

Daoist Aesthetics in the Landscape Painting ‘Sunny Mountains and a Serene Temple’

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Abstract: *Chinese landscape painting (shan shui hua) is a form of art that takes natural mountain and water scenery as its central theme. From its inception, Chinese landscape painting has been profoundly influenced by Daoist philosophy, which has permeated its development and become an essential component of its cultural and artistic DNA. This study employs a qualitative research approach, utilizing methods of observation and literature review. The research examines the representative landscape painting Sunny Mountains and a Serene Temple and constructs a conceptual framework to analyze its compositional elements. The aim is to explore the Daoist aesthetics embedded in Chinese landscape painting through an in-depth examination of this work.*

Keywords: Landscape painting, Taoist aesthetics, nature, meaning

1. Introduction

During the Song Dynasty in China, gradual political unification and a thriving commodity economy created fertile ground for the flourishing of culture and the arts. These social transformations established a solid foundation for innovations in landscape painting. The development of Daoist thought during this period was fostered by open cultural policies and the promotion of rational intellectual trends. Core Daoist principles—such as the unity of heaven and humanity (tianren heyi), following the way of nature (daofa ziran), and the concepts of emptiness and non-action (xujing wuwei)—were widely embraced and applied in artistic creation.

Daoist thought not only persisted and deepened within the intellectual currents of the time but also manifested a distinctive zeitgeist through its expressions in art, literature, and religion. As a philosophical system, Daoism played a pivotal role in shaping the aesthetic outlook and creative practices of artists, emphasizing the harmonious relationship between humans and nature (Dawson, 2001). This influence profoundly shaped the aesthetic character of Song Dynasty culture.

Li Cheng, a renowned landscape painter of the Song Dynasty, fully embodied Daoist aesthetics in his works. His painting “Clear and Serene Temple” reflects the introspective characteristics of Song Dynasty culture, focusing on the relationship between nature and the human inner world rather than external social affairs. Born into a scholarly family, Li Cheng’s artistic pursuits were deeply influenced by his familial background and the turbulent social

environment of his time. Despite facing numerous hardships and an unremarkable official career, his passion for poetry, music, and painting enabled him to develop a distinctive artistic style.

Drawing upon the artistic achievements of predecessors such as Jing Hao and Guan Tong, as well as his own profound observation and understanding of nature, Li Cheng cultivated an artistic approach characterized by technical excellence and emotional resonance. His works stand as a testament to the integration of technical skill and the Daoist emphasis on harmony between humanity and the natural world (Li, 2000).

This article explores the intersection of Taoist aesthetics and the art of landscape painting. By placing these works within a broader socio-cultural and philosophical framework, it examines the roots of this innovative vision and its enduring influence on Chinese landscape painting.

2. Methodology

This research employs a qualitative research methodology combined with a descriptive research strategy, with the researcher serving as the principal instrument for data collection and analysis. The research design emphasizes flexibility and openness to accommodate the diverse needs of the research objectives. Specifically, the methods include observation and documentary (literature) research.

Observation Method, in this study, Song Dynasty landscape painting is regarded as a distinct cultural phenomenon, and works of Song Dynasty painting serve as the primary objects of inquiry. By using observation to gather rich visual information directly, the researcher can extract both content and meaning from these paintings without external interference. This approach enables a deeper understanding of the artistic expressions, cultural value, and social significance conveyed by the works (Ciesielska, 2018). Observing these paintings not only provides intuitive research data but also lays a solid foundation for subsequent analysis and interpretation.

Documentary research provides critical background information and theoretical support for this study. By retrieving and analyzing relevant scholarship, the researcher is able to clarify the research objectives, scope, and framework. It also facilitates a deeper understanding of the paintings in terms of their historical background, cultural context, and artistic development (Wang, 2007).

The two methods complement each other, ensuring a systematic analysis of landscape painting and Daoist aesthetic culture. This combined approach enhances the academic rigor and scientific validity of the research.

