contemporary, and such efforts, like those of Joseph Needham, are worthy of respect. Although "the middle way" does not emphasize binary and difference, it does not reject any linear interpretation of the spectrum of phenomena. Any interpretation can present "the middle way", but how has China endured for millennia, and what makes it China? The answer certainly does not lie in the summary of all subjects and phenomena related to China. They are seen as branches of the "Zhong Yong" principle in China, and the root must not be confused with the branches. In the countless changes and flourishing of Chinese design history, we should see their unity, focussed around the central hall, constructing the millennia-long effort to achieve harmony between heaven and human in the secular world.

The Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, where the author is based, is the largest fine arts institute in central China. Its motto is still derived from the "Zhong Yong" – "Aspiring to the Way, grounded in virtue, relying on kindness, and wandering in the arts" (志于道,据于德,依于仁,游于艺.[13]) Chinese art, as an expression of the harmony and unity of the way of heaven, the virtue of earth, and the kindness of human, still remains the most widespread aesthetic commonality in contemporary Chinese society. If explained using Victor Papanek's perspective[14], this is the real and ideal world that the Chinese people believe in. No matter how other civilizations perceive it, they have held onto this reality for thousands of years.

Przypisy

1. Laozi (6th century BCE), *Dao de jing*, China: Ancient philosophical classic
2. From Luo Guanzhong. (14th century). "Romance of the Three Kingdoms". China: Ancient novel classic
3. Translator's Note: The Chinese character "中" as a core philosophical concept carries multifaceted meanings in Chinese culture, leading to diverse English translations. For clarity, four contextual translations are referenced below:

- **Middle** (position between two ends): Used in expressions such as the title Journey in the Middle, the term “the middle way,” and introduction of the concept.
- **Mean** (halfway between extremes): Found in philosophical classic like The Doctrine of the Mean (《中庸》), as well as descriptions of states between binaries (0 and 1, Yin and Yang).
- **Centre** (geographic centrality): Applied to terms like “the Central State” and Chinese architectural space such as “the central hall.”
- **China** (Specifically referred to the country of China) its writing system, philosophical traditions, governance logic, and thousands years of history form a unique civilization, China.

4. Confucius (5th century BCE), *The Analects*. China: Confucian classic
5. Zhou Dynasty existed from 1046BC–256 BC
6. Zhou Wenwang (11th century BCE), *Zhou Yi*. China: Ancient philosophical classic
7. Needham, J., *Science and Civilisation in China*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1954
8. Zisi (5th century BCE), *Doctrine of the Mean*. China: Confucian classic. Zisi further described the concept of “中庸”.
9. Translator’s note: “艺” in Chinese means art and cultivation and the concept of “技” is more connected with tekhnē (Greek) which is the etymology of technique as well as technology.
10. Ouyang Xiu (11th century CE). The Collected Works of Ouyang Xiu (《欧阳文忠公文集》)
11. Stories like “Chef Ding Dissecting Cow” (庖丁解牛) and “Lun Bian Crafting Wheels” (轮扁斫轮) in Zhuangzi (6th century BC) resonate with the harmony where labels like Art or Tech fade, and the grand design emerges.
12. Originated in Xunzi (3rd century BCE), it was first consolidated into the five-character phrase in Taiping Jing (the Eastern Han Dynasty), and later evolved into a widespread religious symbol during the Ming and Qing dynasties.
13. Confucius (5th century BCE), *The Analects*, China: Confucian classic
14. Papanek, V. (1971). *Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change*. Pantheon Books, New York 1971

Bibliografia

1. Laozi (6th century BCE), *Dao de jing*
2. Zhuangzi (6th century BCE), *Free and Easy Wandering*
3. Zhou Wenwang (11th century BCE), *Zhou Yi*
4. Zisi (5th century BCE), *Doctrine of the Mean*

5. Luo Guanzhong (14th century), *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*
6. Confucius (5th century BCE), *The Analects*
7. Xunzi (3rd century BCE), *Xunzi*
8. Needham, J., *Science and Civilisation in China*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1954
9. Papanek, V., Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change, Pantheon Books, New York 1971
10. Peters, J.D., *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2015

Abstrakt

With the globalization of technology and capital in the post-Cold War era, design has increasingly evolved into interactive media connecting people and the world in the process of unifying the global production and daily life. It has gradually shifted from humanism to technological aesthetics, with its core transitioning from “modern human” to “technological human.” In recent years, the rapid evolution of digital technology has been drastically restructuring human cognition. The interaction between daily life and technologies such as social media, algorithmic societies and big data has formed new production relations and lifestyles, yet it has also brought about a new binary opposition in capitalization and class solidification for human: the blockade of information and value transfer between high-tech and low-tech civilizations, forcing the latter to return to the remnants of their historical civilizations to rethink the future. As the world order begins to shift, historical civilizations revive. Although technology and capital can profoundly influence human cognition, they cannot eliminate and dissolve the diversity of human civilizations as well as the nature. Some fundamental questions are still worth reconsidering: What is the ultimate value of life? What is the better society? The epistemology inherited by the Chinese for thousands of years offers another understanding of the media between human and the world which is – there should be none, human and the world are one. Therefore people only need to maintain the concept of the “middle”.

Keywords: ethical turn, technology ethics, traditional Chinese design, the Unity of Heaven and Human, media construction

Artykuł dostępny online:

https://formy.xyz/en/artykul/journey-in-the-middle/

dostęp: 10.04.2026

1 Podróż drogą środka

Abstract EN

W związku z globalizacją technologii i kapitału w erze po zimnej wojnie oraz wraz z ujednoliceniem produkcji i życia codziennego na świecie design ewoluuje w łączące ludzi i świat interaktywne media. Stopniowo przechodzimy od humanizmu do estetyki technologicznej, opartej na przemianie z „człowieka nowoczesnego” w „człowieka technologicznego”. Gwałtowna ewolucja technologii cyfrowej na przestrzeni ostatnich lat drastycznie zmienia ludzką kognicję. Interakcja pomiędzy codziennym życiem a technologiami, takimi jak media społecznościowe, społeczeństwa algorytmiczne i big data, wytworzyła nowe stosunki produkcji i style życia, równocześnie przynosząc człowiekowi nową binarną opozycję w kapitalizacji i petryfikacji klasowej: blokadę wymiany informacji i wartości pomiędzy cywilizacjami o różnym poziomie rozwoju technologicznego, wymuszającą na mniej technologicznie zaawansowanych grupach zwrócenie się ku swojej historii w celu przemyślenia przyszłości. Wraz ze zmianą porządku świata następuje ożywienie cywilizacji historycznych. Mimo że technologia i kapitał mają ogromy wpływ na ludzkie poznanie, nie mogą wyeliminować ani osłabić różnorodności cywilizacji ludzkiej i natury. Warto wciąż powracać do kilku fundamentalnych pytań: Co stanowi najwyższą wartość w życiu? Czym jest lepsze społeczeństwo?