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DARK-EARTH MANUAL: APPROACHING AN INK-BASED ART PRACTICE

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DARK-EARTH MANUAL: APPROACHING AN INK-BASED ART PRACTICE

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By

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Graduate Program in Visual Arts

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Abstract

This document examines a number of conceptual approaches to an ink-based art practice associated with the tradition of Chinese *shuimo*. The paper seeks meaningful ways to engage an art practice focused on ink's tactility and materiality. It begins by mapping out a direction to develop a conceptually sound basis for such a practice. This is followed by an exploration of ink's manufacturing history in the Chinese context. The methods of ink's production reveal a materially destructive aspect that ultimately leads to a process of transformation. The burning of natural resources to make ink prompts an investigation into ink's material, "thingly" character. A section of Martin Heidegger's *The Origin of the Work of Art* is discussed in the third chapter in relation to my seeking of a renewed approach to ink practice. Concrete, ink-related examples are provided in the fourth and fifth chapters to demonstrate the applicability of the concepts explored.

Keyword: Ink, *Shuimo*, Ink-based art practice, Chinese art, Chinese ink, Gao Minglu, Martin Heidegger, Immateriality, Thing, Thingliness, *Stuff*, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, *World*, *Earth*, *Striving*, Jian-Jun Zhang.

To make things appear.

Dedicated to
FRANCISCO XAVIER GREGORIO LEI
With love and remembrance

30 July 2008 12:58:35

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1. Introduction to Ink: A Renewable Possibility?

In 2006, a contemporary Chinese art critic and scholar named Gao Minglu (高名潞) published an article titled *The Crisis of Contemporary Chinese Shuimo is the Lack of Methodology* (中國當代水墨的危機是缺乏方法論).¹ In the article, Gao claims that the culture of the present-day ink-painting practice—*shuimo* (水墨)—is permeated with two “superstitious” beliefs: one is the attachment to the idealized expressiveness of the inked brushstroke, the other is the unquestioning compliance to the presumed meaning of the pictorial forms and symbols; this includes the expression of painterly chaos associated with the idea of the cosmic forces, the philosophizing of the concept *yinyang* (陰陽) through the depiction of circular and quadrangular shapes as signifiers of harmony and dynamic balance, or the supposed “profundity” results from visual distortion caused by the use of ink and water.² The source of these two beliefs, Gao suggests, springs from the wrongful assumption that the millennia-long tradition of Chinese ink painting is developed purely out of the advancement of the visual expressiveness of ink and wash. What concerns Gao with regard to the tradition of Chinese ink practice is the lack of any significant analysis in terms of concept and its associated methodology. He asserts the importance of developing an art practice that wells from a conceptual foundation and not principally from the visual “expressiveness” of the tools alone (i.e. the brush and the ink).

For Gao, the laying down of a conceptual foundation is the basic criterion in the fostering of a sophisticated sensibility associated with a contemporary approach towards art making. He adds that a contemporary *shuimo* practice must be envisioned as a mediative channel that carries forth not only meaningful thoughts, but also an idiosyncratic “trace” unique to that specific tradition. This “trace,” he further adds,

¹ Online: <http://www.cangpinyishu.com/Article/zixun/shuhua/shpl/200804/2935_2.html> The Crisis of Contemporary Chinese Ink Painting is the Lack of Methodology (Zhongguo Dangdai Shuimo De Weiji Shi Quefa Fangfa Lun 中國當代水墨的危機是缺乏方法論), published in *An Alternative Modern, An Alternative Method* (Linglei Xiandai Linglei Fangfa 另類現代 另類方法 2006).

² The use of the material ink as an art medium has long been referred to as the practice of *shuimo* in China. The modern-day term for Chinese ink painting is *shuimo hua* (water ink painting). I have chosen to use the broader terms “ink-based art practice” and the “practice of ink” to include not only the works of contemporary *shuimo hua*, but also of other genres of artistic practices that involve the use of ink, such as sculptures, videos, and installations.

defines the periphery of the practice, and only within this periphery can a conceptual methodology related to an evolved practice and culture of ink be established.

Another point in the article that necessitates mentioning is Gao's willingness to accept a contemporary *shuimo* practice as one that can be readily expressed through a multitude of unconventional mediums such as sculpture and video installations. *Shuimo*, a term that has traditionally been reserved only for works of art made from the use of ink, brush, and paper, is now broadened to what I choose to call an *ink-based art practice*—a practice that uses ink as the primary basis for an artistic undertaking.

With respect to Gao's article, the following thesis does not seek to defend or even analyze the purported existence of a crisis in today's ink-based art practice, and neither does it pursue a conceptual framework from scratch per se. Instead, this paper shares an affinity with Gao's argument in the sense that it is dedicated to developing a conceptually sound basis for the practice of ink, and to search for available clues in forming a viable conceptual platform that diverges from traditional modes of *shuimo* practice. The former project implies the setting up of a technical structure, while the latter seeks possibilities and connections in order to re-situate an ink-based practice in a wider cultural discourse.

(a) *Formalizing an Approach.* I began my thesis research by asking a simple question: How is ink meaningful as a material for art making today? This seemingly straightforward question eventually became an on-going concern for my practice as an artist, and it has, over time, transformed into a kind of motto for my thinking and hands-on studio practice. In the early stages of my research, this question prompted me to survey the history of contemporary Chinese art from 1989 onward.³ My inquiry proved to be a fruitful one, not only from the perspective of gaining a more nuanced historical understanding of the present-day artistic milieu in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, but also from the standpoint that it has enabled me to culturally connect my work with other ink-based art practices outside of the North American context. Indeed, the benefits of

³ It is now generally accepted that the year 1989 marked the major turning point in the history of contemporary Chinese art for two reasons. One, the important exhibition *China/Avant-garde* was held at the China Art Gallery in Beijing in February 1989. In this exhibition, "over a thousand artists representing most of the active population of the avant-garde congregated in Beijing to exhibit and to view at this prestigious event" (Chang). Two, the pro-democratic movement in May of the same year was followed by the tragedy at the Tiananmen Square in June.

researching into the history of contemporary Chinese art are enormous. But I also discovered that the more I moved along the path of an art-historical study, the further my research seemed to deviate from the process-driven aspects that formed the center of some of my previous artistic practices. The art-historical research tended to diverge from operating alongside my studio practices—both of these endeavors could not symbiotically feed off each other in a productive way, and today they have progressively (and subsequently) developed into two separate but related paths. In light of prioritizing my research as a “nourishing supplement” for my studio practice, my attention has switched from focusing on a conventional art historical survey to examining the procedural aspects of my work as a possible starting point for a non-traditional ink-based art practice.

(b) The Questioning of Ink. The need to formulate a conceptual platform for my practice is not dissimilar to the laying down of a conceptual foundation such as Gao Minglu had urged. The switch of approach—from art-historical to process-based—demands a focus on the technical and the procedural aspects of art making. Insofar as I am interested in locating the premise of my investigation in relation to this hands-on perspective, it seemed logical that the direction of my research should become an exploration into the characteristics of ink, its manufacturing techniques, and the different ways and processes with which ink can be used. This shift in focus allows a re-positioning of my attitude towards what is ethnographically known as a Chinese ink practice.

This thesis does not reinforce certain kinds of unspoken art-related Chinese concepts, such as the *Six Principles (Liu Fa 六法)*, that have dominated traditional Chinese art over the centuries. Rather, the writing of this thesis is based on a pursuit of the questioning of ink with regards specifically to its artistic and conceptual aspects.

Why should we question the practice of ink? The questioning of ink is needed because a new conceptual foundation for a meaningful *shuimo* practice cannot be rooted anywhere else. The questioning of ink is the first step in our attempt to see *shuimo* being practiced in completely different ways.

(c) *Methodology*. The questioning of ink in this thesis will first take the direction of looking at its histories and its documented methods of production. My attention will focus on ink as a physical substance made from a long series of processes. I will trace the etymological sources of the Chinese word *mo* (ink 墨) to verifying its process-based characteristic as demonstrated by its methods of production. I will then examine ink as an object and at its status as a concrete yet immaterial thing. To assist in exploring its “thingly” character, my investigation will employ a selection of passages from *The Origin of the Work of Art* by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. In his essay, Heidegger provides a lengthy discussion on the three traditional European interpretations of a thing. For my purposes, I will also investigate Heidegger’s conceptual functions of the setting up of a *world* and the setting forth of *earth*. I shall set out to prove that these two Heideggerian concepts are immensely helpful in locating a novel way to consider an ink practice. My inquiry will progress towards the formation of my main argument—that the practice of ink can be predicated on examining its status as a thing.

It is important to procure some basic historical facts in order to properly take on a fruitful discussion on the subject of ink. The task at hand is not to conduct a historical survey of past artistic expressions that have utilized ink as a medium of means; this diachronic approach would give little opportunity to properly deal with the question: how is ink meaningful as a material for art making today? Instead, I want to begin by asking a more primary question: what is this medium called ink?

2. *The Historicity of Ink*⁴

Charles C. Pines, in a paper written in 1931, provides a brief summary of the different types of ink known to be in use around the world. He notes that the formula of

⁴ I have chosen to use the word “historicity” as opposed to “history” in light of Heidegger’s emphasis on the temporal and the finite qualities of *Dasein*’s (humans who are concerned with the way of being) historical existence. Traditionally, the objective process of development, say, in traditional art history, implies an unspoken assumption of coherence, uniformity, permanence, and timelessness. These overarching presuppositions have for centuries provided a basis for understanding historical artistic experiences. But under a “historicity” of interpretation, a perspective employed in understanding the field of history in light of (but not limited to) Heidegger’s emphasis on the temporal and singular modes of *Dasein*, we no longer treat the field of history as “a uniform structure [that underlies. . .] historical continuity” (Kisiel and Van Buren 118-120).

