



AESTHETIC CONCEPTIONS AND CULTURAL SYMBOLS IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE PAINTING

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Keywords: Chinese Painting. Chinese Philosophy. Culture. Aesthetic Conception.

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Resumen: La concepción estética en la pintura tradicional china es un concepto esencial en el antiguo pensamiento estético chino y sirve como criterio estético supremo perseguido en la creación pictórica clásica. Los artistas utilizan obras únicas para mostrar la concepción estética en la pintura tradicional china, destacando así los rasgos distintivos de la pintura china. Este artículo realiza un análisis genealógico de la concepción artística en la pintura tradicional china y lo combina con símbolos culturales específicos para su interpretación, con el objetivo de desvelar las ideas filosóficas y los conceptos culturales concentrados en la pintura tradicional china.

Palabras clave: Pintura china. Filosofía china. Cultura. Concepción estética.

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AESTHETIC CONCEPTIONS AND CULTURAL SYMBOLS IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE PAINTING¹

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Abstract: The aesthetic conception in traditional Chinese painting is an essential concept in ancient Chinese aesthetic thought and serves as the supreme aesthetic criterion pursued in classic painting creation. Artists use unique works to showcase the aesthetic conception in traditional Chinese painting, thereby highlighting the distinctive features of Chinese painting. This article conducts a genealogical analysis of artistic conception in traditional Chinese painting. It combines it with specific cultural symbols for interpretation to unveil the philosophical ideas and cultural concepts concentrated in traditional Chinese painting.

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INTRODUCTION

Semiotics, founded by one of its pioneers, Ferdinand de Saussure, proposes a dichotomy of symbols. Saussure argues that symbols represent a whole, where the signifier and the signified represent concepts and forms, respectively. The relationship between the two exhibits a binary and separable state with arbitrary and no intrinsic natural connection. The connection between the signifier and the signified for a particular subject is conventional (Wang; Meng, 2021, p. 101). Saussure suggests that the relationship between the signifier and the signified of an object primarily depends on the individuals' subjective cognitive process, originating from their socio-psychological activities. The function of symbols is to mark and denote objects. The connecting link between symbols and the referred objects lies in human socio-psychological activities. Consequently, the connection between symbols and objects is inevitably influenced by cultural contexts and can vary among different social groups. Susan Sontag argues that symbols used in art are a metaphor, embodying images with overt or hidden true meanings. Artistic symbols represent the ultimate imagery. In traditional Chinese painting, aesthetic conceptions are presented through concrete imagery, which belongs to the "symbols in art." The formation of classical imagery is rooted in ancient China's social

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environment and signifies the symbolized expression of ancient Chinese cultural thoughts (An, 2022, p. 59).

1 AESTHETIC CONCEPTION THEORY IN CHINESE PAINTING

1.1 ORIGIN OF AESTHETIC CONCEPTION

In the Western tradition, form-based aesthetics emphasizes theoretical reasoning, while in China, a distinct form of aesthetics emphasizes experiential insight. In the history of Chinese aesthetics, the emergence of any aesthetic category has its deep historical roots and profound cultural foundation. The category of “aesthetic conception” is no exception. Its emergence, formation and development have undergone a long process of aesthetic evolution. It is an aesthetic category with distinctive Chinese characteristics that has grown within the soil of traditional Chinese culture. It represents the shared aesthetic ideal pursued in various classical art forms, such as poetry, calligraphy, painting and opera (Xu, 2023, p. 32).

Therefore, “aesthetic conception” holds a critical position in the history of Chinese aesthetics. Its research content includes the aesthetic significance of artistic image features and non-representational implications. It encompasses a series of unique viewpoints regarding aesthetic objects, modes of perception, artistic creation and artistic vitality. It profoundly summarizes the laws of Chinese aesthetic psychology and possesses significant theoretical and practical value. The renowned Chinese aesthetician Ye Lang once stated, “From a logical perspective, the theory of aesthetic conception holds an important position in the ancient Chinese aesthetic system; from a historical perspective, the development of the theory of aesthetic conception constitutes an important thread in the history of Chinese aesthetics” (Zou, 2002, p. 104).

