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Holistic Features of Traditional Chinese Spiritual Practices for Personal Cultivation

Wong Ping Ho

The Chinese literati-official Su Shi (1037–1101) wrote that Sicont, a monk,

was good at playing the zither when he was seven. He . . . started practising calligraphy when he was twelve. After he excelled in calligraphy, at fifteen he . . . started studying poetry. . . . He proceeded to read śūtras . . . and entered the realm of dharma . . . If Sicont will progress daily without halt and reach the Way through hearing, reflecting and practising, then even Avatamsaka Sūtra with its oceanic wisdom in the realm of dharma will just become a guesthouse [to the Way], not to mention calligraphy, poetry and zither! Even so, no student of the Way . . . has ever entered its realm through emptiness. Just as the wheelwright Bian crafted wheels or the Old Hunchback caught cicadas – a thing is never too base if it inspires one’s dexterity and intelligence! If Sicont would achieve the Way, then zither and calligraphy will both have helped, and poetry particularly so.

(Yang, 2015, pp. 37–38; square brackets in the original)

A number of things are worth noting in this quote. First, the monk pursued the Way through various practices, including zither (qin in Chinese) playing, calligraphy, poetry, and reading Buddhist scriptures. In other words, these served as his spiritual practices. Second, the fact that “no student of the Way . . . has ever entered its realm through emptiness” means that spiritual practices are necessary if one is to pursue the Way. Third, although the monk’s spiritual practices are artistic and intellectual in nature, actually anything whatsoever can serve as a spiritual conduit toward the Way. Fourth, however, to be effective as a spiritual conduit, a practice must be engaged in in the proper manner, as highlighted by Su’s reference to the wheelwright Bian crafting wheels and the Old Hunchback catching cicadas, two among a number of characters described by the ancient Daoist sage Zhuangzi to exemplify the mindful way of conduct. This quote thus serves well as an introduction to the discussion below of the characteristics of traditional Chinese spiritual practices for personal cultivation.

Diversity of Skilful Means

Zen master and musicologist Lin Gufang observed that in Chinese culture, art and nature are both considered expressions of, and effective conduits toward, the Way, and that life in its totality is itself
In Buddhist parlance, there is a diversity of upaya (skillful means) for spiritual elevation. Chen (2008) remarked that yangshen (nourishing one’s spirit) is achieved “through emotional balance and intellectual engagement”, and “Walking, sleeping, writing, painting, reading, playing chess or musical instruments, meditation, or travelling, were all activities that could be turned to this objective” (p. 31), typical spiritual practices that were popular among the literati. This echoes Hong Yingming’s (1572–1620) words:

Wandering among mountains and forests, springs and rocks, cravings for fame and fortune are wafted from the mind. In poetry, calligraphy and painting one effortlessly finds contentment and worldly stirrings pass away unnoticed. Thus, the virtuous man, without indulging in sensuous pleasures and losing his lofty aspirations, often finds a place where he can foster both body and mind.

(Hong, 2003, p. 270)

The implication of the last remark in this quote is that, provided they are indulged within proper limits and in the right spirit, all sorts of hobbies can be spiritually uplifting. Even so, as this quote hints, poetry, calligraphy, and painting were among the most common spiritual pursuits. Poetry, as Fong (2008) said, “pervaded the quotidian life of literate women and men” (p. 364) in the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, not least as a path of personal cultivation. According to David Hinton, an expert on Chinese poetry,

Buddhist monks use koans and meditation to get past the illusions of self; the poet tries to do the same thing by engaging with regular life. This makes the task messier and harder, but . . . the result is richer. It’s based in everyday experience, not this special, cloistered environment.

To him, “The most spiritually engaged poems were a form of Ch’an [Zen] practice” (Tonino, 2015, unpaginated).

However popular poetry was, it bore no comparison with calligraphy, which every literate Chinese person needed to master, and which indeed was the prerequisite for all forms of writing, poetry included. As such, calligraphy provided a spiritual–artistic practice in the form of an everyday pragmatic activity (Wong, 2005).

The list of skillful means traditionally engaged in by the Chinese for personal cultivation is practically endless. They constitute diverse routes toward spiritual development; an individual can take the most convenient one(s) given his/her circumstances. The whole enterprise can thus be said to be holistic in this sense. Furthermore, as explained below, there are common, interconnecting threads running through many of these skillful means, making them holistic in a second sense.

