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On the Absence of Chinese Ink Painting in the Art College Entrance Examination in China

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Abstract: The essence of Chinese art is the crystallization of thousands of years of cultural accumulation, permeating the wisdom and emotions of the Chinese nation, and serving as the carrier and manifestation of the national spirit. However, due to historical reasons, a profound lack of this traditional artistic spirit is evident in modern Chinese art education. The most representative example is the complete focus on Western art as the assessment content and criteria in the art college entrance examination. This article will start with the differences between Eastern and Western artistic spirits to elucidate the uniqueness of Chinese art and ink painting. Furthermore, it will explore the influence of Chinese artistic spirit on the development of Western art from a historical perspective. By tracing its origins, the article aims to demonstrate the importance of Chinese artistic spirit in contemporary Chinese art and the necessity of incorporating it into higher education art examinations.

Keywords: Chinese Artistic Spirit; Ink Painting; Cultural Differences; Historical Influence; College Entrance Examination Subjects.

1. As Ink Painting Embodies the Chinese Artistic Spirit

The holistic worldview posits that the whole cannot be divided; when parts are separated from the whole, they lose their original nature. Analyzing the whole by cutting it into parts does not lead to a true understanding of the whole. The entirety must have clear parts that can be verified. In this holistic framework, there will never be something inferred from the function of the whole that cannot be found in specific parts. The difference between Chinese and Western understanding of organs such as the heart, liver, spleen, lungs, and kidneys, as illustrated by Chinese medicine and Western medicine, vividly demonstrates this point. In Western medicine, the kidneys are visceral organs, a physical entity. In contrast, in Chinese medicine, the kidneys are functional and not necessarily the physical organs themselves. The philosophical systems of the West gave birth to experimental science. Chinese culture believes that the qi (energy) of human bones is closely related to the qi of heaven and earth, including geography, climate, and time. Artworks similarly follow this principle, especially in painting, where the focus is on capturing the essence of the universe. By studying things in the context of the entire universe, one can discover aspects that cannot be obtained through the study of isolated parts, a principle particularly evident in the field of art.

Chinese artists observe their subjects from multiple perspectives. They begin by immersing themselves in the entirety of the subject, experiencing its overall spiritual essence. They not only observe what is visible from the front but also explore the back or internal aspects. Once they grasp the entirety of the subject, they can swiftly capture its essence with a stroke of the brush. In contrast, Western artists often choose a single observation point as their perspective and meticulously measure the subject based on this point, adhering to principles such as linear perspective. They objectively reproduce the visual image presented from the observation point. In terms of artistic creation, Chinese painting emphasizes conveying mood and atmosphere, often embodying the saying "poetry within the painting." Chinese artists are less concerned with spatial proportions and colors of depicted objects. In contrast, Western painting emphasizes the accuracy of natural representation, striving to faithfully reproduce the external proportions and colors of the subject. When it comes to deep appreciation, Chinese art emphasizes appreciation and comprehension, while Western art focuses on cognition and qualitative analysis. By observing from a single point, there is both reality and illusion, which also positions the observer on the opposite side of the depicted object, clarifying their own perspective. Scientific formulas, the God of religion, and linear perspective in art, all rooted in rational logic, are elements prevalent in Western culture. However, with the advancement of Western culture into modernity and the dissolution of the absolute rational concept of God, the singular observation point in art also disappears, allowing Western art to evolve towards abstraction.

The philosophical concept of "freedom" and holism in Chinese philosophy leads to the Chinese way of observing nature as a "leisurely observation," seeking the essence of objective objects through a combination of senses. This concept arises from the notion that humans and nature share the same universal essence.

Thus, in terms of painting materials, unlike the tools used in Western painting to reproduce nature, Chinese artists use brushes and ink, which are versatile for writing and painting, reflecting a mastery of time and space, and the fusion of art and life. Unlike Western practices that separate art from life, viewing art as a creative endeavor, the Chinese integrate art into daily life.

2. The Inspiration and Influence of Chinese Artistic Spirit on Contemporary Western Art

2.1. Vagueness and Clarity: Cultural Characteristics of China and the West

The entry of Buddhism into China led to mutual influence

between Buddhist and Chinese philosophical thoughts, resulting in the formation of the unique "Chan (Zen) Buddhism" ideology, which became an integral part of Chinese traditional culture. The first significant characteristic of Chinese Buddhist theory is its emphasis on the mind. Chan Buddhism freed itself from the Indian Buddhist tradition of arduous suffering and instead emphasized practice based on Buddhist scriptures. Following Huineng, the renowned Chan Buddhist monk, who famously stated, "The path is realized by the mind; it does not reside in sitting," emphasizing that enlightenment is not confined to any particular form. This aspect also provided theoretical support for later contemporary art movements. With its distinct Chinese characteristics, Chan Buddhism gradually evolved into the most influential Buddhist sect in China, almost becoming synonymous with Chinese Buddhism after the Sui and Tang dynasties.

