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# Chinese Painting:

Philosophy, Theory, and the Pursuit of Cultivation through the Dao

Elizabeth Reynolds

SIT Independent Study Project China Fall 2009

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## *Introduction*

Chinese painting and painting theory have roots within China's major philosophies significantly including Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. Chinese painting while not exclusively adherent to the beliefs and practices of a single belief system instead reveals to overlap these beliefs in the thought process and execution of painting. There is a strong precedent of Chinese painters and their styles embodying Daoist philosophy in not only the appearance and practice of painting but in painting theory as well. Searching for the truth, or the Dao, was a key goal of many artists who through cultivation of one's intellect or artistic skill could potentially come to a truth. However, it is important to understand that while many theories can be connected to the tenants of Daoism, Chinese painting theory is a sort of organic process encompassing Chinese culture and philosophy but the historical figures who emulated the ideas and promoted them. Therefore, it is difficult to point out specific concrete examples of specific religious or philosophical tendencies in a Chinese' personal painting technique. The focus in this paper is the culmination of art theory that evolved through Chinese history which includes all major cultural factors. This is a discussion on how individual painters, mainly the learned men of society incorporated years of theory into personal cultivation in the form of painting. The "truth" that the artists pursued can be translated in Chinese to Dao, the way, and directly related to the principle concept of Daoism. Through an understanding of culminated art theory and philosophy one may begin to understand the purpose and truth or Dao behind Chinese painting.

## *The History of Chinese Painting*

Chinese painting has a history as long as Chinese civilization itself. The style has developed over a course of five thousand years into a form that is not only distinctly Chinese, but along with an interaction with philosophy, literature, and other art forms, painting has contributed to a unique national characteristic. Discussion on Chinese painting inevitably benefits from a contrast and comparison with the Western tradition. The theory behind Chinese painting differs almost drastically with historical Western painting theory and rather compares more subtly with the Western abstract movement. There is no basis for comparing the differences in a better versus worse context but it does help a person of western origin better understand the deep meaning and expanse of Chinese painting philosophy. For the purposes of this paper one can use theory and philosophy interchangeably in regards to how Chinese view the process and observation of painting. The most sustained and integral theory on Chinese painting is embodied in the idea that, “form is only a means to express spirit... [and lists] vitality”<sup>1</sup>, as one of the most important elements of painting. Essentially, painters as early as the fifth century, “realized the importance of capturing the spirit of nature, rather than just copying it. In painting a man or woman, the artist should bring forth his or her likeness: in painting animals , trees , or flowers, he should attempt to capture their characteristics or ‘moving implications’”<sup>2</sup>. The painter, in order to paint successfully, much observe and understand his subject. The artists sought a likeness in the unlikeness, more specifically they wanted to go beyond superficial identical resemblance and create an image that was unique to the artist and captured how the artist’s character, mood, and emotion affected the way in which a subject was seen. One may think of it as the image that a person has when they look at a scene or subject, their interpretation and how they personally internalize and reveal the

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<sup>1</sup> Zhang 5

<sup>2</sup> Zhang 5

character of the subject. Visual likeness is not important but diligence and practice is key to truly understanding the spirit of a subject. Jing Hao, a landscapist of the 10<sup>th</sup> century explained that only after painting a pine ten thousand times did he succeed in capturing its spirit<sup>3</sup>. Painting therefore has a rather personal meaning to each individual painter. Su Shi of the Song Dynasty was a particularly influential painter and poet of the Song Dynasty who believed that “artistic skill is the nearest equivalent to the truth...in addition to physical and mental relaxation, scholars can gain a deeper understanding of the truth by studying fine arts... natural images do not have an unchangeable normal state and therefore imperfections uncertain aspects serve as evidence to their multifaceted nature”<sup>4</sup> Su Shi comments on a contemporary painting and its painter saying, “When Wen Tong paints bamboos, all he sees is bamboos. As he integrates himself into the bamboos, his paintings look endlessly fresh”<sup>5</sup>. The purpose of these painters, particularly when painting subjects from nature, was to try to integrate themselves with the subjects and achieve a sort of harmony with nature. This method stressed the importance of displaying the painter’s emotion while capturing the spirit of the subject. This idea of going beyond the images allowed painters to express their inner emotions, spiritual thinking, and show a unique self.

