
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Through the Prism and Back: The Poet Daozi and His Holy Ink

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The paper discusses the work of contemporary Christian author Daozi (1956–2025). Taking a postsecular approach, it focuses on interactions between his religious-themed experimental poetry and ink painting. The intersemiotic dynamic observed in selected poem-painting pairs is presented in a conceptual framework of “kenotheotic” writing inspired by theological language and resonating with the figure of hermeneutic circle. I argue that this dynamic is present at three levels: explicit, implicit, and “complicit”—meaning the reader’s participation in the spiritual experience facilitated by the textual-visual interplay.

本文以“後世俗”視角探討當代基督徒詩人島子（1956–2025）的創作，聚焦其宗教實驗詩與“聖水墨”繪畫之間的跨媒介互動。作者選取若干詩畫組合，分析其中的符際動力，並提出“虛己成神”（kenotheotic）這一概念框架——該術語源於神學話語，同時呼應“詮釋學迴圈”的意象，用以闡釋文字與圖像交織所激發的精神經驗。文章指出，這一符際互動機制運作於三個層面：顯性表達、隱性意涵，以及“共構”維度——即讀者在詩畫互文的引導下，主動參與並共同完成這一精神實踐。

Keywords: Daozi, experimental poetry, Christian poetry, ink painting, kenosis

關鍵詞： 島子，實驗詩歌，基督教詩歌，水墨畫，虛己成神

Introduction: A Poet Who Searched for God and Found Ink

‘And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love’ (Corinthians 13:13)—thus reads, in English translation,¹ four columns of Chinese cursive characters now hanging in my living room—my little sacred relic of Daozi’s 島子 ‘holy ink’. I received it from Daozi when I visited him in his home-cum-atelier in the outskirts of Beijing in July 2025, just six weeks before his death from leukaemia. A devout Christian, after retiring from his position as a professor at the Academy of Fine Arts & Design at Tsinghua University, he used to copy excerpts from the Bible as his daily prayer. This brought him peace and consolation.

Everything else in his work-and-living room testified to his commitment to ‘faith, hope, and love’: impressive paintings, some of them finished, some still in the making—among them the ‘Last Supper’ (最後晚餐) series and several pieces responding to Russian aggression against Ukraine; bookshelves bursting at the seams with all sorts of ambitious readings on art, literature, philosophy, and religion; scattered photographs of Daozi with his graduate students looking at him with affection and admiration; and Daozi himself—frail as he was, but generous, open-minded, and open-hearted, showing no signs of impatience and skilfully masking his physical exhaustion. We even started discussing a prospective exhibition of his works in Poland.

I had known Daozi earlier primarily as a poet and the translator of *Selected Poetry of the American Confessional School* (美國自白派詩選; 1987), which had had some impact on the development of Chinese verse in the late 1980s. He was one of the most original experimenters in the era of ‘cultural fever’, recognised as a proponent of what was referred to as ‘metaphysical verse’ (玄學詩). This was a highly conceptual type of poetry that drew on various religious traditions just as it did in other domains of human experience—an approach that Feng Tianhai 馮天海 associated with Lu Xun’s 魯迅 conception of ‘grabism’ (拿來主義); that is, a selective, pragmatic incorporation of elements of different cultures (Feng 1989, 72–73).

This tendency is exemplified by Daozi’s early poem ‘A Wall of Pines, Animal Bones, and Dusk’ (松、獸骨、冬日黃昏的牆), wherein the I-speaker ‘touches the limits of language’ (觸摸到語言的邊界) and seeks to push them through philosophical acrobatics learned, presumably, from Daoist *qingtán* 清談 (‘pure conversations’), set in ‘a metaphysical empty place in a pine forest’ (在玄思的松林空地; Daozi 2015, 10). This place is subsequently populated by shepherds from Bethlehem and soon turns into a forest of crosses: Golgotha.

¹ All quotes from the Bible are from the New International Version.

Overwhelmed by this quirky profusion, some critics asked whether he had gone too far in reinventing the genre (Feng 1989, 74; cf. Jian 1989, 111).

In the 1990s, after Daozi's coming to faith, this lay literary metaphysics gradually evolved into spiritual poetry par excellence. The transformation coincided with his turn to visual art, which became his main field of creative activity for the next thirty years. Although he continued writing, his poems never achieved the popularity of his paintings, created in the distinctive style he named *shengshuimo* 聖水墨—a term usually translated as 'saintism ink painting' but that I prefer to render as 'holy ink painting', which I explain below.

It was only in 2015, with the publication of *Selected Poems of Daozi 1982-2015* (島子詩選 1982-2015) that literary circles, especially those sympathetic to Christianity, renewed their interest in his verse and attempted to reintroduce it to a broader audience (e.g., Rong 2017, 2019; Chen 2018). Yet, as these scholars emphasise, such efforts faced difficulties due to the marginal status of religious poetry in contemporary China: on the one hand, it is suppressed by censorship for ideological reasons; on the other, it is dismissed by most critics as uninteresting or doctrinaire—two judgments that, as I hope to demonstrate, are certainly not applicable to Daozi's work.

In addition to thirty-nine of Daozi's poems, this beautifully designed black-covered volume, released by the Hong Kong-based China International Culture (中國國際文化), includes fifteen reproductions of his paintings from the 'God-Gold' (上帝與黃金) series, which further enrich the reading experience. Although the visual material does not directly correspond to the poems' content, the reader can get a sense of how these two modes of artistic expression complement each other. To facilitate such intermedial reading, Daozi had been considering another volume in which poems and paintings would be directly paired as they were in some of his exhibitions.² Sadly, he did not live to finish the project. That said, in 2019 the Maitian Theological Seminary released an exquisite album titled 'Passover' (逾越) featuring eighty-one religious paintings, among which an attentive reader will find several pieces that share titles and themes with his poetry.

Something that struck me at first was the contrast between Daozi's fragmented, impressionistic writing and focused, almost ascetic, meditative paintings. The poems seemed highly visual and spatial, as if they were sketches for abstract paintings, while the paintings, conversely, resembled lyrical micronarratives that could accompany confessional poetry. In other words, if he had painted the way he wrote and written the way he painted, everything would appear clearer. Yet for some reason, his spiritual experience was distributed between the two media in an opposite, utterly counterintuitive, and therefore incomprehensible, way.

² Personal communication with Daozi. Beijing, 22 July 2025.

Or so I felt until I read one poem that shed more light on how he understood poetry, painting, and the relationship between them.

‘Homage to My Mother Tongue’ (向我的母語致敬, 2002) is a poem that, as I try to show through close reading in the next section, refers to three different ‘mother tongues’. One is obviously Mandarin, Daozi’s spoken and written mother tongue in which he created poetry. The second is ink, a visual mother tongue of Chinese art, and with which he painted. The third is the Logos, a pre-language which underlies and nourishes the other two, albeit in distinct ways adapted to their respective affordances. These two are, obviously, anything but disjunctive and remain intertwined at various levels, ‘Homage’ itself being one example. Written in natural language, it speaks of ink, thus referring the reader to poetry’s ‘sister art’ and urging them to reconsider the relationship between the two.

