

Multiplicity, Manifestation and Harmony:
On Chinese Paintings and Daoist Philosophy

Siyi Qi

In ancient China, “painter” was not a standalone profession, because the art of painting was part and parcel of the practices of a “traditional scholar”. Wang Wei, for example, was a masterful painter in the Tang Dynasty, and at the same time a musician, a poet, a calligrapher and a politician.¹ Although in modern times, the realm of art is seen as far apart from the domain of public administration, for ancient Chinese scholars endeavour such as the arts, politics and philosophy are connected by their subordination under the one and the same Dao, the way - the basic Chinese belief in an order and harmony in nature. The grand concept originated in remote times from observation of the movement of heavenly objects and reflections on their impacts on nature and human activities. The Dao is seen as the underlying pattern of nature that regulates both the heaven and its counterpart on earth.

Despite the underlying connections perceived between all spheres of human activities, artistic activities occupied a special place in the heart of ancient Chinese. American scholar, George Rowley, found that “the Chinese way of looking at life was not primarily through religion, or philosophy, or science, but through art. All their other activities seem to have been colored by their artistic sensitivity.”² Artistic practice differs from philosophy or politics or the sciences in that it requires a coordination between the inner and outer resources, which has often been referred by Chinese painters as “heart and hand in accord”. The way of painting requires not only a craftsmanship that skillfully weaves ink on paper to form a coherent piece, but also a firm grasp of the nature of reality and the harmony between man’s lived conditions with nature. It is this close relationship between the Dao of living and the Dao of painting that largely accounts for the continuity of Chinese painting and has given paintings meaning, substance and quality. It is also this interrelationship between the Dao of living and the Dao of painting that this essay is concerned about.

The idea of harmony between man and nature can be a rather foreign idea to modern Westerners who tend to think of nature as object of conquest. The Cartesian project of mind-body dualism has also left its trademark on the psyche of modern men who are accustomed to perceive the mind and the physical body as two separate categories. However, such ideas are increasingly challenged by modern science and people who are concerned about ethics. Newton’s theories present a worldview of a

¹ Wang Wei was a Chan Buddhism practitioner. Many celebrated painters were practitioners of Chan Buddhism, and Chan Buddhism was heavily influenced by Daoism.

² George Rowley, *Principles of Chinese Painting*, p. 3

mechanistic universe where independent objects act on and are acted upon by each other. Yet modern science challenges the mechanistic worldview with the discovery of quantum mechanics which hints at a mind-dependent universe. It is discovered in the double-slit experiment that the mere act of observing a phenomenon invariably changes it. For philosophers of ethics, the ethical bearing of people's actions logically cannot follow from natural occurrences. To people who put forward arguments juxtaposing natural order and human affairs, they are accused of committing the "naturalistic fallacy" - deducing "what ought to be" from "what is the case". Though logically sound, the dissociation between natural order and ethical codes in human affairs has produced many grave problems in our modern era, especially in the realm of natural disasters that threaten the livelihoods of future generations. All of these are reasons to doubt the accepted modern paradigm of a mind-independent external reality separated from human cognition.

Whilst modern metaphysics posits that there is an independent external reality, Daoist philosophers do not believe so. Central to Daoist's metaphysics is the concept of Dao, which is described as "the eternal and omnipresent actual reality" or "the original source of the myriad things."³ Whereas Western traditions take reality to be the single manifested one, Daoism conceives of two Dao that are both central to metaphysical conception - the constant Dao 常道 which is said to be the source of all manifestations and the manifested Dao 非常道 which is the one thousand things 万物.⁴ Furthermore, unlike in Western traditions where the manifested reality is distinct from its creator, the constant and the manifested Dao are within each other - the constant Dao gives rise to the one thousand things and each manifestation contains within itself the constant Dao⁵. In this paradigm, reality is not set aside as a separate ontological category from the mind. Rather, people and other things (in conventional parlance) are all given rise by Dao. Dao is both transcendent above the manifested beings in the world (the constant Dao) and immanent within the myriad beings (the manifested Dao). In conventional thoughts, different things are thought of as having distinct essences which separate one from the other. Rather than assume that there is some fixed, precise and determinate essence that accurately differentiates the manifested beings in the world, Daoists believe that the manifested world is in a constant flux. There is no essence in manifested beings, except for the constant Dao that continuously shapes the development of all⁶.

