

# Taoist Culture Design: The Development of the Design Ideas

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**Abstract:** The cultural development of “Tao” and “Qi” has lasted for thousands of years. The theory of “Tao” began with Laozi and Zhuangzi. Through “*The Book of Changes · Xici*,” it is developed as “the metaphysical is the Tao, and the figurative is the Qi <sup>[1]</sup>”. “Tao” and “Qi” are interdependent as philosophical concepts. It first guided the philosophy of Taoism, Confucianism and other scholars in the pre-Qin period, and then promoted the development of national system in Xia, Shang and Zhou Dynasty, which gave birth to the aesthetic system of the ancient imperial court. With the development of modern design ideas, the design ideas of “Tao” and “Qi” are integrated. After thousands of years of civilization development and technological changes, today’s ideas of “Tao” and “Qi” are booming, and have in-depth exchanges and integration with foreign cultures.

**Keywords:** Taoist Culture; Tao; Qi; Design ideas; Design language

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## 1. Introduction

What is “Tao”? What is “Qi”? In the pre-Qin period, Taoist Cultures was inclined, and many scholars held the position of emphasizing “Tao” and neglecting “Qi.” In the Confucian school, there was theoretical support for the “Tao” that was in favor of “benevolence” and it was widely promoted. The Taoist school put forward more clearly that the device was the foundation, the means, and the tool, while the Tao was the ultimate goal of the school’s thought. Later developed to the Song Dynasty, Zhu Xi explained that “Tao was truth” and “Qi was shape.” The relationship between Tao and Qi was the relationship between the original and the derived. The Legalist School and the Mohist School agreed that these were the same ideas. Later, More people thought these were overlapping. In the development of ancient Chinese Taoist thoughts, “Qi” was usually restricted to a certain range, and there were feudal grade rules and regulations for the classification of “Qi”. Until the Ming Dynasty, in the “skills” chapter of the enlightened reading materials “*The Children’s Knowledge Treasury*,” there was the idea that “Strange skills seemed to be useless to people, but a hundred arts were useful.” From this point of view, the tradition of emphasizing Tao and neglecting Qi in ancient China determined that it was absolutely impossible to put a book that only explained the technical regulations for the manufacture of utensils into a book as a Confucian classic. Only when an object transcended its own pure technical level, loaded the core cultural consciousness and ideology, and became a symbol of sacred things, and it can have beyond the mundane significance.

In history, philosophically and ideologically, “Qi” is the ideology of “Tao,” and “Tao” exists, develop

and inherit relying on “Qi”. “Tao” is a rites. As we know, the aesthetic system of ancient Chinese imperial court was completed in Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties. Although “*The Rites of Zhou*” had been processed by later generations, it still retained the basic type of the imperial court system of Zhou Dynasty. The national system with “Li” as the core defined in “*The Rites of Zhou*” was mandatory and had obvious national cultural and ideological characteristics. The prescriptive literature on the manufacture of national artifacts involving the Chinese people’s initial view of the universe could be described as the national “right way.”

Through these documents, we could see some cultural and aesthetic factors that later influenced Chinese culture and aesthetics deeply. Therefore, the study of “*Book of Diverse Crafts*” could be regarded as the most tangible, most materialistic and physical layer in a series of national systems with “Li” as the core. And in this layer, we could not only see the specific artifact manufacturing with the “rite” as the core of should be what, but also could see that it greatly affected the ancient cosmological thinking mode and humanistic care spirit. “*The Rites of Zhou*,” which was famous for the “Duke of Zhou’s System of Rites,” was the general guide to standardize the social relations of the Zhou Dynasty. It not only helped to establish and manage the hierarchical relationship of feudal society with the help of ideological dissemination and public opinion, but also strengthened the sense of social hierarchy with the use of utensils. “*The Rites of Zhou*” was a written record about the specific provisions of “Li” in society and daily life, but before “*Book of Diverse Crafts*” was added, it was basically related to people’s specific words and deeds, behavior and social communication, and did not include the manufacture of objects in the form of “Li” system in detail. It could be assumed that it was the comprehensive spread of the culture of “Li” system and its penetration into the whole society that made the material objects most far from ideology became the centralized representation of the spirit, culture and cosmology with “Li” as the core, and was specified in detail by the mandatory state system.

At this point, the “ritual” system culture of ancient China officially completed the specific provisions and penetration of all levels of society, and became the inseparable spiritual standards of people and the manufacture of sacred ritual vessels. This naturally would not be rough and random, but in accordance with the purpose, in accordance with the law, inseparable from the guidance of traditional culture and aesthetic standards, including extremely valuable cultural and aesthetic factors “Tao.” There were many products with “Rites” in ancient times, and all ritual vessels contained “Tao.” Bronze ritual vessels were a kind of utensils with a large number and a wide variety in ancient ritual vessels. In feudal society, court officials worked out a complete set of ritual systems, stipulating strict hierarchical differences to maintain the unity of the feudal system. Due to the existence of feudal hierarchical ritual system, some utensils used for sacrifice, banquet, funeral and other rituals had been given special meaning, and reflect the feudal hierarchical ritual system through appearance, shape and pattern, which was the so-called “hiding ritual in utensils (As shown in **Figure 1**. Marquis Yi’s big bronze pot).”