“lampblack and glue with a preservative to prevent decomposition” was used on ancient papyruses that date to the twenty-sixth century BC. He further suggests that the likely origin of the word *ink* may have been derived from the Latin word *encaustum*—a “purplish red ink” used in Roman times for signing edicts (291). An earlier written record of ink can be found from Dioscorides, a Greek physician in the first century BC. He described a recipe combining “soot, gum, ‘ox-glue,’ and ‘chalcanto’ for the making of ink (Johnson 341). Another account came from Vitruvius, a Roman architect and engineer, who has written a description of making ink with “soot from pitch pine being collected from the walls of a specially constructed chamber, then mixed with gum and dried in the sun” (Pine 291-292). This method of ink preparation resembles closely the manufacturing process described in the *Ink Recipe* (*Mo Pu* 墨譜)—an illustrated manuscript and the earliest surviving document of the ancient Chinese ink-making technique—written by Li Xiaomei (李孝美) during the Song dynasty (Sang 2).⁵ These four accounts from three different continents suggest that the invention of ink arises out of the necessity to record and transcribe information.

As a medium for pictorial and writing purposes, ink was used in both Egypt and China in as early as BC 2500. It was made into the forms of fluid and paste from a variety of colored pigments or dyestuffs extracted from plants, animals, and minerals. Many different types of ink were produced from the admixture of a wide variety of ingredients. For example, sepia, a brownish pigment, comes from the glandular sac of a cuttlefish; India ink is made from glue and carbon black; the making of the modern ballpoint pen ink was based on a century-old formula of tannin extract and soluble iron salt commonly known as iron gall ink. Synthetic dyes, invented during the mid-nineteenth century AD, are to this day still being used in ink for drawing and garment design—although the lightfastness of this form of ink is weaker than traditional carbon-based ink, such as India

⁵ In transliterating Chinese texts, book titles, personal names, and geographical locations, the pinyin system of Romanization is used. To maintain consistency through the paper, the order begins with an italicized English translation of the original character, follow by the pinyin Romanization of the original Chinese character, and ends with the original Chinese character printed in traditional text character, the latter two of which are bracketed. In some cases, if the pinyin Romanization of the original Chinese character is not present, only the original Chinese character(s) is bracketed. The family name precedes the given name in citing Chinese personal names. Primary sources of historical scholarship on Chinese ink have been sought out to the best of my ability, but in most cases, secondary sources are used because access to original monographs on the subject of Chinese ink is not available.

or Chinese ink. The viscosity, diffusibility and density of India ink—and also Chinese ink—can be adjusted using vehicles such as shellac, gelatin, glue, and gum arabic (“Ink”). Of all the different types of ink described above, this thesis will focus on *mo* (墨), the carbon-based black ink used in China for over two millennia, also known to the Chinese as one of the *four treasures of the study* (*wenfang sibao* 文房四寶).

Unlike the aqueous solution commonly known as ink today, Chinese ink or *mo* has traditionally been made into a solid form in the style of a cake or a stick. For the purpose of writing or picture-making, an opaque solution can be rendered by grinding and mixing the ink with water. The earliest excavated Chinese ink sample—shaped in the form of a round pill—is dated to the second century BC.⁶ But an earlier form of ink, known as *stone ink* (*shi mo* 石墨), was purported to have been used during the Neolithic period (Wang Yi 1). In an article on Chinese ink published in 1930, Wang Chi-chen suggests that Chinese ink in its earliest form can be “one of three things, namely, coal, graphite, and petroleum” (124). The residue of this early form of ink was found along with cinnabar on oracle bones dated to the Shang dynasty (Britton 1). In the *Anthology of Ancient Calligraphy* (*Shu Gu Shu Fa Zuan* 述古書法纂), the discovery of handmade, processed ink is attributed to a person named Xing Yi (邢夷) in the Western Zhou period, circa BC 1046-771.⁷ Another story describes Xing Yi mixing soot with a viscous material such as boiled starch for the purpose of binding pigment onto a surface (Wang Yi 1). Regardless of its actual origin, handmade, processed ink has come to replace the use of *stone ink* due to its many advantages. With processed ink, the odor, permanence and color intensity can be corrected and strengthened with additives. One formula involves the addition of powdered camphor that acts as a deodorizing agent in an ink mixture. The transition from the prehistoric use of *stone ink* to processed ink matured during the Han dynasty in BC 206-220 AD. During this period, China has established an organized ink industry with professional agents assigned for the caring of ink and other stationeries

⁶Collection of the Hubei Yun Meng Yuan Museum.

⁷“Xing Yi invented the technique of making ‘mo’ / The word ‘mo’ is a combined character of ‘black’ and ‘earth’ / Made from smoked charcoal / It is a type of soil.” (*Xingyi shi zhi mo / zi zong heitu / meiyuan suo cheng / tu zhi lei ye* 邢夷始制墨 / 字從黑土 / 煤煙所成 / 土之類也)

(Wang Yi 2).⁸ The historical transition from *stone ink* to processed ink was a logical step in developing a more efficient and reliable way of sharing hand-written information.

A prominent feature that stands out in all of the above technical formulas and procedures is that the tactile quality of ink is marked at every single step of its production. It is useful to examine this tactile feature as the starting point in a search for the possibility of an unconventional ink practice.

(a) *Destructive Processes*. Historically, the production of Chinese ink relied upon two distinctive processes: wood-based process and oil-based process. It is possible to garner further insights into ink's materiality by looking at these two production methods.

One of these types of historical ink production is based on burning pinewood. This process involves collecting pine-burned soot deposited on the interior wall of a multi-tunneled, earthen kiln. The quality of the soot is determined by the location of the black pigment scattered inside the tunnels; the further the soot is situated from the heat source, the higher its quality (Li "Picture" 4). The collected pigment is then put through a process of filtering, gluing, pounding, pressing, and waxing before it is suspended in mid-air to dry (5). The famous quality pine trees in the Yumi (隰麩) and Fufeng (扶風) areas were originally used for the production of ink. But over years of continuous logging, the supply has gradually diminished, and ink makers had to move to other areas for harvesting new supplies.⁹ As early as the fourth to sixth century AD, China's ink source had already migrated to the county of Yi (易州) in the Heibei province which later became the prime locus of ink production (Wang Yi 2).¹⁰ The clearing of pine trees from the tenth century AD onward reached a level of devastation such that ink makers had to eventually consider another way of producing ink.

The need for an alternative wood-based ink replacement was satisfied by the introduction of a new technique. This new type of ink, introduced during the Song

⁸ The stationeries, often referred to as the *four treasures of the study* (*wenfang sibao*), are ink stick, brush, inkstone, and paper.

⁹ "Today, in the area of Qi and Lu, all the pine trees have already been cleared out. The extent of this clearing reaches as far as Taihang, Jingxi, and Jiangnan." *The pine trees found in these areas are too young to be of any use* (Shen; sec. 24). (*Jin qi / Lu jian songlin jin yi / Jian zhi taihang / Jingxi / Jiangnan / Songshan daban jie tong yi* 今齊、魯間松林盡矣，漸至太行、京西、江南，松山大半皆童矣)

¹⁰ The county of Yi (易州) is also known as Yizhou.

dynasty from the tenth to thirteen century AD, was made from burning oil. Similar to the method of burning pinewood, ink can also be made from soot generated from an oil-based fuel. Tung oil was the best option for burning because of its high carbon yield (Chen 1). In *The Grand View of the Chinese Ink Culture* (*Zhongguo Mo Wenhua Daguan* 中國墨文化大觀), Wang Yi (王毅) suggests that the burning of oil to make ink was a reasonable means to overcoming the growing demand for the medium (3). Another alternative fuel for ink production, suggested by the eleventh century AD scientist Shen Kuo (沈括), was refined crude petroleum (Shen; sec. 24).¹¹

As stated in *The Grand View of the Chinese Ink Culture*, the insatiable demand for ink was documented in the *Record of the She District* (*She Xian Zhi* 歙縣志 7). It mentions that a thousand catties—approximately 600 kilograms—of ink were given as contribution to the imperial court from the county of Hui (惠州) on an annual basis.¹² This excluded the mandatory supply commissioned by the government annually. The usage by officials, scholar-bureaucrats and other users also added to the burden of ink consumption, and this resulted in an unprecedented inventory crisis during the Song dynasty. The oil-burning method was introduced as a remedy to neutralize this crisis, and has since become an important aspect of much of today's Chinese ink production and culture.

There are two conclusive points that may be drawn from understanding these elaborate ink-making processes. One: these processes highlight the material qualities that underpin the ink culture. Two: the making of ink is premised upon the notion of destruction in a material sense.¹³ To make ink, natural resources (i.e. pine tree and tung oil) are incinerated and reduced to their most basic and irreducible forms.

¹¹ "Unlike the limited supply of pine tree, oil originating from the ground is vast and unlimited. . . therefore, coal makers must understand the benefit of ink made from burning oil." (*Gai Shiyou zhi duo / Sheng yu di zhong wuqiong / Bu ruo songmu you shi er jie / Zao mei ren gai zhi shiyan zhi li ye* 蓋石油至多，生於地中無窮，不若松木有時而竭。[...] 造煤人蓋知石煙之利也)

¹² "Until the Song dynasty, a thousand catties of ink embellished with dragons and phoenixes were contributed to the court by the county of Hui annually." (*Zhi song shi huizhou meinian yi da long feng mo qian jin chong gong* 至宋時徽州每年以大龍鳳墨千斤充貢)

¹³ My usage of the word destruction is grounded in a material sense and does not denote the use of the word "destruction" (*Destruktion*) as used by Heidegger. For Heidegger, the term "destruction" refers to the "destruction of the history of ontology" as stated in §6 of *Being and Time*. Heidegger's "destruction," or what Joan Stambaugh translates as "deconstructing" (for implying a fundamentally constructive and

With this materially “destructive” notion in mind, ink can be seen as a processed “thing” composed of a long series of physical transformations—from its initial burning, to filtering, gluing, pounding, pressing, and waxing. The notion of destruction departs from a traditional understanding of the usage of ink (i.e. for a calligraphic expression of the human psyche, or the pictorial depiction of idealized landscapes). It is important to probe further in this direction and to search for more clues ostensibly related to the materially destructive and the process-based aspects of ink.

