

# The Embodiment of the “Self-Exile” Ideology within Xu Wei’s Freehand Brushwork Paintings

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## Abstract:

With the proposal of the policy advocating cultural confidence, scholarly research on Chinese painting is thriving. Xu Wei, as the progenitor of the freehand brushwork, holds considerable research value in today’s domain of artistic and cultural studies. The vicissitudes of his life endowed his paintings with profound ideological connotations, among which the concept of „self-exile“ essentially permeates the latter half of Xu Wei’s life, becoming the predominant theme of his later years. Xu Wei’s „self-exile“ is primarily manifested in two aspects: his „view of futility“ and the quest for his true self’s value. The most representative works in this context are the „*Reclining Tree*“ and the „*Ink Grapes*“, which this paper will explore. Through the analysis of ink usage and inscribed poetry in these two representative works, this article aims to delve into the manifestation of the „self-exile“ concept in Xu Wei’s bold and freehand brushwork paintings. Furthermore, by tracing Xu Wei’s personal history, we will deduce the reasons behind the formation of this concept.

**Keywords:** Xu Wei; bold freehand brushwork; self exile; mind study; Chinese literati painting.

## 1. Introduction

Xu Wei (1521-1593), distinguished as a remarkable painter, calligrapher, and literary figure of the Ming Dynasty, also stood as a significant representative of the Great Freehand Painting movement [1]. His artistic creations not only embodied the uniqueness of his style but also deeply reflected the social and political landscape of his historical era. This period, characterized by political corruption, social unrest, and cultural diversity in the Ming Dynasty, profound-

ly influenced Xu Wei’s creative process [2]. Such a complex life experience not only constituted an essential component of his artistic language but also provided fertile ground for his distinctive expression. Against this backdrop, Xu Wei’s artistic creations often carried profound reflections on the political and social realities of his time. His feelings of loneliness and rebellion were fully expressed through his works. Taking his renowned piece “*Ink Grapes*” as an example, though it depicts simple grapes, the un-

derlying emotions conveyed a sense of contemplation and resignation toward the world, reflecting his escape from reality and yearning for freedom. A similar sentiment is evident in *“Reclining Tree,”* where the artist metaphorically represents himself through a crooked tree, integrating poetry and painting to expound on his philosophical view that “uselessness can be of great use.”

Regarding his painting style, Xu Wei’s Great Freehand painting, as one of the crucial schools in traditional Chinese painting, exerted a profound influence on art history through its innovative techniques and expression methods [3]. The definition of Great Freehand painting encompasses a high level of abstraction and simplification of form and color, while its characteristics manifest an intense emotional expression and inner exploration. Xu Wei’s application of the Bold Freehand painting technique transformed painting from a mere representation of objects into an outpouring of emotions and thoughts. His use of splashed ink techniques, free brushwork, and bold color application broke the constraints of traditional meticulous painting, endowing viewers with a more direct emotional experience and profound contemplation. Simultaneously, as a unique artistic style, Great Freehand painting, under Xu Wei’s influence, continuously evolved and developed, becoming a crucial platform for subsequent artists to express themselves and vent their emotions. By merging with the Neo-Confucianism of the Ming Dynasty, Xu Wei emphasized the subjective consciousness of individual emotions, making his art closer to the authentic inner experience and embodying a personal reflection and understanding of the real world.

The self-exile theme in Xu Wei’s works, responding to his predicament and carrying dissatisfaction and criticism of the social and political environment, provided valuable inspiration for subsequent artistic creation. Xu Wei’s Great Freehand painting, not merely a synonym for an artistic style, was a manifestation of his inner world and a profound reflection on social history, adding rich connotations to the annals of traditional Chinese art history. Through this series of scholarly explorations, we can ultimately gain a more comprehensive understanding of the profound philosophical significance of Xu Wei’s artistic creation and his pivotal position in the history of Chinese art, providing new perspectives and insights for future studies on Xu Wei and the Bold Freehand painting.

## 2. Era Context and Personal Experiences of Xu Wei

Xu Wei (1521-1593, birth name Xu Wenqing) is a renowned Ming dynasty playwright, poet, and painter, often

mentioned alongside Xie Jin and Yang Shen as one of the „Three Talented Scholars of the Ming.“ His art emphasizes the concepts of „Modeling on Antiquity“ and „Innovation,“ drawing on the essence of predecessors’ works to form his insights—a unique approach that influenced many notable artists, such as Zhu Da and Shi Tao.