These ideas are not only coherent with the newest discovery in modern science but also illuminate an ethical way of life based on men's harmony with nature, which Laozi illustrated two thousand years ago in *Tao Te Ching*. Passages in *Tao Te Ching* sees frequent juxtaposition between the natural and human world where value norms

³ Tateno Masami, "A Philosophical Analysis of the Laozi from an Ontological Perspective". p175-187

⁴ The direct translation of 非常道 is the non-constant Dao and the direct translation of 常道 is the constant dao. The Daoist understanding underneath is that the only constant is the unmanifest, all manifestation is subject to change.

⁵ Isabelle Robinet, "The Diverse Interpretation of the Laozi". p127-161

⁶ Isabelle Robinet, "The Diverse Interpretation of the Laozi". p127-161

follow from natural order. Consider the example:

“The whole world recognizes the beautiful as the beautiful, yet this is only the ugly; the whole world recognizes the good as the good, yet this is only the bad. Thus Something and Nothing produce each other; The difficulty and the easy complement each other; The long and the short offset each other; The high and the low incline towards each other; Note and sound harmonize each other; Before and after follow each other. Therefore, the sage keeps to the deed that consists in taking no action and practices the teaching that uses no words. The myriad creatures rise from it yet claims no authority; It gives them life yet claims no possession; It benefits them yet exacts no gratitude; It accomplishes its task yet lays claim to no merit. It is because it lays claim to no merit that its merit never deserts it.”⁷

The Daoists’ conception offers a distinct solution to the “is-ought gap” and in so doing, connects their metaphysical conception with value norms capable of guiding human behaviour. A.G.Graham notes the “subjectivising, Chinese” assumption that “the knowing of li 理 is inseparable from the reactions it patterns.”⁸ Graham sees a network of connections among things and these “things” include human responses. The mind is not set aside as a separate ontological category, but rather is part of the whole. In this way, Daoist metaphysics opens the infinite possibilities for individuals to cultivate themselves according to Dao, and for society to attain harmony constituted by cohesion between social groups as well as harmony with nature.

These Daoist ideas have been part of the Chinese mind and are shown through the way the Chinese paint. The rest of the essay will use a famous Chinese landscape painting *Early Spring* by Guo Xi as a case study.

⁷ Laozi and Dim C, Lau, *Tao Te Ching*.

⁸ Brook Ziporyn, *Beyond Oneness and Difference: Li and Coherence in Pre-Neoconfucian Chinese Thought* . p107-109

