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# Rethinking the Spirit of Chinese Aesthetics

**Abstract**

*The spirit of Chinese aesthetics is deeply rooted in the conception of the unity between heaven and human. From the perspective of pragmatic vitalism, its durative mechanism can be traced back to the vital cause. This cause comprises three main aspects: the substantial, the applicable, and the fruitful, constituting a dialectically interactive and interconnected framework. In practice, this framework is exemplified by the art of painting literati landscape characterised by a progressive process. This process is exposed to three primary strategies or acts of learning: to follow old masters at the initial stage, to follow mountains and rivers at the intermediate stage, and to follow Heaven and Earth at the ultimate stage. All of these are illustrated through the relevant theory and art-making related to most Chinese literati painters, of which Dong Qichang, Shi Tao, and Huang Binhong are three typical representatives from different periods between the 16th and 20th centuries.*

**Keywords**

heaven-human oneness, vital cause, substantial aspect, applicable aspect, fruitful aspect, three strategies, literati landscape painting, Dong Qichang, Shi Tao, Huang Binhong

An enquiry into the spirit of Chinese aesthetics straddles two provinces at least. One is to investigate its context and historical tradition according to the archaeology of knowledge, and the other is to examine its duration, evolution, transformation, and innovation in light of pragmatic vitalism. Generally speaking, the former type of research is confined to the classics as old texts and doctrines subjected to the historical reminiscence of museum values. Its tendency to solidify ideological sources makes it difficult to apply practically to art-making and aesthetic wisdom today. As for the latter type of research, it tends to focus more on the process of change and creation, thus provoking the advent of new thoughts and relevant findings. It bears both the lively potential of enhancing art-making and the organic mechanism of nurturing aesthetic wisdom, thus reflecting a characteristic and long-lasting duration. Taking "heaven-human oneness" (天人合一) as a conceptual stratum, this paper attempts to expose the spirit of Chinese aesthetics with respect to its vital cause (活力因). In actuality, the cause as such comprises three aspects including the substantial (本体相), the applicable (应用相), and the fruitful (成果相), which constitute an interactive and interrelated framework in a dialectic and dynamic mode. All this demands a reconsideration and reclarification with particular reference to the art of painting literati landscape.

## 1. The Spirit of Chinese Aesthetics in Essence

It is noticeable that the spirit of Chinese aesthetics covers such two concepts as "Chinese aesthetics" and "spirit", apart from their hidden implications

when they are connected. "Chinese aesthetics" was originally referred to as the counterpart of "Western aesthetics". As a science of perception that goes beyond perception and appreciation, "Western aesthetics" provides a large umbrella for various fields, among which the philosophy of art stands out in terms of art ontology, value theory and art-making, among others. In the area of development of the discipline, "Chinese aesthetics" usually takes into account the theoretical paradigms of its Western counterpart. However, when it comes to the aesthetic experience articulated by Chinese philosophers, areas such as the spiritual realm, moral cultivation, and the beauty of personality in terms of human development are more emphasised and highlighted. These areas are mainly exemplified by the aesthetic orientation from the outside to the inside. For example, the experience of pleasing the ears and eyes is first emphasised, resulting from the intuitive perception of formal beauty in natural scenery or visual art. Then, the experience that pleases the heart and mind and that results from the appreciation of the content and meaning of the aesthetic object in general is considered. And finally, the experience of pleasing the will and soul, which results from contemplating the subtle meaning, humanistic importance, and heuristic symbolism of the beautiful and sublime in Nature and art in general, is analysed.

On this account, the path of aesthetic experience in connection with aesthetic appreciation ascends from the lower to the higher and from the formal to the spiritual. It is, in fact, inseparable from the Chinese cultural heritage, for it involves the pursuit of "inward transcendence" or "aesthetic transcendence". In short, what makes "inward transcendence" possible is the convergence of the mind with the Dao, based on the moral principle of internalised humaneness or mutual benevolence in general. Such convergence is inseparable from the new concept of the "heaven-human oneness" or the "unity of oneness between heaven and human" that emerged in the Pre-Qin or Axial Period.[1] As a key part of the conception, "heaven" (*tian* 天) is usually identified with nature or universe, and used as a shortened term for such entities as heaven and earth (*tian di* 天地), heavenly way (*tian dao* 天道) and all below heaven (*tian xia* 天下), among others.[2] Then, regarding "aesthetic transcendence", what makes it possible lies in the aesthetic sensibility bestowed with free intuition, human emotion, and human capacity in light of human cultural-psychological formation. Such sensibility is directed to the aesthetic-cum-spiritual state of "heaven-human oneness" pertaining to humanised nature and naturalised humanity.[3]

As discerned in Chinese aesthetic awareness and capacity as well, the function of the beautiful often goes beyond the realm of pleasure or joy, for it lays more emphasis on these three tasks: the first is intended to "illuminate the true through the beautiful", the second to "furnish the good through the beautiful", and the third is to "make life worth living through the beautiful".[4] What "the true" means here purports the true feelings of human beings, the true reality of the human condition, the true meaning of the affectionate universe, and even the truth content of artworks at large. What "the good" means here includes a good heart, good nature, good virtues, good thoughts, good deeds, good words and so forth. In contrast, the characteristics of "Chinese aesthetics" and the way it is developed make it clearly distinct from its Western counterpart in many scopes. For instance, the strong expectation of inward or aesthetic transcendence and moral purposefulness is highly celebrated for the sake of human enculturation, moralisation, and perfection, so to speak. This is mainly

because of the fact that Chinese aesthetics and philosophy alike are deeply concerned about the ultimate becoming of human as human on the one hand, and on the other, about the highest achievement of which human as a human is capable at any rate.

Then, what does the word *spirit* mean in league with *Chinese aesthetics*? According to the dictionary explanations, there are usually three entries: The first refers to mind, feelings, and character; the second to liveliness, main import, and tendency; and the third to fundamental attributes, typical qualities, and stylistic excellence. All these terms of them are intrinsically connected with one another. When the term *spirit* is used for *Chinese aesthetics*, it is meant to stand for the core thoughts, typical qualities, fundamental rationales, and underlying liveliness reflected and revealed in the prevailing tastes, artistic styles, aesthetic values, moral sentiments, humanistic concerns, etc.

From the teleological point of view, "the spirit of Chinese aesthetics" represents a crucial part of the consistent attitude towards cultural literacy or humane cultivation. In Chinese tradition, this attitude is often approached through two main paths: one is "observing heavenly patterns to learn about the change of times", and the other is "observing human cultural patterns to educate people and build a good, prosperous and thriving society". The first way aims at observing the interactions between the sun, moon, stars and other celestial bodies in the universe, treating these phenomena as physical ornaments of the sky, and using them to illuminate the understanding of the four-season rotation. In this way, human activities could be aligned with the capricious external changes and human understanding could be improved. This is related to the deep-rooted notion of *heaven – human* interaction or oneness through perceiving, following, and utilising the mystical features of cosmic rotation in the form of vital rhythm. The latter path highlights the observation of cultural ornaments and values, which include artistic beauty, literary elegance, good conduct, fine speech, working customs and habits, mutual adjustment of human relations, and so on. It is believed that these cultural ornaments and values are helpful in illuminating human nature, cultivating moral virtues, sublimating good deeds and so on. They guide and promote the becoming of human beings as human beings, so that individuals can behave well in social encounters and harmonise their relationships with each other for social order. This is also considered to be the best humane function of civilisation. In ancient times, people resorted to ritual training and cultural education to achieve the above. For example, as noted in the course of Chinese intellectual history, the leading thinkers of the pre-Qin period who were concerned with humane cultivation or cultural education all praised values such as harmony, freedom and benevolence from different angles, and finally established a fundamental principle for the Chinese aesthetic spirit.

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Yingshi Yu 余英時, *Lun tiaqn ren zhi ji* 论天人之际 [*Between Heaven and Man*], Zhong Hua Shu Ju, Beijing 2014, pp. 212–215, 223–227.

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Keping Wang, "A Rediscovery of Heaven-and-Human Oneness", *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 66 (2007) 1, pp. 237–260.

3
Zehou Li 李泽厚, *Ren lei xue li shi ben ti lun* 人类学历史本体论 [*A Theory of Anthropo-Historical Ontology*], Qing Dao Press, Qingdao 2016, p. 293; cf. K. Wang, "A Rediscovery of Heaven-and-Human Oneness".

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Zehou Li, *Ren lei xue li shi ben ti lun*, pp. 489–490, 498.

As seen in the mainstream of Chinese tradition, the core foundation is largely manifested in Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism. Respectively speaking, Confucianism bears a strong consciousness of creating the perfectly good and perfectly beautiful (*jin shan jin mei* 尽善尽美), and maintains a prominent emphasis on the nourishment of moral virtues and equilibrium harmony. Daoism advocates a high awareness of spiritual freedom and independent personality, and keeps constant stress on the becoming of true person in convergence with Nature (Heaven and Earth). Buddhism prefers a hidden sense of time-space transcendence in light of absolute *sũnyatã* (*void*) and *prajna* (*wisdom*), which is assumed to assist people in moving out of the boundless mire of this-worldly miseries.