The law is known as "Tao." "The human followed the ground, the earth followed the heavens, the heavens followed the Tao, and the Tao followed nature." Laozi eloquently defined the link between human, earth, heaven, and nature in Chapter 60 of the "Tao Te Ching," showing the growth rule of the entire nature and even the cosmos. "Tao followed nature" showed man's first understanding of nature as well as the whole universe. All of heaven and earth were included in this definition of nature. Everything in heaven and on earth followed the "law" of "Tao," for example, the "natural" development law, and Tao assumed the role of development rule and law between heaven and earth. "It was tamed to its laws and regulations, and it was justified in its affairs," Ziang Chen of the Tang Dynasty said in the epitaph of Mr. Wang, the Marshal of Shenzhou. Regulations and norms were also referred to as "law" in this context. Many items bearing the rules of heaven and earth, natural laws and standards existed in ancient times, most of which were "magic tools" and educational management tools in many religions. From Taoism's five elements and

eight trigrams plate to Buddhism's eighteen Arhats bracelet. From the ruler to the stick of the master. The product displayed in **Figure 2** was a model product with tight standards and restrictions. Ancient teaching aids include rulers, bells, slide rulers, and etc.



**Figure 1.** Marquis Yi's big bronze pot [2]



**Figure 2.** Ancient teaching aids include ruler, bell, slide ruler, etc. [3]

“Tao” is faith and pursuit. The “Tao” in “*Laozi*” was the objective law of nature. With the development and changes of the times, human beings continue to explore the world. The logic of human understanding of nature and the world will become clearer and clearer, and the thinking will become more and more meticulous. According to the content of *Laozi*, we can think that the “Tao” in *Laozi* refers to the objective law of the development of nature. “There were things mixed, born before the earth and heaven.” That was the objective law of the origin and development of objective things. *Laozi*'s further description of “Tao” was “lonely, lonely, independent but not changed, go around but not dangerous, which can be the mother of heaven and earth.” This was the cyclic and eternal way of heaven in the world and the universe that Tao produce one, one produces two, two produces three, three produces all things. Confucian “Tao” referred to “the way of benevolence and righteousness”. In the *Analects of “Conducious · Li Ren,”* it was written that: “When I heard the Tao in the morning, I could die in the evening.” Confucianism believed that “Tao” was the way of human, which focused on people-oriented, benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and faith, as well as paid attention to people’s self-cultivation.

“Tao” is invisible and “Qi” is tangible. In “*The Book of Changes · Xici,*” there were: “Form” was called Qi.” In *Shuowen*, there were also: “Qi was dishes.” Paragraph note was: “Qi was a general term for all kinds of instruments.” These are all talking about that all tangible foreign objects in the world can be called “Qi”. “Qi” is human. In the “*Analects of Confucius · Wei Zheng,*” it was written that: A Gentleman cannot be only a Tool.” Confucius believed that a gentleman should be knowledgeable and not stick to one aspect. The way of a gentleman was to learn from the behavior of a gentleman. The realm of a gentleman could also be divided into high and low. People for learning was to find the way of a gentleman, and those who had achieved success and dignitaries would enter the realm of not be only a tool. First, *Laozi* said that great minds mature slowly [4], and then “*Fayan Prophet*” said that those who govern themselves well first and then rule others were called outstanding talents. With great talents, people in a certain field could be called “outstanding talents.”

“Qi” is objects. In the “*Analects of Conducious · Duke Wei Ling,*” it was written that: Zigong asked for benevolence. Confucius said: “A workman must sharpen his tools before he can do a good job. When you live in a country, you should serve the wise among the officials and make friends with the virtuous among the scholars. Qi are tools and can also be extended to means. They are all tangible things that can be

described. In the “*Book of Zhou · Baodian*,” a perfect thing was regarded as a tool. In the process of design and manufacture, only those who were perfect and complete can be called “Qi”. People with talent and ability, things with perfect shape and perfect function, can be called “Qi.”

“Qi” is thousands of phenomena in the world. “Qi” can refer to people, things, and the tangible state of all things in the world. In ancient times, the meanings of many words were progressive, including extended meaning, metaphor and pronoun. The first is the original meaning, “Qi” refers to objects and utensils. “*Mozi · Gongshu*” said tools for guarding, which referred to weapons and instruments. It was also included in “*History As A Mirror · Chronicle of the Tang Dynasty*”: “Taking instruments.” Also in the “*Records of Guangdong Military Affairs*” it had: “Prepare your instruments.” According to statistics, the vast majority of “Qi” in ancient texts referred to the utensils with superior shape and structure, which were unified production of certain specifications of the appliance, rather than random small tools and sundries. Therefore, “tools” can be extended to people to describe people’s talents, for example, using “an instrument that held it high in a temple” to describe great talents. Dong (Qichang) also said, “Talents of him (Keli Yuan) was multiple, and his heart could consider four thoughts <sup>[5]</sup>.” Similarly, the talent and capacity represented by “Qi” here are also talents in a positive direction, talents for the benefit of the country and the people <sup>[6]</sup>.