3. Conceptual Framework

The researcher has provided detailed definitions of key concepts, offering theoretical support for the study and constructing a conceptual framework for analyzing artistic works. This research adopts Peirce's semiotic framework to classify signs (signs). Peirce categorizes signs into three types: icon, index, and symbol. An icon refers to the resemblance between the sign and what it represents. An index emphasizes the causal relationship between the sign and its object, highlighting how the sign indicates or reflects the existence of a specific phenomenon

or event (Morgan, 1955). Both icons and indices represent information that can be directly observed, corresponding to denotation.

In contrast, a symbol is considered the highest level of sign development. Unlike icons and indices, a symbol is context-dependent, and its meaning can shift depending on the situation. Symbols often carry multiple meanings and embody deeper connotations, representing a more advanced level of symbolic expression (Ismail & Jusilin, 2020).

This research centers on exploring Daoist thought in Chinese landscape painting, emphasizing the relevance of Daoist philosophy and landscape painting in the design of the conceptual framework. First, the research identifies the icons, indices, and symbols present in landscape painting. Next, it analyzes Daoist aesthetic concept and summarizes its key elements: naturalism, attaining emptiness and maintaining tranquility, the unity of heaven and humanity, and non-action (wu wei). These elements are expressed through icons, indices, and symbols in landscape painting. Together, they construct a unique artistic form that transcends the material world, highlighting landscape painting as an art form imbued with profound philosophical meaning. The specific conceptual framework is illustrated in the diagram below.

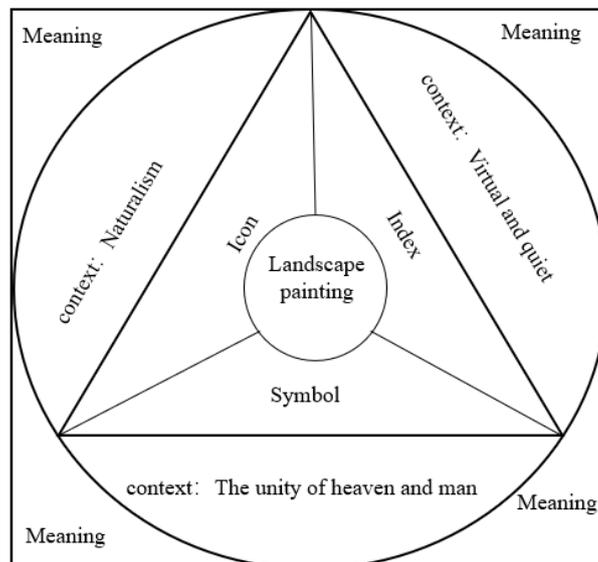


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

Daoist aesthetic ideals function as the contextual backdrop, encompassing the aesthetic aspiration of “revering nature,” the aesthetic attitude of “attaining emptiness and maintaining tranquility,” the aesthetic mindset of “the unity of heaven and humanity,” and the aesthetic perception of “the implicit and the explicit.” In the course of analysis, this study integrates various aspects of Daoist aesthetic thought and summarizes the following key elements:

Revering Nature: “Humans follow the Earth, the Earth follows Heaven, Heaven follows the Dao, and the Dao follows nature” (Laozi, Chapter 25). Daoist philosophy emphasizes the beauty of nature, asserting that “human conduct should be in harmony with Heaven and Earth, so as to draw near to the Dao, cultivate the Dao, and ultimately embody the Dao, all by following the natural order.” (Yang, 2003) Daoist aesthetics values naturalness and opposes artificial embellishment. It’s ideal of “naturalism” rejects secular utilitarian attitudes and serves as an aesthetic extension of the Daoist political principle of “non-action.” In this sense, Daoist aesthetics highlights resonance with nature, respect for its forces, the pursuit of inner tranquility, and the discovery of inherent beauty within the natural world.

