

Tales from the Emporium: I

It was still too early for customers to be about. Sal and Sara were taking the stock off the displays, one shelf at a time, and dusting. It was so much part of the weekly routine of running the Emporium that it took little conscious attention. So they were chatting.

Sara's skills as a potter were now almost as good as her older sister, but she was still full of enthusiasm about exploring different clays, pigments and other additives. Sal thought to herself that she was just as enthusiastic a few years ago when she was still setting up her studio and shop in the two adjoining grounded coaches. It seemed longer than five years, but much else had happened during that time.

Sara had just discovered an online video about Eddie Curtis's pots inspired by the dramatic coalmining waste on Seaham beach on the coast between the Tyne and Tees estuaries. Eddie had conjured up quite chunky pots with impressive textures and colours – some carved out of blocks of clay rather than thrown or slab-built. Sara was asking Sal how much difference it might make that Eddie used a decidedly old-fangled oil-fired kiln. Sal said it was hard to say but as the oil-fired kiln would be a reduction kiln, just like their wood-fired arrangement, then the only real difference would be the absence of wood ash. But, if necessary, pots could be fired inside saggars to keep the ash off the pots.

The two potters were mulling over whether there were any parallels between Seaham's unique beach and nearby Brindlecliffe beach. As the name of the town suggested, the beach was under a cliff which had strata of both red and white rocks. The sea steadily weathered the cliff so the beach pebbles were a mix of both colours, combined with black flinty nodules and the inevitable seashells.

While Sara was well aware that seashells would degrade at firing temperatures, she'd seen plenty of pots where moulds had been taken from shells and used to shape pressed clay. Sal had said adding vermiculite to the clay would give a pearlescent effect as the mica survives the heat in the kiln. Sara and Sal then debated just how much white earthenware clay – which would melt and vitrify at stoneware temperatures – could be added without causing problems. Sara wondered if adding black pigment would emulate sea-worn glossy grey-black flint nodules.

‘One way to find out,’ responded Sal. ‘Give it a go with a few teabowls or such like before we’re ready to do the next firing.’

‘I suppose it’s no coincidence that the pebbles on the beach are mostly in the three primordial colours,’ remarked Sara. She was well aware that Sal based most of her designs around red, white and black as these pigments, along with sandy ochre, were the first to be used by humans when doing cave paintings all those millennia ago. Black came from soot or charcoal, but the others came from white chalk and different types of iron-rich rocks. And, given that pots are made from clays which are also terracotta, buff or white then this colour scheme was almost integral to making pots.

Sal was always disappointed that firing to higher temperatures to produce stoneware meant that she could not use terracotta clays, as these were only suitable for firing up to earthenware temperatures. But she had discovered some pigments which produced a similar shade of red with stoneware.

‘I wonder if the three primordial colours available to potters and early artists influenced why medieval alchemists made red, white and black the basis of the symbolism of the Great Work,’ Sara remarked to Sal.

‘Well, in many ways making pots is itself rather like alchemy – certainly to anyone not used to the techniques of refining raw materials and successfully firing,’ responded Sal. ‘Plenty of academics have noted that smelting metals from ore would seem like “alchemy” to anyone not trained to do so, though so far as I’m aware the same parallel has not been made for pottery.’

‘I wonder if Chinese alchemy has red, white and black as key colours in the symbolism?’ Sara continued, without acknowledging her sister’s tangential remark.

‘They are more likely to have five colours, as that is such an important number in Chinese culture,’ Sal replied. ‘I’m suspect Lao Weng would know, even though he claims to have little interest in Chinese alchemy.’

Just as Sal was getting her Emporium under way Lao Weng had taken over the hitherto rather ruinous tide mill on the north bank of the Creake River and greatly

helped with the restoration. He was a self-taught Daoist who, in his retirement, ran rather successful retreats he called 'Secret and Sublime'. Not long after he had arrived in the locality he and Sal had become close friends – 'Although not *that* close' he was quick to add – as Sal's way of making pots seemed to Lao Weng an excellent example of Daoist creativity.

Two people had entered the shop. At first glance they could have been a couple. But the woman was probably twenty years older than the man. Sal and Sara moved to one end of the small emporium to allow them room to browse. As the sisters were now next to each other they lowered their voices.

'I suspect Lao Weng would say there were originally close connections between Western and Chinese alchemy,' Sal continued. 'I forget all the details, but some time ago he explained that alchemy must have been imported into China from the Middle East as the early alchemical writings have many ideas which are not found elsewhere in Chinese literature – but are found in medieval Middle Eastern alchemical texts. He also said that Chinese astronomy was imported from Babylonian culture at least three thousand years ago. As you must be aware, he also thinks that Daoism itself arrived along the Sichuan trade routes around 500 BC as there are quite specific parallels with pre-Socratic Greek writing.'

'Yes, Lao Weng has tried to explain how some of the verses in the *Laozi* use the same metaphors of a lyre and a bow as Heraclitus,' responded Sara.

