

Coversheet

Chinese Studies

Coursework

“Taoism explains art and art explains Taoism. Art validates Taoism’s identification of the fundamental principles of reality.” (B Willis). How far would you agree with this view?

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“Taoism explains art and art explains Taoism. Art validates Taoism’s identification of the fundamental principles of reality.” (B. Willis). How far would you agree with this view?

Taoism is one of the most important and influential philosophies in China. It is a philosophy that is extremely hard to define, because when attempting, we are already challenged by the first sentence of the *Tao-te ching* “The Tao that can be spoken of is not the real way.”¹ However, by scrutinizing Chinese art and paintings, we may catch a fleeting glimpse of *Tao*, the mysterious energy of the universe which is the source of life.² Many of the fundamental concepts and ideas of Taoism are expressed through Chinese paintings, and by studying them, we may get a better grasp and understanding of this abstract yet beautiful philosophy.

Taoism is the combination of a religion, philosophy and tradition that has shaped the lives of the Chinese for more than 2000 years.³ However, what are ‘the fundamental principles of reality’ of Taoism? To the Taoists, there is only one reality, and that is the Tao⁴. “Tao” or “the Way” is the core of Taoism, it is a force which flows through all life and is the first cause of everything.⁵ It can be nothing, yet it can also be everything; It is something that can only be experienced but not explained.⁶ Therefore, Tao is a spiritual principle, it is one that deals with the primary nature of things, with our own inner self, with the nature of being and the being of nature,⁷ with the very roots and firmaments of what it means to be alive and what life is. Tao is spirit and life united.⁸

Taoists looked on art with special interests, for it seemed to them that art corresponded in many ways to the principles of Tao. Therefore it was not surprising that Taoism became the primary basis of Chinese art.⁹

The main goal of a Chinese painter was to reach a level of true inspiration, a union with Tao. A painting was not a literal representation of a scene¹⁰ but a blending of what the artist saw and the way the artist’s mind transformed it.¹¹ The most important

¹ Eva Wong, Teachings of the Tao (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1997), p. 1.

² *Ibid.*

³ J. Dominguez, Religions in China, Taoism, <http://religion-cults.com/Eastern/Taoism/taoism.htm>, 24th March 2006.

⁴ Ben Willis, The Tao of Art (London: Century Hutchinson Ltd, 1987), p. 17.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Willis, p. 17.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Wong, p. 1.

factor was that qì, the breath of life had to appear in all forms.¹² This breath of life could be found in nature, where Taoists believed contained the way to spiritual harmony.¹³ Nature was always at the very heart of Chinese painting and nearly its sole preoccupation.¹⁴ Besides this, minimalism, wu-wei, and other ethnical ideas were also moral lessons drawn from Nature- the standard for Heaven and Earth as well for man.¹⁵ Thus it was not surprising that landscape paintings were viewed as the most important genre of Chinese painting, with the natural components (mountains, rivers, trees, etc.) given more emphasis and importance than the non-natural components (human beings, houses, boats, etc.)¹⁶

The Chinese were able to see through the mystery and meaning of their landscapes through practicing the principles of Taoism. They were able to see a quality of self-existence and self-sufficiency¹⁷, which was above any intellectual conception of it.¹⁸ This quality's appearance in art came from the artist's individual perception of it. It was spoken of in terms of unity and essentiality, as well as by spirit, describing its feeling as the 'great emptiness' which was the Tao, as the 'hidden idea' of a natural scene of form.¹⁹ From this hint of spirit as somehow present in the forms of nature and even in the absence of form, and arising from the description of spiritual reality as a sense of 'emptiness' came the importance and meaning of space in Chinese painting.²⁰

The Chinese artists were masters of negative space,²¹ those parts of a painting which are not occupied by any form. To them, 'what is not there'²² is as important and meaningful in experiencing the beautiful as the forms themselves. There is a saying for this, 'Something is nothing, nothing is something',²³ it means sometimes the less that is done the more prominent the results will be. The large empty spaces in the landscape drawings are left blank to represent indefinite forms of objects such as fog, clouds, sky, river, sea, etc., the empty space is left open for the viewer's interpretation and imagination, but there is one thing the viewer needs to bear in mind- they have to be able to spot out the 'hidden ideas' within the drawing. Being

¹² Paula R. Hartz, Taoism World Religions (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1993), p. 101.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Willis, p. 2.

