

Chinese Philosophy and Culture from the Perspective of Cognitive Aesthetics: A Comparative Study of Taoist and Confucian Aesthetics

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Abstract: Taoist and Confucian aesthetics have significant effects on cognitive psychology, neuroscience and historical arts. The main objective of this study is to perform a comparative analysis of Taoist and Confucian aesthetics. Moreover, we examined how they alter perception, attention and emotional regulation through visual stimuli of different compositions, materials and form. The study employs a mixed methods design involving qualitative and quantitative aspects. We analysed key philosophical texts from Tao Te Ching and Analects of Confucius to identify and elucidate foundational aesthetic concepts associated with every tradition. The findings showed that Confucian aesthetics were based on hierarchy, order, symbolic codes, perception-based rules and focused attention. In contrast, Taoist aesthetics embraced spontaneity, simplicity and oneness with the natural world that evokes effortless attention and perceptual fluidity. All aesthetics were found to evoke different cognitive pathways with a common sense on harmonious co-existence.

Keywords: Confucian, Taoist, Aesthetics, Cognitive, Harmony and Arts.

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional Chinese aesthetics are aspects of arts derived from philosophical views and ideas (He, 2022). The term “aesthetics” was mainly derived from the western countries and defined as “art studies and experience derived from philosophical, theoretical or scientific explanations.” Aesthetics includes the broad spectrum of psychology, sociology, cultural background, education, criticisms and anthropology (Phelps, 2005). Arts involve a diverse array of components such as visual arts, music, literature and theatre. In China aesthetics is referred to as mei xue which implies the study of beauty. Chinese scholars such as Li Zehou identified Chinese arts into three categories: arts based on satisfaction of the mind and heart; arts based on a sense of beauty and arts based on satisfaction of intellectual intuitive capacity (Li, 1986). According to Li, an individual's contentment of mind and heart is associated with the oneness of body and mind (Li, 1986). In contrast, the intellectual intuitive capacity is associated with the inward or spiritual awareness. It is the duty of every

artist to attain the greatest levels of experience, symbolism and simplicity. Chiang (1973) showed that inquiries into Chinese aesthetics is affected by Chinese traditions and customs that is deeply rooted within Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism. These three roots constitute the basis of Chinese philosophy. Calligraphers such as Du Meng that lived during the Tang dynasty emphasized that calligraphy is based on critical guidelines of balance, mystery, divinity and purity. Chen et al. showed that Chinese aesthetics is mainly derived from Taoism and Confucianism (Chen et al., 2018). The classical forms of Chinese aesthetics occurred before 221BCE during the Qing dynasty and was distinct from western aesthetics. In contrast, the modern forms of Chinese aesthetics rely on interpretation of western aesthetics based on Eastern values and norms. He proposed that divinity can be realized through intuition because it is more of the spirit than the physical appearance (He, 2022). Moreover, Chinese metaphysics is believed to follow the cosmological order that defines the coherent existence of relationships. Chinese arts are distinct from western arts due to the indigenous drama, literature and painting works. Traditional Chinese music has a high artistic value and transcendental quality. Traditional Chinese music and philosophy are closely linked due to elucidation of thoughts that embrace the cosmological features of systems of relationships. The aesthetic quality and value of arts is linked to sensitivity and awareness of symbolism and artistic visualizations of the real world. These visualizations and representations of reality are usually aligned to reflect abstraction. Abstract features including enjoyment, good and beauty are widely shared between the east and west. In normal life, humans are capable of choosing, selecting, relating and integrating all forms of cognitive, affective and attractive experience while making adjustments and refinements. Human experience relies on receptive psychology, space and time (Rinaldi et al., 2018). The creation of an image in the minds of viewers emphasizes the aesthetic approach of synthesizing and analysing cognitive, intellectual and conceptual experiences. The aesthetic process involves integrating and interactions of awareness derived from sensory, emotional, rational and metaphysical perceptions.

1.1 Confucian Aesthetics

Chen et al. proposed that Confucian aesthetics is based on human beings as the basis or starting point (Chen et al., 2018). Confucius emphasizes the union of beauty and goodness and claims that arts should be based on morals. The unity of beauty and goodness is based on form and content implying that the form of arts must be beautiful while its

content should be good. Confucian aesthetics have significant support in Chinese academia and scholars with no or minimal argument on questioning or justification of salient Confucian and Chinese aesthetics. According to Wang , the Confucian aesthetic order is based on cultural inheritance of China's ancient order and constitutes a significant percentage of China's traditional culture as reflected in the order of Chinese characters (Wang, 2016). The traditional Chinese culture should be investigated with an emphasis on the voice appellation system and the writing techniques. The Chinese writing system is composed of records and has more original meaning compared to the voice system. It is fundamentally due to Chinese scripts such as bone inscriptions, Oracle inscriptions, bronze inscriptions and hieroglyphics. Traditional Chinese writing and painting are relatively isomorphic with the characters representing the significance and meanings. The visual representations of images of Chinese characters involve recording and expressing the comprehension of Confucian thought with the deep cultural connotations in China. Confucian culture forms the core basis of Chinese culture with the aesthetic order forming the basis of Chinese culture. The order of all things is based on praising order and interpreting order based on beauty as the core concept of Confucius's idea. Previous studies derived from the analects of Confucius and Shi Ji propose that the Confucian ideology is based on three distinct features (Wang, 2016). The analects of Confucius propose that appreciating the natural and harmonious aesthetic order in the universe is a critical component of Confucius theory. Furthermore, the analects of Confucius suggest that Confucius had a significant admiration of the harmonious and natural existence order of the universe based on the sun, moon and stars. It I believed that Confucius thought that the beauty of the universe lies in its stability, order, longevity and harmony. The universal order and rule states that there are four seasons and that all living things should grow and develop naturally. Therefore, the admiration of these harmonious natural order, Confucius postulated that human beings and the society should emulate nature in establishing a stable, harmonious, enduring and aesthetic order. The fundamental law of harmonious order found in the celestial bodies based on the astronomical phenomena can be applied in governance (Waley, 2012). The analects of Confucius suggest that governance should be based on the principles and virtues similar to the Polaris. Governance should be on its position like the Polaris with other stars surrounding it, implying that the ruler should govern the state or country like the Polaris emphasizing his/her top position with the citizens and other subordinates observing his moral character in a similar manner