As seen in Chinese art and pragmatic wisdom, the given core foundation is chiefly constituted by the rational tendency in sensual activities, the vital energy in aesthetic form, joyful atmosphere in natural landscape, and free-minded state in living environment. Expressed in terms of constitutive elements, this foundation is contained in such general aesthetic categories as emotional and reasonable parallel, formal and spiritual synthesis, abstract and concrete mutual production, strong and tender complementarity, exchange of word and meaning, substantial and functional relationship, vital and rhythmic flow, poetic state *par excellence*, and the like. By and large, reference is made not only to the creative rules and value orientations of art, but also to the subtle styles and appreciative standards of art.

As compared with the typical traits of Chinese artworks and the decisive rationales of Chinese art-making, the spirit of Chinese aesthetics is assumingly deep-rooted in the conception of "heaven-human oneness". Regarded as the highest realm of aesthetic experience, such oneness is a fiducial datum for the becoming of human as human in terms of inward or aesthetic transcendence. As formulated in Daoism, the pursuit of such transcendence is ascribed to the way of serene contemplation through the mind purified of cares and worries, which in turn entails spiritual freedom and independent personality in particular. More specifically, it is pertained "to match the natural disposition of humankind with the natural disposition of things", "to take advantage of the circumstances to let the mind wander freely", and "to attain perfect beauty and wander in perfect joy", all of which aim at cultivating the virtues of the "true person" (*zhen ren* 真人) who is assigned to go beyond worldly bondages and routinised disturbances. As described in Confucianism, the pursuit of such transcendence is explicitly embodied in the moral drive and pragmatic wisdom, both of which are obliged to know, serve and use Heaven (the universe) for the sake of all beings. It is therefore advised to "study from the primary and rise up to the ultimate", "assist the transforming and nourishing power of Heaven and Earth", and "preserve the thingness of all in accordance with the natural law". All this aims at building a noble character of the "superior person" (*jun zi* 君子). As signified in *Chan* Buddhism, the pursuit of such transcendence is implicitly indicated in absolute *sũnyatã* as void and *prajna* as wisdom. It is expected to realise sudden enlightenment (*dun wu* 顿悟) and often expressed poetically in terms of three objectives at least: becoming "the true being that comes from the self-consciousness of the great void (emptiness)", attaining the freedom that naturally resembles "flowing water and blossoming flowers", and securing the sense of infinite time-space that corresponds to such a special vision: "The wind and moon turn out in a day, but the broad sky is of ten thousand years". All this is aimed at nurturing

the Buddha-nature through a fully enlightened mind and genuine wisdom derived from the real knowledge of the absolute true.

Consequently, transcendence, either inner transcendence or aesthetic transcendence, is related to the prospect of human existence in the profane world and life, as evidenced by anthropological ontology. Moreover, it is linked to the metaphysical preoccupation with the spiritual world and, above all, with the contemplative life.

## Three Aspects of the Vital Cause

Pragmatic vitalism is mentioned against the background of the duration, evolution, transformation, and innovation of the Chinese aesthetic spirit, all of which are primarily centred on Chinese pragmatic reason. This pragmatic reason not only emphasises the importance of usefulness, ethics, synthesis of feeling and reason, historical consciousness and relevant progress over time, but also emphasises the development vitality of artistic practise and appreciation. This vitality functions as a theoretical organism conducive to the vital cause underlying the duration of the Chinese aesthetic spirit in general. What then is the role of the three aspects of the vital cause in this case? How are these aspects related to each other in their practical artworld?

The three aspects of the vital cause are previously termed as *the substantial*, *the applicable*, and *the fruitful*. They make up an interactive and interrelated framework in a dialectic mode owing to their characteristic properties and working effect. Accordingly, the substantial aspect is related to the fundamental rationale of Chinese aesthetic spirit. It is distinguished from Mou Zongsan's concept of "real substance" (实有体) that allegedly represents the "original mind" (本心), the "Dao-oriented mind" (道心), and the "true and constant mind" (真常心). These three types of mind in Mou's view give rise to the "free and infinite mind" (自由无限心) as is differentiated from the Kantian consideration of "free will". The applicable aspect is related to the operation of the substantial aspect in the process of artistic practice. It is distinguished from Mou's concept of "real use" (实有用) that purports to base the practical use on the "real substance" in order to demonstrate the role of the "real substance". For Mou's preference to "real use" attempts to replace the Kantian concept of "intellectual intuition". The fruitful aspect is related to the outcome of outstanding artworks produced with the assistance of both the substantial and applicable aspects in art-making. It is distinguished from Mou's concept of "real fruit" (实有果) that is directed to the final achievement by means of practice based on the "real substance", and intended to attain absolute infinity by virtue of the true person (真人), the sage (圣人) or the Buddha (佛). For Mou's expectation of "real fruit" is meant to suspend the Kantian notion of the "thing-in-itself".

In short, what I am trying to do in this regard is to reconsider the vital cause of the duration and creativity of Chinese aesthetic spirit from the perspective of pragmatic vitalism, which leads to a relevant examination of the three aspects named as the substantial, the applicable and the fruitful with respect to their service in art-making and aesthetic experience. All this is inspired by the thought-way of Mou Zongsan in spite of the fact that he looks into a trinity of theoretical structure from the standpoint of "general ontology", and proposes the "real substance" with reference to the "free will", the "real use" with reference to the "intellectual intuition" and the "real fruit" with reference to

the "thing-in-itself".[5] As seen in the two modes of thinking and formulation in question, some theories may look similar in appearance but remain variant in essence because of discrepant concerns, orientations and purposes engaged.

In comparison, the substantial aspect is the root of the three aspects given. By "root", here is meant the genesis of growing power or generative energy. It differs from the eternal, unchanging and unknowable *noumenon* in Western philosophy. Regarding the key qualities of Chinese aesthetic spirit, "heaven-human oneness" is the most typical of them all. It indicates a kind of aesthetic realm that features more spiritual enhancement than emotional ecstasy. Even though it is often claimed to be somewhat hazy and ambiguous, it is still taken as an object that can be thought over, a process that can be reflected upon, and a measure that can be utilised as a frame of reference in the domain of aesthetic experience prevailing in Chinese heritage.

As revealed in the domain of aesthetic experience, the ontological significance of "heaven-human oneness" is not only embodied in the substantial aspect as a fundamental root but also stimulated by the "great Beauty of Heaven and Earth in silence". On this account, the "great Beauty" is four-fold at large, representing the beauty of the great *Dao* that exemplifies the law of Nature, the beauty of the great Virtue that begets all things, the beauty of the flowing rhythm of the affectionate universe, and the beauty of the natural landscape designed by the divine Creator. The "great Beauty" as such is an important object for humans to know, appreciate and utilise, and also a rich source of art imitation, inspiration and creation, so to speak.

Remarkably, the conception of heaven-human oneness mirrors the conception of the affectionate universe through aesthetic experience in particular. Since the idea of Personal God is absent from both Chinese culture and national psychology, the notion of heaven as the spiritual home for human residences is revered as a whole. To make it more accessible and appealing to humankind, human emotions and expectations are woven into such a home to maintain human existence in the anthropo-ontological sense. They ensure that there is a strong sense of connection with heaven. Since Heaven and Earth hearby represent the universe, the notion of heaven as a spiritual home can be identified with that of the universe. Therefore, the feeling of affinity for home-like heaven can be equally applied to the affectionate universe, which is often justified by its greatest virtue, the generation of the myriads of things. Regarding heaven-human oneness, it is to be attained through an aesthetic experience characterised by super-moral pleasure, absolute freedom, and aesthetic sublimation or transcendence. Because of this oneness, the individual self can step into the spiritual home with a joyful consciousness and approach all kinds of encounters in this worldly life with optimistic resilience.

The Chinese way of thinking shows that the unity of heaven and man is usually due to the purposeful pursuit of human cultivation to the fullest. It is so cognitively and spiritually significant that it provides a guiding rope for the ideal of becoming a human being. As mentioned earlier, human individuals seek that which goes from the bottom up in order to achieve the top-down paradigm, the process of which is aspired and guided by the idea of Heaven. Consequently, what can emerge in this interactive relationship is the highest realm of harmony, unity and oneness. As indicated in the feelings of aesthetic enlightenment, this realm may enable people to enjoy taking delight from perceiving the "great Beauty of Heaven and Earth in silence". As implied in the ontological pondering, this realm assumingly enables human individuals

to go beyond the finite vision of the "small I" (小我) and enter into the infinite vista of the "big We" (大我) that accommodates Heaven and Earth and all beings alike. As denoted in the moral or spiritual perception, this realm most likely enables human individuals to climb up to the mysterious sublimation that not merely pleases the mind and soul but also facilitates the mental state of being in light of "sageliness within and kingliness without". These three levels are claimed to be in line with each other, heading for the highest achievement of which human as a human is capable at one's best.

