

# “UNCLE NEVER KNEW”; WHAT CAN NEVER BE FULLY KNOWN

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“Art, perfected, has no meaning.”

Lao Tze, *Tao De Ching*

“The perfect poem is future tense.”

Edwin Thumboo, *A poet reading*

“What is remarkable about poetry is not that it has meaning but that its meaning always exceeds the boundaries of the text.”

Zhang Longxi, *The Tao and the Logos*

## Introduction

“Uncle never knew,” written by Edwin Thumboo, is a poem in two sections, with two stanzas in the first section, five in the second. Stanza one begins on a tranquil—“Tranquil as leaves left in a tea cup”—if also detached note—“Always alone but never lonely.” Both observations apparently refer back to the one pronominally mentioned at the outset—“He lived” or who, on the basis of the poem’s title and subsequent text, we know to be the uncle in “Uncle never knew.” Contrasting with this sense of tranquility and solitude is “the daily bustle” of the surrounding commercial life. Still in the first section, in the second stanza, amidst a tropical setting, Uncle is deep in nostalgic thought—“He was back in Swatow.”

The first stanza of the second section affirms the significance of the ancestral home—“Great houses are history, clan, essential unity”—and proceeds to set out the beliefs and values that transcend time and place. In contrast, the next three stanzas are set clearly in the past, unambiguously referring to “Uncle,”

preceded by the term “Post-astral.” The final stanza combines first person references with present tense to personalize the poem: “When I am by your river, I feel Uncle watching me.”

### Uncle Never Knew

#### I

He lived—if you could call it that—two streets off  
 Boat Quay North. Tranquil as leaves left in a tea cup.  
 Always alone but never lonely. The daily bustle  
 Of barge and coolie ferrying rubber, rice and spice,  
 5 All energy and profit, for towkays and Guthrie’s,  
 Slipped past without ripple or sound or promise.  
 No enterprising cleverness to make his brothers  
 Happy, as nothing drew him to our hot meridian.

Often after rain, he would watch the day dry out.  
 10 But if a few fine drops caught the sun and glittered  
 Against that thinning blue strip of northern sky,  
 He was back in Swatow. At his table. Preparing  
 Ink and brush; fingering his father’s piece of jade;  
 Intoning Li Po, Tu Fu, and reading Mao. Sipped tea;  
 15 Fed his carps, while waiting for his friends.

#### II

Great houses are history, clan, essential unity; belief.  
 A way of life which brooks no breaking of fidelity.  
 Rooted comforts reaffirm; nothing is extinguished.  
 Memory is full and whole: he was ensconced; secure.  
 20 For a few it’s the only pulse. Many need this bedrock,  
 This island, so little that Cheng Ho barely noticed.

Post-astral, Uncle  
 Stroked his undernourished beard. Spoke to clouds,  
 Not people. The moon climbed roofs as he waited  
 25 For glow-worms to signify the darkening bamboos.  
 Communing with self, he was his favourite neighbour.

He could not hear migrant hearts change rivers,  
From big to a small, smelly one. Or feel dreams  
Gather along Carpenter Street, then roll down Telok  
30 Ayer, up Ang Siang Hill, to answer temple bells.  
The world was hard language, felt daily, as heart,  
And will, drop into soft releasing opium working  
Up hungry lungs, as shadows flickered on the wall.

He never knew our age in full; had no transplanted way  
35 To name its joys, its follies. True exile, he denied our  
Home, till life do us part, in '51, leaving companions  
Marx, Engels and Mao, Lu Hsun, the *Li Sao*, T'ao Ch'ien.

When I am by you, river, I feel Uncle watching me.  
I hear much from inside his spirit, his affirmations.  
40 Old Country stories re-surface, tell their tale.  
That House I've never seen, tries to sketch itself.