In modern design ideas, the design ideas of “Tao” and “Qi” are integrated. A good product design work should not only have the inheritance of “Tao,” but also have the innovation of “Qi.” The designed products, that is, “Qi,” should have thoughts, emotions and connotations. After thousands of years of inheritance, “Tao” has jumped out of the confinement of feudal rule. Now “Tao” has more contemporary value. The “Tao” conveyed by a work can be many levels, which can express the author’s thoughts, convey each other’s emotions or interesting experiences, and so on. A product without “Tao” can only be said to be a tool. As a tool, it will be updated iteratively with the needs. However, as a product with thoughts and emotions, its life cycle will be longer, and even have the opportunity to become a representative work or breakthrough work in a category and create a new era of products.

First, “Tao” can be thoughts. A good product design contains the designer’s ideas. Designers convey their inner thoughts to users through products. In ancient times, there were literati who expressed their feelings through the scenery and splashed ink on poetry and painting. The existing designers conveyed the design concept through products. Sato Da <sup>[7]</sup>, an interesting designer in Japan, reveals humor in his rigorous design. In the book “*Sato Da’s Design Subtraction*,” the author use relaxed and interesting words to explain his process of doing design. Each design has a story, and each story is worth pondering. In this series of design stories, Sato’s cognition and thought of design are interspersed. Each design is full of enthusiasm for life.

Then, “Tao” can be emotion. Emotional design also has a certain depth of research. At present, it is considered that the theoretical research of emotional design mainly originated from the book “*Emotional Design*” by Donald · A · Norman of the United States. Later, the research theory was supported by the Japanese perceptual engineering theory. Now, emotional design has cross developed with psychology, ergonomics and other disciplines, showing diversified research and development. The emotional experience that triggers a product can have many levels. It can be an experience, a memory or an interesting event.

Additionally, “Tao” can be language. As we all know, design language is a way for a designer to express to users through products. Simultaneous interpreting the designer’s language by different design elements, colors, graphics and other design elements. However, the language displayed by the product must have two forms, one is the way of use, and the other is the internal meaning. The language of the use mode, that is, the product manual, must be simple. Just like the first law of usability written in the book “*DON’T MAKE ME THINK* <sup>[8]</sup>,” the use mode is straightforward and simple, so that the user’s entry difficulty will be reduced, the sense of use will be improved, and the user base will be more extensive. There is no

quantitative standard for the thought, emotion and language in the product, just like it described in the “*Tao Te Ching*,” the best music is without sound, the best image is without image. “Tao” is also integrated into the product itself, which can only be understood but not expressed.

The innovation of “Qi” can be said to be a thing that has been going on since ancient times. The earliest “Qi” was produced in the human demand for tools. From the initial function determines the form to the industrial design revolution and then to the era of artificial intelligence, it has spanned thousands of years of civilization development and undergone thousands of tempered technological changes. Today’s “Qi” is producing innovative design around “people” both directly and indirectly. From transportation to daily necessities, from large to small, from intangible to tangible, all contribute to the development of “tools”.

“Qi” can be life products. This is the most basic thing in people’s life. It is produced in people’s direct needs and provides convenience for people’s life. There are transportation tools, learning tools, labor tools, etc. Tools are the synonyms of this type of products. The “*Modern Chinese Dictionary*” explains the word tool as follows: Instruments used in production labor, such as saw, planer, plow and hoe; Something used to achieve an end, such as: Language is a tool for people to exchange ideas.

Moreover, “Qi” can be mechanical products. After the industrial revolution, it changed from “artificial age” to “machine age”. Machinery replaced manpower, and large-scale machinery industry flourished. From mechanical watches to ships are mechanical products. Design and research, modern manufacturing technology, computer application technology, mechatronics, industrial modeling design, robot technology and so on are all machinery related products.

“Qi” can be artificial intelligence products. With the advent of the era of artificial intelligence, machines have “wisdom,” and intelligent products are gradually developing. Artificial intelligence is “the ability of the system to correctly interpret external data, learn from these data, and use this knowledge to achieve specific goals and tasks through flexible adaptation.” It can be seen that artificial intelligence is a data system edited manually by using computer technology. Intelligent products are products with such systems, which can follow the instructions set by the system to solve corresponding problems.

With the development of time, Tao and Qi thought gradually divorced from the political color and utilitarian needs of the ruling class, integrated different design ideas at home and abroad, injected new vigorous vitality after rebirth, and developed rapidly in all aspects. Tradition and innovation collide with new sparks. The essence of precipitation combines with emerging industries to create a new future together.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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