Read along these lines, the poem also offers intriguing reflections on the long-standing debate about the (mis)alignment between Chinese culture and Western(ised) religion, dating back to the so-called ‘Chinese Rites Controversy’. Although this issue has been widely researched, it has not been adequately addressed in practice since it erupted in the seventeenth century. What seemed to have become an enduring silent consensus—a reasonable degree of acculturation in aesthetics and symbolism—has recently been repeatedly abused in Xi Jinping’s strategy of a systemic ‘Sinicisation’ (中國化) of religions, effectively amounting to political infiltration.³ Daozi (2018) himself prefers to speak of *chujinghua* 處境化—a term that can be translated as contextualisation, with ‘context’ understood as a particular situation be it of an individual or of a group of people—rather than ‘acculturation.’ Thus, he gives it a

³ Elaborating on this topic would easily lead us far beyond the scope of this paper and literary studies in general; therefore, I decided not to discuss it in the main body of the text. Instead, I refer the reader to a recent study (Klejnowski-Różycki 2024) published in *Studia Oecumenica* that discusses the modern reinterpretations and implications of the Jesuits’ method for the current relationships between the Chinese state and the Catholic church, in which Pope Francis’s (a Jesuit himself) consensual attitude toward the PRC authorities played a crucial role.

My experience confirms the author’s observations and his skeptical assessment of the situation. To illustrate the problem, let me briefly recall some conversations I had with Christians in different regions of China during my fieldwork between April and July 2025. Those representing the so-called “patriotic church” (in contradistinction to the illegal underground church) often invoked the Jesuit missions, with their focus on reconciling theology with local traditions and mentality, as a model for Chinese Christians to follow. A Catholic priest in Xiangtan showed me a photo exhibition on the church premises. It was mostly photographs of local clergy accompanied by slogans of indigenous religious education next to photographs of Chinese church leaders paying visits to state leaders with excerpts from the latter’s utterances on religion, expressing their support for the idea of freedom of conscience and recognising the religions importance in the development of the society. The church also preserved an old well built in the nineteenth century by French missionaries as an example of collaboration between the priests and local people. A prospective priest in Kunming, in turn, took me to an exhibition of Chinese Christian architecture in Yunnan, emphasising its “Chinese” style in which, reportedly, the government wants to rebuild many other churches across the country. At the entrance to all legally operating churches and Buddhist temples I visited, huge centrally placed posters and banners emphasised the necessity for the “Sinicisation of religions.” In unofficial situations, I heard many critical comments on this policy from both clergy and lay people. In underground or house churches, the opposite tendency is visible, with Westernisation seen as a way of maintaining ideological independence from the party’s ‘main melody’.

more pragmatic, and less ideological, dimension, making it more resistant to systemic manipulation, especially one driven by nationalistic sentiments.

Although Daozi was baptised in the Lutheran Church, which renders most sacraments as purely symbolic practices performed in remembrance of Jesus's acts, his work gravitates towards Catholic- or Orthodox-specific sacramental thinking. This means a belief in God's real presence in certain rituals, for example in the Eucharist, understood as the genuine transubstantiation of bread and wine into Christ's body and blood. In a similar vein, Daozi argues that in truly spiritual art this blood of God transforms into ink (and vice versa)—a conviction whose aesthetic and poetological consequences we will trace further (see, for example, Daozi 2019, 2–5; 122–23). As one of the most explicit and most consistently repeated points concerning the connection between his faith and his art, present in almost every self-commentary, it is broadly considered his programmatic statement and discussed in numerous studies on his painting, including Ai's (2015), Zhu's (2015), Chen's (2018), and Dong's (2019).

This is why, instead of the theoretically and ideologically charged 'saintism'⁴ associated with Puritan practice and, on the other hand, a term that risks sounding too reminiscent of pharisaism, I have chosen to translate his *shengshuimo* as 'holy ink', a variation of *shengshui* 聖水, 'holy water' or blessed water used in the liturgy, and for sacraments and exorcisms in some Christian denominations. While Daozi's approach resonates with certain strands of Chinese traditional ink art including, for instance, Confucianist-turned-Buddhist-turned-Daoist Shitao's 石濤 (1642–1707) conceptions of *zunshou* 遵受 and *ziren* 自任⁵, the author himself maintains that Chinese painting, like Chinese culture as a whole, has always lacked this crucial transformative power because there is no real presence behind it to guarantee its vitality. He argues:

The absence of divinity is the greatest deficiency in China's Confucian and Daoist cultures. In neither tradition is there recognition of the one true God who created and completes the universe [...] The idea of redemption—of deification—originates in the mystery of the Word that became flesh. True religion, by contrast, is the only force that remains untouched by the decline of civilisation or by despair over society; it is the power that connects humanity with a greater ultimate reality, with the supernatural.

⁴ In a study included in *Passover*, Dong Lihui 董丽慧 (2019) derives his interpretation of Daozi's work from the multiple definitions of the English word "saintism" as the purported counterpart of the Chinese *sheng* 圣, which is certainly not the case: the counterpart of *sheng* in the Christian context is simply 'saint' or 'holy'. Although Dong makes some interesting observations, especially when he situates Daozi against the history of East-West interactions including the Jesuits' presence in China, his roundabout argumentation is flawed, if only because it suggests that Daozi conceived his project in terms from English, which were only secondarily and not very precisely translated into Chinese. Daozi himself approved of the term 'saintism', but his definitions of it hardly have anything to do with the meaning of this word in English. It is contemplative rather than ideological.

⁵ For a comprehensive explanation of these concepts, see Man (2019).

[...] In the Confucian, Daoist, and Chan (Zen) traditions, I see no such spiritual strength (Daozi 2018).⁶

This is, he believes, quite regrettable—especially since ink is a particularly efficient medium for transcendence, owing to its inherent performativity, as if ritual itself were perpetuated in it:

However, as a vessel—as a carrier of spirituality—the brushwork and brush techniques of the Chinese ink tradition can themselves embody the metaphysical, the transcendent, and the spiritual dimension of the soul. The interplay of black and white, dry and wet, dense and light, parched and moist, sparse and full; the ever-changing freedom of lines, their misty and ethereal qualities—all these can convey the sacred Way and manifest spiritual vitality. In its writing, in its movement, the brush allows light to clarify the realm of the unconcealed, giving form to the sublime of the spirit (Daozi 2018).

The perfect form was waiting for the ideal content, and Daozi saw his role as that of the one who came to bring them together, to fill the empty vessel with the only kind of substance capable of realising its potential.

At the same time, his poetry was also waiting for something. Already in 1992, as a Christian neophyte, in his ‘Ars Poetica’ (詩藝), he had written:

A poem: along the byways of meaning, tracking lost feet
 A poem: lifted high by ascending lifeblood, resounding as a dark river
 A poem: like a viper crossing the road—with each escape shedding a layer of skin

Beauty is not enough. A poem—
 Waits for her: grave trees, eaglewood, planed into an adorned zither: for no reason
 Waits for her: the face of an abyss, wind rising, a manger upholding the Holy Infant:
 groundless.

一首詩：沿著語義的歧路，追蹤丟失的腳
 一首詩：被攀登的血液高舉，響成暗河
 一首詩：像蝰蛇過路，逃一次脫皮一層

美是不夠的。一首詩
 等她：墓樹，沉香，刨成一案錦瑟：無端
 等她：淵面，生風，馬槽托起聖嬰：無稽
 (Daozi 2015, 17–18)

⁶ All translations of Daozi are mine.

After this work, Daozi fell silent, or at least failed to create a poem that satisfied him enough to include it in the anthology, for eight years. The next piece in *Selected Poems* is dated 2000, which indicates that he was indeed awaiting some kind of change.

We do not know the identity of ‘her’, but the image of the infant in the stable and the context of Daozi’s later work suggest that it is Holy Mary. She is the one who gave birth to the incarnate Logos—the eternal Word that became flesh and blood to redeem humanity and its confused language(s). As an ungraspable, unreasonable and ‘groundless’ reality (cf. the famous adage repeated by saints: *credo quia absurdum*), it feels too vague to constitute a consistent space of reference for humans.

