

Chinese Landscape Painting and Daoist Thought in the Tang Dynasty - Wang Wei's Landscape Paintings

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Abstract:

With the growing interest in the influence of Taoist thought in Chinese art, this study examines the profound influence of Taoist thought on Wang Wei's (699-759) landscape paintings and its importance in the development of Chinese art. The emphasis of the research focuses on Wang Wei's artistic contributions as a founding father of landscape painting, especially his use of Taoist philosophies in his works. Using literature analysis, the study examines Wang Wei's innovations in techniques such as Zhi Hei Shou Bai and Liu Bai which reflect the Taoist concepts of simplicity, non-interference, and the harmonious balance between form and space. The findings suggest that Wang Wei's success in translating complex Daoist concepts into visual representations significantly influenced the aesthetics of his time and laid the foundation for the standards of literati painting in later generations. Furthermore, the findings emphasize that Wang Wei's artistic achievements not only had a significant impact on later artists but also contributed to the spread of Taoist philosophy in Chinese culture. The relationship between Taoist philosophy and Chinese landscape art may be the subject of future research. It could examine how other Tang painters used philosophical concepts in their works of art. It might also draw comparisons between literary figures such as Wang Wei and Li Bai. An enhanced comprehension of Taoism's impact on the Tang dynasty's creative and intellectual milieu would result from this method.

Keywords: Wang Wei; Daoism; Landscape Painting; Zhi Hei Shou Bai; Liu Bai; Tang Dynasty

1. Introduction

Wang Wei (699–759), a famous poet, painter, and

musician of the Tang Dynasty, occupies a unique place in Chinese cultural history. As a key figure in the development of Chinese landscape painting, he

is often credited as the founder of the Southern School of painting, which emphasized the expressive use of ink and a focus on conveying the inner spirit of the landscape rather than its realistic Wang Wei's landscape paintings incorporated Buddhist and Taoist philosophies and used innovative techniques such as Po Mo (i.e., broken ink) to significantly enhance the aesthetic sophistication of Chinese painting [1]. His artistic achievements were not limited to painting. Wang Wei's poetry is highly influential, characterized by vivid imagery and a deep sense of harmony between nature and humanity. Su Shi once said, "There is painting in his poetry and poetry in his painting [2]."

His dual identity enhanced Wang Wei's status in the Tang dynasty as a civil servant and an artist, which enabled him to move comfortably in the elite circles of his day while cultivating his unique artistic vision [3]. The combination of his bureaucratic service and personal retreat to the countryside, particularly at his estate in Wangchuan, provided the foundation for his contemplative works that blend natural landscapes with spiritual introspection. His influence extends well beyond his time, leaving a lasting legacy in Chinese art and culture, particularly in literati painting, where the fusion of poetry, painting, and philosophy became the standard for future generations.

The significance of this study lies in exploring how Daoist thought shaped Wang Wei's artistic expressions, particularly his landscape paintings. While much scholarship has focused on Wang Wei's poetry, this paper aims to reveal the philosophical underpinnings of his paintings, examining the profound ways Daoism influenced his techniques, themes, and overall aesthetic. Understanding the intersection of Daoism and Chinese landscape painting during the Tang Dynasty provides a deeper appreciation of how artists like Wang Wei contributed to the development of a distinctively Chinese artistic philosophy.

This study is also relevant in the broader context of Chinese art history, as Wang Wei's approach to landscape painting not only transformed the artistic practices of his time but also laid down fundamental principles for later generations. His use of Daoist concepts such as Zhi Bai Shou Hei (i.e., knowing the white and preserving the black) and Liu Bai (i.e., leaving blank space) pioneered a new way of interacting with nature through art. This paper contributes to the ongoing discussion of how philosophical thought is embodied in visual culture by analyzing these aspects.

2. Overview of Daoist Thought

2.1 Basic Concepts of Daoism and Its Develop-

ment in the Tang Dynasty

Daoism is one of the oldest philosophical and religious traditions in China, rooted in *Dao De Jing* by Lao Zi, which introduces the fundamental concepts of the Dao (i.e., the Way) and Wu Wei (i.e., non-action). The Dao represents the natural order of the universe, and people are encouraged to align themselves with this universal force by practicing simplicity, humility, and non-interference with the natural flow [4]. Another core principle is Yin and Yang, which encapsulates the balance of opposing things - darkness and light, stillness and movement - and emphasizes harmony and interdependence [5]. In the early development of Taoism, these ideas were initially philosophical. Later, however, these ideas evolved into an organized religion combined with mysticism and alchemical practices.