The Chinese history of ideas shows that the relationship between the substantial aspect and the applicable aspect is inherently complementary and interactive. Hence there arises the saying of "making no distinction between the substantial and the applicable aspects". Just like an active mechanism, the substantial aspect serves internally as a vital root, and externally as an applicable device, which procures an organic synthesis of initiation and guidance. It is suggested by the conception of "heaven-human oneness" that "heaven" and "human" are interrelated and converged with each other even though they stand for two distinctive entities. As to "oneness" therein, it is conceived of as a super union of the two entities. The doctrine itself can be understood analogically as an exemplary manifestation of "making no distinction between the substantial and the applicable aspects". However, in order to explain the interrelationship amid the three aspects of the vital cause, it is necessary to examine it in view of "the principle of integrating three aspects into an organic trinity". As manifested in artistic practice in general, it is usually on the basis of the substantial aspect that the applicable aspect is initiated in performance. This involves reflection and inspiration for certain, and can be therefore identified with the act of "facilitating the applicable aspect by virtue of the substantial one" (依体致用). What follows then is the implementation of the applicable aspect so as to activate the fruitful aspect. At this stage, expression and creation are highlighted and actualized, corresponding to the act of "bringing forth the fruitful aspect by means of the applicable one" (化用为果). Accordingly, the substantial aspect works as the inner function or genetic code that initiates the applicable aspect. The applicable aspect shows its practical role in at least two crucial areas: One is the inspirational improvement of the spiritual state, moral cultivation, or sense of personality, which is best embodied in such areas as the spiritual freedom and independent personality advocated by Daoism. The other aspect is the promotion of artistic cultivation and creation, which is most clearly reflected in the theory and practice of landscape painting. The fruitful aspect is the final product achieved by implementing the applicable aspect derived from the substantial aspect. In other words, the fruitful aspect is reflected in the final artworks created by artists who apply the substantial aspect in creating art. In this case, the substantial aspect is nothing more than the doctrinal foundation of the "heaven-human oneness" in the eyes of the artist engaged.

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Zongsan Mou 牟宗三, *Mou Zongsan xian sheng quan ji* 牟宗三先生全集 [*The Complete Works of Mr. Mou Zongsan*], Taiwan Lian Jing Publishing Company, Taipei 2003. Cf. Yue Tao, '*Mou Zongsan "ti, yong, guo" san wei yi ti de lilun jia gou* 牟宗三"体、用、果"三位一体的理论架构 ["Mou Zongsan's Theoretical Framework Based on the Trinity of the Substantial, the Applicable, and the Fruitful"], *Zhe xue yan jiu* 哲学研究 [*Journal of Philosophical Studies*] (2014) 12, pp. 45–50.

What could be the hidden logic for such artworks to the viewer? Generally speaking, such logic relies on the fruitful aspect when it comes to exercising and interpreting the applicable aspect. As it depends upon perception and intuition from the outside to the inside, it can be considered to be the act of "recognising the applicable aspect via the fruitful one" (由果识用). Following this account, the logic then deduces the substantial aspect according to the applicable one. It is therefore regarded as the act of "knowing the substantial aspect through the applicable one" (由用知体).

Ostensibly, this gradational description is here provided in a reversed manner. It helps illustrate the intrinsic interaction and interrelation between the three aspects concerned. Judging from the dialectic principle of "making no distinction between the substantial and the applicable aspects" (体用不二), we are liable to encounter the phenomenon in which "the applicable aspect appears to be the same as the substantial aspect" (即用即体) in the process of art-making. The artistic practitioner tends to take them for granted and applies them simultaneously to practice. This being true, we are likely to find out the possibility that "the fruitful aspect is identified with the hidden connection between substantial and the applicable aspects" (果即体用) under pragmatic circumstances. More often than not, this is probable when it comes to assessing the principle of "integrating the substantial, the applicable and the fruitful aspects into an organic trinity" (三位一体). As space is limited, I presume not to go into a detailed discussion here. Instead, I will proceed to look into the artistic pursuit and creative experience of painting literati landscape in an effort to support the doctrine explicated above.

## The Picturesque Scene and Literary Mind

The doctrine of "heaven-human oneness" is particularly prominent in Daoist philosophising. For example, Laozi advocated that

"He who seeks Heaven is identified with Heaven […]. He who is identified with Heaven, and Heaven is also happy to have him."[6]

Along this line of thought, Zhuangzi asserted that

"Heaven and Earth and I were born at the same time, and all things are one with me."[7]

Meanwhile, he encouraged the person who thinks highly of the *Dao* to hanker after the "dawn-like clean mind" (朝彻) and "freedom from bondage" (悬解)[8] to "be a disciple of Heaven" and "be spring with all things". All this elicits the becoming of the "true person" who is in a position to take up a mind-heart excursion within the Dao as the origin of all things and interact harmoniously with the vital rhythm of Heaven and Earth being the chamber of the universe. Moreover, the "true person" is said to have attained the Dao along with absolute freedom from life and death, cares and worries, and all other disturbances and miseries, consequently able to "ride the clouds and mists, mount the sun and moon, and travel beyond the four seas".[9]

In my judgment, the conception of the "true person" in Daoism is a most unique and typical exemplification of "heaven-human oneness". As an ideal of human personality *par excellence*, it is exposed not only to the supreme joy of spiritual freedom from all worldly bondage but also to the aesthetic experience of artistic life beyond any profane trifles. Hence it retains a profound impact upon the development of Chinese literati landscape painting and gives

rise to such leading rules as "learning to follow the natural Creator" (师造化), "learning to follow mountains and rivers" (师山川), and "learning to follow Heaven and Earth" (师天地). These rules were continuously applied to painting landscape by Wang Wei (王维 701 – 761), Ma Yuan (马远 1140 – 1225), Ni Yunlin (倪云林 1301 – 1374), Dong Qichang (董其昌 1555 – 1636), and other artists during different historical phases known as the Tang, Song, and Yuan dynasties. It is chiefly owing to their contributions that artistic breakthroughs were successively made, and the art of painting landscape in literati style was upgraded to its historical acme of maturity.

It is widely acknowledged that Chinese landscape painting is keen on the picturesque scene and literary mind due to the interwoven use of brush and ink. Such landscape painting aims to combine the picturesque in visual perception with the poetic in imagination or vice versa. Moreover, much attention is paid to personal cultivation and artistic creation. Considering the cultural literacy of the painters and the artistic accomplishment of their works, the art of landscape painting can be roughly divided into at least three stages. The first stage is devoted to learning to follow the old masters to develop techniques, which concentrates on imitating the masterpieces, to produce the "super replicas" (移画) at their best. The subsequent stage is dedicated to learning to follow mountains and rivers to foster a creative consciousness, which focuses on drawing *vis-à-vis* the scenes of natural landscapes and living beings, and produces the "eye-perceived paintings" (目画) at large. The third stage is engaged in learning to follow Heaven and Earth to nourish the genius of expressing the spiritual most vividly and touchingly, which facilitates the free and creative expression of the vital and rhythmic flow of the universe, and thus produces the "mind-inspired paintings" (心画) as the ultimate telos.

To my mind, the three stages hint at a ladder of artistic development. The "super replicas" are grouped into the basic calibre at the bottom of the ladder, the "eye-perceived paintings" grouped into the upper calibre in the middle of the ladder, and the "mind-inspired paintings" grouped into the highest calibre at the top of the ladder. As noted in the progressive development, a painter goes up step by step to upgrade their artistry, and aspires to make the best possible artworks, artworks that are characteristic of both free creation without mechanical confinement and natural expression of the vital rhythm of Heaven and Earth (the universe). Among these artworks of the highest calibre, literati landscape paintings at their best are ranked in the first place when compared with those of other styles.

As noticed in the history of Chinese visual art, the literati painters are mostly inclined to champion and adopt the artistic rule that is designed to "follow natural creation from outside and express the vital rhythm from within" (外师造化，中得心源). Therefore, they would endeavour to compose fine works, each of which rounds off a quiet picturesque scene and a poetic image by

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Laozi 老子, *The Dao De Jing*, sect. 23, in: Keping Wang, *Reading the Dao: A Thematic Inquiry*, Continuum, London 2011, pp. 128–129, 150.

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Zhuangzi 莊子, *Zhuangzi*, transl. Wang Rongpei, Foreign Language Press, Beijing 1999, p. 29. Also see *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, transl. Burton Watson, Columbia University Press, New York 1968, p. 43.

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Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi*, pp. 99–101.

9
Ibid., p. 35.

virtue of the literary mind. They believe that painting and poetry are twin arts in essence, and a poetic painting provides an ideal venue for the viewer to contemplate, linger, stroll and enjoy with ease and pleasure. Therefore, their works are usually immersed in the harmony between nature and humankind or the human convergence with nature. Usually, painters of this type are thought to personify nature as their teacher or a mysterious Creator who transforms things into beautiful forms, grotesque images, and even ready-made "artworks" beyond human capacity. They are artistically observant and percipient, able to find out the delicate features of objects, perceive the vital rhythm of nature, and portray them freely and adequately. However, the basic techniques of either imitating the masterpieces (*lin mo* 临摹) or sketching out the natural objects (*xie sheng* 写生) are not enough for such painters to produce the best paintings or become first-class artists. Hence Zhang Yanyuan (815 – 875) argues that

"... those who cling themselves only to imitation and representation [*mo xie* 模写] would be confined to their self-satisfaction with image resemblance on the one hand, and to the mechanical use of surface coloring on the other. This being the case, they would overlook the subtle expression of the vital rhythm, and fail to master the secrecy of sketching expertise *par excellence*. Then, what they have painted cannot be real paintings at all."[10]

As a rule, the best paintings could be created only with the help of *chuan shen* (传神). It is meant to express the inner vitality and spirituality within the object as a symbol of the affectionate Cosmos. The first-class artists who wish to achieve this ultimate goal must cultivate virtues such as keen observation, supreme sensibility, creative imagination, pure taste, and technical creativity, among others. They should possess all the cardinal virtues of the "true person" in Daoism, who is able to wander freely in the endless space and time, enjoying the "great Beauty of Heaven and Earth in silence". Finally, they are exposed to wonderful inspirations and mystical experiences as they enter the realm of spiritual freedom and aesthetic transcendence. At this point, they are able to create fascinating paintings saturated with picturesque and poetic significance.

