

To what extent does the philosophy of fundamental Taoism reflect in Chinese aesthetics?

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Rationale and Preliminary Research

I have spent most of my life growing up in Taiwan, an island known for its unique blend of Chinese Religions such as Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Being raised in Taiwan, I often pass by different temples, pilgrimages, and rituals led by the local communities. I have always been intrigued by these colorful carriages and architectures; however, due to my Christian ancestral background, I have had little chance to really interact and understand these cultural aesthetics and religious meanings. Hence, as we learned more about Taoism in class, I became especially interested in seeing the multiple connections it has with Chinese cultural aesthetic taste.

Taiwan is known as the place with the largest number of Taoist believers.¹ With more than 7,000 Taoist temples established, the Taiwanese people have a unique way of incorporating Taoism into their daily lives.² The Taoist philosophy believes in the manifestation of Tao that exists before all other existences.³ According to Taoist theory, Taoism emphasizes the idea of “nothingness”, *wu wei*, and *yin yang*. Therefore “one must take the abandonment of sensory experience and conceptual knowledge” to truly understand the essence of Tao.⁴ It is important for Taoist practitioners to avoid making a mental distinction between “true and false”, “good and bad”, and “beautiful and ugly”.⁵ However, all of these beliefs seem to be working in contradiction to our common conception of art and beauty. Therefore, I became interested in the question of how artistic appreciation can truly be cultivated under the heavy influence of Taoism that emphasizes “nothingness” in our Chinese culture. Hence I have led to this investigation: to what extent is the philosophy of fundamental Taoism (teachings from *Laozi*) reflected in the Chinese aesthetics.

The sources I will consult in this investigation will range from academic journal articles, the *Tao Te Ching*, artworks and an interview with a former docent of the Taoist temple Xingtian (行天宮). The three main types of Chinese aesthetics that I will be focusing on for my study are: traditional Chinese paintings, calligraphies, and temple architectures. Through comparing professional evidence from academic journal articles and the *Tao Te Ching*, I will investigate the justification of how Taoism is reflected in Chinese aesthetics.

Plan for Study

My research question is: To what extent does the philosophy of fundamental Taoism reflect in Chinese aesthetics?

This investigation will focus on the manifestation of fundamental Taoist beliefs in the different areas of Chinese aesthetics including: Chinese paintings, calligraphies, and temple architectures.

¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China (Taiwan), “The Taoist Way To Truth,” Taiwan Today (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China (Taiwan), January 1, 1988), <https://taiwantoday.tw/news.php?post=25303&unit=20%2C29%2C35%2C45>.

² Ibid.

³ “Understanding Taoism,” *Taoism*, July 2004, pp. 21-40, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203646717-8>.

⁴ Minghua Fan, “The Significance of Xuwu 虛无 (Nothingness) in Chinese Aesthetics,” *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 5, no. 4 (2010): pp. 560-574, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11466-010-0115-1>, 561.

⁵ Lothar Ledderose, “Some Taoist Elements in the Calligraphy of the Six Dynasties,” *T'oung Pao* 70, no. 4 (1984): pp. 246-278, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156853284x00107>, 270.

From examining professional viewpoints on Chinese painting and calligraphy technique and content, I will be able to make a better judgement of how Taoism influences these two areas of Chinese aesthetics. I will be making personal visits to the National Palace Museum⁶ to physically experience the artistic essence of Chinese artifacts. Then, taking the *Tao Te Ching*, I can compare the ideas behind these artifacts to determine the extent of Taoist influence.

On the other hand, I will examine Taoist temple architectures by visiting the local Taoist Longshan Temple (龍山寺)⁷. I will also be consulting with a former docent of Taoist Xingtian Temple (行天宮)⁸ through an in-person interview to understand more about the architectural choices behind these temple designs and to what extent does it include Taoist philosophies.

Summary of Significant Findings

After paying a visit to the National Palace Museum, I chose the piece “Arhats in Monochrome Ink” by Ding Yun Peng, from the Ming dynasty, as a reference for analysis on the influence of Taoism on Chinese paintings.⁹

⁶ The National Palace Museum is located in Taiwan with a collection of over 600,000 Ancient Chinese historical artworks and artifacts. These artifacts encompass over 8,000 years, including the Six Dynasties of the history of Chinese art. (Official National Palace Museum website: <https://www.npm.gov.tw/en/>)

⁷ As one of the most famous temples in Taiwan, Longshan Temple is located in Taipei, Wanhua District. Taipei residents would often visit this temple to worship or pray to its deities. This temple includes a mixture of both Buddhist and Taoist deities.