By the Tang Dynasty, the ruling class often supported Taoism as it had solidified its position as a significant religious force in Chinese culture [6]. Advocates of Taoism, like Emperor Tang Taizong, saw it as consistent with imperial rule and as the basis of metaphysics. In this period, Daoism extended beyond philosophical thought and became intertwined with statecraft, influencing various fields, including medicine, politics, and the arts. The Tang Dynasty was the heyday of Taoism, with Taoist temples springing up all over China and official Taoist classics established to regulate its teachings [7]. Daoist priests gained social status and participated in essential rituals that reinforced the centrality of Daoism in public life. This era, therefore, represents a period where Daoist philosophy both influenced and reflected the cultural identity of the Tang court and society at large.

2.2 Influence of Daoist Thought on Tang Dynasty Culture and Art

Taoist thought had a profound and multifaceted influence on Tang culture and art. In the visual arts, Daoism's emphasis on harmony with nature and the cyclical balance of forces was reflected in landscape paintings, where the interplay of Yin and Yang was visually represented through the use of light and shadow and the balance of void and form [8]. Some painters, such as Wang Wei, incorporated the concept of Zhi Hei Shou Bai, the artistic enjoyment of the blank, depicting the intangible and the infinite, which was greatly influenced by Taoist concepts. The concept of Wu Wei can also be seen in the soft, flowing brushstrokes of Tang Dynasty landscape paintings. As such, it echoes the Daoist ideals of non-interference and natural spontaneity [9].

Daoism influenced Tang poetry, literature, and even architectural design, in addition to the visual arts. Tang poetry

was influenced by Daoist ideas of transcending the worldly world and reaching spiritual enlightenment, as seen by the writings of poets such as Li Bai and Wang Wei. These literary works often depicted natural scenes. Daoism promoted designs that emphasized balance and simplicity with the natural environment in temple and garden architecture, which further embedded its aesthetic ideals into daily life.

Through its widespread cultural influence, Daoism in the Tang Dynasty promoted a unified vision of life that connected the spiritual with the material, profoundly influencing artistic expression and contributing the principles of prioritizing harmony, balance, and subtlety to the development of Chinese aesthetics.

3. Wang Wei's Landscape Painting Style and the Application of Daoist Thought in His Works

3.1 Overall Artistic Style of Wang Wei

Wang Wei's landscape painting style is known for its poetic subtlety and deep integration with Daoist and Zen Buddhist philosophies. As a master of both poetry and painting, Wang Wei created a unique visual language that reflected the tranquil and reflective emotions of his literary works [10]. His landscape paintings often evoke a sense of vastness, serenity, and harmony. These paintings focus on the quiet beauty of nature rather than human subjects. Scholars such as Dong Qichang have pointed out that Wang Wei's creative use of the Po Mo technique enabled him to highlight the contrasts between darkness and light, fullness and emptiness [11]. As a result, he created a rhythmic visual experience that was considered meditative and thought-provoking.

A distinctive feature of Wang Wei's work is the minimalist aesthetic, in which he often uses very few figures and fine lines to represent nature, leaving a lot of blank space. This blank space, or what we call Liu Bai, plays a crucial role in his paintings. It can provide viewers a space to meditate on the balance of form and emptiness, a key concept in Daoist thought [12]. In his work, visual art and poetic imagination coexist. It allows viewers to "see poetry" in his paintings and "hear painting" in his poems. Wang Wei's landscapes, including such iconic works as *Snowy Creek* and *Wangchuan Villa*, often use a combination of ink rendering and detailed lines to capture the indescribable beauty of nature [13]. Wang Wei possessed a strong ability to blend and match different mediums. This led to the development of Wen Ren Hua, also known as literati painting. It was a movement rooted in philosophical

thought and self-expression.

3.2 Wang Wei's Landscape Painting Techniques and the Reflection of Daoist Thought

3.2.1 The influence of Zhi Hei Shou Bai on composition

The Daoist concept of Zhi Hei Shou Bai had a great influence on Wang Wei's approach to landscape composition. In Daoist philosophy, white symbolizes clarity and openness, while black represents depth, mystery, and the unknown. This idea is therefore most evident in his use of contrasting elements, especially in his skillful use of the Po Mo technique, where areas of darkness and light are carefully balanced to create harmony [14]. This balance is not just a visual device. It is also an expression of the Daoist belief in the interdependence of opposites.