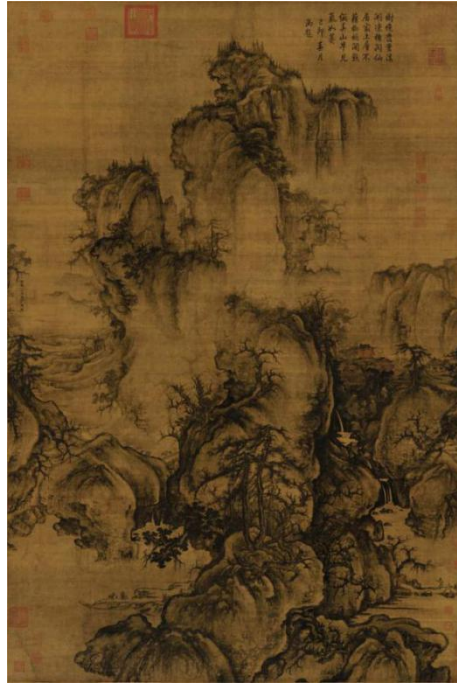


Figure 1: Guo Xi, *Early Spring*, China, c. 1072⁹

Early Spring portrays a mountain wreathed in mist and embellished with trees. The mountain climbs upward among the mists like a twisting serpent. It emerges from billowing, cloud-like boulders at the bottom, then twists up and around to its peak at the top. As it wanders to the summit, it sprouts valleys, gorges, cliffs and ridges. At the left, a hazy valley fades into the distance, passing beneath overhanging promontories. A stream emerges from the valley, circling around large boulders, and empties into a rock-enclosed pool. At the right, a temple sits within embracing gorge, and below, a stream cascades from among boulders into a pool in the lower right corner. Tall barren pines grow from the cloud-like boulders at the bottom, reaching into the center of the painting. Twisted, gnarled trees, measured in groups. And often bereft of foliage, cling precariously to the sides of cliffs and ridges. In the high distance, soft-toned, vertical trees grow the upper ridges, aligned like the teeth in a comb. Travellers and fishermen comfortably inhabit this mountain world. A fisherman poles his tiny boat in the pool at the lower right, while another adjusts his nets. Tiny figures scales paths and ridges, or cross a bridge; one rides a mule. In the lower left corner, two women have just left their boat and are heading home. One shoulders a pole, balancing suspended containers; the other, who carries an infant, turns her head as if in conversation. A child looks on, happily carrying what looks like a fishing pole with two dangling fish, while a small dog scampers ahead toward a rustic gate.

Figure 2: Scholar's description of *Early Spring*¹⁰

⁹ Guo Xi, *Early Spring*, China, c. 1072, hanging scroll, ink and light colors on silk, 158.3 × 108.1 cm (62.3 × 42.6 inches). National Palace Museum, Taipei.

¹⁰ Stanley Murashige, "*Rhythm, Order, Change, and Nature in Guo Xi's Early Spring*".

Chinese paintings use only black ink and leave much space empty. This black-and-white colour play reflects the Daoist idea of *yin* and *yang* - the two complementary and interpenetrating forces whose movement give rise to all.



Figure 3: Taijitu 太极图

The same idea is exemplified in the Daoist symbol of Taijitu, in which forces of *yin* and *yang* represented by regions of black and white compliment and penetrate each other in a circle of movement.

In Early Spring, there are not any fixed boundaries between objects. The boundaries between objects are very vague and the same brush of black ink seems to enliven many “different things” in one breath. This metaphorically reflects the Daoist idea of no fixed essences within the manifested beings and that the same constant Dao gives rise to the one thousand beings.

In this way, appreciators of Chinese paintings may be able to better grasp Daoist ideas through metaphorical imagination than deducing meanings through reading a Daoist texts. One may attempt to grasp Daoist philosophy from *Tao Te Ching* but will probably get confused by the profuse use of paradoxes and the texts’ multiplicity of meanings. Tang Junyi, a Daoist scholar, represents this sensitivity of contexts in finding six different notions of Dao in *Tao Te Ching*¹¹.

- (1) Dao as the unifying totality of the various principles in all things (有贯通义理之用之道 youguantongyilizhiyongzhidao), expressed in their concrete characteristics and behavior, existing immanently within them rather than beyond them;
- (2) Dao as the nameless objective transcendent metaphysical substance (形上道体 xingshang daoti) from which all reality emerges, which is beyond all apperception and predication;
- (3) Dao as named and manifested (道相 daoxiang), that is, through such terms as weakness, return, mother, mystery, and the like;

¹¹ Tang Junyi, *Zhongguo Zhaxue Yuanlun Daolun Pian 中国哲学原论 · 导论篇 (Introduction, Comments on Chinese Philosophy)*.

- (4) Dao as identical to De, Virtue or Virtuosity, which Tang sees as a sometimes used in distinction to Dao but at other times as an alternate denotation of the ontological identity and cosmological function of Dao;
- (5) Dao as the guiding principle for the cultivation of Virtue and other practical applications, in ethical and political life;
- (6) Dao as ideal or original state of persons and things.

This is sometimes made more complicated by logical paradoxes such as the co-existence of the speakable and non-speakable Dao. Language confers meaning through the analytical power of the mind. Different words are understood as carrying a meaning. Sentence structure and a language's syntax dictate the logical relationship between words. Languages function well in common activities, but do not work as well in metaphysical matters - subjects above forms, because metaphysical ideas expressing whole reality cannot be reduced to logical categories.