to the stars revolving around the Polaris. Confucius considered this law as a pre-existing, natural and harmonious aesthetic order with Polaris at the centre and other stars surrounding it. Therefore, astronomical order and social order should have higher degree of similarities and consistency. Confucius highlighted the natural order of “grass bends as wind blows” as an aesthetic order. In Yan Yuan records it is reported that Ji Kangzi questioned Confucius about national and governmental problems of “killing the unrighteous in a bid to promote justice”. Confucius replied that the handling of government affairs properly should not involve drastic and heinous measures such as killing. The characters of rulers in superior positions should be likened to the wind; however, the characters and manners of their subjects should be likened to grass. It is because each individual knows the truth that as the grass bends wind blows; therefore, if all the rulers handled their morality properly, the people who are in inferior positions and affected by their ruling would automatically become good (Wang, 2016).

1.2 Taoist Aesthetics

Taoism was mainly founded by Laozi in the 6th century BC and Chuang Tzu (360 – 286 BCE). In contrast to Confucianism that was mainly concerned with the outset of ethical relationships between various individuals to establish a natural ethical order within the society, Taoism is mainly concerned with the “cosmos” without the sense of ordered entity. Taoism is primarily associated with all things that exists or does not exist based on the tao (way). The way of Taoism refers to the way that can be told of are not an unvarying way: “the names that can be named are not unvarying names, it was from the nameless that heaven and earth sprang and the named is but the mother that rears the ten thousand creatures, each after its kind”. Taoism emphasizes the vacuity and infinity and Laozi argues that it is impossible to distinguish and separate ontology and cosmology because they co-exist and are mutually complementing each other. The origin of the cosmos implies a form-less and empty space in which all things were merged. Laozi implies that, “the way, exists in infinity and vacuity with all creatures initiated in a cosmic arrangement”. In Taoist aesthetics, the way refers to the flexible state of the golden average in which the felicitous centre lies between the extremes of excess and deficiency. Tao proposes that the way of heaven is like shooting an arrow: lower the arrow if you want to aim too high and higher the arrow if you want to aim too low. Therefore, the way of heaven limits the excess and rewards the deficient. Moreover, Tao elaborates that the way of heaven that as an

individual stretches a bow to the limit, they would rather stop in time to avoid fragmentation. Similarly, as one sharpens the edge of a blade; they would recognize when to stop before it becomes dull. Also, as an individual fills their house with gold and jade, they would recognize when to stop before requiring security and limiting their ability to travel afar. Laozi proposes that humans are capable of realizing perfection when they strike a perfect balance between deficiency and excess. The way of heaven in action involves incorporating introspection and tuning with the innate essence. Thus, there is belief that despite everything in the world grows and dies, humans are required to be taught “the way” to ensure interdependence, peace and tranquillity in the society. Taoism suggests that “wandering at ease” involves the emptiness within an individual’s mind (Guo et al., 2019; Kang, 2018; Murray, 2019). An individual who aligns themselves with truthful emptiness and stillness of the mind is capable of comprehending the essence of creatures and seeing all living things around the world return to their original roots in illuminated and open-hearted views. Therefore, the emptiness of one’s mind resembles fasting of the heart and mind where an individual forgets themselves in oblivion to calmness and stillness. A human’s mind has to be emptied and be blank before infusing other information. The main idea of Taoism is that if an individual avoids and stays from fullness and completeness, then they are capable of being rejuvenated and restored. The main emphasis is on emptiness because it is through the empty state that individuals are capable of acquiring endless spaces for inspirations and innovations. The classical Chinese paintings always exhibit blank spaces to permit imagination and creativity among viewers. The beauty of Heaven and earth is identified as the beauty of Nature. Therefore, humans should discover and pursue this beauty by observing nature and feeling part of it. Furthermore, humans should identify the consonance between nature and themselves and promote themselves towards infinity. Similarly, in Chapter 19, Yuan asks a ferryman how to handle the boat effectively. In response the ferryman highlights that “good swimmers should acquire the skill quickly because they forget the risks and dangers of water and can quickly become a part of the water in dealing with the boat”. Thus, the words of the ferryman highlight a significant example to humans that by submitting to Nature, individuals are capable of prosperity and success while opposition to nature leads to destruction and perish. Human beings must have a peaceful coexistence with nature and communicate with each other as a single unit. The curriculum of Taoism involves experience, introspecting, transcendence and regular practice in the pursuit of harmonious and

whole-body relationship between an individual, society and nature (Gordon & Gordon, 2019). Taoist aesthetics emphasize value on the whole body that is critical in integrating existential condition and spiritual consciousness through constant education and nurturing. Taoist anaesthetics highlight that the main focus of education is to cultivate a person to grow and develop morality based on the natural way.