(b) *The “Thingly” Character of Ink.* One approach to be considered in order to proceed with finding a different way to an understanding of ink is to delve into the past to investigate how the conception of *mo* (ink 墨) was historically constructed. This is one way to begin understanding the process of how culture has come to possess an “instinctual” conception of what an ink practice is considered to be. A search through the past allows one to seek out ideas that may have been forgotten over time, or perhaps have not yet been fully explored up to the present moment.

A close look at the Chinese character *mo* (ink 墨) reveals that it is formed by the combination of two simple characters—*black* (*hei* 黑) and *earth* (*tu* 土). One documented report suggests that the archaic form of the Chinese character *black*, which composes the upper portion of the word *ink*, resembles the fire-burning process in which soot is gathered at the top of an opening aperture made for the purpose of allowing smoke to escape (Wieger 113). Another report states that the ancient use of the word *black* derived from the ink-tattooed inscription marked on the faces of criminals (Ci hai 5852). These two accounts have led the sinologists to speculate that the word *black* in Chinese originated semantically from the Chinese word *ink* itself. In the *ABC etymological dictionary of old Chinese*, Axel Schuessler confirms that the word *black* is “a relatively late old Chinese word which replaced [the word] *xuan* (玄 ‘black’) [sic] during the Zhou period” circa eleventh to second century BC (277). As confirmed by *The Analects (Lunyu*

productive nature of the process of *Destruction*), aims at achieving a revolutionary re-interpretation of the way Western cultural tradition has historically been formulated and conceptualized in the past.

論語), *xuan* was a term for the color black.¹⁴ The term *xuan*, however, is no longer a common word used in the everyday. The word *tu* (土), which forms the lower portion of the word *ink*, can be translated as “earth; territory; land; soil; ground; mud; dust” (Giles 485, 1495).

Thus, a look at the past has supplied the following:

1. The word *hei* (*black* 黑) is a much later replacement of the word *xuan* (*black or dark* 玄) for describing the color black.
2. The Chinese word *ink* may have preceded the usage of the Chinese word *black*.
3. The pictographic formation of the word *hei* (*black* 黑) is an illustrative depiction of the gathering of soot above an open fire.¹⁵

The destructive procedure illustrated in the ideographic formation of the Chinese character *mo* points to a tactile, earthly and “thingly” impression of ink as a processed substance created from a long series of physical transformations. This observation signals the opportunity to consider the tactile, “thingly” character of ink as a potentially rich subject of exploration here.¹⁶

(c) *Thing and Stuff*. The fire-burning process represented in the ideogram *mo* (墨) leads to the need to consider the “thingly” character of ink. So, what is a “thingly” character and what is a thing?

There are two ways one can go about responding to these questions. For the purposes of this study, these questions are important only insofar as they offer a “thingly” understanding of the practice of ink. To proceed further, a first course will investigate the Chinese metaphysical concept of a thing. For this purpose, a consideration of the terms *wu* (*thing* 物) and *zhi* (*stuff* 質) will be important.

¹⁴ Online: <<http://afpc.asso.fr/wengu/wg/wengu.php?l=Lunyu&no=246>> “He did not wear lamb's fur or a black cap on a visit of condolence” (羔裘玄冠不以弔).

¹⁵ The Chinese word *mo* (墨) is composed of two characters—*black* and *earth*. They are vertically arranged so as to emphasize smoke's upward traveling motion.

¹⁶ Interestingly, it was suggested to me by Professor Helen Fielding that the process of writing out the ideographic character *mo* by hand is a visual reminder of ink's fabrication process.

A second course is to look at the definition of a thing as defined in Heidegger's *The Origin of the Work of Art*. In that essay, Heidegger claims that the conceptual basis of the artwork has always been fixated upon its “thingly” character, a quality that can be traced back to the historical epoch of ancient Greece. His treatment of art is a disavowal of the traditionally predefined “thingly” interpretations; I will necessarily explore these interpretations and how he came to such a conclusion in much greater detail later in this paper. Heidegger's considerations, it will become clear, are highly significant in our study of “thingliness” in an ink-based art practice.

Up until now, I have amassed evidences that point towards the existence of a tactile, “thingly” character inherent in the practice of ink. But, given this, what is a “thingly” character and what is a thing? A thing, in Chinese, is called *wu* (物). The *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經) indicates that “there are heaven and earth and then afterwards the myriad things sprout from them. What fills up heaven and earth is but the myriad things” (Zhang 66).¹⁷ The *Zhuangzi* (莊子), a Daoist manuscript dated to the fourth century BC, states that “whatever has traits, appearance, sound, and color are all things” (65). These interpretations agree that things can be actual perceptible concrete objects. Wang Shouren (王守仁), an eminent Neo-Confucian thinker from the early sixteenth century AD, provides a further refined clarification of things, in which a thing can be interpreted as the function of the human will. He writes:

With knowing there is the will. Without knowing there is no will. Is knowing not the substance of the will? If the will is to work there must be a thing in which it is to work and the thing is an event. When the will works in serving one's parents, then service of one's parents is a ‘thing.’ When the will works in administering a people, then administration of a people is a ‘thing.’ When the will works in studying, then studying is a ‘thing.’ When the will works in hearing a legal case, then hearing a legal case is a ‘thing.’ Wheresoever the will is employed there cannot not be a ‘thing.’ Where there is a will directed to *x*, then there is *x*. Where the will is not directed to *x*, then there is no *x*. Is a ‘thing’ not then the function of the will? (69)

¹⁷ In Chinese: 有天地 然後萬物生焉 盈天地之間者唯萬物

Wang Shouren's passage suggests that a thing can be an intangible human objective not bound to an observable material state. The human will, with the sheer effort of conjuring up a thought, can cause a "thing" to appear. This argument is supported by Laozi in the *Daodejing* (道德經), who writes: "As a 'thing' the Way is obscure and indistinct, indistinct and shadowy" (Zhang 67). One translation of the Way (*dao* 道) is "the origin of the world, 'generated before heaven and earth'" (14). If a thing is directly compared to that of the Way, albeit a rather imprecise "thing" because it is "indistinct and shadowy," then one can postulate that *wu* (*thing*) is not limited to a physical concrete material existence.

Another word closely associated with the term *wu* is *zhi* (*stuff* 質). This term is generally translated as "substance, character, [and] quality of material," and it has in the past been postulated with a number of different suggestive interpretations.¹⁸ Zhang Dainian (張岱年), in the *Key Concepts in Chinese Philosophy* (translated by Edmund Ryden), explains that the term *stuff* can be applied to describe three criteria: 1. "that which has real content"; 2. "things with determinate and form"; 3. "substance or accidents of thing" (63).¹⁹ He also suggests that the use of this term in Chinese philosophy is associated with the concept of *qi* (氣). This is exemplified in the *Apocryphal Classic of Piety*:²⁰

Before shapes and forms had yet separated out it is called ultimate 'change.'

When original *qi* first begins to appear, it is called the ultimate start. The emergence of *qi* and form is called the ultimate beginning. When *qi* changes there is stuff; this is called the ultimate element. (Zhang 64)

¹⁸ This definition comes from the online Chinese-English Dictionary of Modern Usage by the famous Lin Yutang from the Chinese University of Hong Kong: <http://humanum.arts.cuhk.edu.hk/Lexis/Lindict/>

¹⁹ Although it seems that the translator Edmund Ryden had used the word "form" quite liberally and in a generalized way in the *Key Concepts in Chinese Philosophy*, our understanding of its Chinese counterpart *xing* (形) needs not be conceived in the light of the Aristotelian dual concepts of form and matter. There is, however, a kind of phenomenological constant with respect to how we perceive the contour of an object through our senses regardless of our cultural vantage points, but the way we articulate this sensation (in words or in thinking) is often clouded by predefined sets of cultural views. We may choose to prejudice the use of the word *xing* as "form" in the Chinese epistemological context, or we can think of it in terms of the Aristotelian use of the word *form*; ultimately, it is important to see these interpretations as fundamentally different from one another while they maintain, to a certain degree, a kind of similarity.

²⁰ The source for the *Apocryphal Classic of Piety* is unknown and not made available in the *Key Concepts in Chinese Philosophy*. I have made numerous attempts in trying to find the original Chinese text but to no avail.

In Chinese philosophy, *qi* is translated as the “the ethereal substance of which everything is composed. [. . . It is] a vital force [. . .].”²¹

Based on the above passage, it may be claimed that when the “vital force” changes, *stuff* appears as the “ultimate element”; in other words, *stuff* appears when it is activated by a force.

In another instance, the terms form and *stuff* are differentiated and dichotomized into a binary by the seventeenth century AD philosopher Wang Fuzhi (王夫之). He comments on an earlier Neo-Confucian thinker from the eleventh century AD, Zhang Zai (張載):

Master Zhang says, “The form of the sun and moon has not varied from remote antiquity.” ‘Form’ is said of the ideal model; it does not refer to the stuff. The stuff goes through a cycle day by day but the form is always the same. There is no eternal vessel but there is an eternal Way. The water of the Yangtze and the Yellow Rivers is today as it was in the past but it is not today’s water that is the water of the past. The light of a candle yesterday is as it is today but it is not yesterday’s flame which is today’s flame. Water and fire are close to us and easily known; sun and moon are far and cannot be inspected. (64-65)

Wang Fuzhi argues that the terms “form” and *stuff* are not alike; “form” is the exterior of a thing (i.e. the visual appearance of the Yangtze River) while *zhi* is the opposite; *stuff* is the dynamic interior of a thing (i.e. the internal mechanics of the Yangtze River).

Although Wang’s interpretation of *stuff* contradicts Zhang’s explanation (it is of course not uncommon that philosophical concepts are interpreted differently through the ages), both are in agreement that *zhi* represents a characterization of a thing that involves both movement and change.