Virtual and quite: In Chapter 16 of the “Dao De Jing”, it is emphasized that one should “reach the ultimate emptiness and maintain profound tranquility,” guiding individuals to pursue the highest state of emptiness and a deep inner serenity. Within this realm, the mind is freed from external disturbances, observing the emergence and return of all things with clarity and stillness, thereby discerning the fundamental laws governing the natural order. This state not only aids in exploring the essential connections between life and the universe but also offers profound inspiration and spiritual support for artistic creation, enabling artists to capture nature’s rhythm and deeper significance in a tranquil state (Lin, 2007).

Amid the myriad transformations of all things, everything ultimately returns to its origin, symbolized by “stillness.” This peace not only represents a return to one’s inner essence but also embodies an eternal principle. For artists, immersing themselves in the states of “emptiness” and “tranquility,” and thus perceiving the processes of growth and cyclical renewal, is a critical key to creation. The harmonious serenity of “emptiness” and “stillness” portrayed in landscape painting has long been an enduring theme in the artist’s work.

Unity of Heaven and Humanity: This perspective aspires to a cosmic state in which all things converge into a single totality, exemplifying a realm of profound freedom in artistic expression. It posits that the innumerable entities of the universe essentially form one communal existence, advocating a grand and harmonious coexistence of humankind and nature. Emphasizing the integral interconnection between people and nature, this view asserts that only through symbiotic unity can humanity and nature achieve harmonious development (Gao, 1996).

In Daoist thought, statements such as “already carved and chiseled, yet returning to unhewn simplicity” (jì diào jì záo, fù guī yú pú), “attain the utmost emptiness, maintain profound tranquility” (zhì xū jí, shǒu jìng dù), “fasting of the mind” (xīn zhāi), and “sitting in forgetfulness” (zuò wàng) stress the primacy of inner beauty. Similarly, the saying “ultimate joy is no joy at all, and the highest honor is to seek no honor” reflects Zhuangzi’s belief that the greatest happiness lies in transcending the notion of happiness itself, while the highest honor entails refusing to pursue external recognition. Inner purity and self-discipline are thus regarded as the most admirable qualities, urging people to seek inward beauty rather than external vanity.

Landscape painting conveys not only the beauty of nature but also profound human emotions and spiritual states. Through the Zen-inspired awakening embodied in “holding a flower and smiling,” it showcases a realm of “painting through sentiment,” revealing the refined elegance of landscape art. This elegance expresses the inner beauty summarized by the terms yi, shen, miao, neng—ease, spirit, wonder, and skill. Hence, it can be said that Daoist thought, and the inner beauty manifested in landscape painting mutually resonate.

4. Analysis and Discussion



Figure 2: Li Cheng, *Sunny Mountains and a Serene Temple*, 965, 56cm×111.8cm

In background, rising steeply like towering pillars, the majestic peaks loom in grandeur, adorned at the summit with several pine trees that lend a serene and lofty quality to the scene. In the distance, the layered mountain ridges gradually recede into the mist and nearly merge with the sky, creating an ethereal and distant atmosphere. On both the left and right sides, waterfalls cascade from the highland sources, introducing a dynamic interplay of motion and stillness into the composition.

In the midground, at the center of the image, stands a multi-story temple perched atop a mountain. Its rooftops are shaped like a pagoda, evincing a distinctively Eastern flair. Situated on the edge of a precipitous cliff, the temple showcases a seamless integration of architecture and nature. The waterfall on the left plunges vertically down the cliff, offering a stark contrast to the temple. Bare branches, scattered throughout, add a layered sense of depth to the scene and imbue it with a subtle rhythm of life.

In the foreground, three travelers wearing conical hats traverse a winding mountain path, enlivening the image with both movement and a touch of humanity. At the center, a wooden bridge spans the water, visually uniting the left and right sections of the composition. On the right, a group of stilted structures stands at the water's edge, reflecting distinct regional characteristics. The figures inside the buildings assume varied poses, illustrating the diversity of daily life. Massive rocks and scattered bare branches on either side of the scene echo the overarching theme of nature, while the expanse of water gathered in the pond contributes a sense of softness and vitality to the entire composition.