1.3 Objective

The main objective is to perform a comparative study on Chinese philosophy and culture from the perspective of cognitive aesthetics based on Taoist and Confucian aesthetics. The main objective was subdivided into the following specific research objectives;

- i.) To examine how Taoist and Confucian aesthetics differ based on human perceptions and interaction with the world
- ii.) To analyse how these philosophies are reflected in distinct forms of art such as poetry, calligraphy and paintings.
- iii.) To evaluate the emotions evoked by these aesthetics
- iv.) To examine how this aesthetics contribute to various cognitive processes of thought and decision making.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

The study employs a mixed methods design involving qualitative and quantitative aspects. In the qualitative phase we performed textual analyses of key philosophical texts and artistic expressions derived from both traditions preceded by ethnographic research on communities and artistic tendencies that embodies every aesthetic. In the quantitative phase, we designed experiments to evaluate the cognitive and emotional response to stimuli from every aesthetic. Lastly a survey was conducted to examine individual preferences and analyses of arts related with each aesthetic.

2.2 Sample and Data Collection

We analysed key philosophical texts from Tao Te Ching and Analects of Confucius to identify and elucidate foundational aesthetic concepts associated with every tradition (yin-yang, wabi-sabi and li). Furthermore, passages associated with descriptions of creation and appreciation were examined to evaluate how these concepts influenced artistic forms and content with emphasis on perfect balance and harmonious relationships in

Taoism while a focus on the natural order ion Confucian aesthetics. All scholarly commentaries and analyses were examined to improve the comprehension of historical evolution and aesthetic principles. Ethnographic analyses involved immersion into communities and analysis of artistic patterns associate with every aesthetic through retreats, Confucian testimonies and traditional ceremonies. Structured interviews were issued to participants who were experienced practitioners of arts, artisans, and cultural leaders to provide views on the applications and understanding of aesthetic principles. Observations were recorded for mindful brushstrokes in Taoism calligraphy and ceremonial patterns in Confucian aesthetic. In the quantitative phase, a between-subjects experimental design was adopted with individuals being randomly allocated to either of the aesthetic group. In the Taoist aesthetic group, participants were exposed to stimuli selected from key Taoist aesthetics involving visual stimuli (paintings of natural landscapes such as mountains, ink wash paintings to depict balance, flow and simplicity); auditory stimuli (consisting of ambient music associated with natural soundscapes and embodying a sense of tranquillity. Lastly, physical environments were incorporated to evoke a sense of harmonious co-existence with nature. Similarly, in the Confucian aesthetic group, participants were exposed to various stimuli of essential Confucian aesthetics involving visual stimuli (consisting of paintings of portraits, architectural drawings and social interaction scenes while focusing on symmetry, ritual gestures and order), auditory stimuli (involving traditional Confucian ceremonies with clarity on structure, precision rhythms and harmonious instrumentals), and physical environment (involving formal spaces associated with order, and a known hierarchical structure).

2.3 Measures

The cognitive and emotional responses were measured in response to various stimuli presented in the Taoist and Confucian aesthetic groups. The cognitive measures involved reaction time (reaction time was measured to establish smaller distinct differences in attentional allocation and the speed of processing between various aesthetic groups), eye tracking (eye movements to establish patterns of visual exploration and saliency effect of various components in the stimuli), and Implicit association task (examining measures of implicit associations between natural order, harmony and various stimuli. Emotional measures involved items on the self-reported emotional scales adapted for the study based on feelings of calm, joy or similar emotions evoked by the stimuli. Furthermore, we

obtained physiological measures based on heart rate, skin conductance and facial expressions.

2.4 Data Analysis

All quantitative data were collected and analysed from cognitive and emotional measures using GraphPad Prism version 9.5.1. A Mixed ANOVA was conducted to examine differences in responses between Taoism and Confucian aesthetics across various stimuli. Thematic analyses of interviews and transcripts were conducted to identify recurrent themes. Lastly, all findings were integrated to evaluate the effects of cognitive and emotional responses.

3. RESULTS

The study participants had a mean age of 35 years ($SD = 12$), consisting of 50% males. The cultural background was diverse with 80% of East Asian origin and 20% Western. They had a moderate 80% artistic experience with various forms or aesthetics.

Thematic Analysis

Table 1: Key Aesthetic Concepts Identified in Taoist Texts

Aesthetic Concept	Description	Examples
Yin-Yang	Harmony and balance of opposing forces	Balance of light and dark in ink wash paintings, use of flowing and still elements in music.
Wabi-Sabi	Beauty in imperfection and transience	Rustic pottery with uneven surfaces, weathered landscapes with natural decay, asymmetric bamboo structures.
Ziran	Naturalness and spontaneity	Unforced brushstrokes in calligraphy, improvisational elements in traditional flute music, poetry with organic flow of words.
Wu Wei	Effortless action	Seemingly effortless movements in tai chi, natural flow of water in gardens, uncontrived poetry that arises from inner experience.

In table 1, there are four major aesthetic concepts associated with Taoism. Yin-Yang shows the harmony and balance of opposing forces. Wabi-Sabi shows the Beauty in imperfection and transience. Ziran is a representation of nature and spontaneity while Wu Wei represents an effortless action.

Table 2: Key Aesthetic Concepts Identified in Confucian Texts

Aesthetic Concept	Description	Examples
Li	Ritual propriety and social harmony	Symmetrical compositions in paintings, formal gardens with geometric patterns, ceremonial gestures in tea ceremonies.
Junzi	The ideal person of virtue and wisdom	Poise and composure in portraits, harmonious architecture with balanced proportions, poetry that emphasizes ethical values.
Zhong	Loyalty and filial piety	Scenes of family gatherings in paintings, music with clear structure and rhythmic precision, literature that celebrates Confucian values.
Ren	Humanity and benevolence	Compassionate expressions in portraits, emphasis on social responsibility in architecture, poetry that promotes empathy and understanding.