Unity in Diversity

Sicong was adept at a number of spiritual practices in the form (but not only in the form) of artistic pursuits. This is a common phenomenon in Chinese culture, persisting until the twentieth century. An example is the Sinologist Jao Tsung-i (1917–2018), whose “accomplishments in poetry, calligraphy and painting, as well as zither-playing, are well-known”, and, thus, in whom “the essence of traditional Chinese men of letters finds full expression” (Chinese University Bulletin, 1977, p. 8). Jao specifically described calligraphy, painting, and zither playing as his means of self-cultivation. He has also practised quiet sitting since adolescence (Shi, 2011).

The grande dame of zither, Tsar Teh-yun (1905–2007), belonged roughly to the same generation as Jao. Besides zither playing, she was adept at poetry and calligraphy. During meetings with her zither friends, “they tried out new pieces . . . played the old standard repertory, and practiced related
Chinese Self-Cultivation Practices

arts such as poetry, calligraphy, singing of qin [zither] songs and Kun Opera arias, and sword dance” (Yung, 2008, p. 63). Kun Opera (kunqu/k’un-ch’ü) is an elegant art. Numerous members of the literati class took it up as an amateur pursuit, one of whom was Chang Ch’ung-ho (1914–2015), who taught kunqu, calligraphy, and poetry (Chin, 2002).

It is tempting to ask how one could excel at various demanding artistic pursuits, which, as mentioned above, was common in traditional China. The consensus view is that these various pursuits follow similar principles, with transfer of learning among them. According to Barrass (2002),

In the Chinese mind and the Chinese eye there is a close link between music, dance, opera and calligraphy. Some talk about calligraphy as an art in which “the brush dances and the ink sings”, others refer to it as a form of “music without sound”.

(p. 15)

This is rather abstract. Let us go to the practitioners and connoisseurs for descriptions of how kunqu, say, is similar to calligraphy and poetry. For example, all forms of art Chang Ch’ung-ho loved are about, in her own words, lingkong (being suspended): “A good calligrapher has it in the wrist . . . A good k’un-ch’ü performer has it in her gesturing. And a good poet is able to express it in words” (Chin, 2002, p. xxiv). But what does “being suspended” mean? Here is the interpretation of Annping Chin, Chang’s admirer:

A calligrapher’s wrist is suspended slightly above the table, his palm is empty, his fingers are strong, and his brush has freedom of movement: he can speed up without haste and linger without getting stuck. And when he has mastered speed and lingering and arrested “the bearing of phoenixes dancing” and “the grace of dragons leaping,” he has suspended himself—“the mind has forgotten itself in the brush and the hand has forgotten itself in the writing.” Performing k’un-ch’ü is no different. The best actor lets her singing and her gesturing play the part. She keeps herself distant—suspended—while letting her skills explore her character’s motives and moods and manner. Ch’ung-ho feels that the most difficult skill in the k’un-ch’ü theater is to be able to represent all that is not shown. Just as a good playwright does not resort to sentimental colloquy, a good actor holds back what she could express. In other words, “she is able to move but does not move”; this is also a kind of suspending, between the apparent and the unapparent, and only strong acting can bring it off.

(Chin, 2002, p. 309)

The reference to “the mind forgetting itself in the brush, and the hand forgetting itself in the writing” characterizes the state of wuwei, a Daoist notion “which literally means ‘nothing doing’, or more descriptively, ‘selfless action’: acting spontaneously as a selfless part of tzu-jan [ziran], rather than with self-conscious intention” (Hinton, 2003, p. 215). Something similar was said by a twentieth-century grandfather while teaching his granddaughter calligraphy:

the brush needs to be free. The brush could be a sword, it could be a hoe, and so on. . . . [C]alligraphy presents the form from the formless origin of one’s mental consciousness, so the First thing to do is to understand who you are without asking who you are; just directly enter a kind of nothingness with no ‘I’, ‘me’, or no one ‘up there’ writing calligraphy. Then you can be totally free.