The inadequacy of analytical reasoning as a way of grasping Daoist philosophy opens the door to a philosophical position called radical empiricism in Chinese paintings and correlative/metaphorical thinking. William James's radical empiricism involves the capacity to experience relations and to count them as just as real as the senses. He rejects a dualistic worldview and considers pure experience to be the answer to the objective-subjective divide. Radical empiricists see the rational abstraction of reality as concealment of deeper meanings as what is made "clear and distinct" must belie the dim and fuzzy relations of the real experiential world. Art, says Whitehead, refers to just those elements in experience which are "dim, massive, and important"; these provide for art the "final background of time apart from which its effects fade." So "the type of Truth which art seeks lies in the eliciting of this background to haunt the object presented for clear consciousness."¹²

Vagueness is precisely a feature of Daoist philosophy and Chinese paintings. It seems that grasping Daoist philosophy from the deeper consciousness afforded by aesthetic experiences requires an alternative account of thinking as well, where imagination works better than analysis. The phenomenologist Edmund Husserl gave an account of the function of imagination. According to Husserl, "one isolates a particular region of being, and focuses on some particular concept or sense. One then imagines an instance of something constituted through that sense and then varies in imagination particular properties, one after another, altering and transforming the imagined instance." The type of thinking involved is closely approximated by what A.G.Graham identified as the "correlative, analogical, metaphorical" mode of classification over the "analytic, causal, metonymic" mode. Correlative groupings are loose, metaphorical and ad hoc in character, producing concepts that are "image clusters in which complex semantic associations are allowed to reflect into one another in such a way as to provide rich, indefinitely 'vague' meanings. Aesthetic associations dominate." Here, the connections are not necessarily mutually exclusive;

¹² Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, p. 270

they are temporary, beholden to the contexts where the relations are held¹³. This intriguingly fits the Daoist conception of reality where correlations exist as contingent phenomena – the manifestations.

Example	Metaphorical ideas (aid of correlation)	Analytical statements from artwork ¹⁴ (from scholars' analysis)	Inferred Daoist ideas (from scholars' expression)
1	Variation and individuation of form and the manifestation of Dao according to in-born nature <i>xing</i> 性	Though <i>forms</i> observe a basic formula, and appear as identifiable types, each <i>adjusts</i> to its whereabouts and achieves <i>its own particular identity</i> . Within the strictures of the prescribed categories, <i>all</i> manners of shapes, <i>all</i> manner of changes are possible.	Dao is constantly pushing each individual thing to grow and develop in a particular way that is in accord with its nature <i>xing</i> . ¹⁵
2	Relativity	In Early Spring, light and shadow connote one another. There is neither light nor luminescence without darkness; there is neither darkness nor obscurity without light. Each follows the other, infers the other, acts as a foil for the other.	There is always <i>interpenetration</i> and <i>complementarity</i> between the Dao and these <i>forms</i> . ¹⁶
3	No fixed direction	Brush and ink animate forms by inflecting tonalities and shifting tempos, varying density and direction <i>in response to circumstances</i> .	It is the receptivity of the Dao that guarantees its <i>inexhaustible possibilities</i> which allows it to <i>take aspect that suits it at each place and time</i> . ¹⁷
4	Constant unfolding and alteration	The <i>absence of fixed borders (empty space)</i> permits movement through and among things, shedding objects	The <i>constancy</i> of Dao resides in its

¹³ Brook Ziporyn, *Beyond Oneness and Difference: Li and Coherence in Pre-Neoconfucian Chinese Thought*.

¹⁴ Stanley Murashige, "Rhythm, Order, Change, and Nature in Guo Xi's Early Spring,"

¹⁵ Robert G. Henricks, *Re-exploring the Analogy of the Dao and the Field*. P161-175

¹⁶ Du Guangting 杜光庭 (907); Daoist master, ritual expert, and author of both religious and philosophical essays.

¹⁷ Ibid.