In Table 2, there were four distinct aesthetic concepts associated with Confucianism. Li is a representation of ritual property and social harmony while Junzi is a representation of the ideal person with virtue and wisdom. Zhong represents loyalty and filial piety while Ren is a description of humanity and benevolence.

Table 3: Themes Emerging from Ethnographic Research in Taoist Communities

Theme	Description
Living in Harmony with Nature	Emphasis on connection with the natural world, mindful practices like meditation and gardening, integration of natural materials in living spaces.
Cultivating Inner Peace and Flow	Focus on relaxation and tranquillity, practices like tai chi and qigong, appreciation for simplicity and uncluttered environments.
Embracing Imperfection and Change	Acceptance of the natural cycle of life and death, appreciation for the beauty of aging and weathered objects, focus on adaptability and spontaneity.
Seeking Meaning Through Artistic Expression	Use of art forms like calligraphy and painting as pathways to self-discovery and spiritual connection, emphasis on personal expression and creativity.

In Table 3, in Taoist communities, individuals were found to embrace harmonious living with nature, a sense of inner peace and flow, incorporating imperfections and changes. Lastly, individuals were found to sought meaning from various expressions of arts.

Table 4: Themes Emerging from Ethnographic Research in Confucian Communities

Theme	Description
Maintaining Social Order and Rituals	Importance of following established traditions and ceremonies, emphasis on proper etiquette and decorum in social interactions, respect for authority and elders.
Cultivating Virtuous Character	Focus on self-improvement and ethical behaviour, emphasis on education and learning, importance of upholding Confucian values like loyalty and filial piety.
Achieving Harmony Through Structure and Balance	Preference for order and symmetry in art and architecture, emphasis on clear hierarchies and roles within society, appreciation for precision and control.
Finding Beauty in Form and Tradition	Appreciation for established artistic forms like calligraphy and poetry, emphasis on symbolic elements and cultural references, respect for the accumulated wisdom of past generations.

In Table 4, in Confucian communities there was a sense of maintaining the social order and rituality. The virtue of character, realizing harmonious co-existence through structure and balance were also embraced. Lastly, all individuals found beauty in its traditional form by appreciating artistic forms of calligraphy and poetry.

Table 5: Comparison of Central Aesthetic Concepts Between Traditions

Concept	Taoist	Confucian
Emphasis	Nature, spontaneity, individual expression	Social order, ritual, ethical values
Harmony	Balance of opposing forces, flowing forms	Order, symmetry, clear structures
Beauty	Imperfection, transience, natural materials	Formality, precision, symbolic elements
Individual	Inner peace, spiritual connection, artistic expression	Virtuous character, social responsibility, cultural heritage

In Table 5, the main differences between Taoism and Confucian aesthetics were found to be on emphasis, harmony, beauty and individual preference. Confucianism emphasizes the social order, rituals and ethical

values while Taoism emphasizes nature, spontaneity and individual expressions.

3.1 Comparative Analysis of Taoism and Confucianism.

Table 6: Mean Reaction Times (in Milliseconds) for Different Stimuli

Stimulus Type	Taoist Condition	Confucian Condition
Paintings	450	525
Music	380	410
Physical Environments	510	575

In Table 6, Confucian conditions had slower reaction times in all stimulus conditions of paintings (525 ms vs. 450 ms), music (410 ms vs. 380 ms), and physical environments (575 ms vs. 510 ms).

Table 7: Eye Tracking Data: Areas of Interest in Paintings by Aesthetic Condition

Area of Interest	Taoist Condition	Confucian Condition
Natural elements (e.g., trees, mountains)	65%	35%
Human figures	20%	80%
Architectural structures	15%	65%

In Table 7, eye tracking revealed significant differences between participants in how they interacted with various paintings based on Taoism and Confucianism. In Taoism there was a greater focus on natural elements while in Confucianism there was a higher focus on human figures.

Table 8: IAT Results: Implicit Associations Between Aesthetic Concepts and Stimuli

Aesthetic Concept	Associated Stimuli
Taoist	Nature, simplicity, tranquillity
Confucian	Order, structure, ritual

In Table 8, the IAT between aesthetic concept and stimuli revealed that in Taoism, the associated stimuli were based on nature, tranquillity and simplicity. In contrast, in Confucianism, the associated stimuli were based on order, structure and rituals.

Table 9: Emotional Ratings (Mean Scores) for Each Aesthetic Condition and Stimulus Type

Emotion	Taoist Condition	Confucian Condition
Calmness	4.5	3.8
Awe	4.2	3.5
Respect	3.8	4.4
Orderliness	3.5	4.8

In Table 9, the mean scores of emotional ratings for every aesthetic condition based on type of stimulus showed that Taoism exhibited higher levels of calm and awe while Confucianism showed greater levels of respect and orderliness.