When speaking of the theory of capturing the spirit of a subject, it reflects the broad tradition of Chinese painting philosophy but at the same time should be specified that the people who upheld this tradition and formed it into a powerful, specifically Chinese, concept were the learned men of the Song Dynasty. Su Shi as mentioned above, was a key figure in solidifying the optimal view towards approaching the art of painting. Scholar painters, unlike craft painters, sought to concentrate on improving morality and nurturing spirituality through the arts. In the words of Su Shi, “the reason why likeness should not be valued is its pursuit will result in a

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<sup>3</sup> Zhang 5

<sup>4</sup> Lin 95

<sup>5</sup> Lin 95

further deviation from the truth”<sup>6</sup>, the truth or Dao here being a scholar’s ability to develop his own personal character.

With the express purpose of maintaining the philosophical tradition of Confucianism and Daoism in society, emperors of the Song and Yuan dynasties elected representatives to look for prominent painters and poets, however, over the years of mispresumed patronage and court scandal most of these bearers of artistic culture became more distant from the government and sought more self development and the creation of a network of learned men who promoted these philosophical ideas. During this time specific objects solidified their symbolism of certain characteristics. For example orchids and bamboo represented moral loftiness and plum blossoms and stones represented characteristics of principles and justice<sup>7</sup>. Orchids and bamboo were also commonly humanized being “beauty” and “gentlemen” respectively. Therefore, there was a conscience effort to promote culture in the form of art; may it be promoted by the ruling power, or the literati.

Another element distinct to Chinese painting lies in the method and practice of executing a painting. When conceiving a subject matter and arranging the composition the artist places the most focus on the main subject matter. In heightening what he regards as the most important he is clearly expressing his thoughts on the subject. In extenuating the main subject, blank spaces serve the dual purpose of drawing attention to the main subject while forming their own subtle yet meaningful pattern. The blank spaces allow the viewer’s mind to imagine and wander<sup>8</sup>. Therefore the artist is not in a particular proximity to his subject but instead he is above and beyond the limitations imposed by time and space, in the artists mind he is in midair, able to imagine and see

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<sup>6</sup> Lin 97

<sup>7</sup> Lin 108

<sup>8</sup> Zhang 5

things close and far. For example, it is quite natural for a painting to include elements of all seasons in a single frame, at the same time the idea is that the entire world of nature can be captured in a painting of a single bird, flower, fish, or insect<sup>9</sup>. This is the concept of “seeing largeness in smallness” or being able to embody the spirit of nature in a single subject. Here the meaning of “truthfulness” and “rationality” require the painter and observer to acknowledge the presence of beauty in a conceptual sense and see the rationality as somewhat irrational, and in this contradiction lies the Dao, the way or the truth about natural spirit and personal cultivation.

In Chinese painting the artist’s skill is a highly important and cultivated state. The main tools of painting, brushes, paint and paper are meticulously prepared and quality uses of these tools are essential. An artist’s brush technique is particularly important, the brush must be gripped in a certain manner, and the artist must be fluid in his posture, sturdy but flexible. The brush as well must maintain elasticity with resilience and the tip of the brush while painting or writing should be pointed. The movements and lines of a skilled painter should have a rhythm or melody, this rhythm indicates the emotion of the painter but also the artist’s skillfulness. In Chinese painting the line is the most defining technique, unlike in Western tradition, there is no focus on shadow or light, instead the line accentuates the characteristic of the painted subject, this line is the main contributor to this rhythm and gives the painting a personality since with the use of plain lines gives versatility in simplicity or the “largeness in smallness”. The strength and vitality in each individual line is complemented by the thickness, thinness, dryness or wetness of the brush-worked paint and overall contributes to the rhythm of the painting.