(Hsieh, 2010, p. 113)

Pai Hsien-yung (1937– ), novelist and kunqu promoter, added his take on the matter: Chinese art works such as calligraphy and painting “in essence bear resemblance to kunqu performance”, in that
“smooth lines are utilized not only in Chinese calligraphy and painting, but also in the graceful movements of *kunqu* performances” (Zhou, 2011, p. 215). Interpreting Pai’s view in the light of Chang’s description above, one sees that graceful lines are made possible precisely through the ample room for movement provided by the state “of finding oneself suspended in space between this and that” (Chin, 2002, p. xxiv).

Similar affinities between calligraphy (and painting) and Chinese music have been observed. As a zither player herself, Mingmei Yip likened both the movements of fingers across the strings over the zither board and the resultant melodic movements to movements of calligraphic brush strokes over the paper and the resultant ink traces of varying intensity, thickness, and direction (Yip, 1994). In addition to making this same point, Lin (1998) raised two further points. First, in calligraphy, “the soft brush meets soft paper” (p. 140), posing a problem for controlled execution of brush strokes, particularly as the writer’s wrist must avoid touching the table. However, this also enables more pronounced variations and contrasts in the intensity, thickness, and direction of resultant ink traces. This reminds us of the state of “being suspended” stressed by Chang Ch’ung-ho. A similar situation pertains to the playing of a Chinese bowed instrument, with “the soft bow meeting soft strings” (p. 140), carrying pros and cons analogous to those of “the soft brush meeting soft paper”. Second, in Chinese calligraphy and painting, importance is placed on delicate juxtaposition between filled and unfilled spaces on the paper, embodying the Daoist idea of *wu*, rendered as “non-presence” by Moeller (2006). As Moeller explains, the Daoist foundational text *Daodejing* contains numerous images of efficacy showing “how something works. In every case the efficacy is based on the combination of emptiness and fullness, of ‘having’ and ‘not-having,’ of ‘presence’ and ‘non-presence’” (p. 11). Analogously, soundless moments occupy an important place in Chinese music.

**Stillness**

The *Daodejing* sets great store by *jing*, which is variously translated as “stillness” (Lao–tzu, 1996) and “quietude”3 (Yang, 2015), among other possibilities: “Through stillness, being without desire, the world rights itself” (Moretz, 2009, p. 169). Stillness here refers to a state of mind, rather than necessarily the absence of motion, as various examples of this state found in *Zhuangzi* indicate. The following is the story of the hunchback catching cicadas mentioned by Su Shi, from the chapter “Mastering life”.

[Confucius] saw a hunchback catching cicadas with a sticky pole as easily as though he were grabbing them with his hand.

Confucius said, “What skill you have! Is there a special way to this?”

“I have a way,” said the hunchback. “... I hold my body like a stiff tree trunk and use my arm like an old dry limb. No matter how huge heaven and earth or how numerous the ten thousand things, I’m aware of nothing but cicada wings. Not wavering, not tipping, not letting any of the other ten thousand things take the place of those cicada wings—how can I help but succeed?”

Confucius [commented], “He keeps his will undivided and concentrates his spirit—that would serve to describe our hunchback gentleman here, would it not?”

*(Zhuangzi, 2013, p. 147)*

This is far more than a matter of success in achieving task efficiency through keeping the will undivided and concentrating one’s spirit. One can even say that success in this sense is beside the point, which is “mastering life”. 
Ouyang Xiu (1007–1072) explained the importance of stillness:

When something is reflected in water, if the water is agitated the image will be blurred. But if the water remains still then the smaller detail will be discernible. As for men, . . . if a person can keep his senses from being dazzled and agitated by external things, then his mind will remain still, and if his mind remains still, then his understanding will be clear. Thereafter, as he praises what is right and finds fault with what is wrong, he will be correct in everything he does.

(Parker, 1999, p. 33)

It is unclear whether the terms “right”, “wrong”, and “correct” in the quote are to be understood not only in the factual sense, but also the ethical sense. But given the heavy ethical emphasis of personal cultivation in traditional China, the ethical sense is probably included, if not dominant. In other words, Ouyang Xiu held that a still mind is also an ethical mind. A remark by Tsar Teh-yun supports this interpretation. She advised that “in order to play qin, one should have a tranquil heart (jingxin) and an upstanding heart (zhengxin)” (Lin, cited in Yung, 2008, p. 138), putting “tranquil” and “upstanding” together.