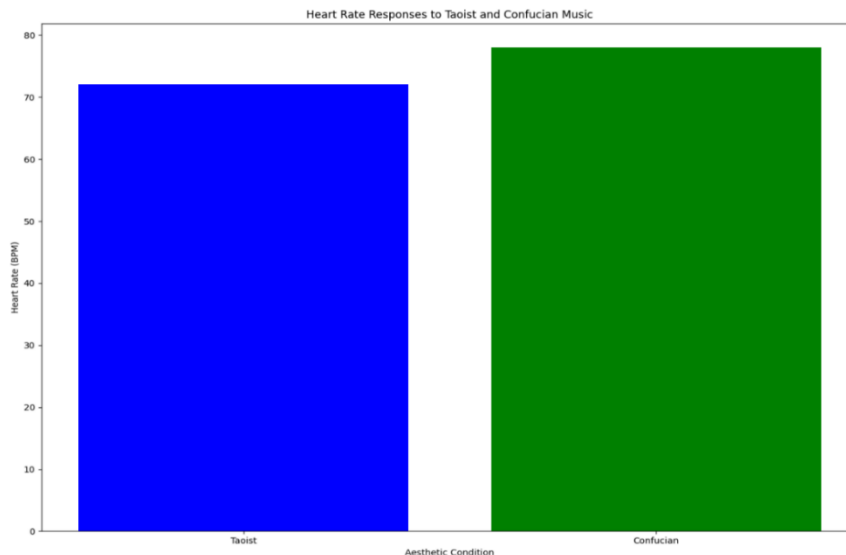


Figure 2: Bar Graph Comparing Heart Rate Responses to Taoist and Confucian Music.

In figure 2, Taoism elicited a lower average heart rate of 72 bpm compared to Confucian music at 78 bpm due to differences in musical characteristics (tempo, rhythm, harmony, instrumentation and dissonance), aesthetical principles (calm, tranquillity, order and structure), and individual preferences.

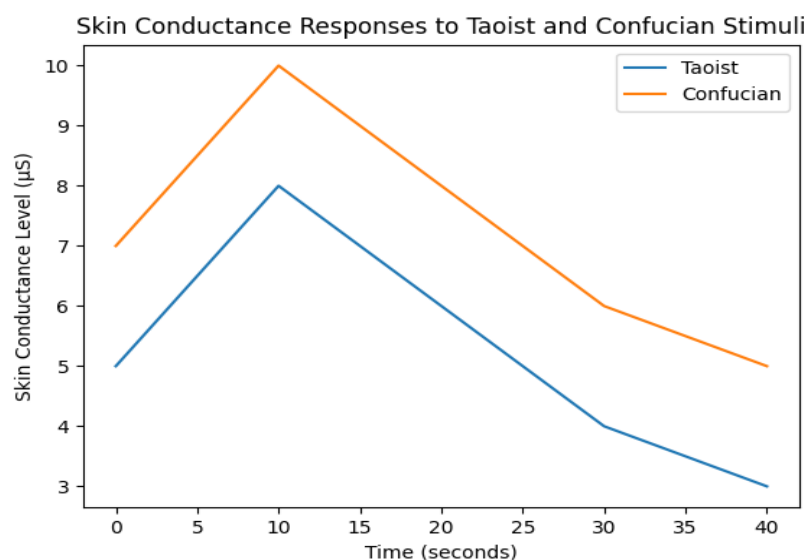


Figure 3: Line Graph Showing Changes in Skin Conductance During Exposure to Stimuli

In Figure 3, in all conditions, there is a steady increase in skin

conductance before a gradual decrease representing physiological responses to these conditions. Skin conductance increased due to arousing emotions such as interest, anxiety and excitements. Thus, Taoism and Confucianism are linked with capturing attention and emotions of an individual.

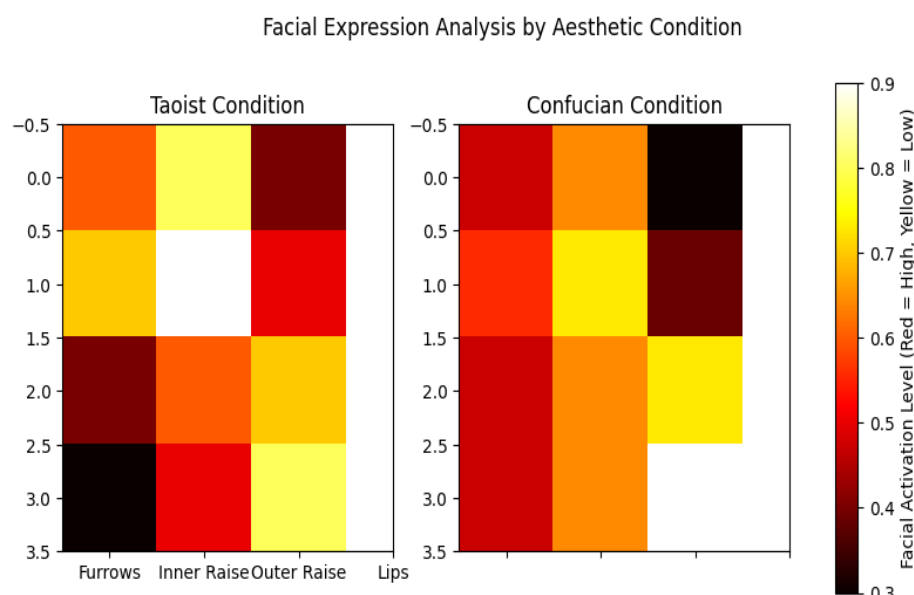


Figure 4: Heatmap Displaying Facial Expression Analysis by Aesthetic Condition

In Figure 4, the heatmap has a red-yellow colour gradient with red indicating higher activation levels in contrast to yellow. The facial segments were categorized into four regions of furrows (brow furrows), inner raise (representing inner eyebrow raise), outer raise (representing outer eyebrow raise) and lip corners. Taoism evoked a higher activation of the inner eyebrow raise areas and brow furrows while Confucianism resulted in higher activation of the outer eyebrows and lip corners.



Figure 5: Word Cloud of Frequent Themes Emerging from Interview Transcripts

In Figure 5, the word cloud is a visual representation of the frequent

themes associated with interview transcripts in the aesthetic texts. The relative size of a word indicates the frequency of its occurrence in the text. The spatial arrangement is random based on semantic relations. The most frequent words were harmony, simplicity, peace, flow, and connection.