Xu Wei lived during the Ming Dynasty’s decline. Politically, the court was mired in corruption and regional princes warred, leading to a severe societal crisis [4]. Intellectually, Wang Yangming’s „Mind Study,“ synthesizing Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, was widely disseminated, advocating „the manifestation of innate knowledge“ and „mind as principle,“ encouraging introspection to realize the highest „Dao.“ A „self-cultivation perspective“ of enduring moral integrity through respect and humility was also prevalent [5]. Xu Wei’s ascetic character was shaped by the turbulent and corrupt politics and personal setbacks. His numerous works reflect a pursuit of inner peace and return to one’s true nature, rooted in the „Mind Study“ and „self-cultivation perspective,“ providing ideological sources for his expressive painting style.

Xu Wei’s early life was marred by adversity. His father died early, and his mother was dismissed due to impoverished conditions. He was raised by his elder brother and his stepmother, who passed away when he was 14 [6]. His brother’s indifference and early parental loss left him feeling estranged. Simultaneously, Xu Wei displayed exceptional intelligence from an early age, as recorded: „Xu Wei, orphaned in youth, was extremely perceptive and could write at nine; with a glance, he could memorize hundreds of words and recite them for his teacher.“ [7]. The contrast between external praise and internal familial detachment likely contributed to Xu Wei’s later aloof and proud personality and his artistic philosophy. His life’s first significant turning point came during the imperial examinations. Reputed as a prodigy, Xu Wei repeatedly failed the exams between 1543 and 1565 [8]. His marriage to Pan in 1541 brought brief happiness, but her death after childbirth in 1547, coupled with repeated exam failures, profoundly affected Xu Wei’s psychological construction, accelerating his quest for the „true self.“ His complex life experiences defy categorization into any single school of thought.

The flourishing Neo-Confucianism of the Ming dynasty was incorporated into the examination curriculum. Xu Wei, as a follower of Wang Yangming’s „Mind Study“ and a frequent exam candidate, inadvertently absorbed Confucian and Taoist philosophies. When Confucianism’s activist approach failed in his era, Xu Wei turned to the tranquility and non-action of Taoism.

All these complexities are embodied in his series of free-

hand brush paintings, exemplified by his representative work, „*The Reclining Tree*.“

### 3. The Reclining Tree

„*The Reclining Tree*“ is a quintessential representation of freehand brush painting, where Xu Wei employs concise and expressive strokes to depict a scene of a person napping against a crooked tree. The figure’s attire and face are outlined with simple lines, while the crooked tree is rendered with bold strokes and a gradation of ink tones, conveying its posture lying atop the water’s surface. From a conventional perspective, this contorted, misshapen tree is far from ideal timber. However, through the lens of Zhuang Zi’s „perspective of insignificance,“ Xu Wei conveys the essence of seeking „true self-worth“ in „futility.“ „Mountain trees are felled by their growth; ointment and fire consume themselves. Cinnamon is cut down because it’s edible; lacquer trees are slashed because their sap is useful.“ [Zhuang Zi, Chapter Seven of Human World] From this perspective, the havoc wrought by that which is useful could not be clearer, as they cannot escape the fate of self-destruction. Zhuang Zi lamented, „All people know the uses of what is useful, but none know the uses of what is seemingly useless.“ In conjunction with the poem inscribed in the upper left corner of „*The Reclining Tree*“: „You make yourself a bookworm, I read not a single word. Upon finding a good tree root, I embrace it and sleep,“ Xu Wei sees the crooked tree as not fit for construction but living freely by the water, undefined and unrestrained, embodying its „nature,“ the „true self.“ [9]. In contrast, scholars who „mastered the arts and sold them to emperors“ may gain fame and rank but are trapped in the pursuit of fame and profit, losing their most genuine essence - the „true self.“ Xu Wei finds common ground with the crooked tree - neither fit for use but living authentically. His poem and painting collectively suggest: that when one ceases to pursue utility, one gain freedom of life, isn’t this a great utility in itself?

