

Painting as the Image of Mind

Xiaoyan Hu Supervisor: Nikolaos Gkogkas



Scholar of the Liu-Li Hall, attributed after Zhou Wenju (active ca. 940–975)

Abstract

For Chinese artists, painting is the image of mind. Not merely nature, but mind is also the wellhead of painting. This idea originated in the Han scholar Yang Xiong (53BC–18AD) who thought of word as the sound of mind and calligraphy as the painting of mind, and who thus suggested that people can identify a person to be a gentleman or a petty man according to his print of mind. The Tang master Zhang Zao (active in the late 8th century) located the secrets of art in mind and nature by claiming that ‘externally all creation is my master’ and ‘internally I have found the mind’s sources’ (Zhang Yanyuan, 847). Numerous later art critics and painters in Chinese art history advocated this claim of painting as the print of mind.

To represent appears to be to express for Chinese painters, since painting as the print of mind, originates from both nature and mind, being ‘perfected in the imagination’, taking form in the surface of silk or paper as the trace of mind, indicating the loftiness or baseness of ‘Qi Yun’ (spirit consonance) beyond formal likeness (Guo Ruoxu, 1080).

To release the image of mind, spontaneity has been especially emphasized in creative progress by Chinese artists.

Although Michael Sullivan (1979: 6/8) interprets the expression of ideas and emotions in Western expressionistic art as very close to that of Chinese art, there is a marked difference between the expressionism of Chinese art and Western expressionist art, due to the unique features of Chinese art and the influence of ancient Chinese philosophy (Daoism, Chan Buddhism and Confucianism) on Chinese art.

An essential concept in Chinese art: ‘Qi Yun’ (spirit consonance)



Twin Pines, Level Distance(details), by Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322)

The minimalistic self-expression by simpler calligraphic brushstrokes and the scantier use of ink, leaves more blank space for contemplation, and also endows the work with the expressive charisma of blandness with lingering flavour.

‘Qi Yun’ is an essential concept in Chinese art as the image of mind. ‘Qi Yun Sheng Dong’ (spirit consonance engendering a sense of life) as the first law of Chinese classic painting was originally proposed by Xie He (active 500–535?) in his six laws of painting, where the law of ‘Ying Wu Xiang Xing’ (correspondence to the object in depicting forms) was postulated as the third level; this has been commonly echoed by numerous later Chinese artists up to this day. Concerning ‘Qi Yun Sheng Dong’, experts in Western academia such as Alexander C. Soper, William Acker, James Cahill, Wen Fong, and Max Loehr offered valuable contributions towards an appropriate translation. I establish ‘spirit consonance’ as the rendering of ‘Qi Yun’, and think ‘Qi Yun’ as the essential character or internal reality of the object and the expressive quality or content of the work. The fusion of expressive and representative functions also leaves space for further explaining the aesthetic interaction among artist, object, work, and audience.



Fisherman by a Wooded Bank, by Wu Zhen (1280–1354)

The skill of calligraphic brushstrokes merged into painting is perfectly shown in the work; relaxed nonchalance and pleasant freedom from worldly affairs seem to be captured in a balance between formal representation and expressive abstraction.

The difference between expressionism in Chinese art and Western expressionistic art

The expressive charisma of Chinese art is often achieved by aesthetically reflecting on Confucianism, Daoism, or Chan Buddhism or the synthesis of these three worldviews, so it is totally different from the philosophical reflection on modern materialism and contemporary social issues, found in Western expressionistic art.

Led by the expressive pursuit of ‘Qi Yun Sheng Dong’, blandness beyond flavourlessness as one of significant features of Chinese art, marked the difference from Western expressionistic art which favours colour and emphasizes form; the aesthetic dialectics of presence and absence, fullness and emptiness favoured by Chinese artists endows Chinese art with a unique expressionistic charisma.



Spring Mountains and Pines, formerly attributed to Mi Fu (1052–1107)

Cloudy mountains exemplify the dialectic of presence and absence, emptiness and fullness, where if audiences tried to imagine the ‘awe (which the artist) must have felt’ on the sublime and magic transformation of nature, they might capture ‘an inkling of what the Chinese value most highly in art’.

Mind as the wellhead

For Chinese painting, form ‘is easy to imitate’, while ‘the foundational without-form is “difficult to apprehend”, it is the ‘without-form’ which ‘serves as the foundation-fount of painting’, and form ‘[rests] on the without-form’ (Jullien, 2012). Form which could be watched, touched, easily imitated seems to refer to the ‘external reality’ of the object, while the ‘foundational without-form’ refers to ‘Qi Yun’ (spirit consonance), the essential character or internal reality of the object, could not be able to be sensed or captured without the cultivation and concentration of mind.

