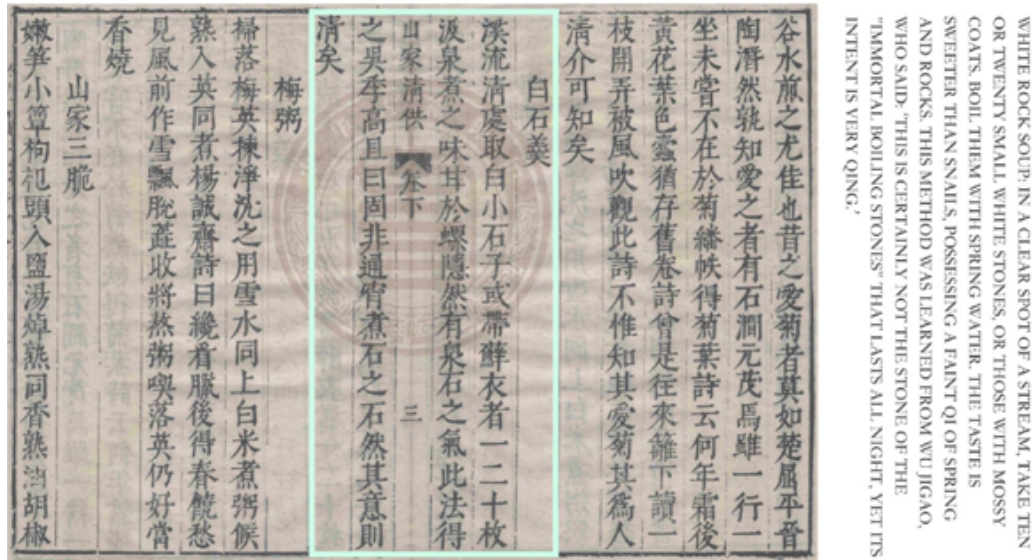


White Rock Soup: On the Aesthetic Imagination Around an Ancient Taste



“In a clear spot of a stream, take ten or twenty small white stones, or those with mossy coats. Boil them with spring water. The taste is sweeter than snails, possessing a faint qi of spring and rocks. This method was learned from Wu Jigao, who said: ‘This is certainly not the stone of the "Immortal Boiling Stones" that lasts all night, yet its intent is very qing.’”¹

— Lin Hong, *Fresh Provisions from Mountainous Families*, Volume II, “White Rock Soup”², 1276

1 “溪流清處取白小石子，或帶蘚衣者一二十枚，汲泉煮之，味甘于螺，隱然有泉石之氣。此法得之吳季高，且曰：‘固非通霄煮食之石，然其意則甚清矣。’”， translated by me.

2 Lin Hong, *Shanjia Qinggong* [Fresh Provisions from Mountainous Families].

Lin Hong (1194-1264), literati and gastronome in the Song dynasty, included the ‘White Rock Soup’ in his collection of creative Song cuisines. This is a highly distinctive and mysterious cuisine that was only spread among the literati in ancient China³, possessing a deep genealogy in ancient Chinese literati culture.⁴ Starting from “Master White Stone” in Ge Hong (283-343)’s *Biographies of Immortals*⁵, the act of boiling stones has carried the meaning of refining the self through alchemy — relying on one’s patience and faith to boil the stone soft, and finally refining it into an immortal pill to pursue a life state that transcends the mundane. Similar connotations were also expressed in poems⁶, legends⁷, and artifacts⁸ in the ancient literati community all over the country till the end of ancient China (1840)⁹.

Edited by Zhang Yuan (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2013), 184.

3 The literati (class) I mentioned here refers to the Shiren class that is unique to ancient China (ca. 475 BCE–1840) due to its special feudalistic system.

4 Chen, Ling. “Shanjia Qinggong Zhong de Songdai Shiren Yinshi Shenmei Yanjiu” [Research on the Dietary Aesthetics of Scholars in the Song Dynasty in Shanjia Qinggong]. (Master’s thesis, Hubei University, 2023), 13.

5 Ge Hong, *Shenxian Zhuan* [Biographies of the Immortals], annotated and translated by Luo Wenhua (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2010), vol. 2, “Baishi Xiansheng”.

6 See Wei Yingwu’s “To a Taoist Recluse in the Mountains of Quanjiao” (《寄全椒山中道士》) and Yu Jianwu’s “Inscription for the Jade Tent Mountain of the Crown Prince’s Garden” (《东宫玉帐山铭》).

