Electroacoustic Improvisation and Life Nourishment

WANG JING

Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, China
Email: adelwangjing@zju.edu.cn

Drawing from the ancient Chinese text *The Zhuangzi*, the sinologist François Jullien suggests that to nourish one's life is to nourish life's vital potential by keeping it open to renewal. Inspired by the anthropocosmic vision of environment improvisation developed by the Chinese musician Li Jianhong, this article begins to explore the philosophical and aesthetic principles that connect electroacoustic improvisation to life nourishment through discussions of electroacoustic improvising practices from China but not limited to China. This article proposes that an understanding of electroacoustic improvisation on the spiritual and existential level offers a refreshed conceptualisation of creativity, environment and improvisation at large.

1. INTRODUCTION

What connects music improvisation to life nourishment (*yang sheng*, 养生)? One is a staged performance and the other is often reduced to leisure practices. There are of course great social values in music improvisation in, for example, creating social coherence or being the spiritual support for revolution for the common good. None of these are what I meant to explore here. I have discussed collective improvisation on the cultural and social dimensions in other articles (Wang 2015, 2017). In this article I zoom in to the spiritual and conceptual dimensions of electroacoustic improvisation.

It is necessary to first explain why out of varied forms of music improvisation I focus on the electroacoustic kind. Electroacoustic music refers to music produced by electrical devices (especially audio recording devices) and electronic instruments, some of which are relatively easy to get access to and more flexible in terms of learning if compared with classical instruments. Culturally and aesthetically, electroacoustic improvisation relates to a broader collection of new media/avant-garde art practices developed in north America, Europe and Japan from the 1950s. Electroacoustic music bridges classical and popular music, inclusive of both academic and non-academic practitioners and audience. The openness of electroacoustic improvisation is paradoxically paired with an elite dimension. But at least in the context of East Asia at large, it is elite in the intellectual sense, not class. Electroacoustic improvisation is more of an everyday practice, in the sense that it does not require mobilisation of various resources. It can happen on varied platforms with or without promotions, such as music venues, art venues, public space, private households, cities or city outskirts. It does not even require an audience (Wang 2020). Particularly, there is no other genre that would emphatically incorporate listening as part of music as much as electroacoustic improvisation.

Pioneering figures in electroacoustic improvisation, including Keith Row, Derek Bailey, Eddie Prevost, Cornelius Cardew, John Butcher, Pauline Oliveros, Otomo Yoshihide, Toshimaru Nakamura and Sachiko M, have influenced practices of Chinese electroacoustic improvisers, including Li Jianhong, Weiwei, Yan Jun, Maimai, Jun-Y Chao, Shen Piji, Sheng Jie, Zhu Wenbo and The Tea Rockers Quintet. These Chinese musicians at the same time have gradually developed their own unique acoustic philosophy, which may arguably also apply to some of the electroacoustic improvising communities globally. It is this uniqueness to which I anchor myself in thinking about and articulating. In particular, I am inspired by environment improvisation, one kind of electroacoustic improvisation, developed by Chinese experimental guitarist Li Jianhong, in terms of beginning to think about improvising and life nourishment.

Li Jianhong began making noise, psychedelic and improvised music in the mid- to late 1990s, a golden age (or a critical turning point as some would say) for the Chinese rock music industry when rock music became more mainstream and more commercialised. From its beginning, Li distanced himself from mainstream rock music. He has organised (together with the laptop musician Wei Wei) one of the most important experimental music festival in mainland China – 2*pi* Music Festival (changed to 2*pi* festival in 2006) (2003–7) in the city of Hangzhou.[1] At the beginning

[1]Li Jianhong started his noise music band 2*pi* (the second skin) in 1999 and founded the independent music label 2*pi* Records in 2003 to release music by himself and his musician friends.

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of his music practice, Li tried harsh noise, laptop music and vocal noise, but soon decided on using only electric guitar because he felt the acoustics of electric guitar could most closely express his feelings. Li was identified as the best noise musician from China by the polish noise composer Zbigniew Karkowski.

