

Paper Four
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Taoism and Ink Brush Painting

Introduction

The study and practice of ink brush painting lead me directly to the philosophy of Taoism. Along with Buddhism and Confucianism, Taoism is one of the three great spiritual traditions of Eastern Asia. Taoism originated in prehistoric China with roots in shamanism. It is over two thousand years old and shares some of the same beliefs found in Buddhism and Confucianism.

Confucianism is considered the path of ethics, and justice. Confucians prefer to create harmony within the family, community and nation. Buddhism was imported from India in the first century AD, and teaches the individual how to be free from suffering through meditation and non-attachment. Buddhists believe that all people can become like Buddha, awake, aware and enlightened. Taoism is the most ancient of the three schools; it means the study of The Tao. Often all three spiritual traditions are practiced together; they are complementary but have important differences.

The differences between Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism can best be illustrated by this account.¹ “Three people are sitting on a bench, a Confucian, a Buddhist and a Taoist, sitting in the middle. A government official stands beside them. The Confucian starts to rise and the government official puts his hand on his shoulder and the Confucian sits back down. The Confucian does so because he believes we should obey the government. Next, the Buddhist stands up and as the government official puts his hand on the Buddhist shoulder, the Buddhist humbly and mindfully sits back down. Buddhists tend to be apolitical; they are devoted to tranquility and personal development. Finally, the Taoist begins to stand up. As the official touches the Taoist's shoulder, she brushes the arm away, reaches for the other two sitting on each side of her and pulls them up to stand. Taoists do not like government interference and in spite of their love of meditation and harmony tend to be individualistic to the point of eccentric. They will take a political stand and never allow compassion to be confused with apathy.” Historically, Taoism has strong matriarchal roots and was egalitarian until the Chinese government promoted the patriarchal values of Confucianism.

This paper will discuss philosophical Taoism and apply it to ink brush painting, rather than traditional religious practices of Taoism.¹ Taoist canon does not have one founder but consists of 1,120 texts written by many different authors. The most important was Lao Tzu, [604-531 BC] a contemporary of Confucius who wrote, The Tao Te Ching, or “The Classic of the Way and Its Power”. Taoism started as a combination of psychology and philosophy but evolved into a religious faith in 440 BC when it was adopted as a state religion. The Tao Te Ching is considered the bible of Taoism.

It is problematic to discuss Taoism because it is not based on scholastic knowledge or intellectual ideas. Taoism is experiential; a lived process developed through introspective meditation and silence observation of nature. The Tao is a reality experienced beyond words or concepts. Ink brush painting; calligraphy, poetry, divination, martial arts, healing arts, cuisine, and meditation are experienced based activities and Taoist paths to spiritual understanding.

Taoist Philosophy

A definition of Taoism illustrates the difficulty in talking about Taoism. The opening line of the Tao Te Ching can be thought of as a distillation of the essence of Taoism. ¹ Ken Cohen's translation of the first line of the Tao Te Ching reads, "The Tao that can be Taoed is not the Tao", or the tao that can be spoken of is not the Tao. Alan Watts translates the first line of the Tao Te Ching as; "The course that can be discoursed is not the Course (of course!)".

We cannot grasp the truth in words because truth is a changing process. "Can you hold the wind in a bucket?" asks Lao Tzu. In Lao Tzu's words he describes The Tao as ⁵ "There is wu mysteriously formed, born before heaven and earth, existing in silence and void, independent and unchanging, perpetually present and in motion. It can be regarded as mother of all things. I do not know its name, except by calling it Tao, or inadequately calling it great. Great means fleeting, fleeting means going far; going far means returning. Therefore, Tao is great, heaven is great, earth is great, and man is also great. These are the four greats of the universe. With man being one of them. Man follows earth; earth follows heaven; heaven follows Tao; Tao follows naturalness."

The development of virtue and integrity is the chief duty of those who practice Taoism. The "Three Jewels of Taoism" are compassion, moderation and humility. Without leading a principled life it is impossible to follow The Way. Spirit forces are thought to protect individuals who cultivate compassion, generosity and humility. Taoism is pantheistic. ⁶ "The Emperor praised the painting highly and asked him the secret of his art. Bowing low the famous scholar-painter replied: I am unworthy of your praise. My pictures are nothing but brush traces and ink stains."—From a traditional Chinese anecdote.

Important Taoist teachings include simplicity in nature and of human character. This idea well represented in the Zen Buddhist concept of "original nature". The Zen koan, "What did your face look like before your parents were born?" is an invitation to contemplate the empty nature of reality by looking beyond the particulars of one's socio-cultural and psychological understanding of self, body, and mind. Simplification is the western idea behind abstraction where the artist limits specific visual information to imply form.