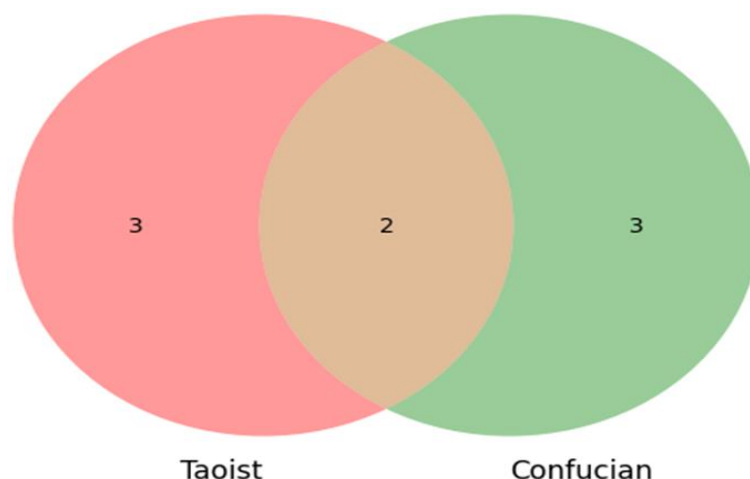


Figure 6: Venn Diagram Highlighting Similarities and Differences in Emotional Responses

In figure 6, the Venn consists of overlapping circles representing Confucianism and Taoism. Taoism is mainly associated with calm and tranquillity while Confucianism is associated with pride and admiration. Shared emotional responses included wonder and joy evoked by all conditions.

4. DISCUSSION

The study found that different aesthetic conditions evoked different emotions reflecting distinct values and principles. The emotional response to this aesthetics is influenced by the diverse cultural background and individual preferences. Frequently occurring words were nature, peace, flow, simplicity, discipline, tradition, connection and order. The greater emphasis on nature, peace and simplicity highlights a greater focus on tranquillity and calmness with a deeper connection to the natural world. Furthermore, order, tradition, respect and discipline emphasize the focus on social harmony, structure and rules of co-existence. Meng et al. proposed that Confucius used the natural phenomenon of the grass bends as the wind blows to metaphorize the relationship and order existing between superior rulers in higher authority and their subordinates in inferior positions to the relationship and order existing between wind and grass (Meng & Dai, 2023). Thus, it emphasizes the social and aesthetic

order that pre-exists in nature. Highlighting and appreciating the grass and wind in nature and relating it to the superior and inferior order in the society highlights a pattern of consistency with aesthetic features of Confucius ideology. Confucius believed that in the order relationship between rulers of superior and inferior positions, the inferior should automatically and unconditionally obey and comply with those in superior positions. The relationship was deemed to be stable and harmonious aesthetic order as the natural order of the numerous stars surrounding the moon in the universe and “grass bends as wind blows”. Previous studies by Wang and Pohl have found that the Confucian theory of aesthetic order suggest that there was a great beauty in heaven and on earth (Pohl, 2018; Wang, 2016). The theory posits that heaven and earth do not communicate; however, the aesthetic order exists. Confucius felt depressed due to dismay, frustrations and helplessness on certain occasions and he said “I do not want to say anything”. However, Zi Gong challenged and said “If the teacher does not say anything, how can the students continuously receive instructions from the teacher?”. Confucius responded by saying that “The heaven does not say anything yet the four seasons still keep running and all living things are growing and developing” (Wang, 2016). Therefore, Confucius found evidence from the laws of nature to support his ideology despite the existence of social reality disorder and feelings of compulsion. In his life, Confucius emphasized and admired this stable and harmonious rule of order in the universe and nature regardless of favourable or adverse circumstances, failures or success. He suggest that Confucianism emphasizes the relationship and harmonious existence between heaven and earth (He, 2022). Harmony forms a core elements of Chinese music aesthetics because it is associated with relationships. For instance, in Kunju, the relationships define the interrelations between meaning, tone, mood, content and form of the music. The beauty of Kunju lies in its symbolism and expression of harmonious representations. The joy or pleasure is realised by understanding the harmonious forces existing in the musical order. In the context of aesthetic musical cognition of arts, the perceiver is responsible for interacting with the musical piece; thus, the communication creates an artistic fulfilment and aesthetic pleasure. In aesthetic value, the beauty appears detached from the will of the subject and acquires an aesthetic significance only when it is aesthetically perceived and comprehended by humans. Thus, the sense of beauty exists within an individual’s perception, appreciation or conception. A man’s perceptive cognition validates but does not identify the presence of beauty. For