From 2004, Li began to develope environment improvisation as a way to improvise in and with the environment. Although the creation myth of environment improvisation has been told many times in my writing (Wang 2016, 2020, 2021), it is still worth rehearsing here.

During a mountain trip to the Faxi Temple in the city of Hangzhou in 2004, Li encountered a sudden rainfall. He had nowhere to go but to wait under the roof of the cloister at the Mahavira Palace: 'I still remember the rain—watching it marching towards my direction from the other side of the mountain, then hearing the rain washing over the trees, sensing the smell from the summer earth. The smoke from the burning incense … the chanting sounds from inside of the palace covering the entire temple and mountains … I fell asleep … The rain, originally that of the universe, became my rain, because I existed that day' (Li 2010).

What Li has described is an anthropocosmic experience of rain listening. It might not be a coincidence for Li falling asleep considering that Gaston Bachelard emphasises the oneiric nature of anthropocosmic experience (Bachelard 1994). During the rain listening experience, awake or asleep, Li's body is directly connected to the cosmos as a mutually constitutive whole; at the same time, a living cosmos within opens up to all that surround him. This is the beginning of his environment improvisation.

Historically, in Chinese culture, creative practices, including playing *guqin*, calligraphy, playing chess, drawing and appreciating stones, are considered practices for life nourishment. Life nourishment is not a privilege for the literati or royalty. It can be found among butchers, carpenters, or fishermen. In contemporary times, anthropologists Judith Farquhar and Zhang Qicheng talk about myriad ways of nurturing life in Beijing, such as practices of *tai chi*, *qigong*, jogging, swimming, walking backward, dancing, singing, keeping birds, appreciation of tea, wine and medicinal cuisine (Farquhar and Zhang 2012: 18). *Yangsheng*, or life feeding, according to *Zhuangzi*, as Farquhar and Zhang interpret, is 'giving life to life' (ibid.: 14). This expression may sound pretty awkward in contemporary context, but if we understand it through classical Chinese cosmology and philosophy of *qi*, it will make better sense.

2. *QI* (气) AND CHINESE ACOUSTIC THINKING

The complexity of *qi*-philosophy and its relation to acoustic thinking is beyond the scope this article. Here I will just give a brief summary.[2]

The British sinologist Joseph Needham has made a significant yet under-developed proposal about Chinese acoustics: that Chinese acoustics is an acoustics of *qi*. The notion of *qi* is crucial in the classical holistic and organic Chinese worldview (Cheng 1987; Ames and Hall 2001; Kim 2015). In ancient China, *qi* was considered both the vital source for life and the driving force in the cosmic world. Through different historical periods, *qi*, from a vague idea, was developed into a cosmological, aesthetic, social, medical, moral concept, and eventually a philosophy, reaching its maturity in the Song Dynasty. There are two commonly heard reductive understandings of *qi*. One is a result of visuocentrism in that the image of steam, gas or fog reduces *qi* to simply a material force. The other is to describe *qi* as matter-energy in the context of modern scientific theories. Both have neglected an important and unique value in Chinese conceptual language, which does not distinguish the thing, its medium and its action but most often emphasises functions (Hay 1985; Wang 2021). For example, in ancient Chinese philosophy, the body (*shen or shenti*, 身,或者,身体) is defined more as a process of experience and action than a physical entity (Zhang 2008). *The Huainanzi* (206 BC–220 CE) states that 'to personify the words of a Superior Man is trustworthiness' (*shen junzi zhiyan, xin ye*, 身君子之言, 信也。) (Liu and John 2010: 359) Here, *shen* means to personify. *Shenti* can be used separately, with *shen* as a noun and *ti* as a verb to emphasise the importance of experiencing with one's body: 'sages use their bodies to incarnate it [the *dao*]' (*shengren yi shen ti zhi*, 圣人以身体之) (ibid.: 499). It is often the case that one character is used both as a verb and a noun. For example, *gui* (鬼) when used as a noun, means 'ghost'; when used as a verb, *gui* can mean 'return' or 'condensation'.