### Uncle's companions

The opposition of Uncle's tranquil, solitary existence and "the daily bustle" of life around him is reminiscent of a similar opposition found in the first two lines of Tao Qian's (T'ao Ch'ien) famous fifth poem of "Drinking Wine":

I built my house in this world of men,  
But there is no noise of carriages and horses.  
You may ask, sir, how is it possible?  
With the mind aloof, the place will be remote.  
Picking chrysanthemums under the eastern hedge,  
Unawares I catch sight of the southern hills

Commenting on Tao Qian's poetry, Zhang Longxi writes,

The first two lines of this poem set up a structural and thematic opposition between the poet's private world and the "world of men" with its "noise of carriages and horses," an opposition that reappears time and again in Tao Qian's poetry. In the second poem of "Returning to Dwell in My Fields and Gardens," for example, we find a variation on the same theme: "In the wild country, I have

little to do with men, / In these poor lanes, wheels and harness are rare.” In Chinese antiquity, only the emperor and his ministers had the privilege of riding in horse-drawn carriages; so the images of “carriages and horses” or “wheels and harness” do not refer to ordinary people but metonymically stand for courtiers and high-ranking officials, and the poet’s preference for poor lanes that admit no big carriages does not indicate the coldness of a misanthrope but his contempt for pomposity and haughtiness.” (124)

In some respects, the poet’s description of his uncle recalls descriptions of Tao Qian: “There was a certain stubbornness and a great deal of courage in Tao Qian that made him a solitary traveler on the path he chose” (Zhang 113). This “true exile,” Uncle, “denied our / Home,” stubbornly resisting attempts to bring him into the family business—“No enterprising cleverness to make his brothers / Happy, as nothing drew him to our hot meridian.” Instead, he longed for the life he previously knew back in Swatow.

One is reminded of Du Fu’s description of Tao Qian in “Qianxing wu shou” (*Five Poems Written in Discharge of Emotions*) (qtd. in Zhang 112):

Old Tao Qian who shunned the world  
May not have attained the *tao* thereby.

The *tao*, represented by the Chinese character shown in Figure 1, is likened by some to a path, or a river, at the end of which one achieves “the universal rule of the return to origins.”



Figure 1: *tao*

At the point of origin, one knows balance, harmony, and tranquility. On the one hand, Thumboo's "Uncle never knew" is about his uncle's longing to return to his origins back in Swatow. On the other hand, the poet's references to his uncle's silence—"Spoke to clouds, / Not people"—and solitude—"Communing with self, he was his favorite neighbour"—may touch on yet another dimension of *tao*. As Zhang explains,

In English, *tao* (or *dao*) is usually translated as "way". Though not exactly a mistranslation, "way" is only one of the meanings of this polysemous Chinese character but not the crucial meaning which bears directly on the complexity of the interrelationship between thinking and language. It is important and especially relevant to our discussion here to note that *tao* as used in the philosophical book *Laozi* has two other meanings: "thinking" and "speaking." ...

The word *tao* is repeated three times in the first line of the *Laozi*, and the repetition certainly makes a serious point by playing on the two meanings of *tao*—*tao* as thinking and *tao* as the verb "to speak":

The *tao* that can be *tao*-ed ["spoken of"]  
 Is not the constant *tao*;  
 The name that can be named  
 Is not the constant name.

Puns like this are really untranslatable, and the point gets completely lost in English translation which usually reads, "the way that can be spoken of is not the constant way." The problem is that "way" and "to speak" in English have nothing in common, but in the Chinese original they are one and the same word. So, in the above translation, I try to make *tao* look like a verb in order to capture the point of the pun in the original text. According to Laozi the philosopher, *tao* is both immanent and transcendent; it is the begetter of all things; therefore it is not and cannot be named after any of these things. In other words, *tao* is the ineffable, the "mystery of mysteries" beyond the power of language. Even the name *tao* is not a name in itself: "I do not know its name; so I just call it *tao*." "The *tao* is forever nameless." Laozi makes it clear that the totality of the *tao* is kept intact only in knowing silence; hence

the famous paradox that “the one who knows does not speak; the one who speaks does not know.” (27)<sup>1</sup>