¹⁵ Chan Wing-Tsit, The story of Chinese Philosophy (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1995), p. 41.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Chan, p. 5.

¹⁸ Willis, p. 3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

²² Sherman E. Lee, Chinese Landscape Painting (New York: Harper and Row, 1954) p. 4.

²³ *Ibid.*

heavily influenced by Taoism, Chinese artists thought that visible forms and shapes of nature held their 'hidden idea',²⁴ and this expressed a visible and individual quality which could be perceived and expressed by art.²⁵ However, this intangible quality had to be reflected within, in the heart and mind of the artist. And in order to release it, the artist had to be natural himself. Only until then would there be a spiritual force, revealing life and character to material forms.²⁶ The technique of utilizing empty space in Chinese paintings was also due to the minimalist values of Taoism, where it is believed that one should never overdo anything.

It was a common feature for Chinese artists to be able to grasp the essential relations of contrast, distance and balance in Chinese paintings, which effectively gave voice to the most dynamic aspects of Taoist philosophies, the principle of *yin-yang*.²⁷ *Yin-yang* is a doctrine that conceived all action and events as the effect of two primary elements or forces, the positive and the negative²⁸. Painters would work to achieve a perfect balance of elements through composition of the painting. Mountains and foothills were balanced by rivers and streams, long views of land by clouds and trees, and negative space by positive space.²⁹ These opposing forces, *yin-yang*, were not meant to oppose each other, "The forces of yin and yang must work together, will work together, or the unnatural state of disharmony, inquietude and suffering will result"³⁰. *Yin-yang* are complements of each other, providing a unified and creative universe between the two.³¹ The goals of the Taoists and Chinese artists were to find the equilibrium between these two negative and positive principles.³² In order to find the balance between these two different extremes, the Taoist practitioners avoid all excess, all points of possessions and oppositions, and instead harmonize such conflicts by stilling them with their minds and their creative spirits.³³ This spiritual equilibrium comes neither from yin nor yang, but lies somewhere in between.³⁴ Many Chinese artists were able to harmonize yin and yang without noticing what they were doing, as they did it unconsciously, with little effort.³⁵ This is because the artists were guided by their intuition, which according to Taoists is the transmitter of spirit.

²⁴ Lee, p. 5.

²⁵ Willis, p. 5.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

²⁹ Paula R. Hartz, Taoism: World Religions (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1993) p. 102.

³⁰ Willis, p. 65.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

³² Arthur Waley, The Way and Its Power: A Study of the Tao Te Ching and Its Place in Chinese Thought (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1935) p. 112.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

³⁵ Willis, p. 69.

Taoists place strong emphasis on the idea of suspending the will, reducing egoistic extremes of unrest and possession, which in return, releases the spontaneous and creative spirit of nature.³⁶, and this is the whole idea of *wu-wei*.

Wu-wei is a term cited numerous times by Lao Tzu in the *Tao Te Ching*, it means literally in Chinese ‘non-action’, or, as used by him, ‘taking no unnatural action’³⁷. *Wu-wei* does not refer to not doing anything at all, but rather to the harmful effects of forcing things, of excessiveness, and of attachment.³⁸ However, its greater meaning lies in that it sets up intuition as the guiding principle for action, and leads to the idea of spontaneous knowledge being the main path to real creativity.³⁹ Non-action to Lao Tzu did not mean passivity or doing nothing; it meant not pushing anything to its extreme limit, or acting in accord with the laws of harmony. To the Taoists, the natural is the spiritual and the unnatural is the unspiritual.⁴⁰ And by letting nature follow its own course in daily life, by refraining from action which is contrary to nature, the life of man is not sublimated. On the contrary, it is liberated and fulfilled. Bearing this principle in mind, Chinese artists practice *wu-wei* unconsciously, become creative because of it, and realize the spiritual unity of life in their works and inner selves.⁴¹ Their art then becomes a vehicle of spiritual experience when artistic perception merges itself with the Taoist’s fundamental reality, both objectively and subjectively. This is because “the spiritual dimension is the original source of those two poles of existence, and this unification makes the artwork, consequently, a reflection of spiritual reality.”⁴² Hence as viewers, we may be able to see perfect harmony and the flow of Tao in Chinese paintings.