The mixture of noun and verb makes the language and Chinese thinking ambiguous and confusing for many. But this also makes it conceptually unique and attractive. As Jullien points out, Chinese thinking does not concern itself much about questions of being but more with the ungraspable, the evasive and the allusive (Jullien 2018).

The Song Dynasty scholar Zhang Zai (1020–77), known as the Chinese philosopher of *qi*, defines *qi* as an existential process of mutual resonating,

[2]An extensive discussion of the philosophy of *qi* and Chinese acoustic thinking can be read in my book *Half Sound, Half Philosophy: Aesthetics, Politics, and History of China's Sound Art*. Bloomsbury 2021.

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interpenetrating polarities that keeps forming an organic unity (Zhang 2012). Zhang identifies '*gui-shen*' as 'the intuitive and intrinsic nature of *qi*' (鬼神,二气之良能). *Gui-shen* can be understood both as subject (ghosts-spirits) and action (condensation and expansion). The condensation of *qi* is *yin* and hence *gui*; the expansion of *qi* is *yang* and hence *shen*. The double meanings of *gui-shen* not only suggests the transformative nature of *qi*, but also emphasises the virtue and the sensation of reverence in *qi*-philosophy. That is, for Zhang, one should have a reverence for transformation, mutation and resonance of nature (*tian*, 天) and the myriad things. Life, for Zhang, is not being but condensation of *qi*. Death is not non-being but dispersion of *qi*. Similar conception of life and death can be traced back to the Daoist classics *The Zhuangzi* in around the third century BC. In *The Zhuangzi*, it is written, 'human life is a gathering of *qi*; when it gathers, this is life; when it scatters, this is death ... thus it is said that one *qi* permeates all under heaven'.[3] Feeding life to life, *sheng sheng* (生生), according to Zhangzai, means *jingjing* (进进), unceasing movement of live vitals (生生,又言进进也) (Zhang 2014).

Zhang's philosophy of *qi* highlights a sixth sense, resonance (*gan*, 感), a moral sentiment as Yuk Hui frames it (Hui 2016: 27). The word resonance (*gan*) was recorded as first appearing in the *Yijing* (*Book of Changes*) in the Zhou Dynasty. From the *Yijing*, we learn that to know the nature of a thing, for example, the earth, one needs to recognise the resonant nature of the earth, that is, what the earth is resonating with and what it is in relation to. For a living organism, the most refined form of *qi* (*jing qi*, 精气) is what makes one thing resonate with one another. As recorded in the *Yue Ji* (*The Record of Music*, second and first centuries BC), sound is interpreted and organised as music according to the principle of resonance between the material of instruments, natural phenomenon, directions, sense organs and social identities. For example, the note *gong* (宫) corresponds to thunder sound in the fall, the spleen, noise, the earth, the Lord and the middle (Wang 2021: 29–30).

According to Zhang, 'sound is a result of and manifests the inherent capacity of resonance among things. People are only so used to resonance that they never notice it' (声者... 是皆物感之良能。人皆习之而不察者尔). It is hence one of the primary goals of Zhang to realise in the cosmos and in the myriad things the capacity for resonance, which is often veiled or hidden (Kim 2015). The capacity for unceasing resonance is exactly the capacity of feeding life to life. For Zhang, resonance is an essential aspect of creativity: that which interpenetrates through resonance (*gan*, 感) is creativity (*cheng*, 诚) (*gan er tong ze cheng ye*, 感而通诚也).

[3]人之生，气之聚也， 聚则为生，散则为死 ... 故曰通天下一气耳。《庄子•知北游》.

