

TOWARDS AN INTERPRETATION OF CHINESE ART

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The purpose of this article is to attempt an interpretation of the philosophical underpinning of Chinese art. In order to elucidate the meditative basis of Chinese art, western concepts which are considered to be complementary to those of the Chinese, especially those proposed by Martin Heidegger and Gaston Bachelard, are used to facilitate the interpretation of Chinese aesthetics.

Die doel met hierdie artikel is om te poog om die filosofie wat Sjiniese kuns onderlê, te interpreteer. Ten einde die meditatiewe onderbou van Sjiniese kuns toe te lig, word westerse konsepte wat as komplementêr tot die van die Sjiniese beskou word, gebruik, by uitnemendheid die wat deur Martin Heidegger en Gaston Bachelard voorgestel is.

Since the days of Alexander the Great Asia had been romanticized in the Western imagination as a landscape replete with marvels, mysteries, miracles and wonders. Notwithstanding the fact that Chinese works of art were brought to Western Europe from the tenth century onwards, and that these works, or aspects of them, were occasionally copied, especially in Byzantium, where artists incorporated Chinese phoenixes, peacocks and dragons into their designs, no specific influence on European art can be traced before late medieval times. This, Wittkower (1989:192) concludes in his assessment of Chinese influence on Western art, is owing to the fact that: "We are only interested in works to which we are drawn by affinity". This accounts for the stylizations of exotic animals and birds, fire-breathing dragons, phoenixes with marvelous feathery tails, elephants with peacock feathers, and deer with flaming manes, as enumerated by Wittkower (1989:152) which were copied by Romanesque sculptors and by Italian weavers from silks which were purchased in China. Since Roman times Europeans coveted Chinese silk which became what was called a "status symbol" and an indicator of wealth for its European owners, especially during the period from c. 1250 to c. 1350 when the silk routes were opened.

Not until the seventeenth century did new ideas about China develop in the European imagination. Then China gradually came to be regarded as a country, not only rich in marvels, like those that Marco Polo described on his return to Italy, but also rich in social, political and religious wisdom. This new vision had important consequences for European art, architecture and landscape gardening. Especially during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Europeans were drawn to Chinese art; Chinese influence is

evident during the Rococo and in landscape design. Since European writers of the Aufklärung regarded Chinese gardens as a metaphor of Plato's utopian dream of a society ruled by philosophers, they concluded that Western antiquity and China had revealed the same truth, "that both civilizations converged to teach one and the same lesson" (Wittkower 1989:189). Hindsight reveals that neither Western philosophers nor artists ever understood the philosophical basis of Chinese life,

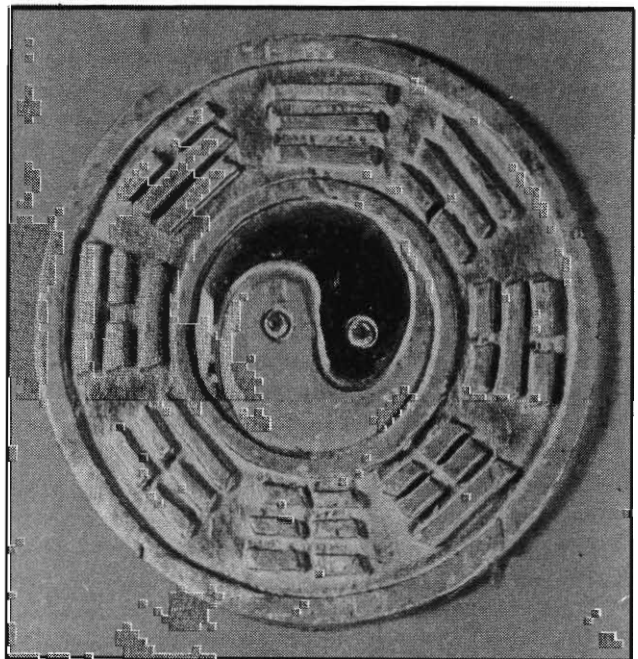


Figure 1. Yin-yang symbol of Taoist philosophy (Source: Toynebee 1973:cover)



Figure 2. Detail of *The nine dragons* by Ch'ên Jung, 13th century, ink on paper, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (Source: Smith & Weng 1973:153)

art or products of craftsmanship which they admired so greatly.

The Western mentality is immensely restless, and, during certain periods in its development borrowed from other cultures what it needed for its own further development. For example, after the period of Sinomania that swept eighteenth century Europe, Japanese art became the craze in Paris during the later part of the nineteenth century. Thereafter, Pacific, African and pre-Columbian art made an impact on European art.