This development primarily resulted from the absorption of indigenous Confucian and Taoist thoughts in China. Although Chan Buddhism outwardly adopts the attire of Buddhism, its internal Confucian and Taoist influences outweigh those of other sects.

Similarly, the emergence of the Chinese artistic spirit has naturally been an ongoing and evolving process. Figures such as Confucius, Laozi, and Chan Buddhism have all exerted significant influence on the Chinese artistic spirit at different periods. During the pre-Qin and Han periods, Confucian philosophical thought, represented by Confucius, dominated the culture. The Confucian artistic spirit based on "rites and music" was the mainstream during this period. The Wei and Jin periods marked a conscious period of development in Chinese art, where Daoist philosophy replaced Confucianism as the foundation of China's cultural psyche. This period highlighted the artistic independence divorced from Confucian utilitarianism. Following the Eastern Jin Dynasty, Buddhism gradually assimilated Chinese social psychology and aesthetic taste, eventually developing into Chan Buddhism after the middle Tang Dynasty. Therefore, the construction of the Chinese artistic spirit is a continuous process of integration among Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism.

In terms of indigenous Chinese philosophy, Confucianism has been dominant politically, with Daoism serving as a complementary ideology. However, in terms of artistic spirit, the philosophical insights of Laozi are the wellspring of the Chinese artistic spirit, constituting its foundational elements. Many concepts within the Chinese artistic spirit, such as "heart purification," "forgetting oneself," and "the interplay of reality and emptiness," originate from Daoist philosophy. Subsequently, Chan Buddhism predominantly absorbed these philosophical elements. As Zong Baihua expressed, "Chan Buddhism allowed the Chinese to recognize the depths of their own minds after encountering the Mahayana teachings of Buddhism, flourishing in both philosophical and artistic realms."[1]

Traditionally, the Chinese artistic spirit aligns with Zhuangzi and Chan Buddhist thoughts, summarized as a pursuit of "freedom" and "conciseness," emphasizing abstract imagery. In contrast, Western artistic spirit resonates with its logical philosophical ideas, characterized by a pursuit of "accuracy" and "elaboration," emphasizing the naturalistic representation of figurative art. Such Western art, from a Chinese perspective, is perceived as craftsmanship unrelated to art. In other words, within the conceptual framework of the Chinese artistic spirit, these works are not considered superior but rather inferior. However, Western modern art, especially contemporary art, has undergone significant shifts in artistic concepts. This transformation is not only driven by internal developments but also has intricate connections with Eastern philosophies.

As Chan Buddhism gradually spread to Japan during the Song Dynasty, eminent monks from Chan monasteries also brought Chinese calligraphy and painting works with them. These artistic creations, alongside Chan Buddhist ideology, were embraced by Japan as a burgeoning continental culture, forming the core of Japanese artistic spirit that permeated various aspects of Japanese culture. The formation of Japanese "Zen painting" is rooted in Chinese literati artistic spirit, distinct from traditional Buddhist art, and exhibits a pronounced artistic consciousness. It shifted from being "art for religion" to "art for art's sake," while inheriting the literati painting's pursuit of simplicity and meaning, embodying the artistic thought of eliminating complexity and realism.

"In the seventeenth century, the West gradually became interested in Japan's material culture, and Japanese art and craftsmanship became particularly popular."[2] After 1860, the Western world began earnestly studying Japanese art. Japanese styles had a significant influence on the artistic styles of European artists. With the deepening contact between Japan and the Western world, Zen Buddhist ideology spread and developed within Western societies. Following World War II, as the global landscape shifted and the United States sought its own identity in art, influenced by the broader shift in Western philosophical thought, the U.S. government actively supported American artists influenced by Eastern artistic ideas. This support encompassed abstract expressionism and pop art, aiming to alter the European-centric image of American art. During this period, D.T. Suzuki interacted with many American artists, disseminating Zen Buddhist ideas through his writings, playing a pivotal role in this process. Under his direct or indirect influence, internationally renowned contemporary artists like John Cage and Robert Rauschenberg emerged, ushering in a new era of art. Fueled by both its overall national strength and the expansion of new artistic trends, New York successfully supplanted Paris as the new global center of art.