### 4. Ink Grapes

Unlike „*The Reclining Tree*“, Xu Wei’s „*Ink Grapes*“ predominantly embodies his quest for the authentic self’s value, offering us an alternative avenue to explore his thoughts on „self-exile.“ This artwork serves as a profound manifestation of Xu Wei’s introspective journey, where the ink-drenched grapes symbolically reflect his existential search for identity and the essence of his being. Xu Wei held the belief that ink-black is the most authentic color, and this piece, characterized by its dramatic, expressive brushwork, depicts clusters of grapes hanging

from the vine, their vivid purple hue rendered through the artist’s masterful use of ink [10]. The pronounced simplification of surface form in this manner is illustrative of Xu Wei’s representation of the „intrinsic nature“ of the depicted subjects within his pictorial compositions [11]. This approach is equally indicative of his philosophical quest for the „authentic self,“ a theme deeply rooted in his artistic endeavors. Xu Wei’s style in „*Ink Grapes*“ is not merely a representation of form, but a liberation from it, eschewing the strictures of realism in favor of conveying emotion and essence.

The accompanying poem inscribed in the upper left corner reads, „Half my life wasted, I have to be come to an old man, standing alone in my study, howling against the evening wind. My resplendent creation, just like the grapes depicted in this painting, remains unnoticed, obscured within the vine of the wild. “ This verse is a poignant reflection of Xu Wei’s inner turmoil and existential crisis. He likens himself to the discarded grapes, cast aside by society, his talents and virtues unrecognized and unappreciated. The wild, unrestrained splatters of ink on the canvas are not merely grapes; they are the embodiment of Xu Wei’s disillusionment with his life’s worth [12].

The act of “throwing away” the grapes in the painting is a symbolic representation of Xu Wei’s rejection of the conventional values and norms that had defined his life. It is a rejection not just of the grapes, but of the societal expectations and personal aspirations that had once held meaning for him. Through this act, Xu Wei liberates himself from the confines of conventional success and embraces a state of existential freedom, albeit tinged with a sense of melancholic resignation.

The work „*Ink Grapes*“ serves as a visual and literary commentary on the artist’s existential state. It encapsulates the essence of Xu Wei’s freehand style, characterized by its spontaneous, unrestrained execution. The painting, with its bold brushstrokes and the integration of the poem, becomes a multi-layered narrative, conveying not only the physical image of grapes but also the artist’s introspective journey through the trials and tribulations of his life.

The significance of „*Ink Grapes*“ extends beyond its artistic merit. It is a testament to Xu Wei’s ability to channel his personal experiences and emotions into his creations, a quality that defines his artistic legacy and sets him apart as a pioneering figure in the realm of Chinese painting. The work invites viewers not only to appreciate the beauty of its execution but also to delve into the depths of the artist’s psyche, revealing a complex interplay of self-expression, societal critique, and philosophical contemplation.

In the larger context of Ming Dynasty art, „*Ink Grapes*“ stands as a pivotal work, encapsulating the spirit of the period’s cultural ferment. It reflects the broader trends of

the era, characterized by a search for personal authenticity and the exploration of new artistic expressions that challenged the established norms. Xu Wei's work, in this regard, is not merely a personal statement but a reflection of the broader cultural shifts occurring during the Ming period.

The influence of „*Ink Grapes*“ extends beyond its immediate historical context, impacting subsequent generations of artists and scholars. It has been studied and interpreted by art historians, who have sought to unravel the layers of meaning within the painting. The work's enduring appeal lies in its ability to resonate with viewers across time and space, offering a window into the complexities of the human condition and the power of art to express the inexpressible.

## 5. Research Value

The embodiment of Xu Wei's "self-exile" thought is vividly portrayed through his freehand brushwork masterpieces, notably "*The Reclining Tree*" and "*Ink Grapes*." In these works, one discerns the dual manifestation of his ideology through the lenses of "uselessness aesthetics" and "self-value exploration." This thought, beyond being a reflection of the literati's psyche amidst the Ming Dynasty's cultural and social transformations, served as the foundational pillar for Xu Wei's trailblazing contributions to the freehand-style painting genre. Consequently, the concept of "self-exile" holds considerable scholarly importance within the realms of Ming painting, philosophy, and intellectual culture, providing rich and profound perspectives on the period's artistic expressions and philosophical undercurrents.

Within the intricate tapestry of Ming Dynasty painting, Xu Wei's painting philosophy and creative practices stand as a pivotal thread, bridging the fabric of history's past and future. His concept of "self-exile," a poignant reflection of the inner turmoil and psychological shifts in literati during the late Ming era's social upheavals, has left a lasting impact on subsequent painting schools, notably the Gong'an School and the Xingling School. Studying this concept allows for a deeper understanding of the developmental trajectory and internal coherence of Ming painting.

