

## COMMENT ON “AESTHETIC CONCEPTIONS AND CULTURAL SYMBOLS IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE PAINTING”

*Jianxia Zhao*

School of Gemmology and Materials Science, Hebei GEO University, Shijiazhuang 050031 – China.

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-5292-7582> |  [jxzhao1990@hotmail.com](mailto:jxzhao1990@hotmail.com)

Commented Article: GUAN, Yan. Aesthetic conceptions and cultural symbols in traditional Chinese painting. **Trans/Form/Ação**: Unesp journal of philosophy, Marília, v. 47, n. 4, “Eastern thought”, e0240066, 2024. Available at: <https://revistas.marilia.unesp.br/index.php/transformacao/article/view/14704>.

Received: 05/02/2024 | Accept: 12/02/2024 | Published: 20/03/2024

 <https://doi.org/10.1590/0101-3173.2024.v47.n4.e02400126>



This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License.

## COMMENT ON “AESTHETIC CONCEPTIONS AND CULTURAL SYMBOLS IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE PAINTING”<sup>1</sup>

Jianxia Zhao<sup>2</sup>

Commented Article: GUAN, Yan. Aesthetic conceptions and cultural symbols in traditional Chinese painting. **Trans/Form/Ação**: Unesp journal of philosophy, Marília, v. 47, n. 4, “Eastern thought”, e0240066, 2024. Available at: <https://revistas.marilia.unesp.br/index.php/transformacao/article/view/14704>.

When elucidating the aesthetic characteristics of Chinese painting, Guan (2024) first identifies the factor of the interplay between emptiness and substance. Subsequently, Guan (2024) introduces the crucial technique of *Liu Bai*, also “leaving blank space” or “blank space” (“留白” in Chinese).

The term *Liu Bai* encompasses two aspects. On the one hand, it refers to the blank areas devoid of brushstrokes in Chinese painting; on the other hand, it denotes an unprescribed, yet purposeful, space that plays a pivotal role in composition. Varied in size and arranged harmoniously, the strategically placed blank space enhances the overall visual experience of the artwork. As the most distinct and unique artistic feature in Chinese painting, *Liu Bai* employs the technique of combining the real with the unreal, existence with non-existence, to portray images, such as landscapes, figures, flowers, birds, insects and fish. This showcases a uniquely characteristic artistic realm.

In China, the earliest record of the term *Bai* (“白” in Chinese) can be traced back to its appearance in pictographic characters, where it symbolized the gradual ascent of a dazzling and eye-catching sun from the horizon. This symbolism is reflected in the common linguistic practice of referring to periods with sunlight as *Bai Ri* or *Bai Tian* (“白日” or “白天” in Chinese) in everyday expressions. This association aligns with Western optical principles as

<sup>1</sup> The research is supported by: The Social Science Foundation of Hebei (No. HB20TY021).

<sup>2</sup> School of Gemmology and Materials Science, Hebei GEO University, Shijiazhuang 050031 – China. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-5292-7582>. E-mail: [jxzhao1990@hotmail.com](mailto:jxzhao1990@hotmail.com).

well. It is due to the presence of *Bai* light that nature sheds the cloak of night, restoring and revealing its inherently clear, bright images and colors. This concept reflects the ancient awareness of the interaction established between the light of *Bai* and various vibrant colors in the people's minds.

In the cultures of the East and the West, the term *Bai* often carries connotations of constancy, purity and lack of excessive variation. In Western culture, for instance, *Bai* is revered as the supreme and holy God's favored color. It also symbolizes ethereal purity and steadfast emotions. Consequently, we can observe that the foundational color in Western weddings is often the color *Bai* or white. Contrastingly, in Han Chinese culture, *Bai* is a symbol of depletion and lifelessness. Various mourning garments are made in the unadorned and uncolored *bai*, or pure white as the traditional mourning attire upholds the value of natural and unaltered colors. In feudal societies, the lowest social stratum is also associated with the term *bai*. Common people in China are referred to as *Bai Ding* or *Bai Yi* (“白丁” or “白衣” in Chinese), and scholars lacking practical experience are sometimes termed *Bai Mian Shu Sheng* (“白面书生” in Chinese), all underscoring the association of *Bai* with the ordinary or inexperienced.

In the realm of Chinese painting, there exists another form of *bai*, known as making the inking place and the blank place dense and alternate, arranged properly in terms of writing. From an aesthetic standpoint, this concept is rooted in the idea that, while artists focus on depicting the black parts of the pictorial space, they must also carefully and ingeniously manage the unmarked white spaces. In this context, the *Liu Bai* or blank areas on the canvas are not merely “white” or “empty”. They are intentional and thoughtful elements deliberately left by the artist, akin to paintings within the painting or scenes beyond the canvas. As Zhang Shi, a Qing Dynasty artist, once expressed, “Blank spaces are not just the paper; blank spaces are also part of the painting (Zhang, 2008, p.129).”