Thus, the ‘sacramental’ ink painting representing the blood that ‘lifts high’, and in a way, helps bridge the distance between the two, facilitating communication between heaven and earth. But this is not its only function, and the dynamic that unfolds between the two arts, as we shall soon see, is far more complex and fascinating. The close reading of ‘Homage to My Mother Tongue’ paves the way for reflection on this relationship, followed by analyses of two text-painting pairs: ‘Annunciation’ (天使報喜, poem [2015], painting [2010]) and ‘Song of Consolation’ (安慰之歌, poem [2000], painting [2013]).

I will approach both texts and paintings in a postsecular way,⁷ engaging extensively with Daozi’s religious experience and the theological thinking that informs his artistic activity. This is, however, only partly a deliberate strategy and partly a natural response to the specific dynamic pattern that emerges within the universe of Daozi’s work in which a kinetics I identify as ‘kenotheotic’ unfolds at three different levels: explicit, implicit, and ‘complicit’. The last of these entails inviting the reader/viewer to participate in the peculiar sacrament of art, in which temporality becomes suspended, offering a foretaste of transcendence.

This, of course, does not mean suspending intellectual rigor. On the contrary, once we find ourselves inside, balance and restraint are required to remain clear-headed in the fast-spinning hermeneutic circles formed by the poems and paintings, the human and the divine, heaven and earth—as we follow Daozi in his attempt to carry out ‘an integration-within-deconstruction of existence with an ultimate concern suffused with religious sentiment’ (懷著宗教情感的終極關切，先對存在進行解構中的綜合), a goal he set for himself as a young poet, and for Chinese literature at large (quoted in Shen 1992, 109).

⁷ In Ni Zhang’s (2016, 51–52) definition: “Postsecular reading asks the reader to encounter the world and human lives as radically more than what secular modernity has made them—even more than what a text, given its inevitable limits and situatedness, may possibly imagine—and to embrace a rigorous openness to the wholeness of reality, including the multiplicity of faith commitments, the alterity of religious traditions beyond the model of confessional communities, and the intertwined power relations of religion and politics.”

Becoming Ink: 'Homage to My Mother Tongue'

Before presenting my translation of 'Homage to My Mother Tongue', let me anticipate the problem of (the absence of) reflexive pronouns that first appears in the second line and may disturb the reader's reception of the poem. This rendition mirrors the original Chinese phrasing, which, albeit less conspicuously than in English, suggests that the two 'you' (你) pronouns that appear in the same sentence as its subject and object may signify different persons or, alternatively, that the reality they represent may be non-self-referential. Thus, I encourage the reader to approach the text first through its hybrid imagery—which arguably holds the key to reconstructing a semblance of narrative within it and unraveling the mystery of 'you'.

Homage to My Mother Tongue

You nurture me, adrift, a word
You open you, show me: I become water

You nurture me, and I keep watch
on the square of your amniotic fluid

You split you open
you split open the good fengshui of mountains and oceans, call me, grant me
the Son of God, a mustard seed, and a vineyard.

You bore sand in the Yellow Springs
you break hairpins in the Azure Heavens
with water-sleeves you steady a bamboo horse

Wandering—
Wandering cornels bloom from every cornice

For in the beginning was you, and its fate was like yours

A grass-eating widowed mother wipes her wandering child in the mirror
On your chili-rubbed nipples, the law of hunger is abolished

Hateful blood through a thousand years, a protean fake eye—
how could it behold an aunt's broken soul, commemorate a nephew's desperate death?

Even if—
the tortoise shell of divination breaks apart
even if—
the beasts and hornets swarm to devour her

You nourish me, adrift, a word.
You open you, show me: I become ink.

《向我的母語致敬》

你懷有我，遊弋，一個詞
你打開你，給我看：我變成水

你懷有我，我便守在
你羊水的方塊上眺望

你掰開你
掰開山海的好風水，喚我，賜我
神子、芥子和葡萄園

你黃泉錐沙
你碧落折釵
水袖攙扶竹馬

流離-----
流離的茱萸遍插飛簷

可太初有你，其命如你

一個食草寡母，擦拭她鏡中的遊子
在你塗抹辣椒的乳頭，饑餓的律法廢止

恨血千年，一隻無常假眼
怎能見識姨母的斷魂，祭侄絕境

即便——
卜龜的脊背完全破裂
即便——
走獸，螞蜂哄然將她分食

你懷有我，遊弋，一個詞
 你打開你，給我看：我變成墨
 (Daozi 2015, 41-42)

The poem focuses on two key notions: water (*shui* 水) in the second line and ink (*mo* 墨) in the final line. Together, they form ink wash (*shuimo* 水墨). The boundary between the domains of water and ink runs through line 13, which builds on the opening sentence of St John's Gospel: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God' (John 1:1). Here, it is transformed into a lyrical invocation to 'you', the clearest signal that the poem has more than one layer, and behind the eponymous 'mother tongue' more than just one reality is concealed. This line is like the gate of Eden, through which Adam and Eve left the garden, marking a sudden transition or retreat, as the verb *liuli* 流離 specifies—from bright, semi-mythical imagery to dark apocalyptic visions.

The first part seems relatively clear, at least at the beginning. It can be read as an account of the poet's intimate relationship with the Chinese language, which functions as his metaphorical mother. As *homo loquens*, he has been nourished in its womb, shaped by the surrounding discourse and his sensibility chiseled by it.

This is an idealised, innocent picture, with no signs of the broadly taken 'hermeneutics of suspicion' (in Paul Ricoeur's [1965] term) that has dominated Western modern and postmodern philosophy and was gradually permeating into the Chinese cultural discourse at the time. In this linguistic paradise, we will not sense, for instance, Lacanian mistrust in language's inherently oppressive 'fatherly' structures.⁸ Speech and script also seem to remain in perfect harmony—without any rupture, like those revealed by deconstructionists, to recall Derrida's (1983) interpretation of the invention of the script as an ambiguous *pharmakon*—a medicine and a toxin at once.

The little squares in amniotic waters are most likely an allusion to Chinese characters, which can be inscribed in square matrices, or perhaps even to early movable type carved on cubic blocks. 'Mountains and seas', in turn, evoke the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (山海經)—one of the richest sources of Chinese mythology, presented in the form of a quasi-geographical atlas. Yet something unexpected happens. When this atlas opens up, what springs out of it are not dragons or phoenixes, but biblical images: the Son of God—Jesus, the mustard seed—an allegory of powerful faith (Matthew 17:20), and a vineyard, symbolising the world which God 'rents' to humans (Matthew 21:33).

⁸ On Lacan's concept of the Father, see, e.g., his seminars *Psychoses* (Lacan 1993).

This is where we come close to the ideas of the Jesuit figurists and their conviction that all ancient civilisations contain dispersed threads of the History of Salvation, which began in Eden and culminated in the death and resurrection of Christ—the incarnated Logos. It is to Matteo Ricci and his successors, well versed in Chinese philosophy, that we owe, for instance, the translation of Logos in John’s Gospel as *Dao* 道. Performing imaginative operations on Chinese characters, they used to split them into components from which they read biblical stories. For example, *chuan* 船 (eight 八 people 口 on a ship 舟) was interpreted as an encapsulation of the idea of Noah’s ark, on which eight people were saved along with the animals. The hexagram Tai 泰 was said to resemble three angels with spread wings attacking the Triune Lord (represented by continuous parallel lines), thereby encapsulating the story of Satan’s rebellion, from which suffering on earth began. In their culture-bridging effort, they even managed to portray Jesus as a Confucian sage.⁹ All this was meant to convince the Chinese that they had been an integral part of the divine plan from the very beginning and peacefully bring them back into God’s embrace.