3. THE *TIAN* (NATURE, COSMOS, HEAVEN, 天) WITHIN: AN ANTHROPOCOSMIC VISION

Environment (*huanjing*, 环境), as used in environment improvisation, contains both the modern meaning of environment and the classical meaning of *tian*. It is worth noticing that only until modern China when the expression *huanjing* was used as a stable translation for environment. To acquire a richer understanding of environment improvisation in particular and improvisation in general, it is necessary to place the term *huanjing* back in classical Chinese philosophy, especially its relation to *tian*. *Tian*, is a rather complicated notion, often translated as 'nature', 'world', 'heaven' or 'cosmos'. *Tian* has been one of the most essential and fundamental concepts in Chinese philosophy. In Zhang Zai's *qi*-philosophy, *tian* refers to a vital process of great harmonisation of polarities in terms of *qi*. The Confucian scholar Tu Weiming proposes the notion of the anthropocosmic, that is, *tianren heyi* (天人合一) from Confucianism, to describe the continuous mutual interaction of *tian* (cosmos) and *ren* (human).

Li Jianhong often stressed that the most important thing in environment improvisation is the interconnectedness between the sensing body and the surrounding environment. The anthropocosmic and creative process of environment improvisation opens the *tian* within the sensing body. In theatre performing artist and scholar Nicolás Núñez's words, it is to 'give back to our organism its capacity to be the echo box of the cosmos' (Núñez 1996). It is a capacity to resonate, if put in Zhang's words. The opening of *tian* is only regained through the body's intertwining with the vitality of the cosmos.

3.1. The anthropocosmic vision of myriad things and environment

Opposing the anthropocentric view of the universe, according to Tu Weiming, the anthropocosmic vision suggests *tian* (nature, in Tu's translation) as both the generative force that has created myriad things and the result of human imagination and conceptualisation (2010). Through Zhang Zai's *qi* philosophy, we further recognise that humans are one kind of the myriad things, together with animals, plants and non-organic items such as stones or sand. Humans are a part of a web of organismic interconnectedness. Myriad things never exist on their own (*wu wu guli zhili*, 物无孤立之理). They flourish through the

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condensation and expansion of mutual resonance (yi qushen xianggan er lisheng yan, 一屈伸相感而利生焉) (Zhang 2012).

Such a holistic and organic anthropocosmic view of nature (*tian*) and myriad things is uniquely Chinese; however, it can find intellectual resonance in non-Chinese context, for example, in contemporary anthropologists Gregory Bateson and Tim Ingold's theoretical works. For Bateson, the most difficult stage of learning, or 'Learning III', is to transcend the self, the 'I', to come to recognise 'a world in which personal identity merges into all the processes of relationship in some vast ecology or aesthetics of cosmic interaction' (Bateson 1972: 306). Bateson asks what sort of thing is this, which we call organism plus environment. This question was raised partly to criticise Darwinian theory of natural selection and evolution. Bateson proposes that the unit of survival is not the genetically fittest or the breeding organism but organism-plus-environment: 'The flexible environment must also be included along with the flexible organism because, as I have already said, the organism which destroys its environment destroys itself' (ibid.: 320). Flexible, in the sense that neither the architecture of organism nor of the environment is pre-determined.

Tim Ingold, while being inspired by Bateson's insight of life, took a more radical position. He argues that the term 'plus' in Bateson's expression problematically indicates the environment and organism as two separate entities. 'There can be no organism without environment, so also there can be no environment without an organism' (Ingold 2002 19). Despite their disagreement, both Bateson and Ingold confirm the mutual constitutiveness and interconnectedness between environment and organism. Ingold goes further to distinguish environment and nature, 'environment is seeing ourselves as beings within a world while nature is seeing ourselves as beings without a world' (Ingold 2011: 20). Ingold's definition of nature is closer to the Chinese notion of *tian*, a force that is beyond the human organism. The notion of *tian*, however, if compared with Bateson's notion of organism-plus-environment or with Ingold's notion of nature, is still unique in its moral connotation that emphasises reverence for life vitals.