In this respect, Dong Qichang as a leading painter in the Ming Dynasty inherits classical methods from the past sages, draws artistic strengths from other practitioners, probes into the profound truth of far-reaching importance, and accumulates rich learning for the sake of outstanding performance. He came up with the opinion that "a painter should learn to follow Heaven and Earth" to gain new experiences and procure new rules for future painters. Moreover, Dong produced the most representative of masterpieces that set up a new benchmark and exerted a long-term impact on the art of literati landscape painting ever since then. As proved in the *History of Silent Poetry* by Jiang Shaoshu at the turn of the 17th century, Dong's paintings are claimed to replicate the masters living in the Song and Yuan dynasties. Dong is alleged to

"... operate a detailed investigation of the six rules of Chinese painting, engaging himself in painting mountains and rivers altogether, and managing to make his brushwork corresponding to the spiritual vision. Consequently, his works turn out to be naturally stylistic, lively, rhythmic, vivid, and intriguing in all. The cloudy peaks and rocky images under his ink brush are formally inviting and distinctive from the mystery of Heaven, and the suggestive traces of his brushstrokes are meaningfully attractive and expressive as though they are parts and parcels of the natural Creator."[11]

In fact, having dedicated so many years to artistic and contemplative exercise, Dong became well versed in the supreme way of painting landscape. In

his fifties, he arrived at the following conclusion grounded on his practical experience.

"A painter firstly learns to follow the old masters. Having reached the sophisticated level in this respect, he proceeds to learn to follow Heaven and Earth. He gets up every morning to contemplate the sweeping clouds over and flowing mist amid the mountains, trying to discover something far better than the painted scenes. When encountering a grotesque tree there, he ought to look at it from the four directions. He may find it fitting into the picturesque expectation when viewing it from its left rather than from its right, or from its back rather from its front. Only when he becomes so familiar with it, he can naturally draw it by expressing its vitality rather than its image. He who expresses its vitality is bound to present it in form. As the form and the mind are cooperating so freely as to make the painter forget the distinction between them, the vitality of the object painted can be best expressed."[12]

This is undoubtedly a personal insight resulting from his painting experience for decades. According to some historical documents, Dong himself was a great fan of Mi Fu (1051 – 1107), and especially appreciated Mi's paintings of mountains shrouded in mist and cloud. Therefore, he imitated Mi's artworks, and drew out the *Landscape Painted in the Style of Mi Fu* to reproduce the mysterious and picturesque scenes, out of which he discovered Ni's *tour de force*. That is, Mi Fu as a well-established painter had magical power in his expression of changing mist and cloud. Moreover, with respect to the Four Masters of the Yuan Dynasty, Dong celebrated Ni Zan (1301 – 1374) as the sage of literati painting, and recommends Ni's style of sparse and desolate painting. Dong has not merely collected the *Autumn Forests* painted by Ni Zan, but also replicated Ni's representative works. The Collection of Landscapes Painted in the Style of Ni Zan has been handed down from age to age. Dong praised Ni in his inscription on a super replica, claiming that

"... Ni is a rare genius, his paintings are so unique under Heaven. He draws out a sketch of several wintry twigs by a few offhanded brushstrokes, which is then no way to purchase by thousands of gold coins."[13]

In addition, Dong also held in high esteem the style of majestic painting by Huang Gongwang (1269 – 1354), a contemporary of Ni Zan. He absorbed the artistic strength from Huang's works and incorporated it into his own paintings, some of which are renowned as the *Eight Views of the Autumn Mood* (秋兴八景图), *Mountains and Rivers in the South of China* (江南山水

10
Yanyuan Zhang 张彦远, *Lun hua* 论画 [*On Painting*], see: Zicheng Shen 沈子丞 (ed.), *Li dai lun hua ming zhu hui bian* 历代论画名著汇编 [*A Collection of Well-known Essays on Painting in Chinese History*], Wen Wu Press, Beijing 1982, p. 36. As for a specific account of "the six rules of Chinese painting" proposed by Xie He (谢赫) around the 5th century, see: Keping Wang, *Beauty and Human Existence in Chinese Philosophy*, FLTR Press – Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore 2021, pp. 234–237.

11
Shaoshu Jiang 姜绍书, *Wu sheng shi shi* 无声诗史 [*A History of Silent Poetry in China*], vol. 4, cited from: Fuguan Xu 徐复观, *Zhongguo yishu jingshen* 中国艺术精神 [*The Spirit of Chinese Art*], Chun Feng Wen Yi Press, Shenyang 1987, p. 357. "The six rules of painting" in this context are referred to those proposed by Xie He in a period between 5th and 6th centuries. See: K. Wang, *Beauty and Human Existence in Chinese Philosophy*, pp. 234–236.

12
Qichang Dong 董其昌, *Hua Chan Shi sui bi* 画禅室随笔 [*Notes from the Studio of Painting Chan*], in: Z. Shen (ed.), *Li dai lun hua ming zhu hui bian*, p. 255.

13
Cited from: Liangzhi Zhu, *Nan hua shi liu guan*南画十六观 [*Sixteen Views on Chinese Literati Paintings*], Peking University Press, Beijing 2013, pp. 339–340.

图), *Woods and Streams in Tranquility* (林泉清幽图), *Stream Glittering and Cloud Shadows* (泉光云影图), *Concealing Clouds and Scattering Rainfall* (云藏雨散图), and *Spring Mountains in the Coming Rain* (春山欲雨图), among others.

As read in his comments on Dong's painting named *The Nine Peaks* in *Wintry Green* (九峰寒翠图), Wang Shimin (1592 – 1680) in the Qing Dynasty pointed out the following:

"This painting is extremely elegant and excellent, completely freed from tacky vogues. It appears so bleak, subtle and significant that it is taken as a perfect echo of Ni's artistry in all dimensions. Looking at the painting, one feels as though being indulged in the landscape that comes out of a hidden fusion between the scene and brushwork."[14]

Even so, Dong shows no complacency at all. Instead, he put forward a higher requirement of "learning to follow Heaven and Earth", and operated a further investigation of the minute details of clouds, mountains, grasses and trees etc. He proceeded to sum up the *métier* of observation, and refines the method of expressing the inner vitality of the object through its outer image. He advises the painter to be keen on both contemplative concentration and heartfelt tranquillity. He is alone interacting with the vital rhythm of Heaven and Earth, and eventually feels himself into it as an outcome of his convergence with it. Accordingly, he finds inspiration and ecstasy when his state of mind is corresponding to the pleasant weather and fascinating scenery. Under such favourable conditions in accord with the union between Heaven and himself, he makes his best "mind-inspired paintings" (心画) that reveal the great Beauty of Heaven and Earth in silence. Such Beauty is not simply formal but symbolic of the vital rhythm of Heaven and Earth. It implies a sense of the affectionate universe to the mind of a Chinese literati painter. In Dong's view, the only way for a painter to master the "Dao of painting" is to experience directly and perceive the vital rhythm of all things immediately. By so doing, the painter is enabled to "take pleasure from painting" and enjoy the benefits of "longevity" in the meantime.[15]

It is noteworthy that Dong attaches crucial importance to becoming familiar with the object, and regards it as the only way of naturally expressing its vital rhythm. In my understanding, familiarity with the object requires close and regular exploration to figure out the underlying structure and form of the natural object and refers to the painter's special approach to watching and appreciating all things between Heaven and Earth. This approach can be divided into two directions: one is to contemplate the object from the perspective of the self (以我观物), and the other is to contemplate the object from the perspective of the object (以物观物). The former expects one to contemplate the object from the standpoint of one's own emotional experience, project one's own sentiment and interest onto the object, and then transform the appearance of the object into the image in one's own mind through creative imagination. By so doing, the object will be coloured with either personal mood or subjective touch. Further on, it is rearranged and painted to express human feelings in perceiving the unity of the object and the self. Under such circumstances, it is transfigured into an artwork that comes out of brush and ink with "the presence of the self" (有我之境).