Obviously, one will not find any consistent argument of this kind in Daozi’s impressionistic poem. If anything, there is a vague intuition of some common, transcendental source of all languages, which renders each of them capable of expressing only a limited part of its all-encompassing message. It is, I believe, in many ways closer to Walter Benjamin’s metaphorical vision of pure language as a broken vessel whose fragmented pieces represent particular natural languages, than to the Jesuit’s laborious quasi-etymological constructions. Although, to my knowledge, he never explicitly credited Benjamin among his inspirations, echoes of—or, more safely speaking, resemblances to—Benjaminian thinking can also be detected in the next stanza, where references to calligraphy return.

Zhui sha 錐沙 (‘to draw on sand with an awl’) and *zhe chai gu* 折釵股 (‘folded hairpin’) are brush techniques.¹⁰ Daozi merges them with images from Chinese mythology into four-character quasi-classical idioms, translated here as: ‘[you] bore sand in the Yellow Springs’ and ‘[you] break hairpins in the Azure Heavens’. ‘You’ is an agent gradually drilling through these Chinese visions of the netherworld, as if attempting to reveal some deeper truth that lies beneath them and can only occasionally surface as ephemeral epiphanies. Still, even these transient epiphanies are suppressed by something—possibly Chinese culture itself or, more precisely, an aesthetic overlay that has accumulated over the centuries—lavish performances (the water sleeves of opera actors) and ornamental architecture (the particular shape of roof eaves) are two examples, obscuring the fact that ‘its fate’ has long been intertwined with the pre-existent ‘you’.

⁹ For a comprehensive study on Jesuits’ figurists and their engagement with Chinese classics, esp. *Yijing*, see Wei 2020.

¹⁰ Tutorials showing these techniques are available at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KAJZBm8xj2o&themeRefresh=1> (*zhui sha*);
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IRUZaG-NU6U> (*zhe chai gu*).

Throughout the first part of the poem, the referent of ‘you’ subtly shifts from the oral/written mother tongue toward the prelingual Logos—a universal reality that precedes all forms of expression. Thus, the poem gradually evolves into a prayer, and the initial contemplation of Eden turns into a conversation with its Creator.

This interpretation may explain the absence of ‘self’ (自己) in the poem. Without delving into theological detail, God is often described by religious and non-religious philosophers alike as a simple being, in whom essence equals existence;¹¹ thus, there can be no split within Him that would create conditions for self-referentiality. In other words, God cannot even hypothetically stand outside Him(self) to speak of Him(self), because He is everything everywhere continuously.¹² Moreover, in Christian thought, He is immanently ‘extrovert’, that is, constituting permanent emanation, although there may be disagreement on whether this emanation refers to the way He has made the world as a ‘natural extension’ of Him(self), as Gnostics believe, or, in more orthodox Christian terms, whether it occurs only among God’s three hypostases known as the Holy Trinity.

In any case, even toward the end of the first part of the poem, we can see the I-speaker’s growing resentment toward Chinese civilisation—a sentiment characteristic of a large group of young intellectuals, Daozi’s peers, in the 1980s, which found its most explicit expression in the famous TV documentary *River Elegy* (河殤, 1986) created by Wang Luxiang 王魯湘 and Su Xiaokang 蘇曉康, this latter also sharing his strong interest in Christianity.¹³ Postulating the necessity of the Yellow (Chinese) River’s connection to the Blue (Western) Ocean, they highlighted China’s dormant passivity and vulnerability to totalitarianism. One of the reasons behind the crisis they pointed out was the nation’s mindset shaped by Confucian legacy, a claim that is also present in the afore cited utterance of Daozi diagnosing the cause of the weaknesses of Chinese tradition.¹⁴

¹¹ An extensive discussion of *Divine Simplicity* is found in Vallicella 2023.

¹² I use the capitalised pronoun ‘He’ with reference to God for convenience, since the English language does not yet have an efficient way to address God’s sexlessness. There is a tendency in theological publications not to replace God with pronouns at all, but this is often more confusing than helpful, and I doubt it can undo the masculinised image of God in most people’s minds, especially since the numerous references to God as the Father have stayed untouched.

¹³ Su Xiaokang speaks of his and his wife’s complex relationship with Christian faith after emigrating to the US in Su 2023.

¹⁴ The series can be watched at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wZocZ1IfJQ4>. A shortened version with English subtitles is available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B_1PGq9NPxQ&t=2s. See also a related book published by the makers of the series: Su and Wang 1988. Studies discussing the work and its background and reception include: Chen 1992, Ma 1996, KasareHo 2020.



Fig. 1. *The Blue Rider* (source: https://www.m-artcenter.com/zh/artist/dao_zi/)¹⁵

His concern about the spiritual condition of the modern world is expressed through the Eliotean wasteland imagery in the second part of 'Homage', as well as in many other poems, which, Daozi admits, are extensively inspired by Eliot as a religious author and critic of modern reality (Daozi and Hao 2013, 36–37). These include 'Mental Asylum' (瘋人院) written in 1985 and revised thirty years later, wherein the reality of the 'red dream' (鮮紅的夢) is portrayed as a dystopian, ghostly grotesque, with notes of the national anthem 'Arise! Arise!' (起來起來) emanating from a water closet. Similarly, in 'Elegy on the Jinmen Explosion' (津門大爆炸挽歌) he offers an uncompromising report on the explosion in

¹⁵ Daozi's paintings were reproduced with permission of his daughter Wang Geshi 王歌诗. I thank Wang for her consent.

Tianjin in 2015. This is also evident in ‘Sayings of an Empty Chair’ (空椅子的諺語), which refers to the symbolic empty chair during the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony in the absence of the imprisoned laureate, Daozi’s late friend, Liu Xiaobo 劉曉波. The chair evokes associations with symbols such as an hourglass, a kicking horse, and black hoofs that trample everything. Liu Xiaobo is like the Blue Rider, portrayed in the painting ‘White Horse and Blue Rider’ (白馬與藍騎士, fig. 1)—probably inspired by Vassily Kandinsky, the initiator of the Blaue Reiter group—bucked off a ghostly white, X-ray picture-like horse. This mysterious persona also appears in the poem ‘Sacred Image’ (聖像) as an ‘uninvited companion’ (未被邀請的同路人) on the battlefield between night and fog.¹⁶

‘Homage’ itself most likely refers to the Mao era, marked by the Great Hunger and the subsequent Cultural Revolution, which severed family connections, as well as to the later Tiananmen bloodshed, which left many mothers mourning their children. The broken turtle shells—ancient divination tools—signify a broken future. On the other hand, as the medium of the earliest forms of Chinese script, they may also hint at the end of (Chinese) language or at least its written form, which has exhausted itself and can no longer contain the gloomy reality; or, perhaps worse, it has been partly complicit in its poor condition. Over all of this, a ‘protean eye’ keeps watch—resembling the Orwellian Big Brother, whose gaze paralyses the society of the communist dystopia, a diabolic imitation the Eye of Providence that safeguarded Eden and—Daozi trusted—still has not turned away from humans. Asked when he had become attracted to Christianity, he gave a remarkable answer: ‘When I realised that Marxism can’t be a religion’.¹⁷

Read secularly, ‘Homage’ brings to mind a poem written by Czesław Miłosz during his exile in America, ‘My Faithful Mother Tongue’ (Moja wierna mowa), which Daozi had likely read, given Miłosz’s celebrity status among Chinese poetry circles in the 1980s and 1990s,¹⁸ although it is difficult to say whether the intertextuality was intended. Miłosz addresses the Polish language as the ‘only homeland’ that has remained to him away from his native land. He recalls how he loyally served it: ‘I set before you little bowls of colours / so you could have your birch, your cricket, your finch / as preserved in my memory’. He did so until one day he realised, just like Daozi, that: ‘you are a tongue of the debased, / of the unreasonable, hating themselves / even more than they hate other nations, / a tongue of informers, / a tongue of the confused, / ill with their own innocence’. Hesitant and resigned, in the end, however, he concludes: ‘Faithful mother tongue, / perhaps after all it’s I who must try to save you. / So I will continue to set before you little bowls of colours / bright and pure if possible,

¹⁶ Daozi 2015, 78.