The origins of Chinese aesthetic conception theory can be traced back to “Laozhuang” and the *Book of Changes* (Yijing). The categories of “conception” and “representation” are the beginnings of aesthetic conception theory. Traces of these concepts can be found in many works from the pre-Qin period, such as the “Explanation of the Trigrams” in the *Book of Changes*: “The Book cannot exhaust words, and the words cannot exhaust concepts. Sages create representations to express concepts” (Yu, 2017). The term “aesthetic imagery”, as a complete aesthetic category, emerged during the Wei, Jin, Northern and Southern Dynasties when Liu Xie of the Southern Dynasty proposed the aesthetic proposition that “[...] skilled craftsmen with a unique perspective can wield the axe according to the image in their mind” (Liu, 2018, p. 98.) in his work *Carving Dragons in the Heart of Literature*. This proposition refers to combining external imagery and the artist’s emotions in artistic conception. The artist utilizes imagination through external imagery, which nurtures the aesthetic imagery within the artist’s emotions. The shadow of “aesthetic conception” can already be seen. In

Liu Xie's work, *Carving Dragons in the Heart of Literature*, many terms related to aesthetic conception, such as "representation," "aesthetic imagery" and "conception," can be found. In literary creation, the author explores the relationship between the subject and object, the mind and the external world, and puts forth the idea of "Blending of mind and matter". The introduction of "Blending of mind and matter" is the form of "blending of the scene", and it holds great significance in forming aesthetic conception theory.

1.2 AESTHETIC CONCEPTION AND IMAGERY

The extensive use and establishment of aesthetic conception in art can be traced back to the Tang Dynasty, marked by Liu Yuxi's proposition that "aesthetic conception transcends concrete objects described". The original text states, "A poem can convey the same meaning of prose without using many words. Therefore, poetry is implicit and subtle, an art that is hard to master. Poetic conception often transcends what is denoted by the objects described, making it subtle and difficult to achieve" (Liu, 2004, p. 26.). This proposition directly relates to the relationship between imagery and aesthetic conception, which have connections and distinctions.

In terms of constitutive elements, the two are interconnected. The most general definition of "imagery", in traditional Chinese aesthetics, is the fusion of emotions and scenes. At the same time, aesthetic conception refers to the artistic images that arise from the successive fusion of emotions and scenes. Aesthetic conception can encompass imagery, but imagery alone cannot encapsulate aesthetic conception. Throughout history, Chinese artists have followed the principle of "observing objects and capturing their essence" in their creative process. For example, when Zheng Banqiao painted bamboo, he had to have a clear mental image before putting his brush on paper. The artist transforms the observed tangible objects into mental imagery and combines it with their thoughts, thus creating artwork and shaping the aesthetic conception. Therefore, aesthetic conception is the fusion of human emotions with specific objects (i.e., imagery). When an object exists in its concrete form, it is merely the physical representation of the object itself. However, when that object becomes a medium for people to express their emotions, it transforms into imagery (Wang, 2023, p. 55). Emotion and scene are constituent elements of imagery and aesthetic conception, and the fusion of emotion and scene forms the common foundation of imagery and aesthetic conception. In traditional Chinese paintings, each imagery (such as mountains, trees, water, boats, birds, etc.) originates from specific scenes while embodying the artist's profound emotions. The painting becomes an artistic world where emotions and scenes merge, creating a cohesive aesthetic conception.

1.3 CHARACTERISTICS OF AESTHETIC CONCEPTION

Compared to other forms of painting, traditional Chinese painting emphasizes aesthetic conception, which encompasses three main aspects: the interaction of reality and illusion, the integration of movement and stillness, and the unity of poetry and painting.