As to the latter, that is to contemplate the object from the object's perspective, the first object is related to a physical object in existence, whereas the second one is related to an aesthetic object in the form. The act of contemplating the first object in view of the second one inevitably involves the active subject

from an aesthetic viewpoint. Otherwise, there would be no aesthetic contemplation at all. However, the self is no longer confined to personal emotions and feelings but obsessed in a spiritual state of pure-mindedness. In other words, it turns into the true self and goes beyond personal emotions and feelings, cognitive desires and prejudices. It retains its true being, and experiences the aesthetic object by virtue of a free and infinite mental state of aesthetic transcendence. This being true, it will conduce to "the absence of the self" (无我之境) in which there is no distinction between the self and the object. Say, "the self and the object are no longer distinguished between which is which".[16] They are identified with one another as if they merge into oneness. Even though being separated in actual reality, they become indistinguishable due to transcending physical existents and appearances. This is interestingly reminiscent of the metaphorical symbolism of "Zhuang Zhou dreaming of a butterfly" (庄周梦蝶). It is cited here as an illustration.

"Once Zhuang Zhou dreamed he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting and fluttering around, happy with himself and doing as he pleased. He didn't know he was Zhuang Zhou. Suddenly he woke up and there he was, solid an unmistakable Zhuang Zhou. But he didn't know if he was Zhuang Zhou who dreamed he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Zhuang Zhou. Between Zhuang Zhou and a butterfly, there must be some distinction. This is called the Transformation of things [*wu hua* 物化]."[17]

In brief, by "transformation of things", it is meant not only the interaction between things subjected to interchanging all the time but also the interconnection between things pertaining to human apperception. Things like Zhuang Zhou and a butterfly "must have some distinction" in between, but they come into indistinguishability (somewhat as oneness) when being transformed in accordance with the possibility of heterogeneous isomorphism. Such a possibility often resides in artistic imagination or aesthetic contemplation. In my observation, it is more or less the same with Zhuangzi's delighted perception of the joyful swimming of the fish down below when he is travelling with Huizi over a bridge on the river Hao.[18] This is simply because Zhuangzi's agreeable and delightful perception on this occasion is aesthetic and playful in kind.

14
Ibid., p. 346.

15
According to Dong Qichang: "The Dao of painting has something to do with the universe in the hands of a painter who sees none other than the vitality of all things. Hence such a painter usually enjoys longevity. In contrast, if a painter is confined to describing minute details only, he may shorten his lifespan, and his paintings are lack of vitality on this account. Painters like Huang Gongwang (Zijiu), Shen Zhou (Shitian) and Wen Zhengming all lived long lives until their eighties. Qiu Ying lived a short life, and Zhao Wuxing died over sixty. Even though Qiu and Zhao differed from each other in character, they both learned to follow the pop trend instead of treating painting as their being or taking pleasure from painting. It is Huang Gongwang who was the first to push the door open to taking pleasure from painting." – Q. Dong, *Hua Chan Shi sui bi*, p. 253.

16
Yong Shao 邵雍, *'Guan wu pian'* 观物篇 [*A Discussion on Contemplating the Object*] / '*Guan wu wai pian'* 观物外篇 [*An Extended Discussion of Contemplating the Object*], in: Peking University Department of Philosophy (ed.), *Zhong guo mei xue shi zi liao xuan bian* 中国美学史资料选编 [*Selected Sources of the History of Chinese Aesthetics*], Zhong Hua Shu Ju, Beijing 1981, vol. 2, p. 18.

17
Chuang Tzu 莊子, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, transl. Burton Watson, Columbia University Press, New York 1968, ch. 2, p. 49.

18
Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi*, ch. 17, p. 283.

In a word, "the presence of the self" results in "contemplating the object from the perspective of the self". It is prone to be overshadowed by emotion, thus obscuring the judgment and the understanding of the real meaning of the affectionate universe in line with human existence. In contrast, "the absence of the self" is derived from "contemplating the object from the perspective of the object". It is apt to retain the true self with a pure mind, thus making it possible to see through the real meaning of the affectionate universe in line with human existence.[19] In my opinion, it is largely associated with the conception of free intuition and personal cultivation in Shao Yong (1011 – 1077), but extended to be a kind of serene contemplation without reference to self-engagement. Dong Qichang was known as the most prominent of literati painters at his time. He gave top priority to the first class of landscape painting characterised by spiritual freedom and aesthetic serenity. He himself strikes me as being open to "the absence of the self" and "the presence of the self" altogether, despite the fact that he tended to value the former more than the latter in his sense of art and beauty.

## Three Strategies of Painting Landscape

What is fairly remarkable is Dong Qichang's relentless pursuit of the picturesque scene and literary mind throughout his career. In his later years, Dong generalised his practical theory into three principal strategies:

"A painter eventually treats Heaven and Earth as a teacher, intermediately treats mountains and rivers as a teacher, and initially treats old masters as a teacher. This goes some way toward explaining the saying that 'one is only enabled to paint landscape after having read ten thousand books and travelled a thousand miles'. It is also the case with the saying that 'both the quiet sky and ten thousand horses are there to teach me how to paint'. Hence it is in vain to speak all this to a person who enjoys no such quietude and pleasure at all."[20]

As advised to a painter in the pure sense of this term, extensive learning from and rich knowledge of all under the sky are stressed as the most desirable prerequisite of personal cultivation for the telos of art-making. They respectively benefit from reading and travelling as an interconnected approach to exploring and comprehending all things within human reach. Quite clearly, the doctrinal idea of "treating Heaven and Earth as a teacher" is the same with that of "learning to follow Heaven and Earth". In Dong's vision, Heaven and Earth are so broad and infinite that they appear somewhat formless, but characteristic of generating power in inexhaustible quantity. More specifically, the act of "treating Heaven and Earth as a teacher" is two-dimensional at least. One is pointed to acting upon the virtue of Heaven and Earth that generates all beings and things alike, and the other pointed to apprehending the vital rhythm of Heaven and Earth that forms the base for the beauty of all sceneries. It is by so doing that one obtains a profound message and subtle enlightenment from the infinite vitality of the eternal motion and constant generation of Heaven and Earth. While experiencing and perceiving the great motion in a vital rhythm, a painter uses brush and ink to draw out varied images of the myriad things. These images are not simply "visible and colourful appearances (forms), but symbolic embodiments of the vital energy flowing between Heaven and Earth".[21] They are the fruits of a free and creative activity, aiming to express the vital essence of Heaven and Earth. The process of so doing is corresponding to the stage of producing "the mind-inspired paintings" (*xin hua*) through the most delicate expression of the inner vitality of the objects

contemplated. In order to fulfil the purpose, it expects the painter "to embrace the heart-mind of Heaven and Earth, and meanwhile to be capable of describing the body of the Supreme Void [the universe] by means of an ink brush".[22]

The act of "treating mountains and rivers as a teacher" is equal to that of "learning to follow mountains and rivers" at this point. It exposes a painter to facing all the scenes or surroundings near and far. It is intended to trace from what things appear to be to what they originally are by looking into their natural forms and existing conditions in the outside world. Compared with the formless and infinite Heaven and Earth, mountains and rivers are normally viewed as specific and finite objects that can be described in poetic images. On this account, the act of either "treating mountains and rivers as a teacher" or "learning to follow mountains and rivers" is conducive to the stage of drawing "sketches in real settings" and producing "eye-perceived paintings" (*mu hua*).

Regarding the act of "treating old masters as a teacher", it is identified with the act of "learning to follow old masters". The painter is advised to imitate the representative works of the precedent masters who are highly celebrated for their styles and techniques. Through this kind of imitation, a painter will apprehend and then discover a relevant method of refining both his expertise of the artistic composition and his brushwork of inking strokes, which is by and large approximate to the stage of producing "super replicas" (*yi hua*).

What Dong Qichang proposes on the progression of painting landscape seems to be top-down in an effort to advocate the ultimate rule of "learning to follow Heaven and Earth". Nevertheless, the process of learning how to paint in practice is to be bottom-up for certain. It is assumed to cover three major stages that range from the elementary to the final via the intermediate. Say, it starts from a low level and ends up in a high one. More specifically, it first learns to follow old masters, secondly learns to follow mountains and rivers, and thirdly learns to follow Heaven and Earth. Only by so doing does it tally with the logic of the progressive process of personal cultivation in respect to the step-by-step improvement of the artistry on the part of a good painter.[23]

19

Yong Shao 邵雍, *'Guan wu wai pian'*, vol. 2, p. 18. Shao Yong pointed out: "it is naturally vital to contemplate the object from the perspective of the object. It is subjectively emotional to contemplate the object from the perspective of self […]. The emphasis on self is bound to resort to emotion. Then emotion causes obscurity, and obscurity causes confusion. Conversely, the focus on the object is bound to conduce to vitality. Then vitality evokes spirituality, and spirituality evokes wisdom."

20

Qichang Dong, *'Dong Xuanzai zi ti hua fu'* 董玄宰自题画幅 [*Dong Xuanzai's Prefaces to his Paintings*], in: Keyu Wang (ed.), *Ming hua ti ba* 名画题跋 [*Prefaces and Postscripts on Famous Paintings*], vol. 18. Cited from: Yuhu Zhang, "'Cong 'shi shan chuan' dao 'shi tian di'" 从"师山川"到"师天地" ["From 'learning to follow mountains and Rivers' to 'learning to follow Heaven and Earth'"], *Wen yi yan jiu* 文艺研究 [*Journal of Literary and Art Studies*] (2008) 4, pp. 110–117, here p. 113.