Similar anthropocosmic vision is also found among some Western improvisors and experimental musicians. The experimental musician Pauline Oliveros has developed the notion of the sonosphere for her improvisation and deep listening practices. Sonosphere, as Oliveros puts it in the simplest way, refers to 'the sonorous or sonic envelope of the earth' (Oliveros 2006). Douglas Kahn offers a more detailed and expansive description of the notion, 'it rises up from the turbulent movements and geomagnetism of the core of the earth, the fluid convections in the core and convection in the atmosphere from the momentum of the earth's spinning orbit in the sun's thermal influence, and moves out through analogies and transductive intermediaries of acoustical and electromagnetic fields and waves' (Kahn 2013: 174). Events of thunderstorms and tornados merges so well, almost magically, with Oliveros's live performances. 'I am listening to everything that I can possibly perceive in order to tune to and flow with the sonosphere' Oliveros proclaims (2006: 481).

Music answers to a synthesis of both the *tian* (the generative force that has created myriad things, the thunder, the tornados) and the improvisor's imagination of *tian*. The music event does not represent any pre-designed system nor does it present the relation or sensation generated throughout, but is the relation and the sensation.

3.2. Tacit resonance: the inconspicuous aspect of knowing through sound

Electroacoustic improvisers or deep listeners relate to the environment in a way which is different from how scientists or biologists relate to the environment. The latter is anatomical. The former is synchronic or resonant. Anatomical suggests objective knowing, which is what we have been taught in school nowadays. Synchronic or resonant relation suggest a different way of knowing, which I call tacit resonance (Wang 2020, 2021).

I have already discussed tacit resonance in other writings and here I want to add that tacit resonance, *moqi*, is the inconspicuous aspect of knowing through sound (Wang 2020, 2021). The anthropologist Steven Feld talks about acoustemology to describe how sound is perceived as a vehicle for transmitting cultural knowledge. Feld has been conducting his fieldwork with the Kaluli people in the Bosavi rainforest in Papua New Guinea since the 1970s. The Kaluli people are conscious of their acoustic knowledge and were able to communicate some to Feld. Hence the anthropologist of auditory culture Tom Rice calls it conspicuous acoustemology (Rice and Feld 2020).

However, a large part of acoustic knowledge is inconspicuous; it operates in a way best described as *moqi*, tacit resonance. In the term *moqi*, *mo* (默) translates as 'tacit', 'silence', while *qi* (契) translates as 'agree', 'contract', 'bond'. *Qi* (契) also means intimate friendship. Friendship (*you*), written as , like the left and right hand, is a perfect body reference for the notion of *moqi*. Tacit resonance suggests an epistemological relation between the organism and the environment that is different from consumption. It

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is mutual nourishment, a process that can be vividly felt, but not necessarily reportable.

4. HOW TO CONNECT IMPROVISING TO LIFE NOURISHMENT?

Now I will return to the central question of how improvising is connected to life nourishment. By the question of how, I am not thinking about creating a recipe for how particular sounds when improvised perform a therapeutic or medical function in life nourishment. That would be a completely different project. I am interested in teasing out general operational principles that underlie both improvising and life nurturing so that the performance of one is exactly the another. I begin this line of inquiry by identifying the first two.

4.1. Principle 1: getting back to the basics, in improvising and in life nurturing

Getting back to the basics is a principle of being economic. Think of white paintings by Robert Rauschenberg, stacks of rectangular blue boxes by Donald Judd, *4′33″* by John Cage, the resonating sound of objects and spaces by Alvin Lucier, or the sinewave of Sachiko M. For electroacoustic improvisation, getting back to the basics means getting in contact with a more intimate source of acoustic energy, foregoing the desire to dominate or to complicate.