Given its importance, stillness naturally forms the foundation of all self-cultivation practices in traditional China. As Moretz (2009) noted, all kinds of practices, whether internal alchemy, ritual, qigong, or taiji quan, “require a foundation of stillness to be safe and efficacious” (p. 170). For example, in calligraphy and painting, preparatory rituals play an important part in stilling the mind before the writing or painting begins, including:

flattening rice paper on a table, softening a brush with water, dripping water onto an ink stone, gripping the brush properly, maintaining a straight posture, and grinding the ink. Artists approach these steps as a ritualistic, spiritual, and meditative process.

(Chung, 2006, p. 35)

Although stillness does not necessarily mean absence of motion, or, for that matter, absence of sound, stillness as a mental state does often require silence. Musicologists have noted the importance of “silence” in qin music. (Recall the reference above to “non-presence”, unfilled space in calligraphy and painting, and silent moments in Chinese music.) Silence includes “not only pauses and interruptions but also the dying away of audible sounds, supported by hand and finger movements that may continue for a while after any audible pitch has disappeared”, suggesting “imaginary continuation of sounds beyond what the normal human ear can detect” (Kouwenhoven, cited in Tien, 2015, p. 42). This requires, and therefore cultivates, deep, spiritual listening.

A qin student of Tsar Teh-yun noted how the master’s room exuded a spiritual aura with a miraculous soothing effect:

The calmness of the . . . apartment contrasted with the noise outside. . . . This situation reminded me of a line in Tao Yuanming’s poem, “If your mind is distant, the place becomes remote.” The calm of the Yinyin Study not only reflected the inner state of Tsar laoshi [teacher], but was also felt by her students. This kind of association brought me into a different state of mind. Before beginning my lesson, I already felt that I had progressed.

(cited in Yung, 2008, p. 10)

The last remark matches Wang’s (2012) observation that “Moral cultivation is already created via emotional moderation and regulation before any string is plucked” (p. 275), echoing the point above about preparatory rituals for calligraphy.
Another student recalled the impact of Tsar’s playing: “I can still clearly remember the impression that this sound, although barely audible due to the traffic noise, made on me. It had a strength and subtle grace that attracted me at once” (cited in Yung, 2008, p. 11). So, to bring the argument full-circle, although it was stressed above that stillness as a mental state often requires silence, a strong enough state of stillness can, on the other hand, even overcome noise, and help others overcome noise too.

This state of stillness enables one to break out of one’s ego and connect spiritually with both one’s deep self and the world (and the deep self and the world are actually one). Practitioners of all sorts of Chinese arts often describe their experiences of learning from nature. It is not that nature offers a material model for the painter or musician to emulate. Learning from nature rather involves an intuitive grasp of the essence or spirit of what is observed, which the Chinese call shen. “In this state, the practitioner grasps, and is being grasped, by Dao. Hence in the practice of his art, he is not exactly himself” (Wong, 2005, p. 165). Arnheim (1997) illustrates this with a poem by Su Shi on the painter Wen Yuke: “When Yu-k’o painted bamboo, / He saw bamboo, not himself. / Nor was he simply unconscious of himself. / Trance-like, he left his body. / His body was transformed into bamboo” (p. 157).

Reverence

Respect and stillness are often mentioned together. For example, “respect and solemnity, along with serenity and peacefulness”, both before and during musical engagements, are required of a qin player, who is expected to “play in awe as if facing an elder, whether or not there are listeners,” and “to always be respectful and devoted as if facing one’s teachers and friends” (Wang, 2012, p. 275).

Clearly, both stillness and respect have dual, inner and outer, aspects. While the Chinese traditionally recognize that in all types of dichotomies, the dichotomized elements mutually transform into each other, symbolized graphically by the taiji circle, when it comes to personal cultivation, the emphasis seems to be more on the inner elements. Take Confucius’ attitude toward ritual practice. Peng (2009) showed that Confucius took all sorts of everyday rituals as occasions for bodily and spiritual exercise, and comported himself accordingly. This might sometimes be suspected of servile adherence to behavioral prescriptions. But Confucius was fully aware that the ultimate point of ritual is not the action itself, but the spirit animating it: “The Master said, A man who is not Good, what can he have to do with ritual? A man who is not Good, what can he have to do with music?” (Confucius, 2000, p. 86)