1.3.1 INTERACTION OF REALITY AND ILLUSION

The relationship between reality and illusion is a central topic in classical aesthetics within traditional Chinese painting. Contrasting reality with illusion is often employed to transform tangible objects into expressions of the artist's intended emotions within the artwork. In this context, "illusion" refers to more ethereal elements or subtle techniques used in the composition, while "reality" represents clear depictions and realistic portrayals. There is a saying, "White as Black," in Chinese painting, which means that the blank space in Chinese painting is a part of the whole composition. Blank space is relative to the inked piece rather than nothingness. The presence or absence, size and position of blanks also directly affect the atmosphere of the picture. In all painting arts, there is no utterly blank work. Only when the empty part penetrates the image and becomes an integral part of the work can the composition of the picture be more concise and full of meaning to achieve a natural and exciting artistic effect. This approach signifies the interplay between reality and illusion, aiming to represent visible objects and stimulate viewers' imagination through different creative techniques, thereby expanding and extending infinite possibilities in the viewers' interpretation. For example, in Zhu Da's paintings, a painter from the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, there are often expansive areas of blank space (see Figure 1). However, focal points also receive the most ink to highlight certain subjects, and the blank spaces allow viewers to generate countless thoughts (Yi, 2023, p. 59).

Figure 1 - Luyan Tu



Source: Zhu Da, Ming Dynasty

The interplay of reality and illusion is an essential component of the spatial representation of imagery in traditional Chinese painting. The portrayal of imagery in traditional Chinese painting is complete with considering the relationship between reality and illusion. Similar to the concept of yin and yang, the relationship between reality and illusion, in the spatial representation of traditional Chinese painting, is both contrasting and unified. However, the relationship between reality and illusion is more directly and prominently manifested in the composition, consistently valued by artists. Whether it is the dialectical understanding of the interaction between reality and illusion or the specific expression of brushwork that alternates between the two, the grasp of the reality-illusion relationship plays a crucial role in the spatial representation of the painting. Song Dynasty painter Li Chengsou stated in *The Principles of Landscape Painting*, “Through careful consideration and flexible execution, artists skillfully employ the technique of using illusion to represent reality” (Bao; Shen, 2022, p. 76). This highlights the importance of the intangible void, emphasizing not only the emphasis on solid elements but also the handling of the void. Da Chongguang also mentioned, “People only recognize the existence of painting in specific places, but they fail to realize that painting is present in all places. The empty spaces in the painting are integral to the overall composition” (Han, 2020, p. 12). The interplay of reality and illusion, the movement from illusion to reality, is the philosophical basis for the spatial representation of imagery in traditional Chinese painting. Only by understanding this approach can reality and illusion interact harmoniously, and every empty space can become a marvelous realm. Zong Baihua, when discussing the spatial representation of Chinese landscape painting, stated, “The sense of space in our paintings is expressed through the rhythmic flow of reality and illusion, brightness and darkness” (Zhang, 2023, p. 66). A single artwork cannot consist entirely of reality or illusion, as evidenced by the outstanding landscape paintings throughout dynasties.

1.3.2 INTEGRATION OF MOVEMENT AND STILLNESS

The corresponding technique to “reality” and “illusion” in Chinese painting is “movement” and “stillness.” As an important source of artistic conception in Chinese painting, objects that appear in a static state exhibit dynamic characteristics. This aspect prevents us from fully grasping the essence of Chinese painting from static images alone. For example, many ancient Chinese landscape paintings allow us to perceive the atmosphere and evoke imaginations of the stories behind the scenes, even though we only see objects within the painting. This concretely manifests the importance of artistic conception in Chinese painting. Chinese painting relies on the perfect integration of movement and stillness to create its unique style. Furthermore, while the artistic conception of Chinese painting arises from the combination of movement and stillness, the beauty of their integration is only revealed through the development of artistic conception (Gao; Li, 2018, p. 28). Take Ma