Figure 1. Untitled-Franz Crane's

2.2. The Influence of Ink Painting on Western Abstract Expressionism

Abstract Expressionism holds a significant position in Western art history. Artists engage in spontaneous creation, expressing emotions through abstract forms, fundamentally altering traditional artistic concepts. The mode of observation shifts from focal perspective to flatness, and the purpose of

creation transitions from representing objective nature to expressing subjective emotions. Appreciating artworks no longer emphasizes resemblance to nature and technique but purely appreciates the lines, dots, and brushstrokes themselves, no longer merely a step in constructing the image of objective nature. This brings to mind Eastern artistic thinking, particularly the mindset of calligraphy. This is also why Abstract Expressionism can be evaluated in terms of calligraphic qualities. British art historian Herbert Read suggested in his "A Concise History of Modern Painting" that the rise of Abstract Expressionism was directly inspired by Chinese calligraphy.

Mark Tobey's masterpiece "White Writing" abandoned traditional Western painting methods in favor of calligraphy as the core expression of creation. Tobey himself regretfully acknowledged his Western identity, finding it challenging to become an Eastern calligrapher.

Both Franz Kline and Pierre Soulages acknowledged that their works were deeply influenced by calligraphy. They engaged in spontaneous creation primarily using black lines as the main form of expression, with their works being extremely similar and difficult to distinguish. Soulages believed that his painting relied on rhythm and space rather than the depiction of material objects.

Pollock employed a dripping technique in his paintings, where the image becomes entirely controlled by the creator. It is considered influenced by Chinese Zen Buddhist ideology, with this artistic language being termed as China's "mother tongue." Pollock described his painting process as follows: "When I am painting, I am not aware of what I am doing. Only after a period of familiarity do I see what I am doing. I am not afraid of corrections or destroying the image because painting has its own life, and I strive to bring forth this life. If I lose contact with the canvas, the result is a mess, but if there is contact, there is pure harmony, natural concordance, and the painting comes out perfectly."[3]

This is similar to the state of mind Zhang Xu and Huai Su experienced when creating cursive script. The original function of cursive script was to respond swiftly to situations, as recorded in "Shu Duan," where "modern cursive script flows swiftly, resembling a spear's root, endlessly transforming," describing the brushwork as "like lightning strikes, producing characters the size of coiling dragons."[4]

French painters, following André Masson's lead after 1948, developed a technique that combined elements of Eastern calligraphy, producing numerous large monochrome works. Masson believed, "For the Chinese and Japanese, these symbols represent a state of being; for us, they are a stylized form of expression."[5]

After World War II, Zen Buddhism gained popularity in the United States, bringing a philosophical wave that influenced American artists. Elements of Chinese calligraphy, ink wash painting, and brushstrokes influenced Abstract Expressionist artists such as Franz Kline, Mark Rothko, Mark Tobey, and Ad Reinhardt.

Zen emphasizes the process and experience rather than the validation of the result. Each creation is a new experience, leading to highly contingent outcomes. Zen considers the so-called objective world as a projection of the mind, with each individual perceiving the world differently. There is no eternal and unchanging objective world; both the external world and the inner world are in flux, and perception of external things depends on the state of the observer's mind. Abstract Expressionist artists influenced by Eastern philosophy broke free from the normative constraints of traditional painting, emphasizing the subjectivity of the artist through intuitive consciousness, thus unleashing their potential for spontaneous creation.

Figure 2. White Writing-Mark Toby

3. Westernization of Modern Chinese Fine Arts Education

Facing comprehensive weakness vis-à-vis the West in the 20th century, China entered an era of profound self-reflection and lack of confidence in its own culture since the Opium Wars. Reform-minded individuals in the field of art also heavily criticized traditional Chinese culture. Xu Beihong's assertion that "sketching is the foundation of all plastic arts" ultimately led to the adoption of Western traditional rational artistic concepts as the basic cultivation for artistic creation in New China. The shift in observation methods overturned the traditional Chinese artistic spirit centered around "tranquility" and "Zen."