When reviewing paintings such as *Snowy Creek*, we see that Wang Wei utilizes the subtle gradation of ink tones to portray mountains, rivers, and trees. It remains minimalist but impactful aesthetic as well. His technique of black ink against white spaces creates a sense of depth and serenity. It allows viewers to experience both the seen and the unseen. Shou Hei in the composition, Wang Wei maintains an element of mystery. Viewers are able to engage with the painting on a deeper, contemplative level [15]. The absence of excessive detail or over-explanation mirrors the Daoist principle of Wu Wei, where the most effective actions are often those that seem invisible or effortless.

3.2.2 Expression of Daoist Philosophy in Ink and Line Work

Wang Wei's use of ink and line exemplifies the Daoist ideal of simplicity and nature. The non-interventionist perspective of Daoist philosophy prioritizes natural, organic growth above forced changes in life. This belief is reflected in Wang Wei's fluid and unforced brushstrokes, which aim to capture the essence of nature without overly strict control [16]. The delicate balancing act between spontaneity and precision in his ink paintings bears witness to his mastery of the Wu Wei painting style.

Wang Wei often employs light ink washes to suggest misty mountains or flowing rivers in his paintings. He tends to apply minimal strokes to evoke a sense of vastness and stillness. The lines in his paintings are neither harsh nor overly defined. This can better help them to complete their imagination of the image. This use of suggestion over explicit depiction aligns with the Daoist belief that true beauty and wisdom lie in the subtle and the understated [17]. In *Snowy Creek* and *Wangchuan Villa*, for instance, Wang Wei uses sweeping and unbroken lines to create a sense of flowing movement and interconnectiveness, which reflects the Daoist as a continuous, self-sus-

taining process.

3.2.3 The Concept of Liu Bai: Time and Space in Daoist Thought

The concept of time is often conveyed through the use of space in Wang Wei's paintings, especially in his strategic use of white or blank areas. According to Daoist philosophy, time is infinite, circular, and has no beginning or end [18]. Wang Wei's works have a lot of negative space that expresses the idea of infinite time and invites the viewers to reflect on the intangible. This blank space represents the possibility of transcending the present and infinity. In a way, Wang Wei's blank spaces become metaphors for the Daoist idea of Wu Ji, or the infinite emptiness [19].

Wang Wei's landscape compositions also reflect the Daoist principle of harmony between heaven and humanity. Using blank space is not just an artistic technique but a philosophical statement. By leaving blank space on the canvas, Wang Wei emphasizes that human beings are part of a larger cosmic order where the visible and the invisible coexist in harmony [20]. The lack of excessive detail in the landscapes reinforces the Taoist ideal of following the flow of nature to achieve a state of unity with the universe.

4. Discussion

4.1 The Direct Influence of Wang Wei's Landscape Painting on Later Artists

Wang Wei's contributions to landscape painting did not merely influence his contemporaries but also extended through several centuries, deeply affecting Chinese art history. His incorporation of Daoist principles—in particular, the ideas of simplicity and striking a balance between the actual and the imagined—became the basis for the work of succeeding artists. The usage of Liu Bai, one of the major innovations made by Wang Wei, became central to the artistic philosophies of many other artists. The technique that reflected the Daoist idea of non-being and the importance of emptiness provided future artists with a method. It was to express both the tangible and intangible elements of nature [21]. Furthermore, he established a pattern for the literati painting legacy by fusing artistic expression with philosophical contemplation through his poetic painting technique, which he perfectly combined with literary works.

4.1.1 The Inheritance of Wang Wei's Style in Song Dynasty Landscape Painting

In the Song Dynasty, Wang Wei's influence became particularly pronounced as the Southern School of landscape

painting flourished. Artists such as Fan Kuan and Guo Xi adopted Wang Wei's minimalist landscape approach. It placed more emphasis on spiritual depth than literal representation [22]. The Southern School, inspired by Wang Wei, emphasized ink washes, simplicity, and the use of space, aligning with the Daoist and Zen Buddhist philosophies that Wang had infused into his work [23]. The concept of Liu Bai, for instance, was widely adopted by Song Dynasty artists, who regarded emptiness not as a lack of detail but as a deliberate and profound aesthetic choice. Wang Wei's influence was so pervasive that his philosophy became inseparable from the very nature of Chinese landscape painting during this period.