Yuan's *Fishing Alone on the Cold River* from the Southern Song Dynasty (Figure 2) as an example. In the painting, viewers can sense the flow of water because the painting conveys a sense of rippling waves. Interestingly, this aspect should be more deliberately emphasized. The composition features only a small boat and the solitary fisherman, aging figure as if the fisherman's portrayal reflects the artist's projection of reality. By creating the environment of the cold river, viewers can also perceive the chilling sensation brought by the surface of the river. At the same time, the fisherman, driven by livelihood, perseveres despite the harsh conditions. Such artistic conception evokes a sense of desolation even when appreciating a static image. Seemingly still, the painting encapsulates true emotions and profound meanings. However, with such an artistic conception, it is possible to appreciate the beauty of the artistic conception and savor its essence.

Figure 2 - Fishing Alone on the Cold River.



Source: Ma Yuan, Southern Song Dynasty

1.3.3 UNITY OF POETRY AND PAINTING

Poetry within a painting is emphasized in Chinese painting. It refers to the poetic essence conveyed through the imagery. Ancient Chinese scholars had already formed their interpretations regarding the similarities and differences between poetry and painting. Before the Song Dynasty, there were few discussions on the relationship between poetry and painting in the theoretical discourse. Wang Wei, considered the progenitor of literati painting, once said, "In my former life, I should have been a painter rather than a poet" (Xu, 2017, p. 26). This indicates a sense of consistency between poetry and painting. Yexie, a poet during the Qing Dynasty, stated, "The poetry of Mo Jie is painting, and the painting of Mo Jie is poetry. There is no need to debate their presence or absence" (Cui, 2021, p. 66). Su Shi of the Northern Song Dynasty believed that Wang Wei's poetic and painterly works contained

“[...] the poetry of Mo Jie contain paintings within its verses, while observing Mo Jie’s paintings reveals poetry within the artwork” (Xu, 2017, p. 151). This highlighted the inherent connection and mutual enhancement between the creation of poetry and painting and the notion that “[...] poetry and painting share the same principles, the heavenly craftsmanship, and the purity” (Su, 2000, p. 65). This was Su Shi’s perspective on the “sameness of poetry and painting” and his aesthetic pursuit in artistic creation. Su Dongpo’s advocacy for the unity of poetry and painting became an important basis for later evaluations of the “poetic sentiment and artistic conception” in Chinese poetry and painting.

The study of the relationship between poetry and painting by ancient literati focused more on their homogeneous nature and mutual correspondence. For example, Guo Xi of the Northern Song Dynasty stated in “Linquan Gaozhi,” “As the ancients said, poetry is invisible painting, and painting is visible poetry. Many wise men have discussed this, and we should learn from them” (Li; Du, 2023, p. 65). This indicates that such discussions were already taking place before Guo Xi. Song Dynasty poet Su Shi said: “Poetry and painting are the same” (Su, 2000, p. 69). Kong Wuzhong, a contemporary writer, also said: “Poetry is an extension of painting, and painting is a manifestation of poetry. The two are not the same, but fusion” (Wang, 2009, p. 112). The notion of the interconnection between poetry and painting gradually became widespread after the Song Dynasty. In the preface to the anthology *Chixia Lou Shiji*, during the Qing Dynasty, a summary was made: “Therefore, painting is the soundless poetry of heaven and earth, and poetry is the colorless painting of heaven and earth” (Guo, 1979, p. 81).

From a poetic perspective, we can recognize two common aspects between Chinese poetry and painting: structural rhythm and implicitness. Chinese painting and poetry emphasize freedom, subtlety and the profound connection between the artist’s intent and brushwork. It is precisely based on this sense of liberation that Chinese painting and classical poetry exude their unique charm. From Chinese paintings, we can discern the artist’s skill and aesthetic inclination and gain insights into the artist’s life experiences because the artistic conception of work is closely linked to the artist’s lived experiences. Furthermore, the depiction of figures and the well-arranged composition of brushstrokes also imbue the work with a poetic quality. The “silent” rhythm and rhythmical arrangement of these brushstrokes give the work the characteristics of “silent poetry.” Although the artistic conception in Chinese painting is primarily manifested within the picture, it transcends the limitations of the artwork itself and becomes integrated into people’s real lives.