21

Yuhu Zhang, "'Cong 'shi shan chuan' dao 'shi tian di'", pp. 113–114. Also see: Baihua Zong, *'Zhong guo shi hua Zhong suo b iao xian de kong jian yi shi'* 中国诗画中所表现的空间意识 [*The Sense of Space Expressed in Chinese Poetry and Painting*], in: Baihua Zong, *Mei xue yu yi jing* 美学与意境 [*Aesthetics and the Significant Realm*, Ren Min Press, Beijing 1987, pp. 245–264.

22

Wei Wang 王微, "'Xu hua'" 叙画 ["Talking about Painting"], in: Z. Shen (ed.), *Li dai lun hua ming zhu hui bian*, p. 16. By "the Supreme Void" here is meant the universe or cosmos.

23

Keping Wang, *Rediscovering Sino-Hellenic Ideas*, Foreign Language Press, Beijing 2016, pp. 379–386.

Undoubtedly, this progressive process is grounded on cultural literacy and artistic repertoire. Hence it calls for "reading ten thousand books" in order to assure three things as follows: a thorough understanding of all principles, a good command of insightful wisdom, and a high sensibility of aesthetic judgment. Moreover, it calls for "travelling ten thousand miles" in order to fulfil three missions as such: exploring a diversity of natural sceneries, observing delicate changes, and broadening artistic horizons. As shown in Dong's belief, a painter should do all this in order to grow into the habituation of contemplating any object with great ease and mental tranquillity, and achieve the capability of "having a complete image of the bamboo in the mind before drawing it". The bamboo allegory is often intended to commend the ability to portray the object and express its inner vitality through appealing imagery with high proficiency and expertise.

To mention in passing, Dong is preoccupied with the art of literati landscape painting in his lifetime. Quite persistently, he champions and promotes it all the way through. According to his categorisation, the artwork that is characterised with a superb expression of the spiritual subtlety of the object (*shen pin* 神品) is considered to be the ideal type, and the artwork that is characterized with an excellent expression of natural spontaneity of the object (*yi pin* 逸品) is considered to be the supreme type. Somewhat distinct from one another in certain dimensions, both of them reveal a kind of transcendent tendency, embrace an emphasis on the "scholarly ambiance", and celebrate a picturesque and poetic composition in light of the literati ethos of classical gracefulness and elegant simplicity.

All in all, Dong gives much credits to extensive learning and rich knowledge as the most important part of cultural literacy and personal cultivation for the improvement of artistic percipience. He even goes so far as to announce this argument: "A picturesque work is created by genius because it bears a lifelike tone along with rhythmic vitality." Yet, it still provides "something that can be acquired through learning". It is by "reading ten thousand books and traveling ten thousand miles" that a painter can broaden his horizon of the natural world, purify his mind of profane temptations or vulgar wants, and reach the level of composing the natural sceneries so skillfully in imagination, and painting mountains and rivers to express the inner vitality of Heaven and Earth.[24] Accordingly, Dong takes up the example of Zhao Danian, a court painter of the Song Dynasty in the 11th century, so as to attest the truth that extensive reading and traveling can neither be neglected nor belittled. Otherwise, it would be difficult for a painter either to procure expressive images of natural landscapes in mind or to become a real master of painting at all, not to mention the big talk about the "ambition to be an ancestor of painting" at any rate.[25]

As a matter of fact, the same applies to the appreciation of literati painting as is inseparable from cultural literacy, aesthetic sensibility and artistic percipience altogether. For instance, in order to appreciate the picturesque scene and literary mind as embodied in Dong's literati paintings each, one needs to understand his ideological sources from Daoism and Buddhism, sources that are originated from such ideas as "becoming a disciple of Heaven" and worshiping the "true being in emptiness alone" (the substantial aspect). Moreover, one needs to know Dong's tenacious learning to follow Heaven and Earth, mountains and rivers, and old masters through persistent practice (the applicable aspect). In addition, one needs to analyse his artistic taste, style and

rhythm (the fruitful aspect) with the focus on such elements as the sense of emptiness, harmony with Nature, high and mystical ideals in significant simplicity, elegancy, picturesqueness, and brushwork. Otherwise, facing a literati painting in which "the current of rivers runs beyond Heaven and Earth, and the colour of mountains is so elusive to catch", one can see none other than the materialized shape of the object in presence, without getting a glimpse into the natural creation of Heaven and Earth, the vital rhythm of the universe, and the true meaning of human life. Regarding how to cultivate the aesthetic wisdom or sensibility to perceive things in a spiritual manner, it calls for a suitable and feasible strategy after all. In this respect, I think the following statement by Hong Yingming, the author of *The Roots of Wisdom* in the 17th century, is quite enlightening and instructive. It reads,

"Only in the midst of peace and quiet can the true realm of man's life be perceived. Only in places where the folks are of few desires can the disposition of human nature be recognized. Remain indifferent whether you will be granted favours or subjected to humiliation, and just do it by leisurely watching the flowers in the courtyard bloom and fade. Pay no heed to whether you will be demoted or promoted from the present post, and just do it by casually following the clouds on the horizon mass and scatter. By listening in quietude to the appeal implied by the pines in the woods or the murmuring of spring water over pebbles, one can appreciate the exquisite melody composed by Nature. By watching leisurely the mist rising from the thick growth of grass and the shadow of snow-white clouds reflected on the surface of a lake, one can find the wonderful spectacles created by Heaven and Earth."[26]

This method is designed not merely to get rid of impulsiveness and impatience that stay against the Dao of painting landscape, but also to develop an aesthetic attitude towards serene contemplation in line with the Dao of personal cultivation. Such attitude is applicable to contemplating natural sceneries and appreciating literati paintings. Moreover, the masterpieces of Dong and the like are known to express no less than, or even more than, the symbolism of all things between Heaven and Earth. They have actually dedicated their efforts to exposing vividly such things as the real meaning of human life, the true being of mental substance, the mysterious melody of the universe, and the "wonderful spectacles created by Heaven and Earth".

According to my observation, this method is originally aimed at personal cultivation. It goes so far as to advise literati to develop their individual perception and sensitivity to the scenic value of the natural environment, which in turn will enhance, among other things, their contemplative experience, philosophical insight, and aesthetic wisdom. Accordingly, it places the context in the picturesque context and bestows the literati with a literary mind that is poetic and philosophical. Moreover, this is done deliberately in an effort to awaken and strengthen the affinity for Heaven and Earth in general, and with picturesque scenes in particular. For Chinese literati are seemingly born with a potential predilection for such an affinity and are usually willing to cultivate it into an affectionate sense of Heaven and Earth (the universe). This is largely due to their constant exposure to and joyful contact with the picturesque and the poetic, either in imagination or in existence during the course of "reading ten thousand books and traveling a thousand miles". As affirmed in *The Literary Mind and the Carved Dragon* (文心雕龙), "those who gaze

24
Q. Dong, *Hua Chan Shi sui bi*, p. 249.

25
Ibid., p. 269.

26
Yingming Hong 洪英明, *Cai gen tan* 菜根谭 [*The Roots of Wisdom*].

at a mountain have their feelings spread over it, and those who gaze at a sea have their feelings spill over it". On this account, the way of personal cultivation and the way of painting landscape are closely coupled with each other to the extent that they appear as two sides of one coin. Their interconnection is bound to occur so long as one is interested in painting landscape as an artistic hobby or a lifestyle.

## Transformation and Innovation in Duration

Among the three kinds of painting as classified earlier, the "mind-inspired paintings" belong to the highest level due to the rule of "learning to follow Heaven and Earth". Stemmed from the rationale of "heaven-human oneness", this rule serves to bring forth the picturesque scene and literary mind as are exemplified in the "mind-inspired paintings". Such paintings represent the artistic excellence of Dong's lifetime pursuit and accomplishment.

Judging from the standpoint of the vital cause and its three aspects, the rule of "learning to follow Heaven and Earth" implies the substantial aspect in its emphasis on the rationale of the heaven-human oneness and the subject-object unity. Meanwhile, it entails the applicable aspect due to its emphasis on the practical operation of the substantial aspect in the course of learning to follow Heaven and Earth as the studio of natural Creator. These two aspects turn out to be corresponding to the intrinsically dialectic logic of making no distinction between the substantial and the applicable aspects. The picturesque scene and literary mind are the outcomes of applying the Dao of literati painting to expressing the inner vitality through the outer imagery. They are therefore attributed to the fruitful aspect in the context of producing the artwork as the fruit by means of the applicable aspect. If these three aspects are put into the art of painting landscape, they are practically interactive and interwoven, not simply allied with the principle of making no distinction between the substantial and the applicable aspects, but also with the principle of integrating the substantial, the applicable and the fruitful aspects into an organic trinity.