So one’s state of mind is crucial. The Neo-Confucian Zhu Xi (1130–1200) considered reverence to be of the utmost importance (de Bary, Gluck, & Tiedemann, 2005), prioritizing it over stillness, thus setting the tone for personal cultivation for subsequent generations. Keenan (2011) noted that, “The Neo-Confucian program for lifelong self-cultivation in this world makes reverence indispensible at every step of moral development” (p. 111). Spiritual Master Nan Huai-Chin (1918–2012) explained the reason for the priority of reverence: “If there is nothing that arouses respect and reverence in your mind, then the mind of reverence cannot arise, and you will certainly not be able to concentrate your mind” (Nan, 1994, p. 210). This observation gains support from etymological study of the term guan (contemplation), which concludes that the kind of contemplation it connoted “is respectful and detached in the sense that it is not ego-driven” (Mattice, 2014, p. 92). Mindful reverence or reverential mindfulness thus underlies various Chinese spiritual practices.

The Dialectic of Stillness and Activity

Earlier on, an example from Zhuangzi was offered as an illustration of stillness, as a mental rather than physical state. From that, one may already surmise that stillness is pursued not for its own sake, but instead for effective action, among other things. Tsar Teh-yun’s biography provides another example of action in stillness. When she played the qin,
Chinese Self-Cultivation Practices

she was transformed into a different presence and seemed to be the embodiment of paradox, for her posture was calm and stately with hardly any overt movement, and her facial expression was neutral, betraying no emotion. In contrast, her hands were swift and flexible, darting this way and that, sliding, lifting, striking, or in repose. The music that emanated from the instrument, alive with excitement, rhythmic suppleness and subtlety, seemed to be an extension of the movements of her hands. In turn, her two hands, when she was playing the qin, seemed to become the essence of her existence, the manifestation of her energy and spirit.  
(Yung, 2008, p. 12)

This is stillness engendering graceful action. Or is it actually the other way round, graceful action engendering stillness? Or mutual engendering at one and the same time? Or are stillness and action an inseparable one, without even the need to invoke the process of engendering, in whichever direction? Here analytical thinking breaks down, or, should we say, is transcended. This is the state of wuwei and ziran, of selfless and effortless action, mentioned some way back, which gives an immense sense of well-being to not only the actor but also the onlooker.

Even the seemingly most inactive practice of quiet sitting only gets its point in action. For example, for Zhu Xi, quiet sitting was meant to bring one’s mind and spirit into calmness, ready for proper action and advancement in serious study. Thus, quietude and activity were complementary (Tsai, 2009).

Transtemporality

Chinese spiritual practices serve as conduits for communion with the ancients. Consider Zhu Xi’s representative view on the proper way of reading classic texts: “One’s reading is to get into the sage mind through one’s mind. Eventually with repeated immersion, one’s mind will then be the sage mind” (cited in Peng, 2007, p. 97). Such an approach did not begin with Zhu Xi; neither was it followed only in the reading of textual classics. The historian Sima Qian (c. 145–86 BCE) recorded:

Confucius practised playing the lute for ten days without attempting anything new. Shi Xiang, his tutor said, “You can go ahead now.” “I have learned the tune but not the technique,” said Confucius. After some time Shi Xiang said, “You have mastered the measure now, you can go on.” But Confucius replied, “I have not yet caught the spirit.” Some time later the other said, “Now you have caught the spirit, you can go on.” “I cannot yet visualize the man behind it,” answered Confucius. Later he observed, “This is the work of a man who thought deeply and seriously, one who saw far ahead and had a calm, lofty look.” He continued, “I see him now. He is dark and tall, with far-seeing eyes that seem to command all the kingdoms around. No one but King Wen could have composed this music.” Shi Xiang rose from his seat and bowed as he rejoined, “Yes, this is the Lute-song of King Wen.”