From the numerous, albeit limited examples cited above, the analysis of *wu* and *zhi* may be narrowed down in two points under the rubric of Chinese philosophy. One, a thing, interpreted as the decision of the human will by Wang Shouren, is not limited to a physical, concrete existence. Two, a thing—as informed by the *Apocryphal Classic of Piety* and Wang Fuzhi—is composed of a moving, changing *stuff*. Henceforth, it would

²¹ "ch'i." Encyclopædia Britannica. 2008. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 25 May 2008 <<http://www.search.eb.com.proxy2.lib.uwo.ca:2048/eb/article-9023931>>. The terms “ch’i” (Wade-Giles) and “qi” (pinyin) are the same.

now seem appropriate to argue that *stuff* may be said to have the “thingly” character within the Chinese context.

It is important and necessary to keep in mind that the terms *wu* and *zhi* do require additional textual support in order for them to be fairly assessed in the context of a thing and its “thingliness.” Without a doubt, there exists a multitude of definitions for these two Chinese terms over the past centuries; due to the scope of this paper, I will take Wang Shouren, the *Apocryphal Classic of Piety*, and Wang Fuzhi’s comments as provisional guides to our understanding of a thing and its “thingly” character.

(d) *Immateriality*. In speaking of the “thingly” aspect of the material ink, one need not to forget ink’s status as a medicinal substance in the Chinese culture. It was during the Han dynasty that ink was treated as a medicine capable of providing restorative power to the human body. This medicinal adaptation is generally attributed to Wei Tan (韋誕), a noted calligrapher in the second century AD, who pioneered the inclusion of traditional medicines such as powdered musk and pearl to ink, thus transforming ink into an ingestible, medicinal substance (Gu, section 8, n. 91). Another ink-making procedure formulated by the famous ink maker Li Tinggui (李廷珪) in the late Tang dynasty involved the use of powdered jade—a nephritic mineral used by devoted Daoist practitioners for prolonging life expectancy. In the *Compendium of Materia Medica* (*Ben Cao Gang Mu* 本草綱目), written by the famous physician Li Shizhen (李時珍) in the sixteenth century AD, ink is listed as a legitimate medicine for treating eleven ailments, ranging from nosebleed, urinary retention to hematemesis.²²

Ink was and still is being used to this day as a cure for a number of illnesses. Nowadays, one can have access to an over-the-counter ink-medicine (*yao mo* 藥墨) for the treatment of skin diseases such as psoriasis and dermatitis.²³ Other ingredients such as gold and cinnabar were purportedly to have been added to ink for the purpose of

²² As stated in the *Compendium of Materia Medica* (*Ben Cao Gang Mu*), *mo* (ink) is also known as *wu jin* (烏金), *chen xuan* (陳玄), *xuan hong* (玄香), and *wu yu kuai* (烏玉塊). Its odor is acidic, damp, and non-toxic. For the treatment of a nosebleed, liquefied ink is to be injected into nostril. For the treatment of hematemesis, a cocktail mixed with ink and white radish or with raw Rehmannia root extract can be used. <<http://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/%E6%9C%AC%E8%8D%89%E7%B6%B1%E7%9B%AE/%E5%9C%9F%E9%83%A8>>.

²³ Online: <<http://www.yaomo.net/html/shenqimoyao/20080126/202.html>>

enhancing its healing power. Curiously, cinnabar, a popular mercury-based mineral found inside ancient burial chambers and used in Daoist rituals for reciting incantations, was used in conjunction with ink as a booster supplement to ward off evil spirits supposedly taking refuge inside a patient's body.²⁴ Whether it is taken externally for the treatment of psoriasis, or internally for hematemesis, ink has been used as a "carrier" to distribute medical substances to affected body parts. In an oncology journal published in 2006, Chinese ink was used as a dye tracer in sentinel lymph node biopsy.²⁵

It is not within the scope of this thesis to inspect the medical effectiveness of ink, or whether the addition of extraneous substances to ink may or may not restore the body back to its fully invigorated state; what can be retrieved from the above accounts and make relevant to this discussion is that ink has been fetishized in the Chinese culture for centuries as a kind of incorporeal element for healing and protection. In the case of the ink-medicine, ink is not perceived merely as a solid mass object, but is treated as a ghostlike substance that can penetrate and be internalized within the human body; in this respect, ink presents itself as possessing an immaterial nature.

So far, this study of Chinese ink, from its history to its manufacturing processes, is predicated on its having a material tangibility. This is supported by the tracing of the etymological root of the character *mo* (ink), which leads one to further examine the procedural and "alchemic" aspects of its production. I began to inquire into the "thingly" character of ink's production, and asked the questions "what is a 'thingly' character and what is a thing?" I also analyzed the two words *wu* (*thing*) and *zhi* (*stuff*), and discovered that a thing can be a human-willed objective in the Chinese context, and that if one is to follow through with this investigation, one must look into a thing's movement and change (i.e. its *stuff* or "thingliness"). I also uncovered an immaterial quality inherent in the use of ink as a medicinal substance capable to penetrate into our physical body and cause it to undergo restoration and rejuvenation.

A renewed ink practice, so it seems, rests on delving into this immaterial, "obscure and indistinct" dynamics. But how can these aspects be incorporated for the

²⁴ Online: "mercury processing." Encyclopedia Britannica. 2008. Encyclopedia Britannica Online. 9 May 2008 <<http://www.search.eb.com.proxy2.lib.uwo.ca:2048/eb/article-82138>>.

²⁵ *Experimental Study of Chinese Ink as a New Type of Dye Tracer in Sentinel Lymph Node Biopsy*. The Chinese-German Journal of Clinical Oncology, Volume 5, Number 1 / February, 2006

benefit of an ink-based art pursuit? It will be evident that Heidegger, in his essay *The Origin of the Work of Art*, has already provided a proposition for such an undertaking.

3. Heidegger and Ink

Before proceeding, it must first be asked: why has Heidegger's philosophy of art been chosen here to accompany my search for a renewed ink practice and my questioning of ink? Essentially, in *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Heidegger's use of the words *earth* and *world* are very similar to the Chinese cosmological expression of *yinyang* (陰陽) inherent in the practice of *shuimo*. In Chinese cosmology, *yin* (陰) functions as a concealing force while *yang* (陽) functions as an unconcealing one. When these two words are combined together, they form a single binome—*yinyang*—that plays a defining conceptual role in traditional Chinese ink practice. In fact, the concept of *yinyang* has imbued Chinese ink practice with an idiosyncratic uniqueness (or a “trace,” as Gao Minglu suggests) that is not available in other non-Asian ink-based art practices (e.g. early Christian illuminated manuscripts). Because the mutual functioning of *yin* and *yang* inherent in the practice of *shuimo* is comparable to the interdependency between the Heideggerian expressions of the setting up of a *world* and the setting forth of *earth* in the work of art (these two Heideggerian concepts will be explored later), I have, therefore, made the logical link in choosing to connect my search of a renewed ink practice to Heidegger's philosophy of art based specifically on the concepts of *world* and *earth*.

It also makes sense to point out that although Heidegger's lifework is mainly known for its aim at “overcoming [the tradition of Western] metaphysics” (see Duits 18), a significant number of comparative studies have been made in linking Heidegger's philosophy with East Asian thought (and in my study, I have matched Heidegger's thinking with an Asian-based art form), specifically to ideas from the Chinese Daoist classics such as the *Daodejing* (道德經) and the *Zhuangzi* (莊子), and Zen Buddhist literatures.²⁶ Reinhard May has made a compelling argument in pointing out that Heidegger has appropriated ideas from East Asian materials without properly citing their

²⁶ Large bodies of scholarly materials discuss Heidegger's thinking in association with East Asian thoughts. See Cheng, Chung-ying, Hirsch, Mehta, and Umehara.

specific sources.²⁷ It has also been acknowledged that Heidegger had corresponded with a number of major Japanese thinkers during his time.²⁸ It would, therefore, not be too far-fetched to assume that some of Heidegger's ideas may have, to a greater or lesser degree, been derived from or filtered through some East Asian philosophical sources. This cross-cultural exchange may have also indirectly contributed to Heidegger's unique writing style. Thus, in light of Heidegger's interest in Asian philosophy, I venture to speculate that his theories of the setting forth of *earth* and the setting up of a *world* may be related to the Chinese binaries of *yin* and *yang*—the “master concepts for expressing the paired nature of reality” in Chinese cosmology (Zhang 94). Indeed, for the purpose of seeking another way to re-think the practice of *shuimo*, the paired terms of *world* and *earth* may be seen as an alternative to the concept of *yinyang* as grounded in an ink-based art practice. A comparative discussion between these two fundamentally different cultural conceptions of art (Heidegger's *world* and *earth* with the concept *yinyang*) can be a very fruitful pursuit, but it is one that deserves to be treated as the subject of another paper.

Now to proceed with the second course earlier set out; that is, to inquire into the questioning of a thing and its “thingly” character as outlined by Heidegger in *The Origin of the Work of Art*.

(a) *Three Thing-Concepts*. *The Origin of the Work of Art* is Heidegger's most extensive treatment on the subject of art and aesthetics. In this essay, his fundamental task begins with asking the question: what makes a work of art? This simple, yet profound and unresolved question starts with an inquiry into the “origin” of the artwork. But in order to discover the “origin,” Heidegger suggests that it is necessary that one first possess a preconceived notion of what is an artwork. Ultimately, this preconception returns us to the question of the “origin,” creating what seems to be an unproductive, circular puzzle.

²⁷ “In his pseudo-dialogue ‘*From a Conversation on Language*,’ Heidegger adopts almost verbatim, but well hidden, two formulations from a text by Oscar Benl on Noh drama” (May 17, 52). “With respect to the *topos* ‘*Nothing*,’ Heidegger obviously formulates the synonymous *topos* ‘*Emptiness*,’ drawing this time on Chapter 11 of the *Laozi* in [Richard] Wilhelm's translation, which has the thingly nature of the container consisting in *emptiness*” (May 30, 51).

²⁸ See Tomio, Tezuka. “*An Hour with Heidegger*,” in *Heidegger's Hidden Sources: East Asian Influences on His Work*. London; New York: Routledge, 1996. Page 59-64. Other eminent Japanese figures that Heidegger came in contact with, according to the translator's preface of this book (viii), are Nishida Kitarō, Tanabe Hajime, Miki Kiyoshi, Kuki Shūzō, and Nishitani Keiji.