2 PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPTS IN SYMBOLIC IMAGERY

Traditional Chinese painting often originates from the ancient literati’s hands, and these literati’s self-cultivation and philosophical thoughts were influenced and shaped by

Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. Some embraced Confucian ethical principles as their belief system, seeking personal social value and realizing life ideals through officialdom and social success. Others revered the Taoist concept of “detachment from worldly affairs” and found contentment in a carefree and reclusive life in the mountains and forests. Some had profound insights into life through the Buddhist concept of “emptiness, tranquility, and clarity.” The selection of typical imagery in traditional Chinese painting, such as snow, moon, flowing rivers, landscapes and bamboo, deeply reflects the influence of philosophical and cultural ideas.

2.1 SNOW AND ZEN

Snow, as an aesthetic symbol, has been celebrated by Chinese literati and can be traced back to the final chapter “Cai Wei” of the *Book of Songs*, where it is written, “In the past, I went there, willows were lush; Now, I think back, rain and snow flutter down” (Ye, 2020, p. 85). Another example is in the poem “Jiao Gong” from the *Songs of the State of Bei*, which includes the lines, “The north wind blows violently, while rain and snow falling incessantly” (Ye, 2020, p. 114). Although these verses were not specifically about snow, they mark the beginning of snow-related poetry. For Chinese painters, snow is a vibrant means of experiencing the world and a subject that can convey one’s sense of life and emotional aspirations. Throughout the history of Chinese painting, there have been renowned artists, in almost every dynasty, who were fond of depicting snow and left behind exquisite works. Representative snowscape works include *Snowy Plum Blossoms* by Yang Wujiu from the Five Dynasties and Northern Song period, *Fishing Alone on the Cold River* by Ma Yuan, and *Clearing After Snow at Jiangga* by Huang Gongwang from the Yuan Dynasty. When viewers appreciate and immerse themselves in the snowy scenes depicted in paintings, the natural landscape and the landscape within their hearts are naturally combined and associated. The resulting imagery captures the dynamic elements within stillness, creating a subtle and unparalleled artistic conception infused with Zen.

Snow holds great metaphorical significance in Zen Buddhism. According to Buddhist tradition, Shakyamuni Buddha practiced asceticism on a snow-capped mountain in the past, hence the epithet “boy in the Snow Mountain”. This metaphor is closely related to the concept of a pure Dharmakaya. In Zen Buddhism, the legendary Zen master Farong lectured on the “Lotus Sutra”, describing a scene where the temple steps were covered with pure snow, and flowers fell on their own. The vast expanse of snow symbolizes the profound ocean of wisdom, characterized by serenity, introspection, depth, equanimity and emptiness. Many snowscapes in Chinese painting seem to embody the pursuit of this great wisdom. A bright, clear, pure world resonates with the artist’s inner spiritual essence. For Zen masters, snow represents emptiness, an unadorned and pristine world without dust, a pure realm (Gao,

2023, p. 136). Zen holds that awakening involves shedding the dust of worldly attachments, as expressed in the saying, “The body is the bodhi tree, the mind is like a clear mirror stand. Always carefully wipe it clean, and do not let dust gather” (Xu, 2017, p. 62). The serene and immaculate world depicted in snowscapes reflects a mindset of non-attachment, free from clinging and stagnation, imbued with a strong Zen ambiance.