Besides Tao Qian (T’ao Ch’ien), the poet includes others whose writings influenced his uncle—“Intoning Li Po, Tu Fu, and reading Mao...” The poetry of Du Fu (Tu Fu), the poet historian, whose description of Tao Qian was mentioned previously, is said to reflect the Confucianist way. Whereas, the free-spirited and spontaneous style of Li Bai (Li Po), one of “The Eight Immortals of the Wine Cup,” suggests a more Taoist influence. In fact, however, both Du Fu and Li Bai have been linked with the Confucian literary tradition (Lu Jiuyuan, qtd. in Zhang 120), and even Tao Qian has been described as “Confucian outside but Taoist inside” (Chen Yinke qtd. in Zhang 121).

Intertextual nods to “companions / Marx, Engels and Mao, Lu Hsun, the *Li Sao*, T’ao Ch’ien” add further dimensions to our understanding of who Uncle is, including his left-wing sympathies, his nationalism, and his sense of being exiled from his homeland. On one side are listed three revolutionaries, Marx, Engels and Mao; on the other side, three references to China’s literary past: Lu Hsun, author of *The True Story of Ah Q*; *Li Sao* (“The Lament”), a poem expressing the disillusionment of an exiled minister<sup>2</sup>; and the poet T’ao Ch’ien (Tao Qian). The list of Uncle’s six “companions” represents a balance between revolution and tradition, between the forces of radical change, on the one hand, and the foundations of China’s cultural heritage, on the other.

### Post-(back-in-Swatow)astral Uncle

The first line of the fourth stanza reads, “Post-astral, Uncle”. It is centered and obviously foregrounded. Astral might suggest something of an out-of-the-body experience, but here it probably would be more accurate to refer to it as Uncle’s back-in-Swatow experience, transported not on a silver cord, but instead by a few fine drops, glittering in the sunlight, “Against that thinning blue strip of northern sky.”

The first eleven lines of the poem, lines 1-11, describe pre-astral Uncle. Uncle’s astral-like back-in-Swatow experience extends from line 12-21, after which, eleven lines later, in line 22 he has become “Post-astral, Uncle”. Again, eleven lines later, in line 32, the tense shifts mid-sentence from past tense,

which characterized all finite verbs since line 22, to the present tense form of the finite verb "drop": "as heart, and will, drop into soft releasing opium working up hungry lungs".

The next two stanzas are both four lines each. Whereas each of the four lines of the last stanza ends in a full stop, only the fourth line of the penultimate stanza does so; the remaining three lines show no end-stopping. Moreover, all four lines in this penultimate stanza contain 11 words each. (The only possible exception is the line containing the year "'51", which if both numbers, "5" and "1" are counted, precludes this from being an exception.)

The number 11 figures prominently in this poem. Among the 64 Hexagrams included in the *I Ching, or Book of Changes*, the Hexagram associated with the number 11 is made up of the trigrams for Kun (earth) above, and Qian (heaven) below (see Figure 2). Note how lines 20-21 close the first half of this poem by referring to "this bedrock, / This island", i.e. earth.

pre-astral uncle	1 He lived – if you could call it that – two streets off 1-11 11 Against that thinning blue strip of northern sky,
astral uncle	12 He was back in Swatow. At his table. Preparing 12-21 21 This island, so little that Cheng Ho barely noticed.
post-astral uncle	22 Post-astral, Uncle 22-31 31 The world was hard language, felt daily, as heart,
restoration/return	32 And will, drop into soft releasing opium working 32-41 41 That House I've never seen, tries to sketch itself.



Figure 2: Hexagram 11

The meaning associated with this Hexagram is peace or tranquility. From Wilhelm's translation of the *I Ching; or Book of Changes*, comes the following description.

This hexagram denotes a time in nature when heaven seems to be on earth. Heaven has placed itself beneath the earth, and so their powers unite in deep harmony. Then peace and blessing descend upon all living things. In the world of man it is a time of social harmony; those in high places show favor to the lowly, and the lowly and inferior is an end to all feuds.