For Heidegger, recognizing the existence and the potential of this circular puzzle is an important step in understanding the nature of art.

The first item that Heidegger asks one to consider is the most rudimentary feature that constitutes a work of art: its “thingly” character. The concept of a thing accounts for everything that is “not simply nothing” (*The Origin of the Work of Art* 653). A pebble at the beach is a thing, as much as a wooden match and paper are things. To begin his examination of “what is a thing,” Heidegger traces three traditional interpretations that people in the past have used to describe the “thingliness of the thing.”

First, a thing is a substance “around which the properties have assembled” (655). In other words, a thing is “attributable” according to different qualities and characteristics. The history of this interpretation goes back to the ancient Greeks and the subsequent adaptation of its thinking by Roman-Latin thought. As Heidegger points out, a problem arises precisely when this adaptation occurs: if a concept was formulated to describe a mode of existence in a particular cultural milieu, its appropriation to another cultural context would cast doubt on the precision of its actual meaning, and consequently put into question the validity of such a concept. Heidegger reminds the reader that the Greek words were integrated into Roman thoughts (e.g. *hupokeimenon* becomes *subiectum*); but the Romans did not share the same experience and ways of thinking as the Greeks, so to appropriate the Greek concept of describing a thing as a substance “around which the properties have assembled” is highly inadequate for the Romans to express their own newly contextualized encounters involving the “thingliness of the thing”—under the idiosyncratic and culturally specific conditions of their own thinking, language, and customs.

Second, a thing is conceived of as the “unity of a manifold of sensations.” For Heidegger, this interpretation faces the same danger as the one described above—that is, a mode of cultural existence can be appropriated, but it cannot be transferred without any kind of undisturbed alteration. A concept made to express a particular mode of existence is no longer fully valid once it has been transplanted to another cultural context. The fact that cultures maintain the same interpretations for things over the past centuries is because people have not genuinely encountered a thing without the prejudice of pre-informed interpretations such as the two described so far. Thus, having recognized ones

own prejudices towards the conception of a thing and its “thingly” character, one must therefore accept that the “unity of a manifold of sensations” does not hold sway as an adequate and fully resolved way to describe the “thingliness of the thing.” Essentially, the “thingly” character of a thing is not always immediately perceived according to how it looks, sounds, or feels.

Third, the “thingly” character is interpreted as “formed matter.” Form refers to the physical parts of a thing composed in space; say, a bone or a shoe. Matter refers to the sensible nature of an object, such as weight, texture, color, and sound. The formulation of the binary structure of form and matter, made to interpret the “thingliness of the thing,” has been used ubiquitously throughout history, and as Heidegger puts it, “in the greatest variety of ways, quite generally for all art theory and aesthetics” (658). Yet, similar to the previous two attempts in interpreting the “thingly” character of a thing, this framework possesses the same flaw; by schematizing the understanding of a thing into a strict dichotomy between form and matter, one in fact strips away other possibilities that may allow the chance to conceive other modes of “thingly” interpretation. To contemplate the work of art as a thing in the terms of “formed matter,” one may in fact make a mistake in assuming that the work of art is a piece of equipment with an aesthetic quality attached to it (668). Hence, the categorization of the “thingliness of the thing” as “formed matter” has proved to lack the capacity to fully encompass the richness and complexity of a thing and its “thingly” character, which, in this context one may assume are aspects of the basic characteristics that make a work a work of art.

Of the three traditional interpretations of the “thingliness of the thing,” which are also known as the three “thing-concepts,” Heidegger suggests that “formed matter” can best offer a clue to understand the real nature of a thing, which in turn will allow for one to grasp the nature of an artwork.

Thus far, with the help of Heidegger, I have chosen here a course to analyze a “Western” conception of a thing and its “thingly” character. But it must now be asked: How is the venture into the Heideggerian discussion of “formed matter” significant to the interest in developing an engaged ink-based art practice—a practice that has been shown to be predicated on the tactile, physical and destructive aspects of ink’s production, and which, through an analysis of *wu* and *zhi*, and the medicinal aspect of ink, appears to be

congruous with ink's own immaterial and an "internalized" characteristics? In response, I shall further suggest that Heidegger's analysis of a thing as "formed matter" has everything to do with the prospect of premising an ink-based art practice on the nature of its "thingliness."

(b) *Equipment.* To imagine the "thingliness of the thing" as a combination of form and matter, one in fact acknowledges the quality of usefulness in a thing (659). Heidegger asserts that "matter and form have their proper place in the essential nature of equipment"; if a piece of equipment is inherently associated with the concept of usefulness, then the essential nature of that piece of equipment is the nature of its reliability (664). He provides an example to demonstrate this point: The daily toil of a pair of shoes worn by a peasant farmer illustrates the shoes' "equipmental character," that is, their reliability. The shoes are reliable because they can be used to carry out work-related duties. Yet, Heidegger, with the question of "being" often centrally rooted in his philosophical inquiries, insists that there is more to the shoes than just their reliability and usefulness—both characteristics originate from the interpretation of a thing as "formed matter."

For Heidegger, the reliable and useful nature of the shoes does not serve to reveal the shoes' "essence."²⁹ It is the inner workings of the artwork that interest Heidegger in

²⁹ In using the term essence, Heidegger is not referring to the fundamental, non-factorable, non-reducible features of a thing, which is defined in *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* as "the basic or primary element in the being of thing; the thing's nature, or that without which it could not be what it is" (125). In the *Historical Dictionary of Heidegger's Philosophy*, Alfred Denker acknowledges that "in scholastic ontology the essence of an entity is its nature or what it is, independent of its existence . . ." (emphasis added, 85). Through our investigation of the three interpretations of the "thingliness of the thing," we learned that a concept formulated to describe a mode of existence in a particular cultural milieu can never be unaltered when it is superimposed upon another cultural setting, because the original meaning of such a concept can no longer be justifiably true when it is transposed to describe another uniquely different mode of existence. Keeping this notion in mind will help us in understanding the Heideggerian notion of essence. To illustrate the difference between the traditional notion of essence and the Heideggerian notion of essence, let's consider a tangible thing: a table. The traditional understanding of essence of a table is its ability to provide support and as an object of use. In a Heideggerian way of thinking, the essence of a table is defined by the relationship it has with the tangible and non-tangible things that it comes in contact with over time, such as the maker of the table; the role it played in the many festive gatherings, and the history accumulated from its overuse. All of these idiosyncratic moments and passages of time point to the uniqueness of the existence of this table, which, for Heidegger, translates as the table's "general essence." The essence of the peasant shoes is expressed through their relationship with the field, in such a way that the shoes are "pervaded by uncomplaining anxiety as to the certainty of bread, the wordless joy of having once more withstood want, the trembling before the impending childbed and shivering at the surrounding

this line of questioning. Using a painting of a pair of peasant shoes by Van Gogh, he attempts to draw out what he calls the “equipmental being of the equipment.” He writes:

In the stiffly rugged heaviness of the shoes there is the accumulated tenacity of her slow trudge through the far-spreading and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by a raw wind. On the leather lies the dampness and richness of the soil. Under the soles slides the loneliness of the field-path as evening falls. In the shoes vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening grain and its unexplained self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field. This equipment is pervaded by uncomplaining anxiety as to the certainty of bread, the wordless joy of having once more withstood want, the trembling before the impending childbed and shivering at the surrounding menace of death. This equipment belongs to the earth, and it is protected in the world of the peasant woman. From out of this protected belonging the equipment itself rises to its resting-within-itself. (664)

Through this poetic description of the painting, Heidegger engages in an imaginative investigation into the inner workings of the artwork. If “the shoes vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening grain and its unexplained self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field,” then we can assume that the shoes are not envisioned by Heidegger as confined, isolated objects that house an unchanging “essence,” but as entities connected to an overall environment. One may even further postulate that the “essence” of the shoes, in light of a Heideggerian understanding (see endnote 24), is determined by a relational interaction between the shoes and all other entities (i.e. tangible and non-tangible things) that happen to occupy a contextualized setting. This contextualized setting, of course, is always different and idiosyncratic, thus the “essence” is never “always the same.” As Heidegger confirms, the artwork is not a mere imitation of reality that depicts the exactitude of what can be observed through one’s eyes, but instead, it is “the reproduction of the thing’s general essence” (666).

It should be noted that the art historian Meyer Schapiro has made a counterargument that the shoes depicted by Heidegger are in fact Van Gogh’s own shoes,

menace of death.” The essence of the peasant shoes, therefore, is an infusion of the entire phenomenal sphere surrounding the shoes.

and that Heidegger “has indeed deceived himself” by using Van Gogh’s painting to project his own kind of existential truth, a truth which, for Heidegger, cannot be found anywhere else (Preziosi 429). Jacques Derrida, in response to both *The Origin of the Work of Art* and Schapiro’s comments, has remarked that although Heidegger has made the incorrect assumption of the shoes as belonging to a peasant, his goal is not so much concerned with the “function of the pictorial reference,” but rather the “being-product” and the “truth of unveiling” that are central to his investigation (448). Indeed, what is important for the purposes of this project rests in the unveiling of the “thingly” dynamism of ink—an operation that has little to do with the “pictorial reference,” but more with the “being” of a possible conceptual platform.

It has also been noted that Heidegger premised his essay on art from a non-aesthetic approach in his attempt at so-called “overcoming” the tradition of Western metaphysics. And from the quoted passage and the subsequent discussion above, I observed that Heidegger is formulating a non-traditional relational system to describe what constitutes the “origin” of the work of art. If Heidegger’s non-aesthetic approach can be called a “phenomenological fundamental ontology of the artwork” (see Duits 24), then one can assume that Heidegger is looking for a new basic relational dynamics that activates the artwork as a “being-centric” thing. It needs to be established that Heidegger is not rejecting the concept of a thing itself, since it is impossible “to display the precise determination of the thing” (*What is a Thing?* 54). His concern rests in the three “thing-concepts” that are traditionally reserved to describe a thing, as stated in *The Origin of the Work of Art*.