The dynamic interplay between Heart Studies, championed by Wang Yangming, and Xu Wei's "self-exile" thought constitutes another critical area of academic exploration. Xu Wei's paintings embody the subject consciousness and self-realization emphasized by Heart Studies. By delving into this connection, scholars can uncover how Heart Studies has permeated painting creation, transforming painting into a powerful medium for the articulation and dissemination of philosophical insights. This

investigation is essential for comprehending the dynamic interaction between traditional Chinese philosophy and the arts.

Moreover, Xu Wei's "self-exile" thought illuminates the complex tension between the individual and society, a theme that remains relevant to contemporary discussions on individual identity and free expression. Through his works, we can observe how individuals seek self-realization within the rigid confines of traditional societal norms, engaging in a nuanced interplay between self and society. This exploration offers invaluable insights into how individuals navigate spaces for self-expression within the framework of cultural expectations, enriching contemporary studies on individual identity and freedom of expression.

Xu Wei's painting legacy provides a valuable perspective for exploring the cultural psychology of ancient Chinese literati. His "self-exile" thought offers a window into the psychosocial dynamics of the era, revealing how the emotional and intellectual landscapes of literati influenced cultural creation and dissemination. This perspective makes a significant contribution to the fields of cultural psychology and art sociology, providing deeper insights into the historical context that shaped artistic movements and trends. Furthermore, Xu Wei's influence on the evolution of painting theory and criticism cannot be understated. His innovative and introspective painting methods have been instrumental in shaping the theoretical framework of painting studies, particularly in exploring subjectivity and individualized expression in painting creation. This has not only advanced painting theory but also enriched the practice of painting criticism, fostering a more refined appreciation of painting works.

To sum up, Xu Wei's "self-exile" thought not only deepens our understanding of his personal painting achievements but also offers a multidimensional lens for academic inquiry. It provides new perspectives and profound theoretical insights into Ming Dynasty's paintings, the intersection of Mind Studies and art, and the intricate dynamics between the individual and society. This research not only pays homage to Xu Wei's artistic legacy but also contributes to broader discussions on cultural identity, philosophical thought, and art theory, solidifying his indelible and enduring image in the annals of Chinese art history.

## 6. Conclusion

As a prominent artist of the Ming Dynasty, Xu Wei's bold freehand brushwork not only displayed his profound artistic expertise but also deeply reflected the influence of his self-exile ideology. By conducting an in-depth analysis of

his life and the historical context, we discovered a significant correlation between Xu Wei's artistic creations and his personal experiences. His feelings of solitude and rebellion were fully articulated in his works, closely tied to the social upheaval and cultural transformation of the mid to late Ming period. Elements of Xu Wei's personal narrative, such as setbacks in the bureaucracy and emotional tribulations, not only constituted crucial components of his artistic language but also provided fertile ground for his unique mode of expression. Especially when selecting themes to depict, he often focused on solitude, escapism, and profound contemplation of life, themes that are vividly embodied in his freehand brushwork works such as *"The Reclining Tree"* and *"Ink Grapes."*

Xu Wei's splashed-ink techniques, free brushstrokes, and bold use of color broke free from the constraints of traditional meticulous detail, endowing viewers with a more direct emotional experience and profound contemplation. As a distinctive art style, bold freehand brushwork evolved under Xu Wei's influence, becoming a crucial platform for subsequent artists to express themselves and vent their emotions. By integrating with the Neo-Confucian heart-mind (Xinxue) school of thought during the Ming period, Xu Wei emphasized the subjective consciousness of individual emotions, making his art closer to the authentic experience of the inner self and reflecting a unique introspection and understanding of the real world. The self-exile ideology in Xu Wei's works, a response to his personal predicaments and bearing witness to his discontent and criticism of the social and political climate, offered invaluable inspiration for future artistic creations through its profound exploration. Xu Wei's bold freehand brushwork, far from being merely a synonym for an artistic style, was a manifestation of his inner world and a profound reflection of social history, enriching the narrative of traditional Chinese art history. Through this series of scholarly investigations, we are ultimately able to gain

a more comprehensive understanding of the deep philosophical significance of Xu Wei's artistic creation and his pivotal role in the history of Chinese fine art, providing new perspectives and insights for future studies and understanding of Xu Wei and his bold freehand brushwork.

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