example, the musical beauty of the Peony Pavilion is independent of men; however, when it is comprehended as an aesthetic object, it is dependent on the perception and appreciation of the audience. Perceptual cognition is based on response to the aesthetic object and synchronization of cognitive and intellectual absorption processes. The perception of beauty by humans elucidates subjective feelings and emotions by increasing the perceptual to intellectual levels (He, 2022). The intrinsic nature of the aesthetic object or its essence evokes human response to the artistic stimuli. However, the formal elements of the aesthetic object cannot independently express their features but they are capable of evoking the sense of awareness of the human subject through coherent and inherent qualities. Humans react to the artistic stimuli derived from the object which is an essential component of aesthetic appreciation. In contrast Hanslick suggested that the additional musical associations cannot express moods due to the absence of intrinsic musical elements (Hanslick, 1891). In Taoism, there was a higher activation of brow furrows and inner eyebrow raise areas that is consistent with a focus on calmness, contemplation and introspection. Hence, reflecting the emphasis on nature and tranquillity embodied in Taoism (Chen et al., 2018). In contrast, in Confucianism, there was greater activation of outer eyebrows and the lip corners that was consistent with respect, attention and a positive experience on harmonious and orderly co-existence. Furthermore, in all conditions we observed a moderate activation of these facial expressions suggesting subtle differences as opposed to emotional reactions. These patterns of activation are consistent with the fundamental principles of each aesthetic and explains how these philosophies alter emotional and non-verbal communication. Skin conductance increased with increase in emotional arousal based on levels of interest, excitement and anxiety among individuals. Therefore, Taoism and Confucianism stimuli alter the levels of attention and emotion of all individuals (Quinn et al., 2023). Core elements of Taoism such as Wu Wei and Ziran focuses on harmonious co-existence with nature and responsible for inducing a state of relaxation, and attention that is exhibited in the steady increase in skin conductance before a decrease to the baseline condition. In Taoist aesthetics, music and the environment consist of natural features, contrast colours and flowing forms. The features of Taoism promote a sense of relaxation and low arousal among participants. In contrast, Confucianism emphasizes formality, attention and propriety, thus, interactions with Confucian stimuli leads to increased cognitive engagement and processing of emotions

exhibited by a significant increase in skin conductance. Confucian aesthetics and its architecture consist of rich symbols and fine details that can be interpreted when selective and sustained attention is practiced among participants. Previous studies found that there is a unique architectural structure and religious information on the existence of Taoist buildings that create a unique acoustic environment. Audio-visual scenes consist of various characteristics and evoke distinct physiological responses in humans. A mix of natural scenes or physical environment and music were found to have significant reductions in the heart rate, variations in respiration and depth among participants. In contrast, unpleasant music was found to increase activity within the electromyogram (Annerstedt et al., 2013; Hume & Ahtamad, 2013; Li & Kang, 2019). Pleasant soundscapes increase the levels of connection and activity of brain neurons. Music directly affects the cognitive processes of emotional processes, memory and learning. Bottiroli et al. found that background music improves cognitive performance and memory while performing various tasks (Bottiroli et al., 2014). In contrast, a significant improvement in memory functions due to musical improvisations compared to musical imitations where beats and patterns are replicated. Therefore, the creation of novel musical products that improves memory and it is independent of the music itself. The cultural background and individual preferences alter the familiarity and alignment with either Confucianism or Taoism. The specificity of each stimulus, music or physical environment also affects the preference for either of the aesthetic condition and consequently, altering the levels of emotional processing and selective attention. The musical characteristics of Taoism and Confucianism were distinct based on the evoked heart beat responses. In Taoism, the average heart rate was low (72 bpm) compared to Confucianism (at 78 bpm). These differences are attributed to the musical characteristics of tempo and rhythm because in Taoist music, there are elements of slow tempos with flowing rhythms that encourage and promote a sense of relaxation and low arousal (Ho & Pastor, 2022; Imre, 2018). In contrast, Confucian music embrace a pronounced and structured rhythm that slightly elevates heart rate. Bao and Ho postulated that the “Lingbao Taoist music” was a core component of major Taoist rituals and practiced in several ceremonies (Bao & Ho, 2023). These scriptural rhythms considered as Taoist music have numerous sets of names and classifications within Taoism aesthetics. The fundamental elements of Taoist music apply to Chinese music due to tempo, beats, rhythm, pattern, meter, scale and key. The differences in these musical

characteristics constitute the fundamental differences between Taoist and Confucian music. Taoist Jingyun is a traditional component of Chinese music that embraces musical features of melody, rhythm, tempo, beat, key, scale, patterns and meter. These findings were similar to Meulenbeld who suggested that in music, the larger the number of beats, the slower the musical piece (Meulenbeld, 2021). In contrast, a smaller number of beats implies faster musical piece. These relationships between beats and speed of musical piece are applicable to all music including the Taoist sutra. Taoist music is composed of slow-tempo and melodious music with constant flowing rhythms (Lee, 2023). In contrast, Confucian music consists of musical pieces that incorporate rhythms similar to ritual music involving chimes and drums. These rhythms evoke a higher sense of alertness and cognitive engagement leading to advanced physiological effects. Additionally, Taoist music is composed of simple harmonies that have a higher degree of evoking peace and relaxation. Gentle flutes and chimes in Taoist have a calming influence on the nervous system compared to gongs and drums in Confucian music. Activation of the parasympathetic nervous system occurs due to the soothing music that mimics the whispers of nature. The slow and soothing nature of Taoist music creates a state of flowing rhythms that are linked with alleviating anxiety, depression and emotional resilience. Previous studies on Confucian music have highlighted high levels of attention and awe due to pronounced rhythms and sounds generated by the instruments. The elevated levels activate the sympathetic nervous system leading to a sustained focus and faster processing of information. Furthermore, the evoking nature of Confucian music leads to strong emotions and feelings of awe, pride and reverence. These emotional feelings have greater levels of enhancing social bonds among community members. The symbolism in Confucian music based on musical patterns and instruments have significant meanings based on culture and historical narratives. Confucian and Taoist aesthetics are distinct and fundamental philosophical approaches of experiencing the world and nature. Previous studies (Chen et al., 2018) have found that both approaches value beauty and harmonious co-existence; however, there are distinct cognitive pathways utilised in eliciting response based on selfhood, order and the natural world. In cognitive aesthetics, Confucianism enhances focused attention, a perception based on rules and collective cognition (Guo et al., 2020). In focused attention, Confucianism enhances visual processing through a symmetrical system of layers and patterns, decoding of symbols based on motifs and designs that highlight social hierarchy, morality and