We now realize that a culture which is as foreign to the West as that of China cannot be assimilated into the European context in any significant depth "as a way of life" as, according to Wittkower (1989:160), Europeans had endeavoured to do. In fact, unless an attempt is made to understand and assimilate the philosophical and religious sources of the arts of China, they can only be superficially copied or their styles merely grafted onto our own. I maintain that the average Westerner, who is conditioned by the continually changing styles in Western art, and especially by the restless experimentation of modern artists, sees Chinese art as essentially static. This, of course, reveals our ignorance of the subtleties of the Chinese manner of expression.

This article is intended to pay homage to the vast resources of artistic wealth which the Chinese have produced over millennia, and to the aesthetic and philosophical concepts which sustained this creativity. I will argue that the West *should* learn from Chinese art, but, I hope, more profoundly than it ever did in previous centuries.

Prodan (1958:20), an art historian, writes that: "The only thing the Chinese really believed in was their unworthiness in the presence of Nature and their only catechism

was an attempt to find in Nature a niche from which they might contemplate the grandeur



Figure 3. *A monk meditating in a tree* by K'un Ts'an, active second half of 17th century (Source: Lee 1964:445)

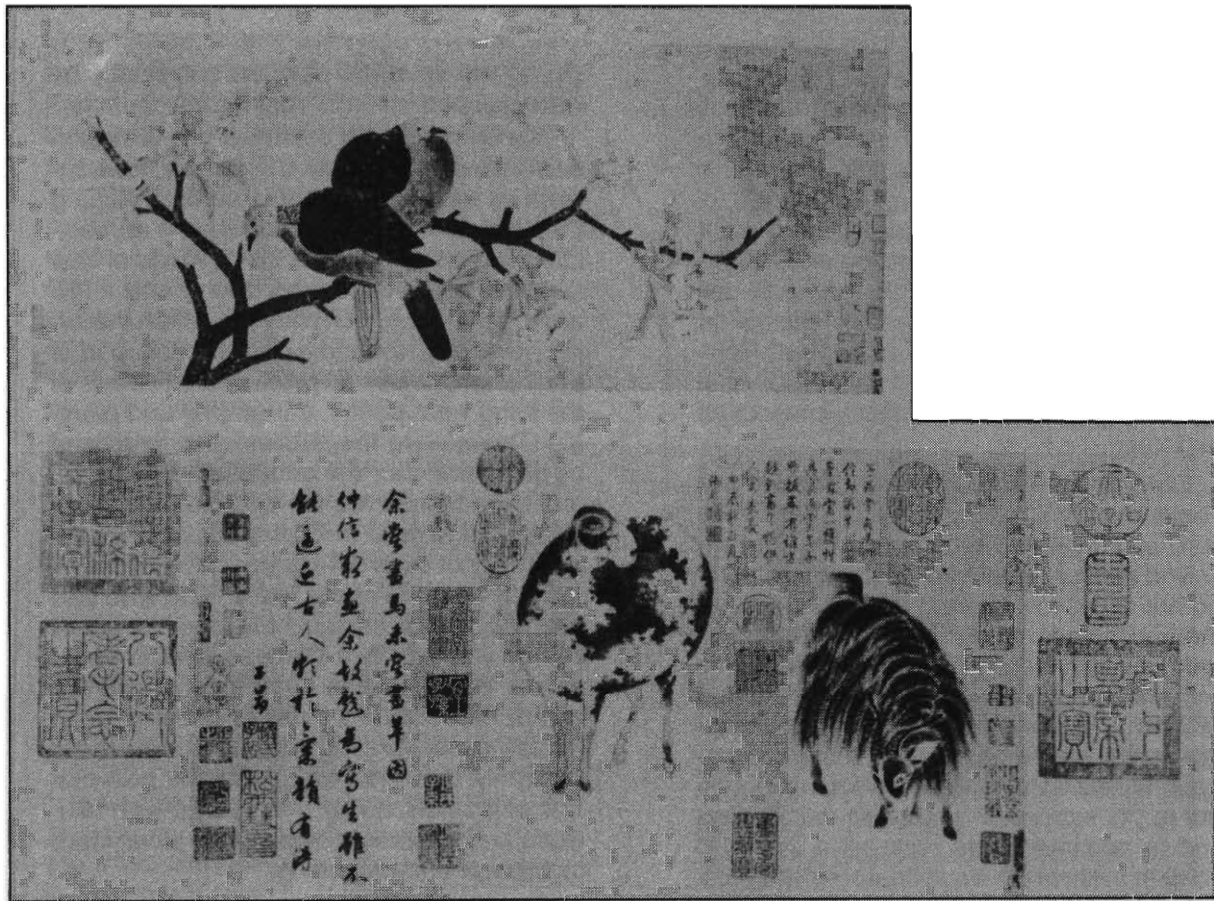


Figure 4. *Two doves on a branch of a blooming pear tree* by Ch'ien Hsuan (1235-1290) and *Sheep and goat* by Chao Meng-fu (1254-1322) (Source: Lee 1964:403)