For experimental and improvising musician Yan Jun,[4] music can be as simple as breathing in his album (Yan 2018, recorded in 2016) with no title. As Yan clarifies in the text accompanying the album, 'this is a work with no title. i.e. it is not a work entitled "untitled" but a work stands on its own. Once Marcel Duchamp said [that a] title is invisible color. For me be [*sic*] with no title is using invisible canvas.'[5] In this work, Yan recorded separately the breathing of two individuals (including himself) in mono in two different studios at different times. He later joined the two mono recordings into a stereo track that lasts more than an hour. Both individuals being recorded fell asleep in the middle. Yan Jun cut the snoring part and made minimal editing. The microphone was placed very close to the mouth, so a great amount of detail was heard. The air is heard streaming in through the nose and mouth and disappearing into the void of the body and then is breathed out. The air rubs the interior of the body as waves beating against the shore. The sound is so basic that it is almost becoming the acoustic background for any organic sounding events.

Yan Jun's work reminds one of a much earlier work series by the Canadian composer Hildegard Westerkamp titled *Breathing Room* created between 1990 and 1991 (Westerkamp 1996). In the first *Breathing Room* piece, Westerkamp recorded her breath with a background of environment sounds for three minutes. In the programme note, Westerkamp writes, 'Music as breath-like nourishment. Breathing as nourishing musical space.' *Breathing Room* (1990), *Breathing Room 2* (1990) and *Breathing Room 3* (1991) were meant for creating a space to breathe and for cultivating a place where the care of the self, the care for women, for life and for the environment, can happen.

Respiration is 'the vector of life nourishment' (Jullien 2007: 31). Both music works are a witty use of breathing sound to generate the widest imagination of the vital flux of life. Both are at the same time animating what is vital in those who listen. More significantly, the works show, how everyone can regain a caring force that animate life coming from the *tian* within, by breathing.

Like Yan, Zhu Wenbo is also a self-taught experimental musician based in Beijing. Zhu is known for his simple, minimal and witty experimental soundworks.[6] In his action score titled *955* (the frequency of the note he plays in the piece), collective electroacoustic improvisation is reduced to its minimum: to an improvisation of just one long note. While he plays a long note on his clarinet, audience members are asked to record the sound and play the recording whenever they want and for any duration of time. After a few performances in 2015, when he was invited to attend the Ftarri Festival in Tokyo in 2017, he made an adjustment in the piece by adding more waiting time. 'I increase the time between my playing by the power of 2 seconds. I silently count 2 4 8 16 32 64 128 256.'[7] For Zhu, allowing more time for him to listen and more time for the audience to play their recordings is what *955* is about.

Getting back to the basics is also an exit strategy, to disengage from the world, to preserve or, not to waste one's life vitals, the *qi*. It is to exit the knowledge of the senses to attend to the *qi* of sounds, to the pattern of the acoustic environment through the listening body, to attend to how it begins, how it endures and how it disappears. In environment improvisation Li

[4]Yan Jun is one of the most important experimental and improvising musician and curator of experimental music in mainland China. He is also a poet. He is the founder of the independent label Sub Jam, releasing experimental, noise and improvising music from mainland China and beyond. He works with feedback noise, body performance and voice. For more on Sub Jam, visit www.subjam.org. For more writing on Yan Jun's music practice and curatorial practice, see Wang (2021).

[5]The album is available at https://yanjun.bandcamp.com/album/-.

[6]Besides being an experimental musician, Zhu Wenbo also organises 'Zoomin' Night' in Beijing, an important music series featuring experimental music by younger generations.

[7]Personal communication with the author, 18 January 2022.

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Jianhong holds his guitar listening to the rain (Li 2010b). In the Shanghai-based experimental musician Xu Cheng's composition piece *Counterpoint* (2018), two blindfolded performers search for each other by listening to sounds made by the sirenphone each holds (Wang 2021: 165–6). Listening always constitutes an important factor in electroacoustic improvisation; it has its own agency, a performer on its own.