Heidegger’s search for the “origin” of the work of art through looking at the artwork as a thing has brought him to a kind of semi-conclusive argument that there is an immaterial, phenomenological aspect in the analysis of a concrete physical thing (i.e. the artwork). Quite serendipitously, this immaterial, phenomenological aspect of an artwork is comparable to the ancient usage of the Chinese term *wu* (*thing*), which is a thing that is not restricted to a material existence. The basic relational dynamics that Heidegger is searching for in describing the inner workings of the artwork is also comparable to the term *zhi* (*stuff*) in Chinese philosophy, which is the moving and changing element within a thing. Both *wu* and *zhi* point to the inner workings of the thing, and it is the inner

workings that must now be probed to continue with exploring further of the “thingly” character in the practice of ink. Heidegger’s analysis of a thing is therefore exceptionally relevant to this investigation of a physically tactile, process-based Chinese ink practice.

Before discussing Heidegger’s proposed inner workings of the artwork, it is valuable to recapitulate what has been discussed thus far: Heidegger is interested to search for the “origin” of the work of art. But in order to determine the “origin,” one must first make certain preemptive assumptions in order to qualify a work as art. To make judgment on works based on these assumptions, one is in fact no closer to finding the “origin” of art that was initially sought. However, to carry out a fruitful pursuit in grasping the nature of the work of art, Heidegger invites the reader to enter into a “virtuous circle” by first looking at one of the most rudimentary characteristics attributed to the work of art—the “thingly” character of an artwork.³⁰

Supposing that the “thingly” character is the basic criterion of the work of art, Heidegger traces the historical hermeneutics of the “thingliness of the thing.” He provided us with three traditional interpretations: One, a thing is a bearer of properties; two, a thing is a unity of a manifold of sensations; three, a thing is “formed matter.” These three “thing-concepts” are found to be inadequate in expressing the “thingliness of the thing,” because each is limited by its own predefined parameter in depicting the thing’s “thingly” character. In other words, each “thing-concept,” or a combinatory play of the three, failed to grasp the multifarious and sometimes evanescent nature of a thing. But through the concept of “formed matter,” Heidegger finds a clue that leads to this present preconception of the artwork—the concept of “formed matter” is derived from the nature of equipment as expressed through its usefulness and reliability.

However, based on a phenomenological analysis of the painting of the shoes by Van Gogh, Heidegger argues that there is much more to the shoes than just the display of their usefulness and reliability. Through a description of the worn-out shoes mobilized by the peasant for the purpose of harvesting a field, Heidegger demonstrates how contact between things (e.g. the shoes, the field, the soil, the earth, the world, etcetera) can generate a series of complex narratives and far-reaching consequences, potentially leading to a form of transformation that takes place in the spectator upon viewing Van

³⁰ Online: homepage.newschool.edu/~quigley/vcs/heidegger-owasum.pdf

Gogh's painting, for example. In this respect, for Heidegger, the happening of truth and the essential being of the artwork is revealed through the painting. Although *The Origin of the Work of Art* remains unclear as to how both the happening of truth and the essential being of the artwork is revealed through the painting, the primary question that concerns this investigation lies in discerning an inner dynamics that can be used for a new ink practice.

As mentioned earlier in this paper, the artwork "consists in the fighting of the battle between world and earth" (Heidegger *The Origin of the Work of Art* 677). The artwork, which is fundamentally different from equipment because it does not provide a useful and reliable service, functions under the colliding force of two intermingling features—the setting up of a *world* and the setting forth of *earth*. I will now examine these two features and the relationship they hold for each other in instigating what Heidegger calls a *striving*. However, I shall consider this dynamic model only insofar as it achieves our purpose in re-thinking a different kind of ink practice.

(c) *World*. Heidegger uses the example of a Greek temple to illustrate the setting up of a *world* and the setting forth of *earth*. In describing the former, Heidegger writes:

A building, a Greek temple, portrays nothing. It simply stands there in the middle of the rock-cleft valley. The building encloses the figure of the god, and in this concealment lets it stand out into the holy precinct through the open portico. By means of the temple, the god is present in the temple. This presence of the god is in itself the extension and delimitation of the precinct as a holy precinct. The temple and its precinct, however, do not fade away into the indefinite. It is the temple-work that first fits together and at the same time gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire the shape of destiny for human being. The all-governing expanse of this open relational context is the world of this historical people. Only from and in this expanse does the nation first return to itself for the fulfillment of its vocation (670).

Similar to the descriptive treatment given to the pair of peasant shoes painted by Van Gogh, Heidegger treks his way through another phenomenological study; this time, he

inspects the inner workings of a Greek temple. For Heidegger, the Greek temple represents the artistic zenith of a “great” work of art, and is, for that reason, the ideal representation to foreground the “setting up of a *world*” in an artwork.

In the context of the Greek temple, the term “setting up” is by no means, say, a mere putting up of a marble mannequin on a pedestal. According to Heidegger, it is through the presence of a god that the temple manifests a sense of unnatural holiness. Simply by being provided with a space for dwelling, the god is bestowed by the people with “dedication and praise” (672). This honorable tribute is given by those whose wish was to manifest the “fulfillment of [their] vocation” (670). This tribute also implies a direct associated with both the act of projecting a possible cultural narrative by the people, and the act of affirming this narrative by fashioning the ideal into a physical form; in this case, the temple-work (i.e. the temple as an artwork and not as an equipment). This explains why the temple-work “gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire the shape of destiny for human being.” The “setting up of a *world*.” therefore, is intrinsically tied to the decisions of a historical people.

Essentially, the making of the temple-work, a major historical decision that reflects the condition of being of a particular cultural group, is the making of a *world*. Heidegger’s use of the word *world* is not the world that commonly thought of as an environment with observable and tangible objects. A *world* is an invisible, abstract “space” that unfolds and opens up to include all the “simple and essential decisions in the destiny of an historical people” (676). And “wherever those decisions of our history that relate to our very being are made, are taken up and abandoned by us, go unrecognized and are rediscovered by new inquiry, there the world worlds” (673). Using the temple-work as an example, Heidegger shows how a *world* can “world” by revealing a condition of being that can be only be seen through the work of art. A *world*, as the “open,” is therefore primarily concerned with revealing and disclosing. The following example illustrates the setting up of a *world*.

A *world* can be set up by establishing “context of higher relationships which gives meaning to the art work [*sic*]” (Stulberg 261). Consider an ink stick. As a solid block of soot mixed with glue and other ingredients, it is black and immobile. It rests on a table

amongst inkstones and brushes. It is for the purpose of writing, and it is the key to the spread of knowledge and literacy in ancient China. It provides not only functionality, but on a conceptual level, it branches out and becomes entangled with other cultural industries, namely papermaking, brushmaking, and stone masonry (for the making of inkstone). This entanglement helped develop what one calls an ink culture—a deeply complex and interconnected matrix that links production techniques, geographical sources, surface designs and embellishments, ideological and religious adherences, use and exchange values, familial lineages, and individuals and celebrities into a unified, yet versatile cultural entity. To properly discuss this ink culture would require not only a further discussion of the characteristics of ink, such as its viscosity and rate of dispersion, but also of its ethnographic relationship amongst cultural customs and beliefs. With these considerations in mind, one can see how a block of ink, if placed in the right context, can potentially be a work of art that sets up a *world* to reveal the very being of a culture. I shall further clarify this point under the heading of *Implementation II*.

(d) *Earth*. Inseparable from the setting up of a *world* is the setting forth of *earth*. With respect to the temple-work, the latter is described by Heidegger as follows:

Standing there, the building rests on the rocky ground. This resting of the work draws up out of the rock the mystery of that rock's clumsy yet spontaneous support. Standing there, the building holds its ground against the storm raging above it and so first makes the storm itself manifest in its violence. The luster and gleam of the stone, though itself apparently glowing only by the grace of the sun, yet first brings to light the light of the day, the breadth of the sky, the darkness of the night. The temple's firm towering makes visible the invisible space of air. The steadfastness of the work contrasts with the surge of the surf, and its own repose brings out the raging of the sea. Tree and grass, eagle and bull, snake and cricket first enter into their distinctive shapes and thus come to appear as what they are It clears and illuminates, also, that on which and in which man bases his dwelling. We call this ground the *earth* Earth is that whence the arising brings back and shelters everything that arises without violation. In the things that arise, earth is present as the sheltering agent.

The temple-work, standing there, opens up a world and at the same time sets this world back again on earth (OWA 671)

The material nature of the temple-work and its surroundings are cogently depicted in this passage. The substance that makes the temple-work (i.e. the stone) and the invisible effect that it causes in its surroundings (e.g. the storm, air, sea, plants, and animals) feature the setting forth of *earth*. Heidegger claims that *earth* “shatters every attempt to penetrate into it” and that it tends to withdraw whatever is revealed—this is the basic nature that circumscribes the logic behind the *earth* (674).

The setting forth of *earth* can be described as a self-enfolding, “close” process that challenges the openness of the *world*. The setting forth of *earth* is the bringing into view, out of the artwork, the different material qualities of the work (i.e. the silkiness of the burned ashes, the blackness of the ink). Yet, the *earth* also represents that “which is by nature undisclosable, that which shrinks from every disclosure and constantly keeps itself closed up [. . .]. To set forth the earth means to bring it into the Open as the self-secluding” (OWA 675). Strictly bringing the material nature into prominence and yet preventing—in the form of concealment—a viewer from grasping and penetrating into the mystery of the materials that makes the work of art are the basic criteria for the setting forth of *earth* in the artwork. To describe the nature of the *earth*, Heidegger uses a rock as an example: one can try to break it open, measure its weight, study its refractive index, but one can never come close to knowing what a rock truly “is”; the *earth* is never fully disclosed to us. The material soot may be used as another example.