Figure 5. *Bamboo* by Wu Chen, 1350, ink on paper, Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taipei (Source: Gardner 1980:394)

of all things created." Even though Confucianism became the official creed the Chinese live according to a completely different philosophy, namely Taoism (fig. 1). To understand the fundamental principles of Chinese art one should have some insight into the practical, life-enhancing and -affirming aspects of Taoism. Only then can one understand why the influence of Oriental art on Occidental art was so superficial. However, I cannot explain the Tao to you. As a matter of generally accepted fact, it cannot be explained.

Consider the following aphorism of the Taoist master Chuang Tzu who lived in the third century B.C.: "When once we have received the corporeal form complete, its parts do not fail to perform their functions until the end comes. In conflict with things or in harmony with them, they pursue their course with the speed of a galloping horse" (Giles 1926:15). The life of man passes like a galloping horse, changing at every turn, at every hour. What ought he to do, or what ought he not to do, except allow his own decomposition to continue? This conveys a sense of deep humility which we encounter in the West only in the greatest thinkers. I can think of one outstanding example, namely St Bernard of Clairvaux, who displayed such sentiments in saying of the abbey which he founded at Fontenay – a Cistercian foundation built at the end of the twelfth century – that those who visit that beautiful place should be truly humble. He also maintained that learning without humility is worthless.

The Chinese had a natural reverence for mystery which we in the West are generally inclined to interpret as a sign of personal weakness or "scientific ignorance". The Chinese lived, according to the Western stereotype, in a world of pseudo-knowledge and in pursuance of a cult of the "vague" which they expressed by means of fantasy, and not in a search for scientific fact.

The actual landscape of China most certainly also gave rise to the sentiments that Chuang Tzu expressed. China is a vast country, dramatic in contrasts, and the climate is pitiless, afflicting man alternately with floods and long periods of drought. In contrast, the Mediterranean world, the cradle of Western culture, is mild and nurturing. Nevertheless, it is the task of a Chinese artist to portray his world as it is, and "he gives proof of his ability when he knows how to reveal his harmony with this Nature in an instantaneous flash of sudden knowledge" (Prodan 1958:23). This is often disclosed in the depiction of the dragon as a natural force, for example, in the picture of *The Nine Dragons*

(fig. 2) the spiralling dragons can hardly be distinguished from the vortices of water.

The Chinese artist's manner of expression was influenced not by the natural environment as well as by his social context. Among the Chinese it appears as though the appreciation of works of art was the privilege of vast numbers of the deceased, and of only a few among the living. Funerary art, which the living never saw, formed a considerable part of traditional Chinese art production. The arts of the living were poetry, calligraphy and painting. These were the sublime arts, practised by the learned for the benefit of the learned, and even sometimes for the sole enjoyment of the artist himself. In ideal circumstances the artist did not even sell his works to anyone. A scholar was one of the literati, one who had become a civil servant, the highest social category to which a Chinese person could aspire. Having passed the imperial examinations, he became a member of the nobility. It was the pleasure of the literati to explore the depths of their knowledge for their own mutual enjoyment, filling their works with allusions and quotations which they alone were capable of understanding.

To cultivated Chinese, from antiquity till today, knowing *how* to appreciate art was everything. Artists firmly believed that it was not possible to appreciate anything without understanding — a notion attributed to Con-



Figure 6. *Bamboo in the wind* by Wu Chen, ink on paper, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (Source: Willis 1987: fig. 3)

the individual artist with a cosmic principle." Any manifestation of artistic creativity is "an echo from the divine part of [the artist's] creative genius" and it "spreads like a flash over the picture or some part of it" (1963:23).

Taoist meditation became an indispensable part of the working method of the Chinese artist. After all, Taoists believe that creativity is itself a form of meditation. The search for truth should therefore be manifest in every true work of art.

Wu Chen (1280-1354) exemplifies the bond between art and Taoism. It was not until the age of 39 that he began to paint. Before that he was a Taoist monk. It was Wu Chen's studies in Taoism that influenced his becoming a painter, according to Willis (1987:11). We infer that Wu Chen saw no difference between being a monk and being a painter, "for was not the Tao nature, and life itself, the same, and was not art the voice of that same spirit which was within and without?" (1987:11) What Wu Chen experienced through meditation as a monk he made visible as an artist. Willis (1987:11) writes: "Indeed, he looked upon painting as 'play' and to him it was a kind of play, a joyous dance of creation upon which the mind could soar upon the cosmic energies of spirit". Examples of his work are *Bamboo* (fig. 5) and *Bamboo in the Wind* (fig. 6). Both contain "ch'i yun" or "spirit resonance".