		<p>of their exclusiveness. Shapes are <i>permeable, protean, unfixed</i>. Ceaselessly, they <i>alter</i> form and character. Shapes startle by their unexpectedness and mystify by their seemingly <i>infinite mutability</i>.</p>	<i>incessant change</i> . ¹⁸
5	<i>Bestowing community among individuality</i>	<p>While spontaneous inflections of contrast and rhythm <i>bestows particularity</i>, they deny absolute separateness, so that each thing, while <i>retaining its own integrity, respects a common foundation</i>. As we wander among the mountain's burgeoning shapes, we sense that we are witnessing the emergence of a single entity, and that every tree, rock, and stream is but a different and momentary <i>incarnation of a single principle</i>.</p>	<i>Everything in the world exists as potential</i> in the Dao.
6	<i>Generation through cycles of change in the S-curve and yin-yang</i>	<p>The S curve is an <i>open-ended cycles</i>, yet which is always new, <i>spiralling into</i> ever-new directions, <i>propagating</i> ever-new permutations of itself. Its inherent reciprocity and mutuality <i>generate perpetual cycles of change</i>.</p>	<p>Yin-yang is responsible for the <i>birth of the phenomenal world</i>. The two forces yin and yang are mutually interdependent and neither can stand alone nor be complete in itself. The two completely balanced powers are held together in the <i>all-embracing circle of unity</i>.¹⁹</p>
7	Form as the <i>manifestation of "hidden" rhythm and the relationship</i>	<p>In Early Spring, creative power is <i>"hidden", "subtle"</i>. Its fecundity lives in the impetus of movement, the <i>rhythm</i> of an unfolding mutuality. While one may sense or feel rhythm</p>	The <i>forms</i> that are <i>you</i> have no meaning except through <i>wu</i> , since it is the <i>void</i> that permits them to

¹⁸ Chen Jingyuan 陈京元 alias Chen Bixu 陈碧虚 (1072), *Daozang* 714, Daoist master and author of numerous commentaries and interior alchemy texts.

¹⁹ Jean C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Introduction to Taoism*.

	between the eternal being <i>You</i> 有 and the eternal non-being <i>Wu</i> 无	and while rhythm in Early Spring obtains its <i>expression</i> in the propagation of form, rhythm itself has <i>neither substance nor materiality.</i>	<i>emerge</i> , to take their place and function; <i>wu</i> by contrast has no other sense because it shows itself and produces. <i>Wu</i> is the <i>root</i> and therefore <i>you</i> are the <i>signs.</i>
--	---	---	--

Figure 4: Daoist ideas from Early Spring based on metaphorical and correlative thinking

Grasping Daoist philosophy from Chinese paintings opens the door to many interesting questions. Pondering about Daoist philosophy makes us question many deep-rooted assumptions we hold about the nature of reality, such as the existence of a mind-independent real world, and the mind-body duality. Daoist thought contributes a refreshing angle where human beings actively cultivate themselves based on a faithfulness to their present experience in a way that is harmonious with, rather than combative against nature. After all, aren't we part of the natural order after all?

In the modern world, experiences are sometimes termed as primitive whereas rational thought the epitome of sophistication and intelligence. The case study raises a curious challenge where rationally-imposed categories undermine our real encounter with experiences. Western rationality hinges on making distinctions and forming logical relationships. Yet Eastern thought takes the apparent distinctions as inconsequential matters of mere appearances. The distinction is inconsequential and temporary whereas the underlying process is what really matters and that is unspeakable, non-reducible and eternal. Traditional ways to knowing seem to hinge largely on the assumption that sameness and differences are the underpinnings of what makes the world intelligible. Eastern thought questions this very approach by its emphasis on the relationship between wholeness and parts, and the context-sensitive process through which they interact. This opens the gate to acknowledging further the importance of our capacities for experiencing the world in full and as a whole. That capacity may not be rational, logical in the traditional sense, but freer, infinitely more playful and imaginative.

The integration of the Eastern and Western thoughts may be the answer to the current spiritual crisis in the world, where human beings feel alienated from the environment, their very experiences and feel compelled to hide behind the hail of rationality. A spiritual salvation may start from how we view the world, how we make the world intelligible. Eastern art and thought may provide some invaluable insights for this endeavour.