¹⁷ Personal communication with Daozi, Beijing, 22 July 2025.

¹⁸ On Miłosz’s reception in China, see Krenz 2022, chapter 2.

/ for what is needed in misfortune is a little order and beauty' (Miłosz 1996, 201 – 204; trans. C. Miłosz and R. Pinsky).

And so, in a sense, does Daozi, although his bowls are not metaphorical but physical—filled with ink, which he seems to perceive as a more reliable medium, less affected by the omnipresent hate and confusion. In this, he resembles Anselm Kiefer, one of the artists he respected most,¹⁹ whose monumental works (especially) from the 1970s and 1980s were intended as a remedy to the hypocrisy of postwar discourse in Germany. Among Kiefer's most moving pieces are those dedicated to Paul Celan, a Romania-born Jewish poet who wrote in the language of his parents' murderers.

That notwithstanding, we cannot ignore that physical ink, in Daozi's conception, also has a metaphysical dimension. The I-speaker perceives this dimension when 'you'—understood here arguably as the incarnate Logos—opens up again. This lets us suspect that it is indeed nothing other than blood, flowing in God's own body. The water and (ink-as-)blood, set on the opposite poles of the poem, take us to the scene of Jesus's death on the cross. After he breathed his last, a soldier pierced his flank with a spear, and water and blood gushed from his heart. Daozi (2018) invokes the Letter of John to explain the relationship between the two:

This is the one who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three that testify: the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement (1 John 5:6–9).

Still, although water and blood/ink share the same source—God or Logos—and remain in agreement, in Daozi's poem they do not flow out synchronously. The 'I' first becomes water, which we may interpret as his initial immersion in the element of language. One cannot simply liberate oneself from it by reaching for a different tool of expression. The ink, which came later (in the poem as well as in the author's life), will always be, to some extent, diluted by the discourse. It will always be 'telling' us something rather than relying on pure contemplation, which is unavailable to human consciousness, implicitly shaped by narrative structures. Although it has a vector opposite to water/language, which disperses, and instead pulls the dispersed threads toward the single point beyond the horizon, it can never achieve its ultimate goal. What it can do is give the viewer's mind momentum, driving it in that direction—that is, toward 'integration-within-deconstruction'.

We can see these different dynamics of the language (of poetry) and image (of ink art) at play in some poem-painting pairs that process the same motifs in contrasting manners. One of the most intriguing is 'Annunciation'. The eponymous poem is nearly symmetrical to

¹⁹ Daozi's lectures (text and video) on Kiefer are found in Daozi 2017.

‘Homage’ but much more concrete, describing the same themes in physical rather than metaphysical terms. The painting, in turn, is characterised by frugal imagery which condenses the theological-philosophical reflection into a moment of aesthetic illumination. Together, they allow us to trace the consequences of the poet’s ‘becoming ink’, which ‘Homage’ only vaguely foreshadows by narrating the process of the suspension of language by means of language itself.

Prism and Focus: ‘Annunciation’

This poem encapsulates the life of Mary. It begins with the image of a prism placed between the stable in Bethlehem and the Way of the Cross on Calvary, and it ends with the image of a heart, which functions like a focus. This focus gathers the diffracted bunches of her pain—as Simeon predicted shortly after Jesus’s birth in a prophecy addressed to Mary: ‘a sword will pierce your own soul too’ (Luke 2:34). Notably, these two images occupy positions analogous to water and ink in ‘Homage’. Halfway between them, like the line from John’s Gospel in ‘Homage’, runs a quote from the Gospel of Luke (1:38): ‘Let this happen to me according to your word’. What the famously obscure John’s Gospel phrased in mystical terms, Luke—the most ‘scientific’ of the four Evangelists and, as tradition has it, a physician by profession—renders as a clear human declaration: Mary’s fiat that made the incarnation of the eternal Word/Logos possible.

The full text reads:

Annunciation

Between the manger and Calvary, through
a many-faceted prism, He, constant in freedom,
stroke by stroke, traces—

Light passes through the white gate—His eternal
tangle of threads, cross-stitch upon cross-stitch, embroidering

the golden ring above the girl’s head.

‘Let this happen to me
according to your word’.

And let the truth be born
through the hollow of her ear, like a spring river stretching a thousand miles
to irrigate the desert: beauty, from her body,

unfurls lilies, cluster upon cluster,
a fragrance of ten thousand arrows piercing the heart—

cluster upon cluster, of pain.

《天使報喜》

在馬槽和苦路之間，假借
多面棱鏡，祂，恒定著自由
一筆，一筆，摹寫——

光，穿過白門，祂永有的
亂針繡，十字繡，繡出

那個女孩頭頂的金環

‘情願照你的話
成就在我身上’。

而真理，情願從她的耳穴
分娩，猶如春江千里
灌溉沙漠：美，從她身上

漫捲百合，一束束
萬箭穿心的芬芳

一束束陣痛
(Daozi 2015, 79)

In the context of the rest of the poem, the prism in line two can be interpreted as a place in which the human and the divine meet. To interact with His creation, God—the simple being who contains all, like the purest white light—‘bends’ and ‘diffracts’ when touching the surface of the human world. The transparent white beam splits into single beams, each of a different colour, and thus becomes visible to our eyes. We perceive it as beauty and further process it, using the resulting colours to create our own art. In this sense, beauty is an epiphany, and

aesthetic experience is the way we share in the divine. The diffracted white light embroiders an aureole over Mary's head—an ornamental crown that is simultaneously a symbol of sanctity, the alignment of her will with God's will, and her voluntary participation in His plan of redemption.

This prismatic effect, however, seems to be a kind of beauty that is specific to one medium: namely, language. Notably, the making of the aureole lasts only as long as the angel's conversation with Mary and ends as soon as she pronounces the last sentence. After that key phrase, she falls silent for the rest of the Gospel, with three exceptions: the *Magnificat* she sings to her aunt, Elizabeth, shortly after the angel's visit (largely a compilation of Psalms); a few words of reproach when young Jesus disappears during a pilgrimage to Jerusalem; and later, during the wedding at Cana of Galilee, when she persuades her son who is already approaching thirty to do his first public miracle.

During the three years of his active ministry, Mary says nothing. It is as if she does not want to disperse the living Logos, diffract it into her own words, which, like drops of water, might turn it into eye-catching little rainbows that distract people, each pointing in a different direction. Instead, she transforms herself into a steady medium of truth, which flows through her body concentratedly—the closer to Calvary and the quieter she becomes, the denser it is, until it pierces the heart (both her son's and hers) when she stands under the cross, as we read in the final line. Thus, she radically interrupts the process of the ultimate diffraction of Logos.

Daozi simulates this process elsewhere—in a poem that, quite symptomatically, closes the volume. For, as he repeated after Wittgenstein in our conversation: 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent' (Wittgenstein 1922, 90).²⁰ The work's title, *Chengming zhi jing* (澄明之境), should arguably be understood idiomatically as 'utmost transparency'. However, contrary to what the title suggests, it is one of the longest poems in the book, and arguably one of the least clear, consisting of scattered images such as the 'photograph' of Jesus on the Shroud of Turin, Moses's staff splitting the Red Sea, migratory birds, electronic chips, Jesus's cornea, and more. In other words, we encounter an intricate pattern of diffracted beams on paper—a full spectrum of God—but we are still unable to 'compress' it into a single Essence. We can at most rearrange it into different mosaics.