Then, at this point after Dong Qichang, there arises a question about whether or not the theory of the vital cause and its three aspects originated from the conception of "heaven-human oneness" still endures in the history of Chinese landscape painting. The answer is yes. However, the process is dynamic, accompanied by transformation and innovation of high frequency. Many literati in history have embraced this theory of painting, but only some of them have become masters at their best. In my view, Shi Tao (石涛 1642 – 1708) in the Qing Dynasty is the most successful in this field. Shi himself takes the rule of learning to follow Heaven and Earth as the most crucial of all, and grows deeply obsessed with it in his later years. He has factually devoted most of his lifetime to travelling through almost all famous mountains and rivers across China, searching for various forms of fantastic and grotesque peaks and drawing the most unique picturesque sketches. He once outlines the gist of what he thinks in these poetic lines:

"Without traveling a hundred thousand miles,

There is no other alternative to see all the world's wonders.

My ink brush paints freely without hesitation for a second, and therefore

The older I grow, the more I get engrossed in learning to follow Heaven and Earth."[27]

Of course, Shi tenders much attention to the necessary inheritance of the past tradition, but never abstains from making transformation and innovation by means of pioneering brushwork and unique composition. Judging from his existent works up till now, he uses ink brush freely in an individual way with a needed reconsideration of relevant rules, techniques and standards of taste. As a result, his paintings feature vital rhythm in thought-provoking ambience, artistic excellence in novel arrangement, poetic and picturesque expression in plain simplicity, and profound philosophy in playful innocence. For example, the One Brushstroke method of painting (*yi hua fa* 一画法) that he recommends is quite distinctive and original. It is neither a specific craft of using an underlying line to complete a painting in a minimalist mode nor a coherent and overarching rule of painting in one brushstroke only. Instead, it is referred to as the fundamental way of creating all things under the sky. Say, it signifies an organic synthesis not only of the inherent laws of motion and rhythm between Heaven and Earth, life and art but also of the working principles of painting landscape in particular and artistic creation in general.

Incidentally, Shi himself is profoundly influenced by Daoism and Buddhism. He is familiar, for example, with the philosophical thought-way of the One in Laozi (founder of Daoism), which is somewhat manifested through such ideas as the following:

"Dao gives birth to the One. The One gives birth to the Two. The Two give birth to the Three. The Three bring forth the myriad of things."[28]

"Heaven obtained the Oneness and became clear; Earth attained the One and became tranquil; The Gods obtained the One and became divine; The valleys obtained the One and became full; All things obtained the One and became alive and kept growing."[29]

Meanwhile, he has an insight into Buddhism as a philosophy that highly celebrates dialectic *chan* maxims, such as "One is all, and all is One"; "Everything stems from One". Owing to all this, he tended to reconsider and redefine the principles and techniques of painting landscapes from the standpoint of cosmological ontology. He thus arrives at this conclusion:

"One Brushstroke is the origin of all things, and the source of all images […]. He who has established the One Brushstroke method believes that have-no-method gives birth to have-method, and have-method threads through many methods […]. This One Brushstroke is so inclusive as to cover what is beyond the chaos of the primordial cosmos, and so expressive as to contain millions of ink brushstrokes. All things don't begin with it but end up in it […]. Hence the One Brushstroke method is set up and all things are illuminated through its illustration."[30]

As I understand it, in this discourse context Shi Tao refers specifically to the dialectical logic of Daoism and Buddhism, seeking to use the One Brushstroke method to break through the chaos of the primordial universe and express

27
Shi Tao 石涛, *Zi shu shi juan* 自书诗卷 [*Collected Poems in the Author's Calligraphy*], in: Shi Tao, *Shi Tao shu hua quan ji* 石涛书画全集 [*The Complete Works of Calligraphy and Painting by Shi Tao*], Tianjin Ren Min Fine Art Press, Tianjin 2002, vol. 1, p. 98.

28
Laozi, *The Dao De Jing*, transl. Keping Wang, Foreign Language Press, Beijing 2008, ch. 42, p. 76.

29
Ibid., ch. 39, p. 69.

30
Shi Tao 石涛, *Yi hua zhang* 一画章 [*On the One Brushstroke*], in: Shi Tao 石涛, *Shi Tao hua yu lu* 石涛画语录 [Shi Tao's Sayings on Painting].

the spiritual vitality of all things between Heaven and Earth. Accordingly, he claims that his art of One Brushstroke comes from incorporating the vital essence of all things. This leads us to the question of what sustains the vitality of all things and also the ethos of life.

With regard to the art of painting landscape in particular, the One Brushstroke method is specifically pointed to two things at least: one is the *métier* of painting, and the other the expression of the true self. The former requires the application of the One Brushstroke method to the possible emergence of many methods, while the latter demands a free mind of tranquillity and a spiritual vision of all things. In Shi's perception, the One Brushstroke craft assumes the great responsibility of "depicting the spiritual vitality of all things between Heaven and Earth", and acts upon the law with its service to coincide with "the great Dao of change in the world". According to his experience, painters who are proficient with this way of painting can "deal with the ten thousand things in view of the One; and deal with the One in view of the ten thousand things".[31] In addition, they can well "express the vitality of mountains, the movement of rivers, the life of forests, and the leisure of humans through their paintings".[32] Just with one leading brushstroke of critical necessity at this stage, the mountains, rivers, human figures, birds, animals, plants, ponds, pavilions and towers within the scope will take shape through meaningful sketches, and present picturesque scenes through visual images. Thus, a painting will be accomplished before it is noticed by its maker, because it comes by spontaneously without violating what happens to the maker's heart-mind.[33] This being the case, Shi acclaims himself as a god-sent genius, and boasts the One Brushstroke craft as the best of all when employed either to portray the formal and spiritual of natural sceneries or to speak for the unspeakable beauty of all mountains and rivers.[34]

When it comes to modern times, Huang Binhong (1865 – 1955) should be qualified as a painting master. In his writings such as the *Comments on the Six Rules* (*Liu fa gan yan* 六法感言) and the *Collected Lectures* (*Jiang xue ji lu* 讲学集录), he thinks highly of Dong Qichang's key proposals in the *Essentials* of *Painting* (*Hua zhi* 画旨). Huang developed his own style by inheriting and innovating the painting methods of the masters in the Song and Yuan dynasties. He managed to make an integrative use of them through constant transformation and innovation. Throughout his lifetime, he travelled a great deal across China, kept learning to follow Nature, attached more importance to sketching sceneries, and accumulated over 10,000 drawings. In his middle age, his painting style became more vigorous, forceful and intriguing. In his senior years, his use of ink and water became more individual, impressive and inviting.

Regarding his experimentation with traditional techniques, over time Huang kept up his pace and focused more on creative alternatives. For example, when it comes to landscape painting, he was convinced that a painter in the modern era should learn from both modern and old masters. However, he found it more rewarding to use natural landscapes as a guide than old masters. To paint good pictures, he advised a painter to acquire both a good knowledge of painting and a sufficient amount of personal cultivation. In this way, a painter will be able to align his artistic interest with the natural Creator, complement what is lopsided in natural scenes, and compose with genuinely expressive brushwork and smart design.[35] Meanwhile, Huang associated the "natural Creator" (造化) with the internal "spiritual rhythm" (神韵). What he

does here seems to leave the readership under the impression that the "natural Creator" is referred either to "mountains and rivers" or to "Heaven and Earth". But in actuality, he encouraged a painter to engage himself in a *vis-à-vis* contemplation of the beautiful scenes in Nature, apprehend the spiritual rhythm beneath the natural creations of Heaven and Earth, and perceive the vital organism in the affectionate universe with incredible power of generating the myriad things. Only in this way can a painter be able to make "true paintings" in the pure sense of this term.

Up to this stage, Huang proceeded to assert that "a natural scene comes into a painting, and the painting in turn overtakes the natural scene". It is definitely the biggest challenge for the painting to overtake the natural scene because the shapes of objects in the world are naturally visual, and easily available for common viewers to see with their own eyes and to ramble about them among themselves. Nevertheless, they possess the vital rhythm and spiritual subtlety containing beauty inside, which is not visible to common viewers who lack percipience in most cases. In contrast, a good painter is well in a position to detect such beauty and express it to its full extent, which leads to creating true paintings. Reversely, a piece of painting that merely shows the formal image of an object or scene is just like a *bonsai* on the table. In other words, it is by no means a true painting at all.[36]

It is noteworthy that Huang devoted his lifetime to painting the picturesque at its best. He prioritised the vital and rhythmic beauty over the formal resemblance and apparent verisimilitude. He was well known for his considerable contribution to the positive heritage of the precedent masters. In addition, he stayed perseverant in making the best out of them in the long course of constant pursuit and artistic practice. In his later years, Huang went through and summed up what struck him as the most successful experiences of painting landscape from ancient to modern times. He brought forth the seven ways of using ink through brush: heavy ink (*nong mo* 浓墨), light ink (*dan mo* 淡墨), break ink (*po mo* 破墨), splash ink (*zi mo* 渍墨), amass ink (*ji mo* 积墨), charred ink (*jiao mo* 焦墨), and over-night ink (*su mo* 宿墨). Among them, he demonstrated a deep understanding of the historical origin and creative use of the break ink. As he stated,

"The break ink technique is to use heavy ink to break into light ink, or the vice versa. Dilute the brush-tip ink with a set of broad sweeps carefully, and break the ink applied to the set taken previously with the brush tip when the ink is not dry yet, so that the water could penetrate naturally, giving full expression to all surfaces of the objects engaged, and making a sense of thinness,

31
Shi Tao 石涛, *Yin yun zhang* 氤氲章 [*On the Painting of Cloud and Mist*], in: Shi Tao 石涛, *Shi Tao hua yu lu* 石涛画语录 [*Shi Tao's Sayings on Painting*].