Inside, at the center, in the key position, is the light principle; the dark principle is outside. Thus the light has a powerful influence, while the dark is submissive. In this way each receives its due. When the good elements of society occupy a central position and are in control, the evil elements come under their influence and change for the better. When the spirit of heaven rules in man, his animal nature also comes under its influence and takes its appropriate place.

The individual lines enter the hexagram from below and leave it again at the top. Here the small, weak, and evil elements are about to take their departure, while the great, strong, and good elements are moving up. This brings good fortune and success.

Beginning the second section, inside "Uncle never knew," lines 16-19, the poet refers to what might be described as "the good elements of society":

Great houses are history, clan, essential unity; belief.  
A way of life which brooks no breaking of fidelity.  
Rooted comforts reaffirm; nothing is extinguished.  
Memory is full and whole: he was ensconced; secure.

For the poet's uncle, it was not death that parted them, but life—"till life do us part, in '51". Before his return, it was open to question whether he lived or only existed—"He lived—if you could call it that". Life is recovered as Uncle returns to his origins.

He never knew our age in full; had no transplanted way  
To name its joys, its follies. True exile, he denied our  
Home, till life do us part, in '51, leaving companions  
Marx, Engels and Mao, Lu Hsun, the *Li Sao*, T'ao Ch'ien.



The above lines from the penultimate stanza describe his Uncle’s parting, “leaving companions”, not unlike the following from the description of Lines for Hexagram 11 in the *I Ching*:

Nine in the second place means:  
Bearing with the uncultured in gentleness,  
Fording the river with resolution,  
Not neglecting what is distant,  
Not regarding one’s companions:  
Thus one may manage to walk in the middle.

The list of Uncle’s six companions begins with the three surnames: Marx, Lenin, Mao, the order of which reflects the historical development of an ideology which drastically altered the structure of Chinese society. On the other side, again three names, but this time, not single surnames, instead three double-character names, each, as noted above, refer to either a major Chinese literary figure or work. The arrangement of three surnames first, followed by three double-character names, coincides with the arrangement in Hexagram 11 of three solid lines below, and three broken lines above.

### **Yin-Yang: intertwined duality**

In his introduction to the *I Ching; or the Book of Changes*, Wilhelm explains the philosophy behind this Confucian classic:

If we inquire as to the philosophy that pervades the book, we can confine ourselves to a few basically important concepts. The underlying idea of the whole is the idea of change. It is related in the Analects that Confucius, standing by a river, said: “Everything flows on and on like this river, without pause, day and night.” This expresses the idea of change. He who has perceived the meaning of change fixes his attention no longer on transitory individual things but on the immutable, eternal law at work in all change. This law is the tao of Lao-tse, the course of things, the principle of the one in the many. That it may become manifest, a decision, a postulate, is necessary. This fundamental postulate is the “great primal beginning” of all that exists, *t’ai chi*—in its original meaning, the “ridgepole.” Later Chinese philosophers devoted much thought to this idea of a primal beginning. A still earlier beginning, *wu chi*, was represented by the symbol of a circle. Under this conception,

*t'ai chi* was represented by the circle divided into the light and the dark, yang and yin.

Figure 3 shows the symbol of a circle, representing *tai chi*, divided into the dark and the light, yin and yang, surrounded by the trigrams, with yang on top, yin on the bottom, similar to their positioning in Hexagram 11. The *tai chi* symbol illustrates the “intertwined duality of all things in nature”. On the one hand, Yin and Yang are opposites, but they are also complementary to one another. Balance between them is achieved through constant change and movement. Yin is characterized as feminine, Yang is masculine; Yin is dark; Yang is light; Yin represents movement out and up; Yang represents movement down and in.



Figure 3: Yin-Yang circle

Something of the Yin-Yang philosophy is captured in the fifth stanza of “Uncle Never Knew”:

He could not hear migrant hearts change rivers,  
 From big to a small, smelly one. Or feel dreams  
 Gather along Carpenter Street, then roll down Telok  
 Ayer, up Ang Siang Hill, to answer temple bells.  
 The world was hard language, felt daily, as heart,  
 And will, drop into soft releasing opium working  
 Up hungry lungs, as shadows flickered on the wall.