Guan (2024) discusses the relationships among *Liu Bai*, the concepts of *You-Wu*, or existence and non-existence (“有无” in Chinese), and *Liu Bai* and *Xu-Shi* or the real and the unreal (“虚实” in Chinese) in the article. Chinese philosophy explores the discussions on *You-Wu* or *Xu-Shi* from two aspects. Daoist and Zen philosophies emphasize non-existence and the importance of the unreal, while Confucian philosophy focuses on the interpretation from the perspective of existence and the real. As Zong Baihua, a famous scholar in China, mentioned, “The discussion on the real and the unreal in Chinese philosophy can be divided into two schools of thought: one represented by Laozi and Zhuangzi, and the other by Confucius and Mencius (Lin, 2008, p. 114).” The exploration of *You-Wu* or *Xu-Shi* in Chinese philosophy has inspired Chinese artists to contemplate the relevant issues, leading to the emergence of artistic theories in the realm of *Xu-Shi* and the technique of *Liu Bai*. This philosophical foundation has provided theoretical support for the creation and development

of artistic concepts and has contributed to the establishment of a philosophical basis for artistic expression.

From the perspective of Confucianism, the individuals’ harmonious state, which is of the human relationships and of the alignment between humans and the cosmos, is considered the most perfect condition. Delicately leaving blank space, where the ink pauses, creates a harmonious unity between the “dark” and the “white.” They complement each other, mutually restrain and fulfil one another. Confucian culture places great emphasis on the harmony and complementarity between *yin* and *yang*. The *I Ching*, or *Book of Changes*, explains: “One *yin* and one *yang* are called the Tao (Yu, 2017, p. 32).” The opposition and unity of *yin* and *yang* give rise to the myriad things in the world. All things result from the continuous transformation of *yin* and *yang* energies, and the endless interplay of these energies harmoniously evolves into a systematic movement. The reciprocal influence between *yin* and *yang* becomes a significant source of the aesthetic characteristic of *Liu Bai* in Chinese painting. *Yin* and *yang* represent harmony.

In Daoist philosophy, the concept of *Wu*, or non-existence, entails a complete rejection of human-constructed intentions, a negation of explicit value orientations, and a disregard for the pleasurable and happy experiences brought about by the senses. It discards the aesthetic expressions conveyed through concrete and tangible characteristics. Additionally, Daoism emphasizes the the subject’s own expression of tranquility and inaction. It yearns for an ideal societal state reminiscent of the ancient times’ primitive and simple conditions, aspiring to a state that can “transcend” all desires. From the perspective of the pursuit of beauty, Daoism’s *Wu* advocates the realization of a natural, simple and pure state. It seeks to achieve a breakthrough into a state of “non-self” or “self-forgetfulness,” highlighting the sublime state of the unreal, non-existence and purity while discarding the universe’s all clamor.

The Wei-Jin metaphysical school, rooted in Daoist and Taoist philosophy, further expounded on the philosophical ontology of Dao and the concept of *You-Wu*, or existence and non-existence from a philosophical perspective. In the metaphysical scholars’ eyes, *Wu* represents a natural state of non-action, embodying the essence of spontaneity and inactivity. Wei-Jin metaphysics, with its distinctive speculative nature, elevated the discourse on *You-Wu* in Chinese philosophy to a new level and profoundly influenced the people’s aesthetic consciousness during and after the Wei-Jin period. Under its influence, a significant feature of Wei-Jin art emerged, transitioning from the concrete to the abstract. In contrast to the Han Dynasty, which emphasized external appearances, Wei-Jin art shifted its focus towards the inner spirit and subtleties. Metaphysical contemplation on the issues of *You-Wu* and *Xu-Shi* prompted intellectuals to gain deeper insights into the realm of the imaginary, prompting a spiritual pursuit of transcendence and expansiveness. The distinguishing between existence

and non-existence, in Wei-Jin metaphysics, propelled the artistic domain forward in the exploration of artistic conception.

In Chinese philosophy, the concept of ontology and the use of empty spaces in Chinese painting share a commonality in being formless and intangible. Due to their inherent ethereal and formless nature, they often require an intuitive understanding. As Laozi stated, “To look at it but not see, it is called *Yi* (“夷” in Chinese); to listen to it but not hear, it is called *Xi* (“希” in Chinese) (Yang, 2010, p. 21).” The essence of Dao, the ontological core, is indeed unseen, unheard and intangible, that is, the so-called unshaped or intangible things (“无状之状” or “无物之象” in Chinese). Yet, it serves as the origin, the ruler and bearer of all things. Similarly, the role of blank space in a painting is to serve as the starting point, the ontological core carrying the entirety of the artwork. It permeates the painting, existing as tangible elements like clouds, water, roads and bridges, as well as the emptiness within figures, mountains and rocks. It connects every part of the painting, becoming the core that threads through all elements of the composition. Therefore, Chinese painting demands a loose, lively and interconnected approach to tangible ink and brushstrokes. This embodies the specific manifestation of the concept of *Liu Bai* deeply permeating into every detail of Chinese painting.

## REFERENCES

- GUAN, Y. Aesthetic conceptions and cultural symbols in traditional Chinese painting. **Trans/Form/Ação**: Unesp journal of philosophy, Marília, v. 47, n. 4, “Eastern thought”, e0240066, 2024. Available at: <https://revistas.marilia.unesp.br/index.php/transformacao/article/view/14704>.
- LIN, T. H. **Complete Works of Zong Baihua**. Hefei: Anhui Education Press, v. 4, 2008.
- YANG, C. G.; **Laozi**. Yinchuan: Ningxia People’s Education Press, v. 4, 2010.
- YU, H. Y. **The Book of Changes**. Beijing: Hualing Publishing House, v. 6, 2017.
- ZHANG, J. J. **History of Chinese Painting Theory**. Jinan: Shandong People’s Publishing House, v. 1, 2008.