Listening suggests the presence of an intense silence, the quietest noise. To resonate and harmonise with myriad things and with *tian* requires concentration. It is what the Japanese field recordist Toshiya Tsunoda's stethoscope recording is about, to make the concentration audible (Tsunoda 2013). Tsunoda fixed a stethoscope with a built-in air mike on his temples, and the stethoscope captured not only vibrations of his muscles and blood flows but also environmental noises. He reflects, 'What is this? At this point, I cannot explain this well since my intuition is preceding over my understanding. Of course, some abstract issue is also involved here, other than field recordings. We can call this recording as evidence of my focusing on some object at a certain place' (Tsunoda 2009).

With deep listening practices, Pauline Oliveros asks us to notice the impact and effects of sound throughout the body, to reinforce the pitch of sound that attracts. Deep listening is intense listening. Concentration on the basics, such as breathing or a single sound source, sharpens sensual faculties. In a deep listening piece titled 'Environmental Dialogue (1996 Revision)', Oliveros instructs 'reinforce means to strengthen or to sustain by merging one's own pitch with the sound source. If the pitch of the sound source is out of vocal or instrumental range, then it is to be reinforced mentally' (Oliveros 2005: 35). By such concentration, one not only connects to the inner self but also the immanence of the ecology of life.

From chapter 19 of the *The Zhuangzi*, Jullien provides the interpretation, 'concentration accumulates in the spiritual' (Jullien 2007: 96). Feeding the spiritual is always an essential part of feeding life to life. Feeding the spiritual, according to *The Zhuangzi*, also requires movement, fluidity and non-obstruction. This leads to the second principle.

4.2. Principle 2: help sound come to sound; help life come to life

The Zhuangzi, chapter 3 'On the Principle of Vital Nourishment,' tells the story of the butcher Baoding who follows the natural structure of the ox and evolves in concert with the broad passages within the ox and hence the nurturing of his tool and his life. The butcher's knife, is not just a tool but in Jullien's words, 'a vector of efficacy' that helps to unravel obstacles and to continue unfolding, unravelling (Jullien 2007: 95). 'The logic here', as Jullien stresses, 'is not a logic of construction, as in geometry, where one composes and decomposes a figure, but one of continuation, which allows processes to unfold endlessly' (ibid.: 95). Behind this distinction between construction and continuation is another more fundamental difference in how one understands creativity. Creativity is more often considered as making something from the without. However, creativity, according to Zhang Zai, is the ability to resonate with things. Hence, the secret of creativity is to cultivate the ability to follow that which comes of its own way (*dao*), the ability to resonate.

The electroacoustic improviser, different from the program designer or the cybernetician who sets up the system and then observes it running, helps that which comes forth by carefully and patiently preparing, following, evolving along and resonating with. What matters the most is not controlling but caring and nurturing. Helping sound come to sound is an existential gesture of following. In the teaching of *guqin*, 'following means nurturing the right essence of balanced harmony' (Van Gulik 1969: 49). Following can be used to understand the improvising group AMM's aesthetics as explained by Cornelius Cardew: 'We are "searching" for sounds and for the responses that attach to them, rather than thinking them up, preparing them and producing them' (Cardew 1971: xviii).

John Cage may come to our mind at this point since he is known for saying, 'let sound be sound'. But there is an essential difference between 'help sound come to sound' and 'let sound be sound'. Using the book *The Yijing*, Cage developed a new way of composition and named it chance operation. He translated hexagrams into pre-assigned musical values, freeing himself from making intentional choices. While letting go of his choices, he gives up resonating with the changing environment as well. He chooses to be a creator of a sounding mechanism, rather than a care taker of a sounding event. Cage does not believe in improvisation because he believes it is impossible that one does not fall back to habits and hence there could not be anything new (Darter 1982). However, improvising is not about creating something new, it is about renewal.

It is worth pointing out here that in the widely known Daoist teaching of 'non-action', there is an important yet often neglected dimension, that is, assisting (*fu*, 辅). Chapter 64 of *The Laozi* states, 'the sage … assists all things in their natural development, never daring to interfere' (辅万物之自然而不敢为). There is a difference between not interfering and assisting, a difference that suggests a significant ethical gap.