The traditional use of color in Chinese painting also differs from the ideology of color in the Western tradition. Ink, an integral element of Chinese painting, is particular to the overall

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<sup>9</sup> Zhang 6

image of a painting. Diverse in its use, ink can be thick and defined or diluted with water to appear almost translucent. These degrees of luminescence lend a defining feature and give Chinese painting a level of 3D depth and space. It is said that ink has five degrees of tone and therefore can depict any color<sup>10</sup>. Aside from ink the use of color holds a specific purpose in the overall composition of a painting. Instead of using paint to depict reality Chinese painters saw color as a means to further accentuate the main subject, use of color affects the painting as a whole, giving it emotion and spirit. However, the color must be chosen carefully and with the purpose of giving the subject the correct spirit. For example a painting of a grey tone hill can have scarlet or purple flowers to draw more attention the existence and spirit of the flowers. This decision reflects the artist's emotion and what he feels is the most important element of the scene. When contrasting colors are combined it gives a painting more force and dynamic, but sometimes this is not what the artists wishes to convey, therefore one distinguishing characteristic of Chinese painting is that color is used sparsely and more often it relies on line sketches, ink wash or a combination of both ink and color for dynamic and rhythm<sup>11</sup>. Overall the technique and brushwork and color use contributed greatly to not only the aesthetic appearance of the painting but the ability of the artist to convey his emotions and the spirit of the subject.

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<sup>10</sup> Zhang 6

<sup>11</sup> Zhang 7



### *Daoism and Personal Cultivation through Painting*

Throughout China's long history almost every major world religion has at some point been assimilated or practiced in China. Some of the religions have had a significant impact on Chinese history and culture. Although Daoism is the only remaining religion that is indigenous to China, the study of this religion is minimal at best. In Chinese official historiography, although some of the most detailed and vast of world records, says almost nothing of the history of Daoism as a practice. Daoist belief is substantiated however, by the literature, mythologies, and the common popular history. Daoist philosophy tends to permeate Chinese culture at a basic philosophical level which gives rise to the idea that Daoism is more utilized as an undercurrent in society rather than a religion seeking cultural conformity and power. "One may say that it is the absence of definition that constitutes the fundamental characteristic of Chinese religion"<sup>12</sup>, and by definition Daoism is indefinable and can only be understood by essentially not understanding. The Dao is at once, "transcendent and immanent...[but also] unnamable, ineffable, yet present in all things"<sup>13</sup>. Therefore, although Daoism has no true written history, the Dao De Jing and the writings of Zhuangzi hold the written principles, the Dao expresses itself best in the existence of Daoist philosophy in Chinese societal thinking and in the existence of many Daoist Temples and holy mountains across China.

While there are infinite areas of Daoism one can discuss because of the vastness of its practices and theories, the ideas introduced in this paper will solely address Daoism's connection to practicing the art of painting while living in a secluded area. The lives of historical and modern day practitioners of Daoism generally follow the traditional accounts of "withdrawing to the mountains and valleys". This theme of a mountain hermit is popular in Daoist literature as it

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<sup>12</sup> Schipper 3

<sup>13</sup> Schipper 3

complements the idea of removing oneself from the attachment, organization, and lack of tranquility that is most social centers. Temples on holy mountains such as Weibao Shan in northwestern Yunnan provide a sort of retreat to get away from the world. The mountain itself has special symbolism as it is where the earth and sky meet, where one can be closer to the gods and cultivate a more pure qi. Kristofer Schipper in the “Taoist Body” explains further that the alter is symbolically the same as a mountain in that it is in an enclosed space for the Dao, one can enter into the confines of an alter area and retreat from the world. Schipper also explains that the incense burner is also a sort of symbolic miniature mountain, like a mountain it is the focus of meditation and represents the world of the Immortals, “the mountain [here] is located inside the pure chamber, under our eyes. To move towards it implies a movement towards the inside”<sup>14</sup>. Therefore one can begin to understand the inward trend of Daoist philosophy. The mountain represents a retreat, but the retreat is simply necessary to start the process of self understanding, development and cultivation.