The stanza begins by referring to "change"—"He could not hear migrant hearts change rivers, / From big to a small, smelly one." In lines 29-30, dreams gather, roll down one street and up another, to answer temple bells; and in lines 31-33, heart and will drop "into soft releasing opium working up hungry lungs". Twice mention is made of movement, down then up; there are antonyms: "big," and "small"; "hard," and "soft"; twice the poet refers to the noun, "heart"—"migrant hearts," "heart and will"; and the verb "to feel," again repeated twice—"Or feel dreams," "felt daily."

The sense of duality is reinforced throughout the poem by numerous occurrences of things in two's. The poem is divided into two sections. Uncle lived two streets off Boat Quay North. Alliteration, particularly in the first stanza, repeatedly occurs twice: "leaves left"; "bustle of barge"; "rubber, rice"; "rice and spice". There are frequent pairings, such as "barge and coolie"; "energy and profit"; "towkays and Guthries"; "Ink and brush"; "Intoning Li Po, Tu Fu"; "Sipped tea; / Fed his carps"; "full and whole".

If one takes into consideration traditional associations from Chinese astrology involving the five Elements (*Wu Hsing*)—earth, metal, fire, wood, and water—we discover what may be references in the final stanza to two cycles of balance. The first, the cycle of generating/creating, or water nourishing wood, can be inferred from line 40, "When I am by you, river, I feel Uncle watching me," in which "river" suggests water, and the verb "watching" is associated with wood. The second, the cycle of overcoming/destroying, or water quenches fire, is inferred from line 41, "I hear much from inside his spirit, his affirmations," in which the verb "hear" suggests water, and "affirmations," i.e. what was spoken or told, is associated with fire.

Yin represents emptiness and nothingness; Yang, movement and energy. In the first stanza, Uncle's Yin-side is evident: "No enterprising cleverness to make his brothers / Happy, as nothing drew him to our hot meridian." Pre-astral, Uncle is described as "Always alone but never lonely"; and "Tranquil as leaves left in a tea cup," all energy and profit "Slipped past without ripple or sound or promise." He is alone, not lonely; the tea cup is empty except for the tea leaves left behind; all energy and profit leave nothing behind in their wake. The counterpart to pre-astral Uncle is his Yang self "back in Swatow." Then, in this astral state, Uncle is "preparing," "fingering," "intoning," "reading," "waiting." He is surrounded by all that reminds him of "A way of life which

brooks no breaking of fidelity,” in which “Rooted comforts reaffirm; nothing is extinguished,” where even the negative becomes the positive.

Noting Wilhelm’s reference to the Analects where it quotes Confucius as he stands by a river, we encounter a similar situation in the last stanza of “Uncle never knew,” where the poet is also by a river. Here, the poet addresses the river,

When I am by you, river, I feel Uncle watching me.  
I hear much from inside his spirit, his affirmations.  
Old Country stories re-surface, tell their tale.  
That House I’ve never seen, tries to sketch itself

Though all four lines are punctuated with a full stop, there is an obvious pairing of lines, with the first two lines forming one pair, and the last two lines another pair. In the first two lines, the first person pronoun, “I,” is the repeated grammatical subject in three clauses, involving one relational—“I am”—and two mental processes: “I feel”; “I hear”. Uncle’s presence is sensed, his affirmations are heard, but on a spiritual plane, not physical.

When I am by you, river, I feel Uncle watching me.  
I hear much from inside his spirit, his affirmations.

In the last two lines of the poem, the first person pronoun occurs just once, and only as part of the post-modification of the grammatical subject of the main clause—“*That House [I’ve never seen], tries to sketch itself*” [emphasis added]. Each of these two concluding lines begins with the grammatical subject of the sentence comprising that line. Also the first letter of certain nouns in the grammatical subject—“House,” “Country”—are noticeably capitalized, thus lending a certain weight to these nouns which they might not have otherwise.