To nourish life, as Jullien demands, 'we must learn to welcome that which comes of its own accord' (2007: 93). Li Jianhong understands this well in environment

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improvising. In 2009, Li took another mountain trip to Qing Liang Peak to record his environment improvisation. He planned to make a recording in the morning before he realised that local villagers got up much earlier than he expected. He was at first upset thinking the recording would be ruined by loud chatting and animal noises. Then he came to realise that he should not select or control the environment to improvise with. Environment improvisation is to improvise with any sound that comes to him. Excited with this epiphany, he ran into the pigpen and recorded an improvisation with oinking pigs and chatting noise (Li 2010a).[8]

Assisting and cultivating is also a gesture often seen in Yan Jun's live improvisation. Yan collaborated with the Shanghai-based sculptor Yu Ji in an exhibition performance titled 'Deep in the Cloud' (AM Art Space, Shanghai 2013). Yu often works with found industrial and construction materials. In this performance, Yu threw a few bags of cement among her installation works. Just like a construction site, the whole performance space was filled with dust, a material Yu has been obsessed with for a while. Yan improvised with the dust with his self-made feedback system. Several subwoofers were placed face upwards among Yu's sculpture, keeping the vibrating dust suspended and dancing in the air. Both the acoustic and the visual were extremely plain and basic, but their vital presence is felt rather vivid.

Yan's relation to his tool, the self-made feedback system, resembles that of the Butcher Baoding and his knife from *The Zhuangzi*. And so is Li Jianhong and his guitar. It is not about mastering a technical tool, but to use the tool to enhance the faculty of sensing, to assist tacit resonance, between the improvisor and his surrounding environment, to happen. Jullien puts it well, 'what is necessary is not "to dare to act" but rather to "help that which comes about by itself" ("of its own accord"). In other words, we must help life come to life, as it is inclined to do on its own, just as the plant is inclined to grow' (Jullien 2007: 124).

Helping sound come to sound is to abandon the periphery–centre relation. It is to recognise that every one of myriad things is a centre and has its own heaven within, an echo-box, capable of resonating with cosmic reverberation, just as Toshiya Tsunoda would often do in his sound works. By placing contact microphones inside a bottle on mountain road, a bent pipe by the river side, downpipe for rainwater, or cavity in a cliff wall, he assists regaining resonance in the tiniest and most mundane thing, with great care and elegance (Tsunoda 2019).

[8]This soundtrack is available at https://cfimusic.bandcamp.com/album/here-is-it.

5. CONCLUSION: RESONANCE, THE LOGIC OF RENEWAL

Cornelius Cardew speaks against the recording of improvisation, because for him, improvisation lacks a logical structure, hence it cannot be scored nor can it be recorded. He quotes Wittgenstein from the *Tractatus*: 'the gramophone record, the musical thought, the score, the waves of sound, all stand to one another in that pictorial international relation, which holds between language and the world. To all of them the logical structure is common' (Cardew 1971: 4.014). Based on the analysis in this article, I propose that there is a logic for improvisation, which is similar to the logical structure of life nourishment, in that both operate through regeneration. Both are the art of renewal.

Improvisation is not about making progress, just like all life nourishment practices. It is about renewal, renewal of the heaven within that is always interconstitutive with the vitality of *tian* (the world, nature, cosmos). Respiration is perhaps the most basic art of renewal. One follows the *gui-shen* of *qi*, condensation and dispersion, interpenetration and transformation of a ceaseless movement that continually renews life, feeding life to life. The notion of renewal is ecological. Instead of constructing something new, one pays close attention to what already exists.

Improvisation is life feeding. It changes our life task from 'know thyself' to feed thyself. Not feeding the body or the soul, but the *qi*, the life vital, the immanence of life.

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