Arguably the most pertinent Daoist belief to the study of Chinese painting is the idea of self cultivation. Daoist cosmology explains that at the birth of the universe there was a diversification of qi energies that is not constant but is in fact consistently changing, conforming to the process of the Dao. Transformation is intrinsic to life and therefore plays a significant purpose in Daoist philosophy, “continuous mutations...joyful changing according to time’s cycle and the nature of things...subtle mingling of alternating phases which are not easily understood”<sup>15</sup>. These transformations refer to the human cycle of birth, growth, and death but also to the continuous cycle of nature, through seasons, phases, and death incorporated. This cycle is a process of change that while ends at the same point it began can also be broken down to smaller

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<sup>14</sup> Schipper 92

<sup>15</sup> Schipper 116

transformations such as the transformation of a bud to a flower; from a child to an adult. The perfect human in Daoist theory is one that has been nurtured and can be integrated into the natural environment, only after nurturing and becoming immersed in the natural world can a body arrive at the point of spontaneity. While inherently confusing to a person of western decent, the idea flows integrally with the concept of universal qi. Furthermore the body at birth is not perfect and must pursue cultivation which one can call a sort of spontaneous energy distribution. Schipper explains that a child's spontaneity is merely an illusion and that true spontaneity is only acquired through self perfection and cultivation. A great example is calligraphy, and similarly painting, "a child does not know how to give Chinese characters that perfection of form that expresses so completely their essence...It takes daily practice and endless repetition of the same gesture, the same discipline and ritual procedure, to achieve the mastery that finally allows one to create perfect forms without any apparent effort"<sup>16</sup>. Therefore, essentially what he means is that it takes years of practice to get to a point of creativity. This concept is fundamentally different from Western ideological foundations yet holds a level of clarity when one connects the idea of skill to spontaneous creativity and the creation of an actual likeness of a subject's spirit, may it be a word or an image of nature.

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<sup>16</sup> Schipper 42

## *My Personal Experience*

I feel that there is no proper way to introduce or create a thesis about my 18 days spent on Weibao Shan, except to say that it was my first experience not only receiving one on one consistent instruction on an brand new art form but one in which I had more time than ever to reflect and appreciate life. That is not to say that the time was spent idyllically, a mild perfectionist by nature I spent anywhere from three hours to five hours a day studying and practicing the art of Chinese painting. A typical day began at 9AM when I was abruptly woken up by the perpetually frowning and yelling temple fuwuyuan who screamed, “chi fan!” After a breakfast of zhou with sugar I would either relax for an hour or begin practicing. Aside from the scheduled meals, 9AM breakfast, 2PM lunch, and 6PM dinner, I could practice whenever I liked and Chong Hui would come in and out when she could to teach and comment on my work. However, I personally believe the most interesting element to retell of my time on the mountain was the process of skill cultivation, the path it took, the difficulties I faced, and finally the success I achieved in my study of Chinese painting.

I arrived on November 8<sup>th</sup> early in the morning and by twelve that day I went up to the painting room where Chong Hui got me organized with practice paper and paint. Having dabbled in many forms of art, mostly ceramics, drawing, and photography, (never painting) back in the states I have come to truly appreciate the atmosphere of an art room. The atmosphere outdoors was perfect, outside almost every day was sunny and the sky was blue, there would be days when it got cold and my hands would almost freeze but nothing a bit of jumping up and down couldn't fix. But inside was the best, surrounded by paintings with an alter and three god statues in the center, I was constantly inspired to work. The first day I was not sure what to expect, I knew how I learned art, by having examples right in front of me, by watching someone do something, so she