The soot that accumulates inside a chimney manifests its blackness as a tangible residue. Rubbing this black pigment with bare hands will not provide full access to the mystery of the blackness that one sees. The blackness could easily vanish or transform if it were examined with scientific instruments, say, under the watch of high magnification. Yet, even all the data that can be gathered to display the properties of this blackness remain futile and incomplete with respect to disclosing the mystery of its dark presence. Attempts to pierce into this darkness reveal that the mystery is still intact, concealed, and not entirely accessible. This blackness, as shown in the powdery form of soot, contains such a mystery: a mystery generated by the setting forth of *earth*.

(e) *Striving*. The ever-concealing mystery of soot's dark enigmatic presence is, it may be argued, demonstrably the nature of the *earth*. The ever-expanding cultural entanglement of ink is demonstrably the nature of a *world*. The setting up of a *world* and the setting forth of *earth* are essentially two opposing elements that exist in a codependent manner in the making of a work of art. What is a work of art? In a Heideggerian way, a work of art is the dynamic operation between *world* and *earth*.

Heidegger explains that the *world* fulfils its duty by attempting to expose the hidden nature of the *earth*, and *earth* fulfils its task by concealing the “spawning” of the *world*. Although each aspires to overcome the other, they also work in unison so each can support and endure the presence of the other. The *world* can only exist as a *world* if there is an *earth* to reveal and preserve. Conversely, the *earth* can only be an *earth* if there is a *world* to conceal and protect. Each element maintains the purpose of surmounting the other in the form of what Heidegger calls a *striving*. A *striving* is the battle between the two elements in which one “carries the other beyond itself”; in a dialectical fashion, through the intermingling between *world* and *earth* in the work of art, the “unconcealedness of beings” is revealed and “won” (676, 681). It is beyond the parameter of this paper to discuss how the “unconcealedness of beings” is revealed through the work of art in a Heideggerian way. My concern needs to remain focused on the interaction between *world* and *earth*.

The search for a renewed ink-based art practice has been predicated on treating the use of the medium ink as a thing. But everyone already knows that ink is a thing—ink as a material thing is already self-evident. The questioning of ink as a thing is seemingly not needed, but when one looks into a handful of canonical art history books that focus specifically on the topic of traditional ink-based artwork, from the elegant figurative works by Yan Liben (閻立本) of the early Tang dynasty in the seventh century AD, to the mountainous landscape of Huang Binhong (黃賓虹) in the mid-twentieth century AD, one discovers that the theoretical treatment of ink as a thing has not been a focus nor very much explored as a potential subject of artistic investigation. If I take into account that “the study of art in China was confined only to *shu* calligraphy and *hua* painting,” then

by means of its absence from traditional art history, I ought now to boldly set out to re-imagine the practice of ink as a practice that explores its “thingly” character (Cheng 3).³¹

4. Implementation I

Although the operations of *world* and *earth* are concepts that exist “behind” the work of art, it is useful to imagine how their functions can be “visually” illustrated. One should be reminded that the far-reaching breadth and significance of the Heideggerian functions of the setting up of a *world* and the setting forth of *earth* in the work of art are observable in such a way that they can be revealed, not in a quantifiable, scientific manner, but phenomenally through what Heidegger calls a *striving*. An illustration of this *striving* will aid us in grasping these two functions (*world* and *earth*) in relation to the possibility of enriching a renewed ink-based art practice.

On the most crass and basic level, the interaction between water, ink and paper can be seen as a visual demonstration of the hidden relation between the setting up of a *world* and the setting forth of *earth*. On one hand, when wet ink is applied directly on an untreated two-dimensional surface—say, a piece of porous paper, it has the tendency to be absorbed and spread randomly in all directions to cause a form of visualization of the setting up of the *world*. As mentioned earlier, the term *world*, as derived from a Heideggerian understanding, is the unfolding of the “simple and essential decisions in the destiny of an historical people.” The spread of ink on a piece of porous paper, although a seemingly “natural” gesture, hides a configuration of connectivity pertaining to aspects of the Chinese culture that are not often immediately associated with the utilization of ink, such as the setting up of quarry plants for the making of ink stones, and the exploitation of animal fur for the production of handmade brushes. The conscious act of applying ink on paper, therefore, establishes a connection between a microcosmic, self-driven artistic expression, to a macrocosmic cultural “entity” not dissimilar to the way Heidegger has utilized Van Gogh’s shoes painting to demonstrate the series of complex narratives involved in the making of a work of art. This phenomenal connectivity is also similar to

³¹ A number of canonical Chinese art history books have been consulted, such as Bradley Smith and Wang Weng’s *China: A History in Art* (1973?), Michael Sullivan’s *The Arts of China* (1973), Zehou Li’s *The Path of Beauty-A Study of Chinese Aesthetics* (1988), and Wen C. Fong’s *Beyond Representation* (1992).

the way an ink stick is conceptually tied to an interconnected matrix of cultural productions as mentioned earlier in this paper. Keeping this connectivity in mind allows one to consider that a splotch of ink on paper reveals not only some clues about the identity of its maker, but also some aspects of the maker's culture in relation to its own historical understanding as a people, and the time and age in which they exist.

On the other hand, the material spread of ink on paper in terms of its visually stratified, gradient expansions and pattern arrangements can be considered as a manifestation of the setting forth of *earth*. The *earth*, according to Heidegger, "is by nature undisclosable, that which shrinks from every disclosure and constantly keeps itself closed up." The characteristics of the materials (i.e. water, ink, and paper) that are disclosed, such as permeability, rate of saturation, chromatography, absorbency, and texture, are, in fact, indicators of what is essentially absent and undisclosable to us, that is, the so-called "essence" of the materials (see endnote 22); in other words, although the materials are physically present and graspable in the sense of its tactility, physicality and properties, at the same time, they also prevent one from knowing what the materials truly "are"—such coyness or sheltering quality of materials expresses the function of the setting forth of *earth*. The nature of the setting forth of *earth* can also be materialistically (and metaphorically) expressed as the stage when the spread of ink on paper has stopped, dried, and thus caused the paper to shrink. This shrinkage (as a property of the paper) exemplifies the attempt for the *earth* to draw in, to contain, and to retrieve what has been exposed from the setting up of a *world*.

Essentially, the visual appearance of the spread of ink on paper (say, a piece of unsized mulberry or bamboo paper) is unpredictable. The way a splotch of ink is spread is based on a negotiation between a number of criteria, such as the absorbency of the surface, the amount of ink fluid, and the climatic and geographic conditions (e.g. airflow and other environmental qualities) in which this interaction is taking place. The resulting image is determined by each individual ink spread from one strain of fiber to another as conditioned at least by the above suggested terms. It can be expected that each strain of fiber reacts to ink differently, not only because each is differently shaped on a microscopic level, but also because each is differently pressed, entwined and adjoined to other strains of fiber, causing ink to be dispersed randomly at different locations and to

different areas. The gradient spread of ink, therefore, can be seen as a display of a self-driven relation between the expansion of ink and the resulting shape of the image—this self-operative interplay mirrors the self-propelling nature of a *striving*, a process that expresses the exchange of a “dialogue” between *world* and *earth*.

5. Implementation II

It is stated earlier that a block of ink, if contextualized in a proper setting, can potentially be a work of art that expresses the Heideggerian *world*. To illustrate this point, I choose to discuss the example of an artwork, the *Sumi-Ink Garden of Re-Creation* (2002) by artist Jian-Jun Zhang (張建君). I will focus specifically on the function of ink in this work in conjunction with locating the presence of the Heideggerian *world*. I will also utilize some of the key ideas in this paper to demonstrate how they can be theoretically applied to the making of an artwork, namely the transformative quality of the ink-making process, the feature of immateriality in the usage of ink, and the setting forth of the Heideggerian *earth* in the work of art.³² It is important to keep in mind that ink, by itself, is not a work of art in the Heideggerian sense. Only when ink is placed in relation to a context or manipulated in a certain way that allows the exposure (or opportunity) of seeing and thinking about ink differently, can ink be called a work that sets forth the “work of art.”³³ This implies that one cannot treat ink simply as a material (i.e. as reliable equipment) that can be used up like a pencil or a crayon, or merely for the

³² My research on Jian-Jun Zhang’s *Sumi-Ink Garden of Re-Creation* is mainly collected online. My recollection of seeing a similar water-activated, ink-based scholar’s rock sculpture came from a trip I took to Shanghai in 2004. I have not since been able to retrieve further information regarding the specific work that I saw; on top of that, very little written material on the *Sumi-Ink Garden of Re-Creation* can be found from either online or printed materials. However, there is a catalogue of Jian-Jun Zhang’s work published recently, but since I have not had a chance to examine this catalogue, I expect to do so in service to a revised version of this paper in the future. Because I have not personally visited the *Sumi-Ink Garden of Re-Creation* installed both at the Pollock-Krasner Foundation and at the fourth Shanghai Biennial, and with a lack of reliable sources to work with, I have decided not to discuss the work as a whole, but mainly the theoretical function of ink in the work.

³³ It is in my opinion that Heidegger does not take the term “work of art” in any traditional, commonly known sense (e.g. pertaining to the study of aesthetics). The term “work of art,” in my understanding of Heidegger’s philosophy, possesses a sense of sacredness and holiness not unlike the “setting up” of a Greek temple as described by him. It has, however, been argued that Heidegger’s conception of art is an attempt to invigorate the Benjaminian aura “in order to secure the possibility of an authentic relation to the origin that would reestablish the spirit and power of the German people” (Long 90).

purpose of depicting a representation, such as a flower or a tree, but as a medium that can reveal its own unique material personalities.