Wang Wei, a poet and painter of the Tang Dynasty, also known as Mo Jie, was born in Shanxi Province. Wang Wei had a deep passion for painting snow and can be considered an expert in this field. He was also a pioneer of Zen painting and a revered Zen master in Chinese art. Apart from his innovative ink drawing techniques, what truly astonishes people is the serene atmosphere and the profound artistic conception conveyed in his paintings, achieved through the mastery of every brushstroke and word. He can be regarded as the first painter in the history of Chinese painting to make snowscapes a primary subject of his works. Existing examples of Wang Wei’s snowscapes include *Snowy Creek*, *First Snow at Jianggan*, and *Clearing After Snow at Jianggan* (see Figure 3). Wang Wei’s snowscape creations primarily embody a state of “emptiness” and “tranquility,” an egoless realm. They reflect the return of nature and human nature, fully manifesting the three flavors of Zen practice of true emptiness, wonderful existence and non-obstruction.

Figure 3 - *Clearing After Snow at Jianggan*



Source: Wang Wei, Tang Dynasty

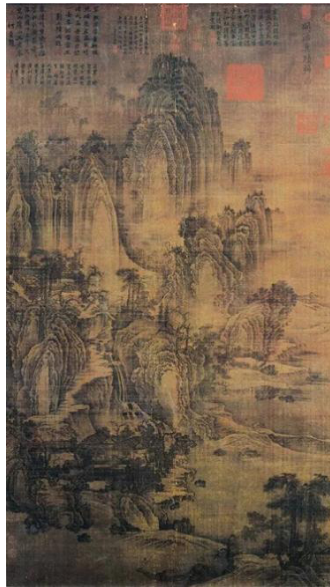
Wang Wei had a profound understanding of the samadhi of Zen and embraced a detached attitude towards worldly gains. He found contentment in solitude, without distractions, and pursued painting without seeking personal gain. Zen philosophy asserts the emptiness of all things, as stated in the “Heart Sutra”, “Form is emptiness, emptiness is form.” This refers to an ontological emptiness, and the painter must have an empty mind to portray emptiness. Due to setbacks in his official career, Wang Wei started living a reclusive

life outside Chang'an in Shaanxi province. He distanced himself from the hustle and bustle of urban life, engaging in contemplation, meditation and self-realization. The mountains, forests and vegetation became external manifestations of Wang Wei's inner world. Through this lifestyle, he devoted his entire being to the natural landscapes, far more than the average person. As a result, his paintings of snowy scenes, mountain paths, villages and river crossings are filled with a sense of tranquility and loftiness, permeated with a profound Zen spirit. On the other hand, this creation of serene and ethereal Zen paintings also aligns with Wang Wei's calm and solitary character and his intentional pursuit of serene artistic beauty in his poetry, forming an intimate connection (Rui, 2018, p. 70). These works embody Zen's ethereal and serene artistic conception, reflecting the pursuit of the integration of self and nature, the unity of mind and object that Zen philosophy emphasizes.

2.2 MOUNTAINS AND WATERS EMBODYING THE DAO

Landscape painting is an essential component of traditional Chinese art, where the imagery of mountains and rivers is incorporated into the artworks. Most artists in this field have been influenced by Daoist philosophy. Many of them even chose to live in seclusion within mountains and forests, finding solace and inspiration in the nature's company. Within the realm of painting, landscape art became their optimal choice for exploring profound insights and cultivating the Dao. As Xu Fuguan expressed, "Only by entrusting the profound mind to nature, to the grand elements of nature such as mountains and rivers, can the profound mind and the spiritual realm of this interest be harmoniously united. Thus, what Zhuangzi referred to as the Dao is, in fact, the spirit of art, and it naturally finds its place here" (Xu, 2010, p. 56). From this perspective, it becomes evident that "mountains and rivers" in the painting are not merely physical objects but possess vitality and spiritual essence. They embody the cosmic spirit, and exceptional landscape paintings can compete with nature itself, capturing the heavens and earth's essence.