Figure 3: Li Cheng, *Sunny Mountains and a Serene Temple* (details).

Next, the researcher will analyze the index elements of this figure. As shown in Figure 3.a, the mountain is primarily composed of exposed rock, with soil typically too thin to accumulate anywhere except at higher elevations. Consequently, sparse pine trees tend to grow near the summit. Figure 3.b shows mist swirling among the mountains, indicating a clear morning. Meanwhile, Figure 3.c features bare branches that vividly reflect the seasonal change; these leafless trees undoubtedly suggest the onset of winter.

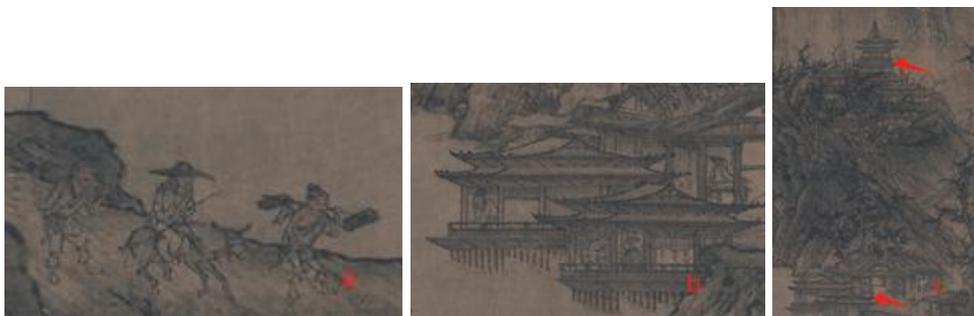


Figure 4: Li Cheng, *Sunny Mountains and a Serene Temple* (details).

As seen in Figure 4.a, an elderly man riding a donkey is accompanied by two porters carrying luggage, clearly indicating they are traveling. Figure 4.b shows a cluster of buildings situated by the water, supported by stilted pillars, reflecting a typical Song Dynasty architectural style (Li & Liu, 2024). The presence of a tea stall suggests that these buildings serve as a way station for travelers in need of rest. In Figure 4.c, a temple occupies the center of the composition, underscoring its prominence as the painting's core theme. Standing in isolation atop a towering peak, the temple's significance is further highlighted by the way station at the foot of the mountain, indicating that it is a sacred site of pilgrimage.

From Figure 4.a, it is evident that the travelers are heading toward the mountaintop temple. The position of the way station in Figure 4.b, located along the only path leading to the temple, implies that it offers a resting place for pilgrims and suggests that the journey up to the temple remains arduous and steep (Qiu, 2022).



Figure 5: Li Cheng, *Sunny Mountains and a Serene Temple* (details).



Figure 6: Li Cheng, *Sunny Mountains and a Serene Temple* (details).

In Figure 5, the “symbol” is derived from the “mountain’s scale (bigness)”: the striking contrast between the towering peaks and the smallness of the figures. The context here pertains to the Daoist aesthetic principle of “revering nature” (Fang, 2016). The mountain symbolizes permanence and immovability, whereas the travelers represent humanity’s transience and insignificance. Consequently, people should approach nature with awe, humility, and gratitude. We must recognize our own limitations and forsake hubristic notions of conquering the natural world. Nature carries boundless life and energy, upholding the balance of the ecosystem. Only by cherishing nature and respecting its laws, along with taking concrete action, can we contribute to restoring and sustaining ecological balance.

In Figure 6, the symbol arises from the “dynamic quality of the waterfall (streaming from top to bottom)”: it winds down from the distant mountain peaks, intermittently appearing and disappearing as it passes the midground mountain, before rushing into the pool in the foreground. The context here is the Daoist aesthetic concept of “wu wei” (“non-action”). The waterfall tumbles from a great height in accordance with gravity, free from external control, illustrating nature’s spontaneous and law-governed power while manifesting a natural order that “governs without governing.” It is important to understand that “non-action” does not mean “doing nothing,” but rather entails respecting the innate character and principles of things. Its meaning lies in reminding us that many things in life, like the waterfall, have their own inherent direction and rhythm, and excessive control or intervention often proves counterproductive. Acting in accordance with these natural forces leads to the best possible outcome.