As mentioned before, Chinese art parallels with Taoism in that they both value spontaneity highly.⁴³ One of the main principles in Taoism is spontaneity, in fact, some would even go further to say that the nature of Tao is spontaneity.⁴⁴ Lao Tzu once said in ‘Tao Te Ching’ that ‘Man follows Earth, Earth follows Heaven, Heaven follows Dao, Dao follows Spontaneity’.⁴⁵ In the same sense, Chinese artists tried to draw spontaneously, because with spontaneity comes intuition,⁴⁶ then could they be

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Chan, p. 246.

³⁸ Willis, p. 67.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁴⁴ Hartz, p. 103.

⁴⁵ The classics of the Dao: A New Investigation, trans. Wang Keping (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1998)

⁴⁶ Willis, p. 72.

truly creative, only then could they draw with freely moving actions off the brush.⁴⁷ Unlike western artists, Chinese artists would not make drafts before the actual painting, they would not even think at all of what they were doing or how they were going to do it – it was just done, without a thought.⁴⁸ This of course, had much to do with the strict, disciplined training of the artists, their control of the brush was at a level so high that they could draw subconsciously, without thinking at all. This is vitally important, as while painting, the artist would let his heart run free and simultaneously concentrate on trying to connect himself to the Tao and become one with it.⁴⁹ And by doing so the artist would be able to create a drawing that expresses the very tone and spirit of nature.⁵⁰ This is explanatory to the fact the action of Tao itself was naturally spontaneous and creative⁵¹ - no one could predict its course or improve on its methods, and men should pattern their lives according to it.⁵² Hence one should follow and live out its inner true self, and thus intuition is such an important concept in Taoism and Chinese art.⁵³ Creativity is a transformative process in which opposites become united or balanced out, and as such evolves and evokes harmony.⁵⁴

One interesting point of Chinese landscape painting is that it is rarely a setting for the depiction of human activity or as a veiled expression of human moods; it exists for itself and it exists as an expression of the cosmos.⁵⁵ One of the major differences between Chinese and Western paintings is that Chinese landscape drawings place heavy emphasis on the individual spiritual interpretation of the artist, unlike western artists, where realistic depiction is given much thought.⁵⁶ The paintings of the Chinese artists are based solely on the impression of the artist towards the landscape. Rather than aiming for a faithful depiction of the landscape, the Chinese artist would try to bring out the spiritual harmony and inner beauty of nature in their drawings.⁵⁷ Hence Chinese artists would be drawing from their very own heart, letting their intuition take lead and paint the picture from within, unconsciously.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Willis, p. 33.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁵³ Wong, p. 5.

⁵⁴ Willis, p. 18.

⁵⁵ Chinese Landscape Paintings: Journey of the Mind in Space,

<http://www.ux1.eiu.edu/~cfrb/chineselandscape.htm>, 22nd March 2006

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Waley, p. 5.

There's a saying that art sees the universal in the particular. This suggests that there is a single essence which runs throughout life that can be identified and revealed by art. To the Taoists, this is the Tao. In my opinion, not only did the Tao principles permanently alter the techniques of the Chinese artists and result in their taking on the Taoist ideas and principals,⁵⁸ but it also influenced their painting theory and their philosophy of art.⁵⁹ Yet, art also served as a medium for the application of the Taoist principles, and in return, had its own influence on Taoism.⁶⁰ Therefore, I totally agree with the statement that Taoism explains art and art explains Taoism.

⁵⁸ Willis, p. 2.

⁵⁹ Willis, p. 1.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

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