This elevated state of artistic "Dao" flows within the artists' hearts like blood, solidifying into the "supreme truth" of their artistic pursuit. As shown in Figure 4, *Kuanglu Tu* depicts the scenery of Lushan Mountain and its surrounding areas, with strict structure and grand momentum. In such a painting, Jing Hao integrated Lao Zhuang's, Confucius' and Mencius' thoughts, leaving us a diagram of heaven and earth's evolution and revealing human beings' position. "Yu" stands for the upper and lower directions, all the space; "Zhou" stands for the past and the present, all the time. In this vast range of time and space, people stand in it and become the universe's dimension. In this way, the man's image is the image of standing upright between heaven and earth.

Figure 4 – *Kuanglu Tu*

Source: Jing Hao, Five Dynasties

The Southern Dynasty painter Zong Bing once said, “Mountains and waters charm the Dao.” Here, the term “charm” is apt to describe closeness, proximity and delight. It suggests that mountains and waters intimately connect with the Dao, reflecting and embodying its essence. The concept of the “Dao” lies at the core of Daoist philosophy, and scholars have always struggled to define it precisely, as the Dao rejects clear definitions (Xia, 2021, p. 104). In the opening line of the Daoist text, “Laozi” states, “The Dao that can be spoken of is not the eternal Dao” (Wang, 2018, p. 32). If the Dao could be expressed in words, it would not be the eternal Dao. The term “eternal” implies permanence. As an eternal “Dao,” it cannot be described in words; it simply exists. Furthermore, the fourteenth chapter of the “Laozi” states, “Observed but unseen, it is referred to as ‘Yi’; heard but unheard, it is called ‘Xi’; touched but untouched, it is known as ‘Wei.’ The forms of these three entities are elusive, as they inherently exist as an undifferentiated whole” (Wang, 2018, p. 25). It emphasizes that the Dao cannot be seen, heard or touched. The Dao is a transcendent and chaotic existence that surpasses all tangible and concrete things. In the subsequent writings of Zhuangzi, the characteristics of the Dao are further described more concretely and vividly. He states, “Dao is both real and unquestionably credible, yet it is also non-doing and formless. Dao can be sensed, not transmitted through words, but not directly perceived. Dao is the essence and root, existing even before heaven and earth appeared in ancient times” (Gong, 2007, p. 64). Dao is empty and formless, yet this emptiness is not absolute nothingness. It contains boundless creativity. This also relates to the second characteristic of the Dao as an existential

entity. The Dao is the source and foundation of all things, the mother of everything. The forty-second chapter of the “Laozi” presents the famous process of the Dao, giving birth to all things: “The Dao gives birth to one, one gives birth to two, two gives birth to three, and three gives birth to all things. All things carry the yin and embrace the yang. Through the blending of qi, they achieve harmony” (Gong, 2007, p. 97). Here, “one,” “two,” and “three” represent the process of the Dao, creating the world and all things through the differentiation from a chaotic state. It can be seen that the Dao predates heaven and earth, and it cannot be concretized into a specific graspable entity. However, a real and active existence creates and nurtures all things. It exists within things and beyond them. It is boundless in space, encompassing all things, and timeless (Zhang, 2021, p. 12). Furthermore, the Dao moves continuously without faltering, silently and unobtrusively, governing the operation and development of all things. The growth of all things, the changing seasons, and the vastness of mountains and rivers are all results of the movement of the Dao.

According to Zong Bing, the Dao is not external to the self. It resides within the mountains and waters. The form of mountains and waters reflects the presence of the Dao, granting them sublime significance. Thus, mountains and waters possess “intrinsic qualities and spiritual appeal.” Moreover, the entire composition is considered by Zong Bing as a harmonious universe. He states,

Now, we unfold the silk fabric and let the distant mountain scenery be captured. This small piece of silk can also portray the majestic form of the Kunlun Mountains and the lofty peaks. By vertically painting a three-inch stroke, we can convey the height of a thousand feet; by using ink to draw several feet horizontally, we can depict a distance of a hundred miles (Huang, 2022, p. 93).