auspiciousness. Lastly, it consolidates the memory based on the layered and organized structures that are adapted as mnemonic aids in memory recall. Constant and repeated exposure to visual stimuli improves the activity within the hippocampus and enhances long-term memory. The perception based on rules in Confucianism encompasses activation of the schema, order and predictability, and competency of cultures. Confucian aesthetics follow an existing principle of composition based on balance, colour palates and perspective. These existing principles form the “schemas” and frameworks embedded in the mind that regulate and simplify perception. Previous studies by Sekeres et al. and Giuliano et al. have postulated that interactions with stimuli of high consistency and schema leads to activation of the inferior temporal cortex thus increasing interpretation of information and rapid recognition (Giuliano et al., 2021; Sekeres et al., 2018). The adherence to rules creates a sense of predictability and order that is reflected within the Confucian aesthetic experience. Previous research has proven that the presence of predictable patterns activates the striatum within the brain linked with processing of rewards and contributes to aesthetic pleasure obtained from order and predictability. Competency among Confucian cultures is based on comprehending the rules and principles associated with its appreciation. The fluency among cultures is a significant component of aesthetic systems that increases cognitive processes and emotional processing in response to various stimuli. Guo et al. observed that Confucian art has components of collective cognition derived from shared attention and gazing cues (Guo et al., 2019). The presence of elements that can guide the viewers attention through focal points, symmetry and line of sight increases the coordination between attention and viewing when presented with pieces of art; hence, a sense of social connectivity and shared experiences. Furthermore, the reference to shared cultures, myths, beliefs and historical events increases collective memory and narration. Previous studies have postulated that deeply rooted arts in collective memory increases the activation of neural networks within the brain responsible for emotional resonance and processing of shared information resulting to robust social bonds and a sense of belonging. In cognitive aesthetics, Taoism is mainly characterised by oneness with nature, simplicity and harmony. Taoism does not have rigid structures encouraging open curiosity and awareness; hence, the mind is free to move without the elements of focused attention. Previous research has established that open awareness is responsible for activating the default mode networks (DMN) thereby increasing curiosity, introspection and innovative thinking

(Doorenweerd et al., 2021). The presence of subtle and altered patterns in Taoism enhances the breadth of perceptual experience. Similarly, Dolcos et al. have proposed that interactions with a broad spectrum of perceptual stimuli leads to activation of the posterior cingulate cortex that boosts visual attention and sensitivity to the environment (Dolcos et al., 2020). Furthermore, the absence of external demands in Taoism creates wander and flow in the mind eliminating bias judgment. This state of mind and flow is essential in activating the brains reward system and the prefrontal cortex creating a sense of enjoyment and immersion into Taoism aesthetics. Lin et al. established that perceptual fluidity in Taoism embodies an integration of cognitive and sensory information with an emphasis on organic forms and flow of kinesthetics with the associated stimuli (Lin & Hirunruk, 2022). Deshmukh found that embodied cognitive activities is responsible for activating the motor and sensory sections of the brain creating a sense of unity with the environment (Deshmukh, 2019). Taoism has elements of dynamic interactions and interplay that are crucial in responding to stimuli such as light, and other environmental factors. The dynamic nature of perceptive stimuli has been found to increase the activation of brain regions associated with processing of rewards and anticipation that increases the overall aesthetic experience. There is a greater significance attached to interconnections and interrelations among elements of holistic perception and Gestalt principles that increases perceptual fluidity. Similarly, previous research has shown that Gestalt principles explain how the human brain grows and develops in grouping and connecting visual elements to create a coherent and uniform whole from separate components. In Taoism, there is mindful detachment that is derived from aesthetic Catharsis and self-comprehension, inner peace and tranquillity and non-judgmental observations. The greater focus on natural simplicity motivates viewers to view the world without attachment or judgment. A higher state of mindful awareness is essential in meditation which reduces the levels of activity within the amygdala and enhances emotional regulation (Kral et al., 2018). Similarly, the lack of external demands and focus on natural beauty cultivates a sense of inner peace and tranquillity. Previous research has elucidated that interacting with nature and selectively focusing on the present moments activates the prefrontal cortex and the insula that are linked with positive emotions and reduction of stress. Additionally, the subtle complexities of nature increase a sense of self-understanding and reflection in Taoism compared to Confucianism. It is highlighted that those aesthetic experiences promote Cathartic release

and encourages personal development through introspection and processing of emotions.

5. CONCLUSION

Confucian and Taoist aesthetics have contrasting approaches to cognition, environment and beauty. Confucianism enhances focused attention, perception based on rules, shared meanings and fostering a sense of order and social cohesion. In contrast, Taoist aesthetics creates a sense of flow with nature, effortless attention, mindful detachment and perceptual fluidity. Moreover, Taoism enhances introspection, regulation of emotions and connectivity with the natural world. Taoism and Confucianism share similar aspects of pursuing harmonious co-existence. The Confucian order emphasizes structure and shared cultural practices such as codes that promote stability and social harmony. In contrast, Taoism focuses on the natural flow and non-judgmental observations which encourages emotional and inner harmony. Hence, these traditions highlight that beauty is not a singular phenomenon but a multifaceted structure of order and free flowing interactions with nature. The understanding of Taoism and Confucianism is applicable in real life often dominated by dissonance and chaos because they provide a sense of harmony within the world and among various individuals. Appreciation of the structured beauty of Confucianism increases meaningful relations among individuals, social norms and cohesion in the society. Similarly, appreciating the fluid beauty of Taoism fosters a sense of harmony, simplicity and enrichment of lives.

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