The Taoist tenet of "not doing" or effortlessness allows a self-generating universal life force or ch'i (Chinese), prana (Hindu), Ki (Japanese) to flow. Taoists observe the practice of "wu wei," which is to let nature take its course. Finding a harmonious and balanced way of life and relationship with the universe is exemplified in the first essential and most important canon of ink brush painting; ³ "The action of the ch'i and powerful brushwork go together". This idea is found in ² Zen as "technical knowledge is not enough, one has to transcend technique so that the art becomes an "artless art" growing out of the unconscious" or not doing. There is no struggle with the ink, brush or paper, each has its own properties that are learned and then forgotten. The painting is considered "dead" unless it has ch'i. The painting acquires a life of its own when ch'i is present.

Descriptions of "The Way" are purposely ambiguous and offer multiple meaning. Frugality and ego-less-ness are a valued principles in Taoism. It is better to keep silent or to say the most with the least. An ego-free response to nature is sought and is part of the Taoist (and Zen) understanding of "emptiness". Being free from the ego allows for true insight and there is no separation from self and nature. Only experience exists

as the artist unites with nature ⁷. Turning to nature to express spiritual insight, is the basis for the Northern Romantic tradition in the West. But the Western linguistic illusion of subject and object perpetuates the idea of a separate self. The intent to capture the divinity of the natural world seems to transcend time and culture.

Art for Life's Sake

Ink Brush painting is one of the spiritual paths of Taoism. The Tao holds that nature and humanity are not separate. The ultimate goal for the ink brush painter is to permeate the physical with the spiritual. Painting is thought to be a way to enhance and deepen our appreciation and understanding of life. When we clearly perceive the natural world, we clearly perceive ourselves.

The combination of Yin and Yang gives birth to the Principle (Li). The Principle is said to govern all physical phenomena in nature such as rational/ritual appropriate light and dark, gravity and aerial perspective and is a concept originating with Confucianism. An artist normally observes nature and discovers the Principle through intuition. It is believed that the five main organs and orifices of the body correspond to the five elements of water, fire, wood, metal and earth. In Taoism, there is a whole cosmology built around these elements and their interaction. Truth and beauty are not sought out directly by the ink brush painter, but organic harmonies within the five elements are kept in mind. Though the art, spiritual nourishment is obtained from deep meaningful perceptions believed to wipe clean the intellect and senses.

^{3, 6} Hsieh Ho, of the fifth century, put forward the Six Cannons of traditional ink brush painting.

1. Infuse ch'i/yün to show life-movement (breathe of life); the ability of the painter to make manifest aspects of ch'i is something that one has to be born with. The other five can be learned and practiced to the point of true accomplishment.
2. Establish bone method in using the brush; brush creates structure. Design should be according to tradition.
3. Respond to matter by creating form; According to the object, draw its form. Originality should not disregard the essence of things.
4. Distinguish objects by applying colors; according to the nature of the object apply color. Color, if used should enrich.
5. Arrange elements in appropriate positions; organize composition with the elements in their proper places. The brush should be handled with spontaneity.
6. Study earlier examples by copying them. Seek to pass on the essence of the master's brush and methods. Learn from the masters but avoid their mistakes.

The ink brush painter concentrates on the essential nature of things, not on objective reality. It is the energy or ch'i of mountains, rocks and water that direct the shaping lines. Direct copying of nature is thought of as a sterile description. Ink brush painting should express the wishes of the heart and mind. While art can communicate social criticism and morality, Taoists believe human beings deepest aspirations are for contemplation and contentment. A Taoist perspective holds that contemplation and contentment can be realized by merging the self with nature. An artist may create an idealized version of nature, allowing the viewer to take a spiritual journey, or go into transcendental meditation. The painter strives to reveal the life energy of nature, creating a visual world in which to manifest the spirit of the Tao.

In the October 2006 issue of *Discover Magazine* an article written by Kathryn Garfield discussed Vincent van Gogh's famous spiral brush strokes and his ability to render natural forms that closely match the famous Kolmogorov statistical model of turbulence in fluid dynamics. The problem of turbulence is considered the last unsolved mystery in classical physics. The article raised the question; did Van Gogh's psychotic mind allow him to perceive existing natural patterns that are generally unseen? A scientific study found bumblebees that had never encountered real flowers favored Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* over the floral works of other well-known artists.⁴ Van Gogh owned a large collection of Japanese prints and was deeply influenced, by implication Zen Buddhist views of nature. Van Gogh painted visionary landscapes with the principles of Yin and Yang related to the conjoining of sun and moon, clouds and swirls in "Starry Night." Heightened perception is a prerequisite for intuiting nature, being crazy is not.