Figure 7: Li Cheng, *Sunny Mountains and a Serene Temple* (details).



Figure 8: Li Cheng, *Sunny Mountains and a Serene Temple* (details).

In Figure 7, the “symbol” derives from the “location of the temple and civilian dwellings”. The temple stands atop a lofty mountain peak, while the residences are scattered at its base; to reach the temple from these civilian houses, one must traverse a rugged and perilous mountain road. This spatial configuration is closely linked to the Daoist aesthetic concept of “reclusion” (yinyi), which advocates withdrawing from worldly strife and seeking refuge in mountains or secluded settings to attain inner peace and spiritual freedom (Ling, 2007). The temple symbolizes a transcendence beyond the material world—an embodiment of a secluded life removed from mundane concerns—and serves as a spiritual “haven of tranquility.”

People’s humility and reverence before the temple express not only religious faith but also a spiritual aspiration for inner peace and wisdom. In modern society, amid burgeoning material desires, mounting life pressures, and external clamor, individuals often feel both physically and mentally exhausted. The temple thus offers a spiritual space to temporarily alleviate worldly anxieties. The journey from the civilian dwellings to the temple metaphorically represents a spiritual pilgrimage, underscoring humanity’s pursuit of higher meaning and self-discovery.

By looking up at the temple, individuals endeavor to transcend their own limitations, seek direction in life, and find inner peace and belonging. Such reverence for the temple not only guides people back to a place of inner tranquility, but also provides fleeting solace and opportunities for spiritual growth amid the world’s clamor.

In Figure 8, the symbol derives from the donkey—specifically, the image of scholars riding a donkey. In traditional Chinese culture, the donkey symbolizes simplicity and an ability to adapt to any situation; the act of riding a donkey reflects an outlook that does not compete for worldly fame or fortune but instead seeks inner tranquility and spiritual freedom. Often associated with a carefree, unrestrained approach to life, the donkey—being a humble, ordinary animal—aptly represents those who strive for freedom and remain unfettered by worldly norms, living in harmony with nature away from the clamor of society.

This donkey-riding figure also mirrors their actual living conditions, marked by economic hardship under the pressures of social realities. Nonetheless, they refuse to be constrained by material wealth, preferring a life of poverty over compromising their spiritual independence and lofty ideals, thereby maintaining an inner sense of freedom and peace.

5. Conclusion

By analyzing the multifaceted elements of the landscape painting Sunny Mountains and a Serene Temple, this study examines the symbolism and significance of Daoist aesthetics as depicted therein. The painting's representations of mountains, rivers, buildings, and more illustrate the spatial relationship between humans and nature, reflecting people's reverence for religious faith while, at a deeper level, expressing humanity's universal longing for peace, wisdom, and spiritual growth.

The Daoist aesthetic principles portrayed in this painting remain profoundly relevant in contemporary society. In a world saturated with materialism, noise, and increasing stress, the pursuit of spiritual fulfillment and inner balance has grown more pressing. Nature is not merely the backdrop of human life but also a vital sanctuary for the human spirit. Confronted with modern challenges, this painting urges us to respect and embrace the rhythms of nature, drawing solace and inspiration from it. By fostering a sense of awe for life and cultivating harmony with the natural world, we can not only discover an inner tranquility but also pave the way toward more sustainable living.

With its enduring symbolic import and tranquil beauty, this painting powerfully reminds us of Daoist aesthetics' lasting wisdom, inspiring the pursuit of harmony within ourselves and our surroundings. Its significance transcends its historical context, offering a timeless reflection on our need for balance, humility, and spiritual growth in the human experience.

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