7 See “Shenjing Boiling Stone” and “Method for Decocting the Five Mineral Quartz Crystals” (“煮五石英法”) in Yunji Qiqian.

8 According to Yunlin Yishi, while residing at Huishan in Wuxi, Yuan dynasty painter Ni Zan conceived the “Clear Spring White Stone Tea.” He combined crushed walnuts, pine nuts, and starch into stone-like cubes, adding them to tea brewed with Huishan spring water. This creation left a lasting impression on literati; for instance, Qing scholar Chen Hongshou later referenced this “White Stone Tea” in the inscriptions he designed for his signature “Mansheng” tea-pots.

9 The end of ancient China is usually defined as 1840 by historical scholars,

Even though all the descriptions I found for White Rock Soup and similar acts are brief, leaving many details unmentioned, I believe there are some tacit aesthetic imaginations for most contemporary Chinese people. For instance, these acts are not daily routines but ritualistic immersions in nature; rather than bringing rocks home, the ideal is to boil them directly by the stream. Overall, I believe one aesthetic imagination is common: there is a sense of connection with nature. Why do contemporary Chinese people have this kind of tacit aesthetic imagination?

Rather than adopting a single cultural perspective, I want to approach this question from a hybrid one that remains open to both original Chinese thoughts and modern Western science. This reflects my own conflicted position as a contemporary Chinese: I want to believe that the taste of White Rock Soup connects me with nature, yet under scientific epistemology, I don't know how to achieve this. At the same time, this perspective also creates an entry point for Western readers. How might the aesthetic imagination around ancient White Rock Soup help scientifically minded contemporary Chinese better understand our original culture? My essay, therefore, stages an open dialogue between these two systems of belief.

Materiality: Qi and Minerals

I want to enter the conversation with the concept of qi, as in the White Rock Soup it is the most emphasized taste / flavor / perception of such cuisine. In ancient Chinese philosophy, qi is not

when the first Opium War took place, marking the beginning of the modern China. In this essay, I would define the time range of White Rock Soup and similar acts as around 300-1800, based on the estimated writing year of its first document (Biographies of Immortals) and last document ("Mansheng" teapots).

a religious idea but the fundamental substance that constitutes and flows through all things. As Chen Deli explains in *The Theory of Qi and the Life Spirit of Chinese Aesthetics*, both humans and the natural world arise from the transformations of qi; the qi of human life and that of nature are interconnected, corresponding, and resonant. Humans and all things thus exist in relations of mutual similarity and mutual response.¹⁰ In this sense, qi forms a network linking humans and the myriad things, circulating continuously and enabling resonance between them. Through qi, humans may sense a fundamental oneness with the world.¹¹ For ancient Chinese literati, such a state of “Resonating with All Things” became one of the highest spiritual aspirations.¹²

If we say that qi is the material medium that connects nature and the human in White Rock Soup, this triggers my attention to minerals in modern science. Scientifically speaking, when stones are boiled in water, they may release extremely small amounts of minerals.¹³ In the case of White Rock Soup, these minerals are like the so-called qi—they are invisible, intangible, and almost impossible to perceive directly through taste. Yet their existence is nonetheless affirmed within their respective systems of belief. Thus, in a sense of materiality, minerals and qi

10 Chen, Deli. “Qi Lun yu Zhongguo Meixue de Shengming Jingshen” [The Theory of Qi and the Vital Spirit of Chinese Aesthetics]. *Journal of Peking University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)*, no. 6 (1997).

11 Gong, Xiaokang. “Qi Heyi Juyou Daode de Xingzhi? Yi Wang Yangming wei Zhongxin de Kaocha” [How Does Qi Possess Moral Character? An Investigation Centering on Wang Yangming]. *Universitas: Monthly Review of Philosophy and Culture* 49, no. 4 (April 2022).

12 Chen, Ling. “Shanjia Qinggong Zhong de Songdai Shiren Yinshi Shenmei Yanjiu” [Research on the Dietary Aesthetics of Scholars in the Song Dynasty in Shanjia Qinggong]. (Master’s thesis, Hubei University, 2023), 17.

13 C. W. Fetter, *Applied Hydrogeology*, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2001).

form an interesting parallel: both exceed the range of direct empirical verification, yet both exist within people's imagination and are trusted. Perhaps, in this very limited sense, we may use minerals to understand the "qi of spring and rocks".