Figure 3. The painting works of Pierre Sularez

The evident absorption of Western thought in a disorderly manner significantly influenced the understanding of literary value at that time. This phenomenon indicates an excessive reverence for science and democracy among the Chinese at the time. Chen Duxiu believed that it was necessary to "overthrow the decadent and extravagant classical literature and establish fresh and sincere realistic literature."[6]

This popular, realistic literary view also permeated the entire cultural sphere beyond literature. Regarding art, Chen Duxiu believed that the manifestation of the scientific spirit in painting was realism. In his essay "Artistic Revolution—In

Response to Lu Wei," he pointed out, "Painters must also use realism in order to unleash their own genius, to paint their own paintings, and not fall into the molds of the ancients."[7]According to Chen Duxiu's viewpoint, he believed that artistic works must accurately depict objective objects through realistic techniques and rational means, and must conform to the spirit of science to be considered outstanding works of art. Through the study of European Enlightenment thought, the core creative concept of the "May Fourth" New Literature and Art was scientism and realism. Not only did literature demand realism, but art also required the same. This was in stark contrast to traditional Chinese artistic concepts. In fact, the main reason for the decline of Chinese artistic spirit in the early 20th century was the infusion of scientific and realistic spirit into Chinese literati art during the May Fourth Art Revolution led by Chen Duxiu, Kang Youwei, Xu Beihong, and others. This dealt a subversive blow to the Chinese artistic spirit, which had previously valued simplicity, sensibility, and intuition in expressing imagery.

Under the influence of a series of policies in New China, art became a propaganda tool for class struggle. Artists also became part of the working class. Traditional literati ink painting also became "popularized." Its spiritual core was not Zen thought or Daoist metaphysics, but "worker-peasant-soldier thought." The themes required glorification of leaders and reflection of progress in the era. Artworks became propaganda tools, and this made Western realistic artistic styles more marketable, with the concept of "artistic realm" becoming less important.

Meanwhile, within academic circles, some teachers vigorously advocated the incorporation of traditional Chinese painting techniques and concepts into teaching to maintain the continuity of Chinese art. Since ink wash painting had to learn sketching, efforts were made to achieve the nationalization of sketching and to teach sketching alongside line drawing. Moreover, in the field of art education, there still exist excellent teachers who uphold the spirit of traditional Chinese art, such as Pan Tianshou, as well as outstanding literati artists and their works. This ample evidence illustrates the deep accumulation of Chinese culture in the literati class and the resilient vitality inherent in Eastern art itself. The continuity of literati artistic spirit implies the continuation of Zen thought in art. The genetic difference between Chinese artistic tradition and the West also lays the groundwork for the ultimate differences between contemporary art and the West. The Western turn towards the East in art is a rebellion against the rational spirit of art, against the representation of nature, and against depicting concrete images. Whereas "tranquility" and "Zen" have long influenced the Chinese artistic spirit, and aside from some criticisms by artists due to long-standing historical issues causing stagnation, there has been no 180-degree cultural shift. This has also led to China, after absorbing Western contemporary art styles on the premise of advancement, not presenting a truly subversive stance of "anti-art," but rather, after a brief period of labor pains, naturally accepting it as the original form of art expression. The main rebellion focused on the early reassessment of the scars of the Cultural Revolution. Considering the Cultural Revolution as a relatively short and special period in the long history of Chinese culture, this rebellion quickly lost its spiritual value. The issue of "the boundaries of art," which is the main concern and subject of discussion in Western contemporary art, has not been widely addressed by Chinese contemporary artists, or has not aroused their long-term attention. Only a few artists, such as Huang Yongping, have briefly produced similar works. This is largely due to the early influence of Zen thought in China, with concepts such as "not two" and "unity of heaven and man" having long been embedded in the spiritual essence of Chinese humanities and arts. As a result, Chinese contemporary artists are not as sensitive to the issue of "the boundaries of art" as Western artists.

4. Conclusion

These repeated impacts have gradually diminished the status of traditional art in modern education, and the importance of traditional artistic spirit in education has been downplayed. This directly leads to the absence of Chinese artistic spirit in Chinese fine arts education, especially as there is no exam subject embodying Chinese artistic spirit in the art college entrance examination system. Currently, the education system places more emphasis on imparting Western artistic skills such as sketching, color theory, and composition, while neglecting the inheritance and promotion of traditional Chinese painting techniques. This is not just a loss in technical proficiency but also a rupture in cultural and historical consciousness.

We can observe that the influence of Chinese artistic spirit on the study of Western contemporary art in contemporary times carries the implication of Chinese art nurturing Western art. Due to China's abandonment of its indigenous artistic spirit in blind pursuit of the West, there has been a cognitive dissonance, leading to a disconnect between art education and contemporary trends.

China is no longer in a special period requiring comprehensive Westernization. The indigenous artistic spirit, which is both national and influential in global art development, should occupy an important position in higher art education. One of the first changes needed is that art subjects in college entrance examinations should not solely focus on Western realism.

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