By contrast, consider the ink painting titled 'Annunciation' (fig. 2), which predates the poem by five years. In it, we see only two distinct elements against a deep blue background: Mary's head and the angel's wing. There's no sign of the soothingly 'diffracted' beauty found in the poem. Instead, Mary appears as if she were struck by the wing, or at least bent to avoid it, or slanted by the air current it caused. With a bright circle around her head, she resembles a

²⁰ Personal communication with Daozi, Beijing, 22 July 2025.

candle from other paintings by Daozi—especially the ‘Searching for God’s Heartbeat’ (尋找上帝的心跳) series—which could easily die down, but it will not, because God loves what is weak, ‘a bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out’ (Isaiah 42:3). This is, as Daozi noted in his reflection on Chinese civilisation, where God’s generous omnipotence can be revealed.



Fig. 2: *Annunciation* (source: <http://doc.sina.cn/?id=comos:fzihnep5314612>)

The image may alternatively be interpreted as the letter Omega, a frequently recurring motif in his work, symbolising the eschaton, but also—in his conception—the uterus, ‘containing within it the love of the Virgin who conceives Christ. In fact, the love of Christ and the love of the Virgin are one and the same: both are manifestations of God’s holy love’ (Daozi 2018).

The feathered upper limb of the divine messenger is the same as that attached to the book that soars above the boundless waters like the Spirit, *Ruah* at the dawn of the world in Daozi’s painting ‘Truth Will Set You Free’ (真理必令你得自由). In a single instant, we are confronted with both beginning and end. Everything in between, narrated in the Gospel and later, in Daozi’s own poem, is reenacted by the artist’s brush: the flow and thickness of the strokes trace his hand’s minute movements, making the painter’s body itself a medium.

Yet Daozi remains a humble medium. He does not claim to fully recreate the Source. Had he tried, he likely would have stuck to the traditional monochromatic style—whose perceived

modesty, seen in this light, becomes a paradoxical testimony to human hubris. After all, can a human being produce something as simple and self-contained—and simultaneously all-encompassing—as God? Or, even if one could, out of divine inspiration, will others be capable of ‘retrieving’ God out of it? Therefore, against the long-standing Chinese monochromatic bias, Daozi uses colours. He explains:

As for colour, since the time of Wang Wei, literati painters have tended to look down upon the rich gold-and-green palette. Thus, in Chinese painting, ink and water alone came to constitute the entire colour system. I believe the greatest problem here is that the ‘Southern School’ completely abandoned colour. Although it is said that ‘ink contains five colours’, these are, after all, only ‘five colours’, which can’t miraculously represent everything (Daozi 2018).

In his Bible-informed colour code, brownish red signifies wine transformed into Jesus’s blood, red signifies sacrifice, and blue signifies heaven (Daozi 2018). Sometimes these colours coexist in one painting; other times, the spectrum is spread across a series, emphasising the impossibility of fully undoing the ‘prismatic’ effect of perception shaped by language. Examples include ‘Red Martyrdom’ (紅色殉道圖), ‘White Martyrdom’ (白色殉道圖), and ‘Blue Martyrdom’ (藍色殉道圖)—blood assumes a new hue in each work, symbolically moving from human pain, through purification in Christ’s messianic act, to transfiguration into heavenly spirits.

That said, reading the poem ‘Annunciation’ alongside the so-titled painting, one can experience the (literal) floweriness of the literary narrative. The more precise the language tries to be in its description of the scene, supplementing it with sophisticated metaphors, the more interpretive paths it opens, therefore broadening rather than intensifying the vision. The painting, conversely, reducing the content to two elements and several colours, encapsulates the existent and possible narratives of the event, aiming—if imperfectly—to recreate the divine condition in which actuality equals potentiality.

Descending Words, Ascending Lines: ‘Song of Consolation’

It is certainly not my intention to argue for the superiority of ink painting over poetry or vice versa, and I believe Daozi himself never thought in such terms. The fact that, for a time, he almost entirely switched from writing to the visual arts likely reflects the latter’s better alignment with his changing circumstances and his assessment of reality.

The baptism of water—here, language—along with the symbolism of banishment discussed in the context of ‘Homage’, carries also an intrinsic hope for the spreading of life. It is like

bringing God to people, however flawed the linguistic measures may appear. The baptism of blood (represented by ink), also known as martyrdom—whether a brutal execution or a slow self-immolation—has the opposite vector. It points toward death, its role being to bring people to God: by moving the indifferent ones and paving a spiritual path for those who crave liberation from the earthly, carnal experience. Therefore, what in light of ‘Homage’ might be interpreted as an apophatic turn, phrased by Daozi in secular Wittgensteinian language, here acquires also another dimension: that of participation in the salvific mission.

This dynamic between two types of baptism—of water and of blood—is most clearly visible in the poem-painting pair ‘Song of Consolation’, in which it is a painting that speaks of poetry and not the other way around, as was the case in ‘Homage’ and ‘Annunciation’. The text, written in 2000, takes the form of a litany. Each exhortation begins with the verb ‘console’ (安慰), addressed to the Holy Spirit, also known in Christian tradition as the Consoler. God’s grace is invoked across a wide range of people and their physical and emotional landscapes. The litany begins with an allusion to the myth of Sisyphus: ‘[console] a huge stone’ (巨石), ‘[console] the brother that rolls the stone on the mountain’ (把巨石滾上山的兄弟), ‘[console] his and the stone’s nourishing of spring breeze’ (他和巨石齊心化育春風), and the spring breeze itself, before expanding to encompass the Milky Way, ferries, graduating students, bamboo forest, gardeners, ‘the choir of death’ (死亡合唱團), the ‘morning star of shepherds’ (牧羊人的晨星), withered grass, and ‘the eyes in the manger’ (馬槽裡的眼睛) (Daozi 2015, 37–38).

About a third of the way through the litany, the I-speaker inserts a prayer for the consolatory power for himself. He wants to turn others’ tears into joy and comfort mothers, the poor, and ‘diseases on the shore robbed by the poor’ (貧窮洗劫了岸上的疾病). From this point on, it becomes unclear whether the remainder of the poem continues to request God’s consolation for His creation or instead lists those whom the I-speaker himself would console if granted this spiritual power. The boundary between God and ‘I’ subtly blurs. The diffracted God spreads Him(self) very, very thin, casting Him(self) at the mercy of grammar and syntax, and allowing the stream of language to carry Him through the forking veins and capillary vessels of the world—until, in the last line, He ends up in a manger in Bethlehem and needs to comfort Him(self)...

The painting (fig. 3) depicts the moment when the pleas expressed in the litany are fulfilled: the Holy Spirit descends on the apostles at Pentecost, bringing consolation after the death of their mentor. Seven figures are depicted, who, Daozi (2018) clarifies, represent seven anonymous poets. From their heads, ascending lines (whose bottom-up brush direction is clearly visible) extend toward the upper edge of the painting. As Ai Lei’er 艾蕾爾 observes, this illustrates ‘the process of escaping from the visible world to the invisible world’ (Ai Lei’er 2015, 116). The poets-as-apostles, in a sense, internalise all the vast earthly landscapes they have traversed in their writing alongside the incarnated God, sublimating them within

themselves and becoming one with Him. Again, unlike the poem, the image directs attention toward a focal point beyond the horizon, where everything will ultimately be reintegrated.

In theological terms, the afore discussed works and Daozi's oeuvre at large, position poetry—and language more broadly—as inherently kenotic, whereas painting is theotic. Kenosis literally means the 'self-emptying' of God, here: the Logos's descent into language whose veins split and spread endlessly to nourish the human world. Theosis denotes the deification of the worldly, made possible by the death of the one who is believed to have nailed all past and future human sins to the cross—a messianic act in which Daozi seeks participation, sharing the love and the suffering of the crucified.