came in explained some things in Chinese, most of which I felt I understood, painted a flower and said “do that”. Luckily I knew how to hold the brush since I had taken a number of calligraphy classes over the summer and a bit in the fall, but it took me about a day and a half to figure out the correct way to format the flower. I found the placement of petals to be confusing, many overlapped etc. Overall when painting a flower there were certain things to pay attention to, the amount of water for starters could not be too much or too little. Too much made the petals meld into each other in a way that was not beautiful, or it fused the colors, or worse it ripped the paper. Too little and there wouldn’t be enough color or the petal wouldn’t be able to take its full form. Another key element was the flower’s asymmetry. A flower needed to have partings or spaces and sides had to be larger than others, there was never a succinct way to explain how a flower needed to look, but after awhile of painting and looking I began to interpret what looked good and what was too round or symmetrical.

After almost four days of painting the same flower over and over again I graduated to a flower behind the flower. Simple enough, and by that point I had come to manage the water flow and color tone fairly well. I found it amazing that no matter how long I practiced flowers, even in the last few days, I learned some new technique or would finally figured out what part of the flower I was actually painting. The flowers are highly stylized and one must really step back about five feet to truly appreciate the flow and appearance of the flower. Soon I learned the process of leaves and stems; this step took me quite a bit longer. The leaves were straightforward enough, young leaves had to go in threes and older leaves could go in threes or fours but no leaves could ever be in a line or be completely symmetrical with other sets of leaves. The tracing of the leaves and the stems were difficult, here I had to pay attention to three things, flexibility, rhythm, and strength. These words were constantly said to me, usually in the context of “this stem has no strength” or “pay more attention to the rhythm” and at times this was very disheartening

and frustrating. Giving a painting rhythm was never something I had experienced and obtaining this rhythm is difficult at best and requires years of training.

Finally I graduated to the high quality paper and one day when I was working on some final paintings Chong Hui came in and decided to teach me how to paint bees. I was thrilled, that sort of detail brought life to paintings that I found otherwise bland. The bees were also highly stylized looking to me more like small yellow butterflies rather than bees. When I returned from my weekend break in Kunming I started in on a flower formation that had black half opened flowers with pink and orange leaves. This formation was incredibly difficult and certainly lacked the strength and rhythm of Chong Hui's work but in the time that I had, I made great progress.

The last subject I learned on my time on Weibao Shan was bamboo. As bamboo has much in common with calligraphy, our Shufa Guy (his name no one ever learned) started to teach me. Till that point he had been a bit more critical of my work, tending to come in and comment as he watched which had always put me at edge, but now as the actual teacher he took on a whole new role and was extremely supportive. I found that I could asked questions freely and discuss my shortcomings and problems without feeling like I was being judged. I made great progress in the four short days I practiced bamboo but teachings were helpful and concise. In the end, I will never forget the pride I felt when Chong Hui would happily tell the visitors that I learned faster than any Chinese student

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*Itinerary:*

November 7<sup>th</sup> Left late at night on a direct sleeper bus for Weibaoshan

November 8<sup>th</sup> Began classes, while living at the Emperor Pavilion

November 18<sup>th</sup> Went back to Kunming to get more supplies and fix computer

November 22<sup>nd</sup> Returned to Weibaoshan on sleeper bus

November 23<sup>rd</sup> Classes commenced

November 29<sup>th</sup> Left Weibaoshan for Zhongdian

December 2<sup>nd</sup> Arrived in Kunming to finish writing the paper

*Ideas for Further Topics in the Area of Daoism and Chinese Painting:*

- Classical versus Modern study of Painting in China; one could compare the study of painting in a classical religious setting to the modern setting of art schools and institutions in Kunming
- Specific study on how the practice of painting and art contribute to the religious advancement of individuals
- A general study of Daoist practice and art on Weibaoshan; one could use the Emperor Pavilion as a base to conduct observations and interviews with residents on the mountain
- A Personal History of Chong Hui and her desire to pursue Daoism through taiqi, meditation, and painting
- The Iconography and Art of Daoist Temples on Weibaoshan