Old Country stories re-surface, tell their tale.  
That House I’ve never seen, tries to sketch itself.

Both “Old Country stories” and “That House” are actively engaged in attempting to convey information about themselves, either verbally—“tell their tale”—or visually—“tries to sketch itself”. There is a creative energy at work, and the reference to “re-surface” suggests the energy is moving upward. Both are features of Yang.

## Evolution of peace

The second stanza, lines 9 through 15, is suggestive of Hexagram 63, both by its references to rain (water) and sun (fire) in the first two lines. The image of Hexagram 63 is water over fire.

Often after rain, he would watch the day dry out.  
But if a few fine drops caught the sun and glittered  
Against that thinning blue strip of northern sky,

Uncle’s activity, with its repetition of Yin-like pairings—“ink and brush”; “Li Po, Tu Fu”; “Sipped Tea; Fed his carps”—followed by Yang-like references to a single nominal or verbal element—“his father’s piece of jade”; “Mao”; “while waiting for his friends”, visually recreates Hexagram 63 (see Figure 4).

Preparing / Ink and brush;  
fingering his father’s piece of jade;  
Intoning Li Po, Tu Fu,  
and reading Mao.  
Sipped tea; Fed his carps,  
while waiting for his friends.

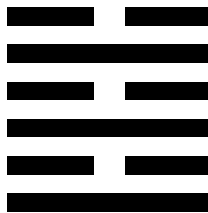


Figure 4: Hexagram 63

Hexagram 63, *Chi Chi*, is described in the *I Ching* as “the evolution of T’ai, PEACE (11). The transition from confusion to order is completed, and everything is in its proper place even in particulars” (Wilhelm).

## Lines 42-51

What can never be fully known is the *tao*. Neither can a poem, however, ever be fully known. For the reader, there is always more meaning waiting to be discovered; for the poet, more lines to be written. “Uncle never knew” ends on line 41 with the sentence: “That House I’ve never seen, tries to sketch itself.” That House, the poet has never seen, so the sketch, the picture must remain unfinished. The poem, too, by the poet’s own admission, must remain incomplete, never fully capturing that way of life, that House “back in Swatow.”

I conclude on a wholly speculative note. Uncle returned to Swatow, the poet tells us, in ’51. Previously, we observed a transition into Uncle’s astral phase in line 12—“He was back in Swatow”—a transition into his post-astral phase in line 22—“Post-astral, Uncle”—and the transition into the final phase in line 32. The four phases end on lines 11, 21, 31, 41 respectively. Is there another phase to be written, beginning in line 42, and finishing on line 51? Perhaps, lines waiting for when the poet himself is back in Swatow. But until then, in the poet’s own words,

Neat incompleteness must suffice. Life goes on.

Edwin Thumboo, *A poet reading*

## Notes

1. Commenting on this quote, Edwin Thumboo observed that whereas puns typically are not used for a high purpose, here the pun is used to verbalize a very central and essential idea.

2. Commenting on the *Li Sao*, Zhang Longxi noted the following: “The *Li Sao* is the title of the poet Qu Yuan’s (c. 340 - 277 BCE) great work. It is translated by David Hawkes as “On Encountering Trouble,” and included in the Penguin Classics series under the title of *The Songs of the South*. Qu Yuan is the archetypal exile in classical Chinese literature. He was banished from the court of the state of Chu, alienated from his king, because of the slander of his political enemies; so he wrote the great poem *Li Sao*, and finally he threw himself into the river Miluo and was drowned. To this day, the *Duanwu* festival (Tuen Ng Festival in Cantonese) is a festival to mourn his death, and the customs of eating *zhongzi* or a kind of sticky rice ball with meat in it and rowing dragon boats all have something to do with his suicide. The custom was that people would throw *zhongzi* into the river while rowing the boats, and the idea is that fish would eat these rice balls and leave the body of Qu Yuan alone.”

### Works Cited

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