'And, more crucially, the idea that everything is flow,' added Sal. 'You know that was more or less the conversation that Lao Weng and I had when he first came into my studio. He started talking about "undifferentiated creativity". I had to stop him and say I hadn't a clue what he was talking about. But in that incredibly simple-sounding but quite detailed way he has of explaining Chinese ideas he just said that Western languages require a subject and an object. Which means that most Western creative people think about the "I" who is making something or another. This subject-and-object way of talking and thinking can be termed "differentiation". Whereas if the creative person lets go of their sense of self and becomes at one with the creative process then undifferentiated creativity just happens, all by itself.'

'Yes, isn't that the best way to make pots,' Sara added. 'I think most people would just say they're "in the zone" and at one with the making process. But when you also

think about Lao Weng's other ideas about how the spirit of creativity just "flows through" the world, becoming increasingly more manifest, then I think it does describe how you and I make pots very well indeed.'

Sara visibly stopped. 'You know that remark about mercury being all-but synonymous with Western alchemy? Well mercury is the only metal which flows at room temperature. It's as if mercury is all-but synonymous with the Daoist and Heraclitian ideas of 'everything is flow' – that the whole creative, ever-transforming, ever-transmuting process that is the whole of reality. I'd never thought of that before.'

'Me neither!' exclaimed Sal. 'Run that one past Lao Weng when you see him next and see what he has to say. I think he might be impressed – even though he doesn't seem to be fond of alchemy.'

Sara's remark seemed to trigger more reminiscences from Sal. 'Lao Weng has said several times to his guests that the biggest problem that Western people have with undifferentiated thinking – that is, thinking without any dualism between self and none-self, or subject and object – is they immediately differentiate it as a mystical experience separate from "everyday thinking". Yet undifferentiated thinking – "enlightened thinking" if you must – is both everyday and mystical all at the same time.'

'And when his students – his "guests" as he insists we call them – actually get to appreciate that remark it can seem like a light has come on in their heads. Several of them have tried to explain it to me in great detail afterwards,' Sara remarked.

Sal laughed. 'Yes, indeed, to me too. What do you say to them?' she asked.

'Well I just let them ride on their excitement,' replied Sara. 'It would seem entirely the wrong thing to say something like "Yea, I know, I got that insight a couple of years ago!" After all it really is exciting and they should be riding on the wave of the insight.'

'It's when they first really understand that the whole of creation is an ever-evolving process that the conversations can get wild. I only wish I could have recorded what some of them said as they applied the insight to their business interests – although of course we must never say who we think those businesses might be.' Sal glanced

briefly at the not-quite-a-couple. She felt that he was taking more interest in her conversation with Sara than his companion's remarks about the pots. His companion was making suggestions as to which of the teabowls would be most suitable for drinking mead. 'One of the smaller ones, Penny,' the man had ventured to suggest, 'unless you find a really large one which would be suitable as a wassail cup.'

'No, Simon, I was thinking of something for personal consumption, not for using in some sort of ritual.'

Sal noticed that the man – clearly known to his companion as Simon – had stopped looking at the pots and was reading one of the various A4 posters which she had pinned up at the back of the shelves. Most of them were verses from the *Nei-yey*, the oldest of all the Daoist writings known to have survived, but not as well-known as the *Laozi* or *Zhuangzi*.

Simon must be a very slow reader thought Sal. Or be deeply taken with what he was reading.

Ch'i is neither matter nor spirit.
It existed before the world
And everything in the world is only an aspect of it.

When condensed *chi* becomes life,
When diluted *chi* becomes indefinite potential.

When *chi* expands it turns and animates the world;
While turning it spreads itself into every corner of space and time.
It has no detectable existence except for the forms it takes
and in the transformations of these forms.
When these forms die they become *ch'i* once again.

Ch'i gives form to [*zao*] and transforms [*hua*] everything.
Zaohua is creation without a creator:
it defines the form but changes it constantly.

The only constant reality is *ch'i* in its transformations:
the constant coming and going

from diluted and undetectable
to condensed and manifest.

Ch'i is like infinite potential energy:
the myriad things are nothing but *ch'i*.
Yet when the myriad things disappear
the *ch'i* remains.

Simon turned to Sal and asked if she knew anything more about these verses.

'What would you like to know?' Sal guardedly responded.

'Well, do you by any chance know who wrote – or translated – them?'

'I wrote them,' Sal replied and paused for emphasis. 'Though they are more of a paraphrase of a more long-winded couple of pages in an academic book. I just liked the idea of abbreviating them as *faux* early Daoist texts.'

'*You* wrote them?' Simon was clearly having a little difficulty getting his head around the idea. 'Do you have degrees in sinology?'

'No, not at all – my only degree is in making pots. But I do know someone who knows a lot more about Daoism than most people. And he has directed me to some really useful books.'

'Such as?'

'Well what you were looking at came from a book by Isabelle Robinet which, from memory, is called *Taoism: the making of a religion*'. Though similar ideas are in Chang Chung-Yuan's classic *Creativity and Taoism*.' Sal thought it was her turn to ask a question: 'Do you know either of them?'

