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Industrial Design

# The art of letting go



Eastern philosophy is challenging how technologies for reflection and rest are designed. It asks whether our digital tools have been solving the wrong problem all along.

**M**editation apps invite users to rate their calm on a scale of one to ten. Fitness trackers assign a score to the quality of sleep. Journaling tools nudge via notifications: *"Time to reflect!"*

These technologies encourage self-awareness, but there is an underlying irony. The very tools designed to help us slow down and look inwards are often built on assumptions that keep us measuring, comparing, optimising and striving. They turn introspection into a task with a target.

**Assistant Professor Janghee Cho** from the Division of Industrial Design at the College of Design and Engineering, National University of Singapore, thinks we have been asking the wrong questions. His research examines how technologies built to support reflection and rest are shaped — and often constrained — by a Western-focused way of thinking that is largely goal-driven. In two papers, Asst Prof Cho and his collaborators turn to Daoist philosophy to reimagine what these technologies could look like if we loosened our grip on those assumptions. The implications point towards new ways of designing interactive systems that support human well-being without reducing it to data points on a dashboard.



Assistant Professor Janghee Cho turned to Daoist philosophy to challenge how technologies for reflection and rest are designed.

## A narrower lens than we think

Research in human-computer interaction (HCI) has emphasised reflection as a design goal. A burgeoning ecosystem of personal informatics tools, AI chatbots and mixed-reality environments aims to help people track behaviour, review progress and gain insights into themselves. But these systems can misfire. Weight-loss apps have been shown to exacerbate eating disorders. Rigid benchmarks, such as the so-called “10,000 steps,” distort how users interpret their own bodies. Journaling tools can tip users from healthy reflection into anxious rumination.

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“Much of HCI research on reflection is rooted in Western traditions that emphasise analytical reasoning and individual self-improvement,” Asst Prof Cho adds. “That’s good, but when it becomes the default perspective, we risk designing technologies that are blind to other ways of making meaning.” Rather than displacing Western approaches, he positions Daoism as a complementary lens — one that foregrounds embodiment, relationality and attunement to natural rhythms.

## Emptying the cup

In a paper presented at the 2026 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems in Barcelona, Asst Prof Cho and his research assistant Mr Aaron Pengyu Zhu interviewed 18 Daoist priests, scholars and practitioners. Three interconnected dimensions of reflection emerged: stillness, resonance and emergence.

Stillness is not passive withdrawal. It is an active practice of emptying — silencing the mind, releasing attachment to fixed identities, creating space for meaning to surface on its own terms. Participants described how meditation, *Qigong* (an ancient Chinese practice that combines gentle movement with medication and breathing techniques) or simply giving undivided attention to a single everyday activity could cut through the mental noise of constant digital stimulation. One Daoist priest described mobile technology as a form of “noise” — echoing the ancient Daoist concept of the “mechanical heart,” a mind so overfilled with stimuli that it loses contact with what is real.

Where a fitness app prompts users to analyse yesterday’s performance, stillness suggests the more radical act of forgetting. “In Daoism, emptiness holds greater power than fullness,” Asst Prof Cho notes. “It challenges designers who assume more data always leads to more insight.”

Resonance turns this attention outward, drawing on the Daoist concept of *Gan-Ying*, or sympathetic response. Practitioners spoke of attending to breath and bodily sensations rather than fixating on screen-time statistics. Emergence, the third dimension, describes how reflection unfolds through alignment with



The team’s in-person interview settings:

(A) Practitioners at the Daoist Association were engaged in a collective scripture study session. The team observed their chanting practice and conducted an interview with the priest leading the recitation after it concluded, this collective chanting practice prompted the team to further understand the *dao* as something situated within relationality.

(B) The interview setting for another Daoist priest at the Daoist Association.

(C) A Daoist temple in Singapore, where we interviewed three participants.

Photo credit: Aaron Pengyu Zhu

bodily rhythms, situational flows and natural cycles. One practitioner recounted weeping with his wife over financial difficulties, then recognising within that distress was a signal that life was offering a lesson — a *Yin-Yang* perspective towards uncertainty as generative rather than threatening.

## Rest, or resistance?

The same philosophical undertone runs through [another paper](#) presented at CHI 2025, which widens the view from reflection to rest. Sleep apps quantify our repose. Meditation timers measure our stillness. Wellness platforms award badges for relaxation. Rest, Asst Prof Cho argues, has been colonised by the same productivity logic it was meant to counteract.

The paper proposes that rest is not merely a human state to be optimised but an ecological phenomenon — something emerging through entangled relations between human, nonhuman and natural systems. Drawing on the Daoist concept of *Wu-Wei*, or effortless action, Asst Prof Cho notes that genuine rest cannot be engineered through intervention. It arises through attunement. “The goal is not to create more ‘rest technologies’,” he says. “It is to foster conditions where regenerative rest can emerge naturally. Technology should be a participant in that process, not an instrument of control.”

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## Sparking a broader conversation

Asst Prof Cho makes the case that HCI’s theoretical foundations have drawn too narrowly from a single intellectual tradition. “Apart from Western notions, Eastern teachings and philosophies unveil concepts that can complement and enhance existing frameworks, offering epistemic plurality and not replacement.”

Asst Prof Cho and his team are now extending these ideas into new projects on youth digital well-being, AI safety and parenting stress. Across these areas, the underlying question remains the same: can technology support healthier, more reflective ways of living without turning well-being into yet another metric to optimise?

That opens up a deeper set of provocations. In a world where young people are growing up with algorithmic feeds, generative AI and constant digital nudges, what would it mean to design for agency rather than dependence? How might technologies support parents and caregivers not by adding another layer of tracking and responsibility, but by easing pressure and cultivating space for rest? And if good technology sometimes helps us let go, step back or even forget, might the future of digital well-being lie not in more intervention, but in knowing when technology should recede? What if a wellness app measured its success not by engagement metrics, but by how gracefully it faded from your attention? ◆