Observing nature with mind-eyes, is the approach of achieving the harmonious unification of human beings and nature and cultivating internal self, and vice versa. The artistic exploration by Chinese painters towards nature is consistent with the philosophical attitude of ancient Chinese towards nature, especially Daoism which emphasises the returning to nature and the unification of nature and human beings.



On a Mountain Path in Spring, by Ma Yuan (active ca.1190–1225)

It depicts a pleasant travel in spring, and it bears a couplet by the Emperor Ningzong (1164–1224; reign dates: 1194–1224): ‘Flowers touching my sleeves dance in the wind, birds sang their songs to fly away humans’.

How to cultivate the ‘mind-eyes’

When painters make painting, ‘what is found in form is fused with soul’, and ‘what activates (the) movement’ of brush and ink is ‘the mind’ (Wang Wei). ‘When feeling are depleted, mountains lack colour; /When the mind is preoccupied, water is not clear’, this old poem was cited by Wu Taisu to illustrate the significance of the concentration of the mind (active mid–14th century).

How to reach this concentration? There are two ways:

Fasting the mind: Daoist inaction (Zhuangzi)

Sitting in meditation. (Daoism and Chan Buddhism)

For instance, before starting painting, Mi Youren (1075–1151) prepared just like this: ‘[sitting] in meditation in a quiet room, forgetting all the worries of the mind and sharing (his) wandering with the emptiness of the blue void’. ‘The efficacy of effortlessness’ is understood by practising Chan meditation and the simplicity of perfected Dao by studying the Dao is appreciated (Huang Ting Jian, 1045–1105).

Spontaneity and the unconscious

The spontaneous state ‘without conscious realisation’ is essential for artists when creating art, in order to avoid the image being ‘stopped in the hand’ or ‘frozen in the mind’ (Zhang Yanyuan, 847). When inspiration seems to be ignited instantly and the perfected image shows in front of painters’ mind-eyes, they suddenly rise to wield the brush to catch the perfected image, ‘it is like the hare’s leaping up when the falcon swoops; if it hesitates in the slightest, all will be lost’ (Su Shi, 1037–1101).

The spontaneous state is a state where both the object and self are forgotten (Zhang Yanyuan, 847), ‘When self and things were both forgotten’, ‘mind and aims both soared aloft’ and hands responded with the mind which grasped the image and spirit (Wu Taisu, active mid–14th century). Technique is also best forgotten when producing a work of art, according to Jing Hao (870–930), who suggested that artists will ‘achieve the real landscape painting’ when ‘reaching the state of forgetting the technical matters of brush and ink’.

An engaging state of ‘relaxed alertness’ seems to be a precondition for artistic spontaneity and is regarded as necessary for artists, according to Guo Xi (1000–1090). When the ‘mind becomes fully calm, upright, loving and sincere’, artistic spontaneity will be triggered, that is, ‘the different characteristics of objects, will spontaneously order themselves in (...) mind and appear without effort under (...) brush’.



Mountain Market in Clearing Mist, by a Buddhist monk Yujian (active mid-13th century CE)

The work appears spontaneous; although the images of mountains, water, boats and cottages can not be clearly identified due to the use of ‘splashed’ ink, the expressive charisma of spirit consonance in the image shines through.

Two influential poems of emphasizing spontaneity:

‘When Wen Tong painted bamboo,
He saw bamboo and not himself.
Not simply unconscious of himself,
Trance-like, he left his body behind.
His body was transferred into bamboo,
Creating inexhaustible freshness.
Zhong Zhou is no longer in this world,
So who can understand such concentration?’
(Su Shi, 1037–1101).

‘When I begin to paint I am not conscious of myself,
And suddenly forget about the brush in my hand.
If the butcher or wheelwright were to return,
Would they not recognise this feeling again? ...
(Wu Zhen, 1280–1354).

Moral reflection and education

‘After a hundred generations’, viewers ‘will still be able to see [Su Shi] in their mind’ when looking at his painting as the image of the painter’s mind (Zhu Xi, 1130–1200).



Three Friends of Winter, by Zhao Mengjian (1199–before 1267)

The symbolic images are the reflection of the ideal personality in the painter’s mind.

References

- Bush, Susan and Shih, Hsio-yen. (eds). (2012). *Early Chinese Texts on Painting*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Jullien, Francois. (2012). *The Great Image Has No Form, or On the Nonobject through Painting*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Zhuangzi. *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*. Translated by Watson, Burton. (2013). New York: Columbia University Press.