Direct Perception

The intention of the painter is to create an interpenetration and mutual influence of scenery and feeling. The feeling is the scene and looking at the scene leads one to experience direct perception. Direct perceptions are thoughts uncolored by dogma, belief systems and philosophy, even Taoist philosophy. Landscape painting is not considered an intellectual, technical or formal challenge and does not require metaphor or symbolic interpretation. When the mind perceives and experiences nature directly selfishness and emotional preoccupation fall away. A painting provides the viewer with inherent meaning that is obvious and immediate. Inner feelings are not explicit (or exploited), but extend throughout the painting to create a general mood. As the viewer makes a personal interpretation by bringing their feelings to the painting, the mood of the painting takes on personal qualities allowing the painting to carry depth of meaning for each viewer. This is why ink brush painting has a universal appeal. The problem with the "meaningful" in art is that it can lead to utility, and it becomes dangerous to art to be a utilitarian tool for morality or a standardized code of ethics.

Concreteness

Taoism encourages the simple and precise rather than elaborate inventions of the intellect. The painter will use as few strokes possible to define rocks, trees or mountains, an example of the frugality of energy expenditure. The Taoist poet uses the fewest possible words to express the deepest possible experience. Concreteness is shown in the two following couplets.⁶ "*The cry of a cicada gathers in the ancient temple, the shadow of a bird crosses the freezing pond.*" A second example: "*Aroused by the beauty of spring, unable to sleep, I watch the moon move flower shadows up my silk curtain.*" The words paint concrete images that we can see and feel. If you have to think about or figure the poem out it becomes like explaining the punch line of a joke, the effect gets lost.

Parallelism

As the painter builds up a composition, elements are used to provide contrast in the form of what is called the host and guest. Two parts of a picture are set in relationship to each other and represent giving and taking or passive and aggressive or another pair of opposites. These pairs of opposites then form a unit, which is then set against another part of the painting in further host-guest combinations. Parallelism is illustrated with Taoist poetry.⁶ "*When the moon shines, the water glints and sparkles. When the wind blows the grasses rustle and sigh.*" Moon shines/water sparkles; wind blows/grasses rustles, these words are chosen as parallel images to enrich and heighten their effect.

Contrasting opposites add to each other and compositions based upon the identity of opposites exemplify the Taoist concept of Yin and Yang. Complementary opposites project philosophical ideas of Taoism as visible creation. When Yin and Yang are equally present, balance and calm prevail. The yin of the ink and the yang of the brush unite on the surface of the impermanent and fragile rice paper. Sparse expressive brush strokes show little concern for objective realism and point to an artists search for spiritual freedom.

As ch'i is put into a painting, an intangible quality knits strong invisible threads throughout the painting, in what the Chinese call "Dragon veins". I find this to be the most challenging idea of ink brush painting. Dragon veins seem to be implied lines.

⁵ Ch'ing Dynasty painter Wang Yüan-ch'i [1642-1715 A.D.], explains Dragon veins by saying: "The dragon's vein is the source of the spreading force in a painting. This can be upright or slanting, whole or divided, continuous or broken, concealed or exposed, establishing the structure. The open-and-close movement comes from high to low, with distinct host and guest elements either densely grouped or sparsely scattered, where winding peaks, meandering paths, gathering clouds and streaming waters emerge. The rise-and-fall movement goes from near to far, with distinct front-facing and back-facing components tending up or down, inclining to left or right, and giving the head, the belly and the foot of the mountain equal stress. These are the manifestations of the structure. Displaying the dragon's vein without open-and-close and rise-and-fall movements can result in general stiffness with loss of the spreading force..."

Conclusion

Ink brush painting particularly landscape painting, is a projection in visual terms of Taoist philosophy. Tao refers to the what; the Principle is the how or the why and Ch'i the vital breathe of the universal. Monk Shih-t'ao of the seventeenth century writes ⁵. "The mountains and rivers let me speak for them. They have come out of me and I have come out of them. I search exhaustively into all the wonderful peaks and sketch them. In the process we meet one another in spirit and achieve complete synthesis, which is a state of ultimate oneness."

This philosophy permeates all parts of ink brush painting from the first brush stroke named shaping thread lines like; unraveled hemp rope, rolling billows of clouds, and wrinkles on a demons face to dot shaped lines like; raindrops, big axe, thorns and horses teeth. There are more principles, materials, elements and techniques in the study of ink brush painting that I have yet to discovered, and more I haven't covered in this paper. I am stunned at how deep this study has taking me, and plan to continue.

Taoism suits me, personally and ink brush painting, creatively. Occasionally, I feel a handicap in coming late to this tradition and being born outside of Asian culture. Yet, this is probably for the best. I exercise the freedom of the west as I integrate my interpretation of the traditions of the east. It is powerful magic making ink brush paintings. I do it out of a profound curiosity and pure delight as I see what comes into being with brush, ink and paper.

References:

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