'Well neither of the authors that's to be sure. But yes I have read both the books. Though not for several years. I don't usually meet people who are even aware of these books, least of all by walking into what I thought was a gift shop in a minor holiday resort – though please forgive me, appearances

are clearly deceptive and these verses on the wall and the way you make the pots are clearly an indication that you live a very Daoist life.'

The woman – Penny – had decided on which of the teabowls she wanted to buy and Sara went to the counter with her to wrap it.

'Who is your friend who recommended these books?' Simon enquired.

'Well he goes by the name of Lao Weng,' Sal informed him. 'But, as you must realise, that is just an adopted name. To be honest I don't know what name his mother gave him. Almost certainly a very ordinary English name.'

'Does he teach?'

'Yes, that's his only income, so far as I'm aware.'

'Which university is he at?'

Sal smiled broadly and tried to stop herself laughing rather rudely. 'No, he's not an academic. He just invites guests to his retreats.'

'I've never heard of anyone who fits that description. Is it possible to join one of the retreats? Or otherwise meet Lao Weng?'

'Well, if you want to write down your contact details I'll ask him to email you. He only uses computers when he comes into Eaton, but that's usually once or twice a week.'

'I get the impression he's a bit of a hermit,' surmised Simon.

'A good impression indeed,' Sal answered without elaborating. She had gone to the counter to pick up a notepad and pen, but Simon had reached into his pocket and brought out a business card. Sal glanced at what was printed on it:

Simon Danser
Reader in Comparative Ontology and Paleontologies
University of Wessex

Didn't exactly sound like the sort of person Lao Weng might want to invite on the retreats, she thought. But she promised Simon that she would pass it on when she next saw him.

Simon then asked if he was correct to think Lao Weng lived nearby. Before Sal could come up with an evasive answer Simon's companion, Penny, reminded him that they needed to get a move on else they would miss the charabanc trip to Bishop's Snoring which they had specifically come 'all this way' to do. Halfway out the door Simon turned and asked what time the emporium closed and, when told not before five p.m. unless it was raining, promised to be back after their trip.

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Sometime about four that afternoon Simon and Penny reappeared. Sal was on her own in the shop as Sara had gone off to get some food for that night's meal. She asked them if they had enjoyed the charabanc trip.

'Oh yes, we learnt a lot. The driver clearly has a lot of local knowledge. Though I'm sure he didn't share it all with us,' replied Bea.

Sal smiled but made no comment. She was well-aware of the charabanc driver's shortcomings. He was, to put it politely, rather brusque with the passengers.

'But I wasn't aware the old lighthouse at Brindlecliffe was the first in the world to have a parabolic reflector,' chipped in Simon. 'Do you know of anyone else who is knowledgeable about the more obscure aspects of this area's local history?' continued Simon. 'I'm thinking about writing a guide book about the less well-known places and events in the area around the railway. I know the heritage railway brings in significant numbers of visitors. But I have the hunch that these visitors' interests are more wider-ranging than railways. The working title for the book is *Beyond the Tracks*. It might be something you could sell in your shop – or Emporium as you call it. And maybe in the rather wonderful Queen Alexandra Arts Centre.

'Well,' said Sal, thinking as she spoke, 'I'm not aware of any similar guide books to this area. And there is the railway's gift shop who might stock it as well as The Alex.'

'Oh, yes,' responded Simon. 'We were hoping to visit the railway's gift shop next. I hope they don't shut too early. Would be wonderful if the manager's there and we could talk to her too.'

'Well,' said Sal again, thinking how best to respond. 'The manager may well be there. But it's probably best if you didn't talk to her about books. Though please don't say I said so.'

'Why so?' asked Bea.

'Well,' Sal started again and paused. 'Let's say that the manager only reads naff cook books and thinks that everyone else only reads naff cook books.'

'Oh,' said Simon looking slightly dejected, and casting a glance at Bea, who made no comment.

'But don't worry,' continued Sal. 'If you speak to the Property Manager of the railway then she will make sure the shop stocks your book. And I'm sure Cynthia at The Alex would want to too. Will you be coming around here again soon?'

'I'm not sure,' replied Simon. 'Although Penny has moved to Brindcliffe I live in the West Country so this is quite a trip. Though I'm sure I'll need to come again before the book is finished.'

'Would you like me to see if the Property Manager is free to meet you while you're here? She may have some suggestions to make about what could be included in your book – assuming you're looking for suggestions,' Sal added with a little retrospective diplomacy.

'Well, yes, always happy to have suggestions,' Simon replied, although in a tone of voice which didn't sound entirely convincing.

Sal picked up the phone and explained briefly to the Property Manager what the situation was. Sal put the phone down and said to Simon and Penny 'The PM's on her way over.' Simon and Penny exchanged a sustained glance – the thought of meeting someone known as 'The PM' was an unexpected challenge.

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Sources

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