However, I realize this interpretation is reductionist. By reducing the stone to its material components, we erase the meaning it holds as a whole. In this view, the stone is no different from mineral supplements such as calcium or magnesium tablets, many of which are extracted from rocks. Yet when we consume such supplements, we do not experience the same sense of "Resonating with All Things" as when drinking White Rock Soup. This suggests that White Rock Soup cannot be understood through a purely reductionist framework. How, then, should we understand the qi present in it?

Here lies a paradox: qi is supposed to transform across forms — from an intact stone to powder and into the human body — much like minerals. Why, then, do mineral supplements not evoke the same sense of "Resonating with All Things"? Either the theory of qi cannot fully explain this aesthetic experience, or qi does not circulate in the same way as scientific material exchange. I incline toward the latter. Imagine White Rock Soup were made by grinding the stone into powder, what aesthetic imagination would it evoke for contemporary Chinese people? I think the original "qi of spring and rocks" would likely diminish, since the powdered form resembles ordinary nutritional intake rather than a special medium of spiritual connection.

Does this mean that the less food is processed, the more such aesthetic imagination can be felt? Ancient taste aesthetics may offer a clue through the concept of qing, a literati ideal

across many dynasties¹⁴, meaning lightness in flavor. Light cuisine seeks a subtle balance in which no taste dominates, following principles such as “yin–yang” and “five phases”. In such dishes, the original qi of each ingredient can coexist harmoniously and remain perceptible, enabling a sense of “Resonating with All Things.”¹⁵ The degree to which a cuisine achieves this resonance was evaluated through qu, the most important criterion for ancient Chinese taste aesthetics.¹⁶ Therefore, in ancient Chinese taste aesthetics, this pursuit is clearly not equivalent to a mechanical reduction of food processing. What is pursued is the minimal expression of flavor, ingredients, and technique—always on the condition that harmony is preserved.¹⁷

But what exactly is harmony in taste aesthetics? What specifically do principles such as “yin–yang” and “five phases” maintain? I found that ancient Chinese taste aesthetics appears to follow a top-down development: since the Han dynasty (202 BCE), taste aesthetics incorporated the theory of qi from the

14 Zhao Rongguang, *Zhongguo Yinshi Wenhua Shi* [History of Chinese Food Culture] (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2006), 12.

15 Moreover, light flavors imply low intensity of taste, which helps restrain personal desires, fulfills moral requirements, and ensures the smooth circulation of qi within the body. Additionally, light taste does not overstimulate the senses, nor does it disrupt the harmony of bodily qi; instead, it preserves the acuity of taste perception, which was highly valued in ancient China—taste was considered one of the most important senses for understanding the world (See Gong 2018).

16 Zhao Rongguang, *Zhongguo Yinshi Wenhua Shi* [History of Chinese Food Culture] (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2006), 429.

17 If we analyze White Rock Soup in this way, we find something interesting. Although simple, it almost perfectly conforms to this minimal form of harmony: the “yin” of the spring water and the “yang” of boiling over fire are balanced; the composition of the “five phases” is also harmonious—the “metal” and “earth” of the white stone, the “water” of the spring, the “wood” of the moss, and the “fire” of cooking.

medical classic Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon.¹⁸ As a result, taste aesthetics came to address not only sensory qualities—color, flavor, texture—but also the relationship between the body and the world.¹⁹ Qi thus became its core concept, giving rise to the notion of “Resonating with All Things” as the highest form of taste aesthetics. Therefore, I suggest that to understand what “harmony” means in this aesthetics, we must situate it within a broader material philosophy linking food, the body, and the world.

Harmony and Resonance in the Material Philosophy

In the British sinologist Joseph Needham's work *Science and Civilisation in China* (Volume 2: History of Scientific Thought), he mentioned a vivid demonstration of the “resonance” concept in Ancient Chinese material philosophy by scholar Dong Zhongshu:

(Dong Zhongshu argued:) “If the note Gong is struck on one lute, other Gong from (nearby) lute strings will all resound by themselves... they are moved by a sound which has no visible form... Where there is a mutual response without anything visible (to account for it), people then say that the phenomenon is ‘natural’ (or ‘spontaneous’). But in fact, there is no such thing as ‘natural’ in that sense. (That is to say, everything in the universe is coordinated with certain other things, and changes as

18 Zhao, Jianjun. *Zhongguo Yinshi Meixue Shi* [History of Chinese Dietary Aesthetics]. (Jinan: Qilu Press, 2014), 160.

19 In ancient Chinese medical theories, the health of body deals with the qi that flows through the body, therefore it is a philosophy of understanding the relation between body and the world.