4.1.2 The Wang Wei School during the Yuan, Ming, and Qing Dynasties

During the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, Wang Wei's artistic philosophy continued to inspire generations of painters. The Yuan Dynasty, in particular, saw a resurgence of interest in Wang Wei's style through artists like Zhao Mengfu, who sought to revive the literati painting tradition [24]. In the Ming Dynasty, Dong Qichang's theories on the Southern School of painting directly referenced Wang Wei as the founder of this aesthetic [25]. Dong Qichang advocated for the Po Mo technique. He also emphasized the intellectual and philosophical depth in painting. These ideas trace their roots back to Wang Wei's innovations. Wang Wei's impact continued throughout the Qing Dynasty, particularly among royal painters and literati artists who aimed to imitate his nuanced harmony between form and void, spirit and substance.

4.2 The Continuation and Development of Daoist Thought in Later Art

The Daoist principles that Wang Wei incorporated into his paintings did not stagnate but instead evolved in later Chinese art. Daoist thought emphasized the harmonious relationship between humanity and nature. Chinese painters' aesthetic approaches were still influenced by this ideology long after Wang Wei's lifetime. A few critical components were minimalism's subtle elegance, negative space utilization, and Yin and Yang's harmony. Chinese art terminology now includes these ideas as essential components.

4.2.1 Innovation and Change of Daoist Thought in Later Landscape Paintings

In later generations, Daoist principles in landscape painting were not simply replicated but transformed into new forms. For instance, artists of the Ming and Qing dynasties added to Wang Wei's achievements by reinterpreting Daoist philosophy. Painters like Shi Tao also added more emotional depth and personal expression to their land-

scapes. It combined Taoist concepts with a more personalized approach to art. The concept of Zhi Hei Shou Bai was reinterpreted to explore the tension between the visible and the invisible, the known and the unknown. These later artists also pushed the boundaries of Daoist expression in art [26].

4.2.2 Wang Wei's Landscape Paintings and the Spread of Daoist Philosophy Among the Public

Wang Wei's contribution to the dissemination of Daoist thought goes beyond his influence on elite artists. His landscape paintings often feature calm, contemplative scenes as a public artistic expression of Taoist thought. His works and their copies circulated widely. As a result, the philosophical ideas of balance, harmony, and simplicity from Daoism reached a broader audience. These concepts became part of the visual and cultural lexicon of Chinese society [27]. The peaceful, contemplative quality of his landscapes offers viewers a way to approach the philosophical underpinnings of Taoism.

5. Conclusion

This study examines the long-term impact of Taoist philosophy on the evolution of Chinese art and also discusses the profound influence of Taoist thought on Wang Wei's landscape paintings. Wang Wei's seminal techniques include his use of Po Mo and Liu Bai. These techniques are closely related to Taoist principles such as simplicity, non-interference, and balance between form and space. His technique of incorporating these philosophical concepts into his artwork influenced the aesthetics of his time. This integration also laid the foundation for future generations of traditional Southern School artists.

One of the key findings of this paper is the importance of Taoist thought in Wang Wei's works. Specifically, the concept of Zhi Hei Shou Bai plays an important role. It greatly influenced the compositional strategies he used in his paintings. This Taoist philosophy, which emphasizes the balance of opposites, has become Wang Wei's guiding principle in depicting nature. This balance is reflected in his space strategy and the contrast in his paintings. This balance is able to draw the viewer into a meditation experience that transcends the visual. This approach provides the philosophical basis for insight into his artistic vision. This study also highlights Wang Wei's significant influence on later artists and the development of Chinese landscape painting. His unique poetic imagery and visual art blend set a new standard for the literati painting tradition. The recognition of artists from the Song to the Qing dynasties allowed this standard to develop even further. Wang Wei's influence extended far beyond the visual arts.

He also contributed to the widespread dissemination of Taoist philosophy in Chinese culture.

In conclusion, the study of the interaction between Taoist thought and Chinese landscape painting has excellent potential. One study area is how other Tang dynasty painters incorporated philosophical ideas into their art. In addition, comparing Wang Wei with poets Li Bai, Du Fu, and other famous cultural figures can yield deeper insights from different modified perspectives. This could help us understand how Taoism influenced the Tang dynasty's wider intellectual and artistic environment.

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