32
Ibid.

33
Shi Tao, *Yi hua zhang* 一画章.

34
Shi Tao 石涛, *Shan chuan zhang* 山川章 [*On the Painting of Mountains and Rivers*], in: Shi Tao 石涛, *Shi Tao hua yu lu* 石涛画语录 [*Shi Tao's Sayings on Painting*].

35
Binhong Huang 黄宾虹, *Zen yang cai shi yi zhang hao hua* 怎样才是一张好画 [*What Counts for a Fine Painting*], in: Binhong Huang, *Huang Binhong lun yi* 黄宾虹论艺 [*Huang Binhong on Art*], Zhongxiu Wang (ed.), Shanghai Calligraphy and Painting Press, Shanghai 2012, pp. 125–126.

36
Binhong Huang, *Huang Binhong hua yu lu* 黄宾虹画语录 [*Huang Binhong's Sayings on Painting*], in: Liu Wang *et al*. (eds.), *Yi shu te zheng lun* 艺术特征论 [*On the Characteristics of Art*], Culture and Art Press, Beijing 1984, p. 21.

thickness, dryness or moisture in the meantime. In addition, the ink colour will stay fresh and lively on the paper, just like being nourished by rain and dew. This technique is well mastered by literati painters in the Song and Yuan dynasties, but rarely known in the Ming Dynasty. That's why the brush-and-ink paintings in the Ming Dynasty are of poor quality. Shi Tao in the Qing Dynasty revives this technique. He spreads a layer of light ink and then uses a layer of heavy ink to paint fine grasses, waiting for the natural seepage of water and ink in effect. Therefore, the grasses look thriving and vivid as they are. This is an example of using heavy ink to break into light ink. Relatively speaking, it is easy to use heavy ink to break into light ink while difficult to use light ink to break into heavy ink."[37]

Aside from transforming and renovating the ancient ways of painting, Huang strived to offer new ideas and explore new techniques. With an in-depth understanding of the painting theory on the use of ink and water, he proceeded to launch bold experiments and came up with the delicate artistry of spreading water for the sake of coherent effect, rhythmic flow and unified vision. He did all this in a bid to create "spontaneous paintings between resemblance and non-resemblance". Therefore, Huang was alleged to mature slowly in art and achieve his high accomplishment until he was 75 years old. "Mature" here refers to his act of learning to follow the natural Creator, instead of mastering his skill of painting mountains and rivers. The images of mountains and rivers in his mind are shown through his imaginative power and magical transformation.[38]

Indeed, Huang is renowned for his profound knowledge, sophisticated expertise, and adequate use of varied techniques with ink and water. Sometimes he would apply heavy colours to either thick ink or scorched ink, which procures an expressive touch to "illustrate the one while manifesting the many". All this elicits the ingenious use of bright ink in black-and-white contrast, which evokes the vital force of a painting, and portrays mountains and rivers in light of a lofty, magnificent and significant tone. Interestingly, each of his outstanding artworks turns out to be a proof of the discourse given: What he has done in art making "has no parallel in history, and may serve as an exemplary sample for later generations to recreate". In conclusion, few modern painters can surpass Huang in respect to his artistic accomplishment. Li Keran, who claims himself to be a "low achiever of Huang's students", may be the only artist to be compared with Huang in the genre of painting misty mountains and cloudy vales.

Taken in sum, the spirit of Chinese aesthetics is deep-set in the conception of "heaven-human oneness" in essence. It features a durative mechanism that is associated with the interactive and interrelated framework. This framework consists of the vital cause and its three aspects termed as the substantial, the applicable and the fruitful, the operation of which is illustrated through the art of painting literati landscape in the discussion given above. In this case, I traced back to Dong Qichang, Shi Tao and Huang Binhong as three representatives of literati landscape painters. By so doing, we can get an insight not only into the way of inheritance and transformation but also into the synthetic artistry of the picturesque scene and literary mind. The three painters and their artistic experiments give prominence to the enduring vitality embedded in Chinese aesthetic ethos because of their historical significance and pragmatic relevance. Such vitality plays a guiding role in artistic practice, remains durative with the passage of time, and undergoes further development through endless creation and recreation by well-established literati painters. Compared with what is stereotyped and lifeless, what is creative and dynamic

stays open to constant transformation and innovation, and therefore deserves more reconsideration and reflection.

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## Iznova promišljati duh kineske estetike

**Sažetak**

*Duh kineske estetike duboko je ukorijenjen u koncepciji jedinstva između neba i čovjeka. Iz perspektive pragmatičnog vitalizma, njegov se mehanizam trajnosti može pratiti do vitalnog uzroka. Ovaj uzrok obuhvaća tri glavna aspekta: supstancijalni, primjenjivi i plodonosni, koji čine dijalektički interaktivan i međusobno povezan okvir. U praksi, ovaj okvir oslikava umjetnost naučenjačkog slikanja krajolika koje karakterizira progresivni proces. Taj je proces izložen trima primarnim strategijama ili činovima učenja: slijediti stare majstore u početnoj fazi, slijediti planine i rijeke u srednjoj fazi i slijediti Nebo i Zemlju u konačnoj fazi. Sve to, prikazano je u relevantnoj teoriji i umjetničkom stvaralaštvu za većinu kineskih slikara naučenjaka, od kojih su Dong Qichang, Shi Tao i Huang Binhong tri tipična predstavnika iz različitih razdoblja između 16. i 20. stoljeća.*

**Ključne riječi**

jedinstvo neba i čovjeka, vitalni uzrok, aspekt supstancijalnosti, aspekt primjenjivosti, aspekt plodonosnosti, tri strtegije, naučenjačko krajobrazno slikarstvo, Dong Qichang, Shi Tao, Huang Binhong

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## Den Geist der chinesischen Ästhetik neu denken

**Zusammenfassung**

*Der Geist der chinesischen Ästhetik ist tief in der Vorstellung von der Einheit zwischen Himmel und Mensch verwurzelt. Aus der Perspektive des pragmatischen Vitalismus lässt sich sein durativer Mechanismus bis zu der vitalen Ursache zurückverfolgen. Diese Ursache umfasst drei Hauptaspekte: den substanziellen, den anwendbaren und den fruchtbringenden, die einen dialektisch interaktiven und miteinander verbundenen Rahmen bilden. In der Praxis wird dieser Rahmen durch die Kunst der Landschaftsmalerei von Literatenmalern veranschaulicht, die durch einen progressiven Prozess gekennzeichnet ist. Dieser Prozess ist drei primären Strategien oder Lernakten ausgesetzt: in der Anfangsphase alten Meistern zu folgen, in der Zwischenphase Bergen und Flüssen zu folgen und in der Endphase Himmel und Erde zu folgen. All dies wird in der relevanten Theorie und im künstlerischen Schaffen eines Großteils chinesischer Literatenmaler exemplifiziert, von denen Dong Qichang, Shi Tao und Huang Binhong als drei typische Exponenten aus verschiedenen Perioden zwischen dem 16. und 20. Jahrhundert in Erscheinung treten.*

**Schlüsselwörter**

Einheit von Himmel und Mensch, vitale Ursache, substanzieller Aspekt, anwendbarer Aspekt, fruchtbringender Aspekt, drei Strategien, Landschaftsmalerei der Literatenmaler, Dong Qichang, Shi Tao, Huang Binhong

37
B. Huang, *Huang Binhong hua yu lu* 黄宾虹画语录 [*Huang Binhong's Sayings on Painting*], Part III.

38
Bomin Wang, *Zhongguo huihua tongshi* 中国绘画通史 [A *Complete History of Chinese Painting*], San Lian Bookstore, Beijing 2000, p. 418.

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# Repenser l'esprit de l'esthétique chinoise

**Résumé**

*L'esprit de l'esthétique chinoise est profondément enraciné dans l'idée de l'unité entre le ciel et l'homme. Selon la perspective du vitalisme pragmatique, le mécanisme de durée peut nous faire remonter jusqu'à la cause vitale. Cette cause comprend trois aspects : le substantiel, l'applicable et le fécond, qui constituent un cadre dialectiquement interactif et interconnecté. Dans la pratique, ce cadre illustre l'art d'une peinture de paysages de lettrés caractérisée par un processus progressif. Ce processus est exposé à trois stratégies majeures ou actes d'enseignement : suivre le chemin des anciens maîtres dans la phase initiale, suivre les montagnes et les rivières dans la phase intermédiaire et suivre le Ciel et la Terre dans la phase finale. Tout cela est illustré à travers une théorie pertinente et une création artistique pour la plupart des peintres lettrés, dont Dong Qichang, Shi Tao et Huang Binhong sont trois représentants typiques appartenant à diverses époques entre le 16ème et le 20ème siècle.*

**Mots-clés**

unité du ciel et de l'homme, cause vitale, aspect de la substantialité, aspect de l'applicabilité, aspect de la fécondité, trois stratégies, peintures de paysages de lettrés, Dong Qichang, Shi Tao, Huang Binhong