Wu Chen's meditation on *Bamboo in the Wind* is also revealed in the poem which he wrote on the right side of the painting. It reads:

The bamboo, without a mind, yet can
send
Thoughts soaring among the clouds;
Standing alone on the mountain, quiet,

Dignified, it typifies the will of a gentle-
man.

(Willis 1987:14)

To these words the painter added: "Painted and written with a light heart", followed by his signature.

The image reveals a moment in nature, a moment of ever-changing life, of which the artist's soul became a reflection. The artist created this work, not only by meditating upon nature, but by using his brush with the spontaneity which comes only after a lifetime of disciplined practice. Most important of all, what does the emptiness on the right side of Wu Chen's picture reveal to us through sympathetic meditation? Does it reveal approaching mist, or rain, or fog? Does it reveal a limitless expanse of space in the background, or is it simply used as a contrast to the dynamic force of the "will of a gentleman", which

the artist invites us to recognize in the bamboo? One can never finally say.

The essence of Chinese painting lies in its interpretation and its appeal to the beholder to complete the picture. The blank surface of the silk or paper is as meaningful within the image as the brush strokes which constitute the image (fig. 7). A Chinese art critic (quoted by Gombrich 1962:175) wrote: "Figures, even though painted without eyes, must seem to look; without ears, must seem to listen. [...] There are things which ten hundred brush strokes cannot depict but which can be captured by a few simple strokes if they are right. That is truly giving expression to the invisible." Gombrich (1962:175) refers to the visual language of Chinese art as "restricted". It is a language of understatement, which is expressed in another Chinese treatise (quoted by Gombrich 1962:175): "When the highest point of a pagoda reaches the sky, it is not necessary to show the main part of its structure. It should seem as if it is there, and yet is not there; as if it exists above and yet also exists below. Hillocks and earth mounds show only the half; the grass huts and thatched arbours should be represented only by their rough outlines." Gombrich (1962:176) says that the art lover and, one may add, especially a lover of Chinese painting, "may go through life without ever realizing to what extent the pictures he loves are crisscrossed by subjective contours of his own making. If he were ever to strip them of these projections, merely a meaningless armature might well be all that would remain." Even more than the Western artist, the Chinese painter relies on the power of "indeterminate forms", as Gombrich (1962:176) calls them.

These indeterminate forms are complemented by emptiness. The concept of emptiness should not be confused with nothingness or the void, which we in the West are inclined to associate with nihilism. To the Oriental mind, emptiness is the highest reference to what we designate with the word "being", according to Heidegger (1985:105).

What Chinese artists had been teaching the viewers of their works is that art appreciation is participation in the act of completing a picture, since it contains emptiness. However, a picture can never be definitively interpreted. This does not mean that the interpretation of a work of art is a futile undertaking. On the contrary, it means that a work of art forever remains open to reinterpretation. In this sense it is incomplete and should be completed by the viewer. Taoism teaches that emptiness, wherever it occurs, is meaningful. Lao Tze said that it is the hub of a wheel, which is the stillness at the centre, that makes the

wheel a functional object. Likewise it is emptiness in the rooms of a house which makes them habitable. If a container is empty it can be filled up. Likewise, if a painting contains emptiness, it can be interpreted; if it is totally full and contains no emptiness, it will be meaningless to the viewer. Also, if the viewer is full of his own opinions, he is not like the empty container which can be filled. A viewer and a Taoist painting stand in a remarkable relationship, since they fill the emptiness in each other.

During the past few decades this relationship has also been emphasized in the West and it is called the "hermeneutic process", or the process of interpretation, in which the viewer receives the message of the painter as a *participant* in the creative process. Gaston Bachelard, the French philosopher, has poetically called this phenomenological experience of a work of art a "reverberation", by means of which a poetic [or painterly] image communicates its meaning to the reader [or viewer] in a relationship set up between them. In this relationship the profound significance of the image echoes back and forth between the being of the reader and that of the poem's [or painter's] creator. For reverberation to take place, Bachelard (1969:xxii) says, the reader must be open to the images of the poem, an openness which necessitates some impulse or degree of admiration for the poem: "We can admire more or less, but a sincere impulse, a little impulse toward admiration, is always necessary if we are to receive the phenomenological benefit of a poetic image." According to Bachelard one should approach a work of art "admiringly". For a full

understanding of how to participate creatively in the interpretation of a work of art, we in the West should study Chinese art which, traditionally, was created for the purpose of being re-created with admiration.

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