Fig. 3. *Song of Consolation* (source: <https://www.wkphc.org/9073/>)

In ‘Harvest’ (收穫), a poetic dialogue with a blind angel of apocalypse, the I-speaker notes that ‘everything that can speak / empties out’ (凡能說話的 / 都掏空了; Daozi 2015, 48–49). The notion of kenosis is thus extended to the entire human race, including the poet himself, emphasising the constant dispersion of language. Yet, it also suggests that each individual is a potential source from which the salvation of the world begins. Thus, speaking and writing constitute, in a sense, a continuation of God’s humble self-abasement, already foreshadowed in the grotesque scene from ‘Ars Poetica’ of a poem chasing its lost feet, which we may interpret both as physical body parts and as rhythmic units (詩腳). In ‘Sacred Image’, in turn, he writes: ‘Why do you have to paint Him? For / an invisible atonement’ (你為何要畫祂? 為了不可見的罪罰; Daozi, 78), hinting at the theotic dimension of the visual art as a necessary completion of the self-humbling verbal activity; again, as in ‘Ars Poetica’, where the mutilated poem can only be ‘lifted high’ by blood—that is, by ink in Daozi’s artistic universe.

This is not to say that language can never attempt to point upward, and Daozi makes such attempts occasionally, too, albeit skeptically. The best example is arguably one of his most popular poems, ‘Crane’ (鶴), which builds on a relatively straightforward (compared to other writings by Daozi) symbolism, with the crane—in Chen Yun’s (2018) interpretation—being a reference to Jesus. Ironically, though, on the content level, this very poem explicitly speaks of kenosis, or even a kind of hyper-kenosis: a cycle of multiple incarnations in variously gendered bodies, and the downward movement between heaven and earth to “drive the bright moon toward the grassy slopes that sleep naked” (正把皓月驅向裸睡的草坡; Daozi 2015, 66). So, even if the language indeed might have some degree of theotic potential, the author does not appear to be particularly keen on exploring it, seeing the language’s significance elsewhere.

Kenotheosis

Kenotic writing is not a new concept. It has been identified in outwardly religious authors such as Geoffrey Hill (Merriman 2011), as well as those indebted to Christianity in less ‘confessional’ ways, including Dostoyevsky (Sengupta 2021) or Petrarch (Yocum 2013). Nevertheless, it can arguably also be seen as an element of more general secular ‘cryptotheologies of the late modernity’, to use Agata Bielik-Robson’s (2014) term referring to the philosophers in whose work echoes of Jewish worldview can be identified, including Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Emmanuel Levinas or Jacques Derrida. Many postmodern philosophers, influenced by Derridean deconstruction and the Critical Discourse Analysis informed by it, aim to dismantle the Logos as the source of symbolic

violence, seeing language—especially written language—as their ally in the battle against the so-called metaphysics of presence. Others who more or less openly identify as religious thinkers acknowledge the findings of the ‘cryptotheologians’ but tend to perceive them not as the decline of the said metaphysics, but, contrariwise, as a precious, albeit unintended, discovery of Logos’s self-banishment into language, and build a radically kenotic weak theology on it.

This is what Gianni Vattimo did, for example, in reinterpreting Benjamin, whose conception of ‘weak messianism’ constituted one of the crucial inspirations for early postmodern thinkers. (Recall, for instance, Derrida’s famous ‘Tours de Babel’, a creative interpretation of Benjaminian thought on language and translation). In Andrzej Zawadzki’s (2003, 177) words, commenting on Vattimo’s book *Credere di Credere*,

The incarnation of God is an act of ‘weakening’ and unavoidable secularisation inscribed in the very structure of Christian religion [...] Sacrum loses its ‘strong’ character of the absolute otherness, its radical transcendence, as well as its natural—or, rather, naturalistic and violence-based—dimension, as it is seen, in contrast, in the invoked conception of Rene Girard (from *Violence and the Sacred*).

An implication of such a reinterpretation of religion is the adoption of ‘weak’ ethics of mercy, which Vattimo equalises with charity, giving them ‘a new significance of tolerance of plurality’ (Gołąb 2022, 32).

Daozi, however, seems to be neither on the side of the ‘desecrators’ nor of the ‘re-secrators’. While he acknowledged the general spiritual-intellectual mechanics of the postmodern condition, once aptly described by poet Tadeusz Różewicz as ‘falling in all directions simultaneously’ (Różewicz 1976, 119; trans. M.J. Krynski and R.A. Maguire), his poetic kenosis always carries an unassuming mustard seed of painterly theosis, and vice versa. They unlock each other and set each other in motion, creating a complex kenotheotic dynamic.

This semi-neologism is obviously not meant to put forward any theological or doctrinal claims, which far exceeds my competence, and even less so—to impose them on Daozi. Rather, it is a heuristic category which tries to capture the inseparability and concurrence of two dimensions of his oeuvre: its descending and ascending movements. The two are understood here both vertically and horizontally, with ‘descent’ often manifesting itself through expansion of text and associated contexts and its steering away from the Source, while ‘ascent’—through condensation of the image, meant to approximate the Source. They also have their temporal aspect, with kenotic ‘descent’ chronologically preceding theotic ‘ascent’, while being retrospectively interpreted and justified by it.

This dynamic could be translated back into secular poetological terms as a unique form of fusion between the arts. Daozi’s poem-painting pairs, as well as his poetry and art as a whole, can be inscribed in structures resembling the hermeneutic circle: the understanding of one

element adds to a better understanding of the other, which in turn feeds back into a fuller understanding of the first, and so on. This figure of understanding might be applied to many Chinese literati, in whose works text and image have always been connected in a more intricate way than mere ekphrasis—a typical intermedial practice in the West, where a clear distinction between source (painting) and interpretation (poem) is usually maintained.²¹ In ancient China, painting was considered poetry without words, and poetry was regarded painting without forms. Only by grasping both, along with the calligraphy—which allowed poetry to be inscribed into painting as a bridge between the two—could one fulfill the ideal of the literati. Also the work of many modern literati, including those discussed in Paul Manfredi's *Modern Poetry in China: A Visual-Verbal Dynamic* (2014), such as Yan Li 嚴厲 and Che Qianzi 車前子, arguably lends itself to such a hermeneutic-circular interpretation.

However, what is at issue here is not mere understanding in purely intellectual terms. While further reflection along these lines may appeal to literary scholars, it would be too reductionist and would do little justice to Daozi's thirty-year pursuit. A much more important aspect is the fuller spiritual experience enabled by the specific kinetics generated within this circle. Regardless of whether the painting or poem was created first, the number of years that separate them, whether they were intended as a text-image diptych (in most cases, as Daozi told me, they were not)²² or simply refer to the same biblical scene or motif, approaching them in this way mitigates the asynchrony between the kenotic 'descent' and the theotic 'ascent', and the linear temporality partially dissolves in the circular movement. Time becomes trapped and condensed, approximating what one might imagine as an atemporal state.

This, one may say, constitutes a conceptual upgrade to the idea of sacred time as circular 'primordial mythical time made present' (Eliade 1959, 68), in contrast to linearly progressing secular time—a distinction made by anthropologists following Mircea Eliade. In Eliade's conception, circularity allowed people to relive certain events repeatedly, always equally real and original, yet still confined within linear chronology for each cycle. In Daozi's artistic project, absorbing his poetry and painting, we get a foretaste, a simulation of the simultaneity of all events from the History of Salvation as the circle 'spins'—that is, when our mind travels circularly between the two.

Yet, this effect is only possible if the spinning is sufficiently fast, and if the entire energy of reception feeds into this movement rather than into the expansion of the circle, as often happens in a classic hermeneutic circle. It is easy to get carried away while reimagining the

²¹ Chen Yun (2018, 248–49), too, places Daozi's work against the background of the Chinese literati tradition, emphasising its difference from the Western-style thinking in terms of "text *and* painting" rather than the more integral "there's poetry *in* the painting, there's painting *in* poetry; there's language *in* image, there's image *in* language" ("画"中有"诗", "诗"中有"画", "象"中有"言", "言"中有"象").