they change.)”²⁰

I understand Dong Zhongshu’s words as that we can resonate with all things because all things are within a state of connection; we simply have not observed these links (therefore, there is no such thing as natural spontaneity in that sense). All phenomena are influenced by other things; they are not metaphysical or spontaneous, but stem from connections that have remained unseen. However, such harmony is not a logic-less chaos, but is precisely constructed through various principles such as “yin–yang” and “five phases”, as Joseph Needham put it: “it is an extremely precise and orderly picture of the universe, in which the ‘fitting together’ of things is ‘so close that not a hair can be inserted.’”²¹ This is a dynamic and organic worldview based on materiality: the entire world is an ever-resonating network of all things, and all things spontaneously maintain the specific harmony of resonance. This framework can help explain harmony in taste aesthetics as part of a broader material philosophy. It aims to situate the act of eating within a harmonious network linking humans and all things, so that eating does not disrupt this resonance.

Yet this understanding, though coherent, remains intangible. I can grasp its logic, but how can I actually perceive? Is a sensitive tongue — capable of distinguishing every flavor — enough to achieve “Resonating with All Things”? Or must other senses also be engaged in some particular ways? To address this, I think we need a more concrete framework that clarifies

20 Needham, Joseph. *Science and Civilisation in China, Volume 2: History of Scientific Thought*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 306.

“(Dong Zhongshu argued:) ” and “(or ‘spontaneous’).” is noted by me while the other supplements are noted by Joseph Needham.

21 Needham, Joseph. *Science and Civilisation in China, Volume 2: History of Scientific Thought*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 311.

the role of perception within this network—in other words, a guide to how tasting and sensing might lead to such resonance.

Daoist philosophy may offer a possible insight. Rather than recognizing only five senses, it suggests that a state of perceiving nothing at all can itself become a kind of “sense.” The Daoist classic *I Ching* (*Yijing*) states: “The Changes have no consciousness, no action; they are quiescent and do not move. But if they are stimulated, they penetrate all situations under heaven.”²² This implies that when the mind reaches complete stillness, free of distraction, it becomes capable of sensing everything. When we deliberately attempt to perceive, we adopt precisely the noisy attitude that Daoism opposes. In other words, our perception does not exist independently of our consciousness; it is deeply interfered with by it. If we wish to perceive that harmony of qi in White Rock Soup, we must truly believe in its existence.

However, this understanding seems like a circular argument, rejecting any form of doubt—one cannot experience it if they question it, yet to experience it one must first believe. If I want to taste the harmonious flavor within White Rock Soup, I must refrain from questioning or deliberately seeking it. There must be some angle for questioning this understanding.

Resonating Ancient Taste over Time

My angle for questioning this understanding is the ever-changing nature of the material world. I do not think that Daoist philosophers were born into such tranquility, as stated in the *I Ching*, nor that they remained permanently within it; inevita-

22 Wilhelm, Richard. *The I Ching or Book of Changes*. Translated by Cary F. Baynes. Foreword by C. G. Jung. 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 339.

bly, certain stimuli by time would cause them — at least passively — to depart from that state. Joseph Needham also addressed this in his book mentioned earlier:

Now we can raise a central question: what was the primary motivation behind the Daoist philosophers' love of observing nature? It can almost certainly be said that it was to formulate — even if only temporarily — a theory or hypothesis that could account for the terrifying natural phenomena ... Whether these phenomena were earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, storms, floods, or various diseases...²³

Needham keenly pointed out the fragility of this so-called “harmony” in my current understanding: when something that disrupts harmony strikes, it is hard for people to restore the original state of harmony, since such an epistemology of an ever-resonating network cannot support identifying and suspending the exact mechanical chain of cause from the phenomena.

Perhaps the issue becomes clearer if I consider my own attempt to taste White Rock Soup today. The waters of this planet have already changed due to climate change and human activity. Even if the difference is subtle, I can no longer experience the exact taste of the Song dynasty eight hundred years ago. Modern science might argue that human gustation can dynamically adapt to environmental change, allowing us to approximate earlier flavors. But this does not resolve the deeper problem: I can understand how I myself change over time, yet I do not know how White Rock Soup has changed. In other words, after Lin Hong described it eight hundred years ago, where did the taste he experienced go? If we are always resonating with

23 Needham, Joseph. *Science and Civilisation in China, Volume 2: History of Scientific Thought*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 70.

the myriad things — like two lutes responding to one another, as suggested by Dong Zhongshu — then how am I supposed to locate and resonate with that particular taste in White Rock Soup?