(Sima, 2008, pp. 245–247)

Confucius did not know who composed the lute-song, but after he had fully internalized it, he could literally see the composer and identify (and identify with) him. The implication is that a piece of work, whether textual, musical, calligraphic, or of some other domain, is an embodiment of its originator: the creation bears the mark of the creator, and hence provides a channel for an encounter with, and “appropriation” of, the creator. The creator “externalizes” himself/herself in a material creation; the reader (listener, learner, etc.) reverses the process, “penetrating” the external creation, reaching back to the creator.
That is why all kinds of learning in traditional Chinese culture involve imitation (Wong, 2005). Lin (1998) stressed that artistic imitation enables entry into past masters’ souls, noting that sometimes a practitioner who has successfully established his or her own personal style would still continue imitation exercises for the sake of inspiration. And even without further imitation exercises, those carried out in the past may still provide fresh inspiration, as the following record illuminates:

Listening to recordings spanning two decades of playing [the qin], I hear significant change and development taking place in the repertoire of my teacher, Zheng Chengwei . . . When I asked him about this, he told me that when he plays he feels as though his teacher is playing with him, that he can almost see his teacher out of the corner of his eye. (The idea that Zheng feels he can almost “see” his teacher further enhances the idea that he is experiencing some form of past-in-present as he practices because Zheng is legally blind. He is not only remembering the visual experience of his teacher, but also visual experience as a whole.) As he plays with his teacher, he remembers various movements his teacher would make, as if he were “suggesting” certain variations that he did not actually realize. Sometimes Zheng develops these suggestions and incorporates them into his playing. He . . . sometimes comes to understand things his teacher suggested years and even decades earlier. Other times, he plays “together” with his teacher, and at still other times, he discovers something different than what his teacher played and plays that. . . Zheng’s description of playing with—and sometimes against—his memories of his teacher suggests that the resonance this creates imbues his experience with that of past-in-present.

(Khalil, 2009, pp. 213–214; content in parentheses inserted from original footnote)

This past-in-present is a kind of transtemporal spiritual encounter.

Holistic Efficacy

Although this chapter discusses traditional Chinese practices of personal cultivation as spiritual practices, their effects are actually holistic and global, encompassing also the physical, moral, and psychological domains. Indeed, they challenge the reification of these categories. For example, Chen (2012) noted that Chinese martial arts “was not just for combat, but also for illness prevention and self-cultivation” (p. 155). Similarly, daoyin gymnastics “deals with the issues of disease prevention, health maintenance and longevity, as well as physical beauty. Its ultimate goal is certainly to attain spiritual perfection” (p. 158).

While it is understandable that physical exercises like martial arts and daoyin can promote both physical and spiritual well-being, it is less obvious that sedentary spiritual practices can also contribute to physical health. The connection between personal cultivation and physical health has long been recognized in China. “Like Taiji Quan practitioners, Chinese artists are often said to live to an old age and ‘return to the youthfulness’” (Wang, 2014, p.171). According to Zhu Xi, mindful reading requires proper posture, eye movement, and vocal deployment, and is, therefore, a form of body cultivation too (Wang, 2014). The wholesome effect of mindful reading as a spiritual-cum-physical practice is, thus, multi-faceted and global. Lu Shiyi (1611–1672), a follower of Zhu Xi, claimed that Confucian classics can cure minor illness (Peng, 2007). The painter Huang Binhong (1865–1955) also wrote this from his own experience: “Calligraphy and painting . . . can cure those with illness and prevent illness in those who are not ill” (Roberts, 2005, p. 269). Even quiet sitting, a most sedentary practice, has salutary effects on health, as Chinese medical practitioners have long stressed. Phlegm-Fire Touching Snow, a medical book published in 1630 covering the condition called “phlegm–fire”, devoted its concluding section to quiet sitting (Gong, 1996). Of course, as pointed out above, quiet sitting, to be effective, requires the right mindset, viz., reverence, similar to other Chinese practices of personal cultivation.
Final Remarks

This chapter explored the holistic features of traditional Chinese spiritual practices, which represent different points of entry into mindful action. An individual can choose the one(s) he or she finds most congenial. The ultimate aim is that one naturally acts mindfully in all domains of life, which is most difficult, an unending, lifelong pursuit.

Notes

1 This chapter is an abridged version of a paper presented at the 2016 Mind Humanities International Conference, Republic of Korea, 11–13 April, 2016.
2 Hinton (2003) renders ziran as “self-so”, “the of-itself” or “being such of itself” (p. 214).
3 Jing, as an adjective, may mean either “still” or “quiet”, or both.
4 Yinyn means “quiet, serene”.
5 This is the same instrument qin that is translated as “zither” in other sources quoted above.

References

Wong Ping Ho