²² Personal communication with Daozi. Beijing, 22 July 2025.

whole through its details and the details through the newly reimagined whole, and so on, producing interpretations that are increasingly diluted despite their appeal. In Daozi's project, this process is constrained: his circle has a distinct centre—one that gently reigns in escaping thought, keeping it in the same orbit. At this centre, there is nothing but Logos—metaphysically present, undisturbed by its own deconstructions and reconstructions.

The hermeneutic potential of mutual re-readings of poems and paintings is harnessed here to generate spiritual experience, a taste of participation in divine reality. One can scarcely extract more sophisticated constructions beyond 'faith, hope and love' from Daozi's mature work: his poetry is too scrambled to support consistent argument, and his paintings are too straightforward for that. Academic publications typically testify to this, usually limiting themselves to panoramic surveys.²³ Yet, instead of reading 'extensively', one can read Daozi's poems and paintings more intensively, allowing the two temporal dimensions they represent to blur and, potentially, cancel each other out.

Are we witnessing a return to what many see as the tyranny of logocentric structures? Obviously not. Daozi is not setting a trap in the middle of a public square to ensnare confused passers-by in a suspicious game; rather, he is unobtrusively inviting us into a private space of contemplation. It is almost ostentatiously flagged—like a biomedical laboratory or a nuclear reactor: 'Warning: God'. One may pass by unperturbed, wearing a condescending smile—or, one may choose to engage, taking a leap of faith to experience something more, and likewise, leap out whenever it feels appropriate.

Such a fleeting visit may feel awkward, much as it does to go sightseeing in a temple where others are praying, but Daozi probably would not mind hosting a tourist who does not share his faith, if only because he once travelled the same path. He used to explore different religions to collect 'substrates' for his poetic experiments in order to broaden the poetic language, push it beyond conventional limits of expression, and make it capable of addressing what had been not only unknown but also unknowable within the extant grammar of thinking, reflected in the grammar of language.

Undeniably, he succeeded in loosening the strictures of poetic diction, allowing it to embrace a variety of imaginative forms. In doing so, he paved the way for other authors who continued the reinvention of the genre, such as Zang Di 臧棣 and Ya Shi 哑石—two of the most experimental 'grabism'-style innovators. Yet, arguably, it was only an inversion of priorities that allowed Daozi to fulfill his goal, which by that point, ironically, was no longer his goal.

Once he began immersing himself in spiritual reality—a process catalysed by his 'up-lifting' painting—his language began to transcend itself spontaneously, not by expanding across the

²³ One exception is Chen Yun's (2018) discussion of the poem "Crane" (鹤), which is a very specific symbolic work with consistent imagery—a rare thing in Daozi's poetry—and referring, in Chen's interpretation, to Christ.

page, which offers only a flat, limited surface, but by reaching toward another dimension, gently inflecting the reader's mind and increasing sensitivity to diverse frequencies and impulses. This rewiring occurs subtly, each time one attempts to connect the dispersed dots of words, taking a complex detour through the unspeakable and interacting with it in one's own intimate ways.

Recapitulation: Three Dimensions of Kenotheosis

In sum, Daozi's work can be seen as embodying what I deemed kenotheosis in three ways, which I refer to as explicit, implicit, and complicit.

First, he explicitly addresses it in his poetry, reflecting on the incarnation of the Logos and, conversely, considers the deification of humans through Jesus's sacrifice. The former is most clearly pronounced in the poem 'Annunciation', discussed in section 2, where the author reimagines the moment of immaculate conception, when the word became flesh. More obscure references appear in 'Homage to My Mother Tongue' analysed in section 1. There, the incarnation is metaphorically inscribed in the spiritual history of humankind starting from the Christian myth of origins which the author intertwines with references to Chinese cultural symbolism. In 'Song of Consolation', investigated in section 3, it is, in turn, framed as a yearning and prayer for God's fuller and more tangible presence among the people through Holy Spirit. In the closure of 'Homage', a hope is voiced that one's 'becoming ink', that is turning to another form of artistic activity, may bring one closer to such a reconnection, whereas eponymous paintings paired with the other two poems can be seen as manifestations of this belief and attempts to reunite with the Source.

This takes us to the second way in which kenotheosis is present in Daozi's work. Namely, it is enacted formally, as the author immerses himself simultaneously in two types of artistic creation that embody these different mechanics of kenosis and theosis: in his poetry, the Logos confines itself to language, which increasingly diffracts like in a prism trying to convey the richness of the events from the History of Salvation, while in his art, these linguistic bunches are refocused. Both paintings, 'Annunciation' and 'Song of Consolation' offer almost ascetic representations of biblical scenes, whose richness, however, becomes revealed once we trace, for instance, the movement of the brush, thickness and structure of the strokes, colour, and texture.

Third, as the two aforesaid dimensions combine, Daozi's work imposes a kenotheotic dynamic on the reader, making them 'complicit' in it—offering a sense of participation in the transcendental dimension. This last level is, as far as I can credibly analyse my own writing, reflected in the present interpretation of Daozi's work. As I was trying to 'empty myself out',

to legitimise my experience of his oeuvre through intersubjective language that spreads horizontally across the page, splitting into ever thinner threads, my thought was simultaneously 'lifted', and thus significantly inflected by the element of the sacred, whose presence could not be ignored—unambiguously 're-presented' in his holy ink. Although I made an effort to distinguish the secular interpretation from the spiritual one, setting them as parallel alternatives (as in section 2, where I differentiate three 'mother tongues'), they immediately blurred, and the referents of key words ('mother tongue', 'you') shifted.

It is, I venture, not the kind of work for which analysis can be neatly layered, starting from the most obvious and progressing to the least obvious, as is often done in academic writing to guide the audience step by step through a text (following, in this respect, the old pattern of biblical hermeneutics that distinguished four types of sense: literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical, to be deciphered in that order). Daozi's work simply does not function in this way. You must take it all at once, agree to stay in the same orbit, maintaining a dynamic balance, allowing the words and images to pull you simultaneously in different directions, and accept that you may not succeed in sharing your findings in a manner that satisfies your own and other people's standards of literary criticism. Still, it is worth the risk. For if we write only about the kind of poetry we already know how to safely write about, we are doomed to miss a great deal.

The notion of kenosis that emerged out of my interactions with Daozi's work to describe the visual-verbal dynamic in his oeuvre hardly does justice to its richness and complexity, which I tried to signal by opening other interpretive contexts and perspectives along the way, even though there was no room to elaborate on most of them properly. Yet, it is one that, I believe, captures his uniqueness on the Chinese cultural scenes, reflecting his more-than-artistic engagement in spiritual search through poetry and ink painting. The two streams of this search, integrated in the reader/viewer's mind, accelerate their imagination and give it a momentum to overcome the limitations of its own spatiotemporal substance and peep, if only briefly and from afar, into the transcendental dimension.

It also demonstrates the power and versatility of the Chinese ink wash tradition, which transcends cultural boundaries. Born out of a non-theistic spirit of the Eastern religious-philosophical worldview, in Daozi's hands, this art significantly enriches the experience of Judeo-Christian faith and, to some extent, deoccidentalises its idea of Logos, tapping into its liberating potential buried under thick layers of biased, overtly institutionalised religiosity.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the National Science Centre, Poland, under the individual research project *Deliberating Poetry: Chinese Avantgarde Between Expansion and Expulsion* (Deliberowanie poezji: chińska awangarda między ekspansją a ekspulsją), no. 2024/53/B/HS2/00552.

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