On this question, Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi offers a response to the fragility of harmony discussed above that has inspired me. He suggests that when we feel fear or distress due to changes in nature, it is because we have separated ourselves from nature; only by seeing ourselves as the very nature can we calmly face any transformation.²⁴ This is coherent with the spiritual pursuit of “Resonating with All Things”.

Another element through which ancient Chinese thought can respond to my question is time. In framing it, I have unconsciously relied on a modern scientific notion of time — as an abstract, independent parameter or a sequence of uniform, homogeneous instants. For ancient Chinese people, however, time was never conceived in isolation; it was inseparably bound to space.²⁵ Contemporary Chinese aesthete and philosopher Zong Baihua further observed in *Aesthetic Strolls* that because agricultural life followed seasonal rhythms, Chinese temporal experience was seasonal and corresponded to spatial orientation — “thus the sense of space became rhythmized and musicalized along with our sense of time”.²⁶

So far, I have not formed a coherent answer with this information. Yet drawing on the perspectives above, I propose a working hypothesis: suppose, as Zhuangzi suggests, that we

24 Needham, Joseph. *Science and Civilisation in China, Volume 2: History of Scientific Thought*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 73.

25 Needham, Joseph. *Science and Civilisation in China, Volume 2: History of Scientific Thought*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 313.

26 Zong, Baihua. *Meixue Sanbu [Aesthetic Strolls]*. (Beijing: People’s Publishing House, 2014), 106.

imagine the world as our own body, constantly in motion. Observed from the perspective of each organ, time is bound to space — that is, to other organs. Perhaps the taste experienced in the Song dynasty occurred in the tongue of this cosmic body; over eight hundred years, the tongue has moved to the position of the stomach, and the stomach to the tongue. We now occupy the stomach's position; within a corresponding spatiotemporal configuration between the past tongue and present stomach, we may encounter the same matter, yet lose the taste that only the tongue can perceive. Still, according to the order of the world itself, that taste may have completed its act of tasting and entered digestion in another form, precisely where we now stand. In this sense, the taste might still be accessible, but in the “style” of the stomach. Even more, the aesthetic imagination we gain today from reading about White Rock Soup may be its present form — a contemporary echo of that historical taste.

I am not offering a merely poetic interpretation, rather I am challenging the once-habitual assumptions of food, time, and perception. I am not fully satisfied with the answer above, which remains merely a mode of connective thinking.²⁷ However, I have learned something in the process and I would like to conclude with this following answer to my research question: To understand our aesthetic imagination around White Rock Soup, we need to understand the material epistemology of ancient Chinese culture such as *qi* and “harmony”, the spiritual pursuit such as “Resonating with All Things”, and the taste aesthetics such as *qing*, which are rather fundamental ideas of this culture. However, the material-based epistemology²⁸ in an-

27 For example, how does it comply with the rigorous order of “harmony”? And on the other hand, how might it resonate with modern science, as well as with contemporary perspectives such as quantum physics?

28 Here by material-based epistemology, I am referring to a belief system/

cient China has offered an entry point for contemporary people who believe in modern science to understand. In my case, White Rock Soup is a distinct cuisine enjoyed by ancient literati, who believe there is a fundamental matter that connects and flows through body and all other things called qi; they regard perceiving the broad qi of the nature as their spiritual pursuit which is “Resonating with All Things”; such ideas led to a prevalent taste aesthetic called qing, which means the flavors are light and in a harmonious integration, therefore every qi from the food can be tasted. All these elements correspond with the content and context of White Rock Soup, therefore influencing our today’s aesthetic imagination around this cuisine. Our aesthetic imagination is the product and emergence of such cultural understanding of food, taste, body, and our relation with nature. However, the unfinished part of my research is the particular way of tasting and resonating (how am I supposed to perceive the qi), thus I can understand the relation between the aesthetics and my embodied senses. My answer so far is coherent to the extent of epistemology, yet is still not coherent to the extent of tangibility. However, I believe this essay has presented a promising trajectory for exploration.

epistemology that understands the world through matters/materials, which doesn’t necessarily deny the spiritual existence, thus different from materialism or reductionism in western philosophical context.



SCREENSHOT FROM A CONTEMPORARY VIDEO DEMONSTRATION OF WHITE
ROCK SOUP, CR.食草男慢先生, 2025.

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