The *Sumi-Ink Garden of Re-Creation* is an installation of five solid ink-made sculptures (some over six feet high and mixed with resin and fiberglass) shaped in the style of classical Chinese scholar's rocks. Pumping systems are installed to enable a continuous trickle of water to gradually modify the shape of the ink blocks. These ink blocks are situated on top of bricks that were scavenged from a demolished house. At the outer rim of the bricked ground, a series of disjointed wood frames and a fish tank (with fish) are strategically placed on the floor.³⁴ The ink blocks, bricks, wood, water, and fish, possibly chosen to signify the *five elements* (*wuxing* 五行), suggest a materiality that is very much culturally rooted in the "everydayness" of the Chinese people. These five types of material and their suggested symbolic qualities—ink as knowledge, bricks as dwelling, wood as warmth, water as nourishment, and fish as sustenance—can be viewed as critical to the survival of an idiosyncratic culture that has politically embraced hundreds of ethnic groups over a period of two thousand years since the unification of China by the *First Emperor* (*Qin Shi Huang* 秦始皇). One can imagine a miniaturized version of this culture; that is, if the culture's supposed essential elements (essential in the sense of knowledge, dwelling, warmth, nourishment, and sustenance) can be teased out and be brought to the forefront. Then perhaps one can envision the *Sumi-Ink Garden of Re-Creation* as a literal "re-creation" of a possible Heideggerian *world* in which an extensive, culturally symbolic relationship is revealed, through the expression of each of the elements' materiality, so as to express the crucial characteristics of a historical people. The ink-made scholar's rocks, the continuous running of water, the dismantled house, the open wood frames, the fish, and the unusual positioning of each of these

³⁴ This information came from a webpage that reported on the first Guangzhou Triennial and the fourth Shanghai Biennial: http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1248/is_9_91/ai_108278520/pg_7. There is a noticeable difference between how the *Sumi-Ink Garden of Re-Creation* was installed at the Pollock-Krasner Foundation and at the fourth Shanghai Biennial—two locations where the work was purported to have been exhibited. The online article stated that five ink sculptures were situated on top of the bricks, but the photo provided by the Pollock-Krasner Foundation website shows only one ink sculpture placed on top of the bricks, surrounded by at least five smaller ink sculptures outside of the boundary of the bricked ground. One can assume that the artist has made a conscious modification of the work at the Shanghai Biennial, which took place at a later time. The description of the work in this paper is based on the online article, which is a report on the Shanghai Biennial. Unfortunately, a picture of the work at the Shanghai Biennial is not available.

objects in relation to one another, all hint at a profusion of ethnographic practices related to Chinese geomantic diagrams, astrological signs, mythical guardians and animals, Confucian canons, ritualistic objects, conceptions of landscape and much more.³⁵ All of these cultural extensions can be seen as phenomenally rooted in the setting up of the *Sumi-Ink Garden of Re-Creation*.

One interesting phenomenon that can be observed from the *Sumi-Ink Garden of Re-Creation* is the manipulation of ink in the form of traditional Chinese scholar's rocks. A scholar's rock is a symbolic referent to the Chinese intelligentsia, specifically the literati culture—an educated class specialized in painting, calligraphy, poetry, and the arts. The ink sculptures, in the form of scholar's rocks, engage in a constant process of deterioration caused by the trickling of water; the water slowly wears out the ink, and over time, the sculptures are rendered liquid. This transformative gesture demonstrates a state of ephemeral existence not dissimilar to the ink-making process of reducing a tree into ash and soot. In fact, Zhang's ink sculptures further emphasize this kind of material conversion—through a series of mechanical processes, the carbon-based residue (soot) is made into a solid block of ink, which is then reinvigorated by water to undergo another

³⁵ During the Song period, another cultural trend developed that gave new meaning to the usage of ink. This trend was that the making of ink was practiced by statesmen and scholars. Beginning in the early Tang dynasty, ink was no longer treated strictly as a utilitarian object meant for the purpose of transcribing information. Ink was made not only by professional ink makers and their apprentices, but also by well-to-do officials and intellectual elites as a form of recreational activity (Wang Yi 10). Known as *literati ink* (*wen ren mo*), ink came to be produced by hobbyists to convey a sense of cultural literacy amongst friends and colleagues. In some cases, they were made as ingratulatory gifts for the purpose of amassing favors from officials and rulers. These special inks were either made with the assistance of an experienced ink maker, or by a professional agent using a custom formula tailored for a specific need, such as for publishing a manuscript. In such practices, each side of a piece of ink was engraved and gilded with a personalized message, a commemoration, a statement about its expected usage, or the name of the studio or office for which the ink was made. Inks were produced in small quantities, and served to be a part of a study room's décor, especially since many of the inks were not made for actual use.

The popularity of *literati ink* gained much momentum in later Ming and Qing dynasties, and it became a decorative and collectible item. In the *Ink List of the Fang Clan* (*Fang Shi Mo Pu*) published around 1572-1620 AD, over three hundred different styles of decorative mould-making ink models were recorded by the famous ink master Fang Yu Lu. In another album published by his contemporary Cheng Jun Fang, five hundred models were recorded. Inside these albums, pictures of geomantic diagrams, astrological signs, mythical guardians and animals, Confucian canons, famous individuals, commodities, ritualistic objects, landscapes, plants, poems, calligraphies, and other culturally symbolic subjects were used as ink mould models. Some of these models were so stylized and oddly-shaped that they could not have been made to be use for actual grinding. An example is a set of six ink sticks made by the Qing dynasty ink maker Wu Tian Zhang. Each of these ink sticks are fully coated with gold and inscribes with the words “family collection” on one side, suggesting that they were made as collectible objects and family heirlooms. Similar inks were also made for inclusion in box sets; each is housed in an isolated cushioned space lined with patterned fabric for value-added sophistication.

phase of transformation. The ephemeral quality of the inky scholar's rocks as a representation of knowledge as transient can be interpreted as the setting up of a *world* in which the "decisions of our history that relate to our very being are made, are taken up and abandoned by us, go unrecognized and are rediscovered by new inquiry." The change of matter, the change of the states of existence, the absence of its previous form, and the presence of another kind of materiality in Zhang's ink sculptures disclose the aspect of immateriality unique to the signature of ink.

The slow deterioration (or the gradual disappearance) of the ink sculptures can be seen as being used up by the forces of water. But this "using up" is entirely different than the mere using up of material in the form of a pencil or crayon; this "using up" is essentially an important part of the work that succinctly express the materiality of ink, not through the depiction of its physical, tactile presence, but through the explicit "display" of its absencing. The gradual vanishing of the physicality of ink brings to mind its materiality in the most acute sense; at the same time, the spatial void that fills up what was once a visually perceptible ink sculpture demonstrates the setting forth of the Heideggerian *earth*. As mentioned earlier, *earth* "shatters every attempt to penetrate into it," and it tends to withdraw whatever is revealed into being concealed; thus *earth* can perhaps be best represented as the presence of this negative void that takes up the absence of the physical ink sculptures. Indeed, the absencing of ink's physicality in Zhang's *Sumi-Ink Garden of Re-Creation* is the presencing of the immeasurable and unknowable quality of the Heideggerian *earth*.

6. Conclusion

Journeying through this study on Chinese ink has allowed me to discover a way to conceive of a possible ink-based art practice. This renewed conception is meant to treat the practice of ink as a form of persistent questioning its "thingly" material nature based on the numerous conceptual elements explored so far (i.e. the destructive, the transformative, and the recuperative aspects of the ink-making process; the immateriality of ink; the setting up of a *world* and the setting forth of *earth*; and the *striving*). Although the "thingliness of the thing" is for my purposes still largely indefinable (and perhaps it

should remain undefined so to allow space for a “thing” to freely manifest its multifariousness), its exploration has so far provided a promising seedbed upon which a renewed ink practice can be developed. Bringing forth the materiality of ink in relation to its historical understanding and its associated cultural significance for the purpose of seeking possible future artistic narratives is a core aspect of my material practice.

I return again to the question raised earlier: “What is a thing?” Although Heidegger did not provide a clear definition of what a thing is in *The Thing* (1950) and in *Building Dwelling Thinking* (1951), he did, however, suggest that a thing possesses the qualities of gathering and uniting.³⁶ If one takes these two aspects and applies them to the present study of a renewed ink practice, one will discover that the long series of manufacturing and processing procedures, from the initial burning of wood to the application of ink in the making of a work, is an expression of a “thing” that gathers and unites.

As Heidegger has shown, a thing and its “thingly” character are no trivial matters; they pertain to a long history of philosophical inquiry that goes back to an ancient past. In *The Origin of the Work of Art*, he has demonstrated that the three traditional “thing-concepts” are unable to entirely encapsulate our phenomenal experience of a thing. Most certainly, for Heidegger, a work of art is to be more than just these three traditional “thingly” interpretations. But if it seems lacking and insufficient to conceive a work of art as a thing through these three “thing-concepts,” then why am I still maintaining the claim that a renewed ink practice can be a practice that explores ink’s “thingly” character?

Ultimately, it is unavoidable to conceive a work of art as a thing; in fact, by considering the material ink through a knowledge of an arduous and laborious process composed of a series of physical transformations (i.e. burning, filtering, gluing, pounding, pressing, and waxing), the “thingly” feature of ink is brought to the forefront as a pertinent topic of artistic investigation. Given this, can I possibly imagine an ink-based art practice that foregrounds ink’s “thingly” presence, a presence perhaps not limited to the three traditional “thing-concepts” as outlined by Heidegger?

³⁶ “The thing stays—gathers and unites—the fourfold.” The fourfold, as discussed in Heidegger’s *Building Dwelling Thinking*, is the gathering of earth, sky, divinities, and mortals. A jug or a bridge becomes a thing by bringing these four elements closer to one another. More information can be found in Heidegger’s *The Thing in Poetry, Language, Thought*.

There is, of course, no doubt that a thing can take on many other forms of interpretation, such as the Chinese conceptions of a thing as *wu* and *zhi*, and Jian-Jun Zhang's *Sumi-Ink Garden of Re-Creation* that I have discussed earlier. But the questions remain: why does a thing require so many interpretations? And why are we so intimately tied to "things"—a pedestrian question that connotes vagueness and imprecision, but at the same time possesses layers of unfathomable conceptual meaning? According to Bill Brown, "even the most coarse and commonsensical things, mere things, perpetually pose a problem because of the specific unspecificity that 'things' denotes" (3). Maybe this is one of the reasons why the exploration of the interpretation of a thing and its "thingliness" can be so marvelously fascinating especially when placed in the context of my questioning of ink; most certainly, the "thingliness of the thing" is an important philosophical subject that needs to be further explored in the search for a continuously renewed ink-based art practice.

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