Since the form of mountains and waters manifests the Dao, and the imagery of mountains and waters ultimately materializes on the canvas, the artwork becomes an entire world of mountains and waters, transcending specific temporal and spatial limitations. Furthermore, Wang Wei, a contemporary painter of Zong Bing, vividly described the relationship between landscape painting and the Dao. He stated, “Regarding the art of painting, its ultimate goal is to capture the essence of form [...] With a single stroke of the brush, one attempts to depict the transcendental essence. Through discerning the physical appearance, one captures the essence of every minute detail” (Zong; Wang, 1985, p. 18). This passage also imbues “painting” with the transcendence and spirituality of the Dao, representing the manifestation of the cosmic spirit and the heaven and earth’s great way.

2.3 CONFUCIAN VIRTUE COMPARISON IN IMAGERY

In the history of Chinese culture, bamboo, pine and plum are collectively known as the “Three Friends of Winter.” Like plums, orchids and chrysanthemums are also hailed as embodying the “gentleman.” Bamboo has noble qualities of “high integrity” and “open-mindedness.” These contents are the embodiment of Confucian Virtue Comparison thought. The term means likening specific characteristics of things in nature, including plants and animals, to human virtues. From a rhetorical point of view, Virtue Comparison establishes a connection between the signified and the signifier through a metaphor, making the signifier a symbolic representation of the qualities of the signified. Under the interpretation of Confucianism, the concept of Virtue Comparison has profoundly impacted Chinese culture. For example, the images mentioned above of plum, orchid, bamboo and chrysanthemum have been symbolized by human consciousness. Therefore, these things no longer refer to plants or things, but have moral significance.

Confucianism focuses on the Way of Humanity, emphasizing the harmonious relationship between individuals and society. It seeks to establish a harmonious and stable society by regulating human relationships through self-discipline, observance of rituals, and the virtues of benevolence and righteousness. Confucius said, “Only after the cold winter can we know the resilience of pine and cypress” (Xu, 2010, p. 41). Pine and cypress symbolize perseverance in the face of adversity. The *Book of Songs* contains numerous descriptions of natural beauty, such as the line “To speak of a noble person, their demeanor is gentle and jade-like”, which uses “jade” to symbolize a noble person’s virtues. Under the influence of the Confucian concept of “comparing virtue,” later painters and poets expressed their aesthetic imagery not as purely objective nature, but as endowed natural objects with special meanings (Chen, 2013, p. 41). For example, in Sheng Dashin’s *Xishan Woyoulu*, a work from the Qing dynasty, he wrote,

When composing poetry, there must be a sense of meaning and purpose, just as in the art of painting. The solitary flight of migratory geese symbolizes the aimless drifting of a lone wanderer; the playful water activities of leisurely seagulls symbolize the unrestrained freedom of a recluse; the hidden roots of a pine tree signify the presence of a noble person in seclusion; the tangled and crowded trees represent the company of petty individuals” (Sheng, 2008, p. 112).

It can be seen that Chinese poets and painters, influenced by the concept of comparing virtue, use imagery to express their emotions and feelings through the comparison of objects and moral virtues.

CONCLUSION

As the representative of traditional aesthetics in Chinese culture, artistic conception embodies the essence of traditional Chinese painting. Artists use the limited “form” of the material world to express the boundless “meaning” within their hearts. This relationship between “meaning” and “form” represents a transcendent energy inherent in traditional painting. The transcendent “meaning” beyond the “form” produces high-quality artistic works. Over its 5,000-year history, Chinese painting has gradually developed a unique tradition of visual thinking and a formal language system.

It emphasizes the integration of form and spirit and the blending of scenes and emotions, placing great importance on expressing the artist’s thoughts. The existence of artistic conception not only endows traditional Chinese painting with unique charm, but also promotes Chinese painting to form its system in world art, making it different from Western painting that emphasizes realism and depicts the background. This is conducive to Chinese painting and aesthetic theory to show their unique Chinese characteristics and style.

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