⁸ Xingtian Temple is located in Taipei, Zhongshan District, a popular place where residents would visit to pray to Guan Yu. The temple was created to show dedication to a prominent general of the Han Dynasty and who is now the protector of businessmen, Guan Yu. The temple was the first in Taiwan to have banned incense burning and offering tables as a response to the rise of environmental issues in order to treat all beings with kindness and compassion.

⁹ “A Closer Look at Chinese Painting: Selected Works from the Ages in the Museum Collection,” A Closer Look at Chinese Painting: Selected Works from the Ages in the Museum Collection, accessed April 13, 2021, <https://theme.npm.edu.tw/exh108/painting01/en/page-1.html>.



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According to Professor Aleksandr A. Alepko, “Chinese painting is the ‘disclosure’ of Tao through the comprehension of the images of reality.”¹¹ In this painting, the lines¹² and the strokes are “fluid yet steady and strong.”¹³ The images produced through these lines are abstract representations of reality. Indeed, instead of a super-realistic approach, Chinese paintings follow a flattened and simplistic view of the world. This aspect of Chinese paintings reflects the same teachings of the *Tao Te Ching*, which in chapter 19 states “renounce wisdom...it is more important to see the simplicity, to realize one’s true nature.”¹⁴ Hence, through the specific technique of “flatten[ing] nature itself”¹⁵, the artist is practicing “Spirit Resonance”, which is a way for artists to transfer their Qi energy into their daily actions.¹⁶

Moving on to Calligraphy, I will be using the calligraphy “Letter” by Su Shi from Song Dynasty as a reference to inspect the relationship between Taoism and Chinese calligraphy.

¹⁰ “A Closer Look at Chinese Painting: Selected Works from the Ages in the Museum Collection,” A Closer Look at Chinese Painting: Selected Works from the Ages in the Museum Collection, accessed April 13, 2021, <https://theme.npm.edu.tw/exh108/painting01/en/page-1.html>.

¹¹ Aleksandr A Alepko, “Taoism Traditions in the Artistic Culture of China,” *Journal of Siberian Federal University. Humanities & Social Sciences* 9 (n.d.): pp. 1264-1276, <https://doi.org/10.17516/1997-1370-2016-9-6-1264-1276>, 1266.

¹² The artist followed a traditional technique passed down from the Song artist Li Gonglin, using the “baimiao” monochrome ink.

¹³ Aleppo, “Taoism Artistic Culture”, 1266.

¹⁴ “Tao Te Ching, English by Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English, Terebess Asia Online (TAO),” Tao Te Ching, English by Gia-fu Feng and Jane English, Terebess Asia Online (TAO), accessed April 11, 2021, <https://terebess.hu/english/tao/gia.html#Kap19>.

¹⁵ Alepko, “Taoism Artistic Culture”, 1266.

¹⁶ Denver Vale Nixon, “The Environmental Resonance of Daoist Moving Meditations,” *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology* 10, no. 3 (2006): pp. 380-403, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156853506778942095>, 389.



According to the Professor of Chinese culture and philosophies, Ming Tak Hue, stated that the act of Calligraphy allows “the hearts and minds [to] holistically merge with [the] practices of calligraphy,” and “it was considered an application of the Tao.”¹⁷ It was a way to reveal the inner-self through the movement of the brush, just as the “beauty of Nature revealed itself through *the Tao*.”¹⁸ From the five scripts of calligraphy, the one used in “Letter” is Running script, characters written in continuous strokes¹⁹. In this piece of writing, the characters are written when the brush tip is sharp and rounded for a combination of angular and curving strokes.²⁰ Similar to the famous Chinese calligrapher Wang Xian Zhi from the Jin dynasty, the brush strokes show little regard for “technical skill” and “adherence to the rule”, yet it maintains the “grace” and “beautiful charm” in his line flows.²¹ This specific quality of effortless beauty is what reflects the essence of *Tao*, consisting of “zi ran” nature, “tian ran” heavenly spontaneity, and “tian zhen” heavenly authenticity.²²

¹⁷ Ming-Tak Hue, “Aestheticism and Spiritualism: A Narrative Study of the Exploration of Self through the Practice of Chinese Calligraphy,” *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 44, no. 2 (2010): p. 18, <https://doi.org/10.5406/jaesteduc.44.2.0018>, 18.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 26

¹⁹ Richard Barnhart, “Chinese Calligraphy: The Inner World of the Brush,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 30, no. 5 (1972): pp. 230-241, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3258680>, 236.

²⁰ This piece was especially described to have brushes that look like “running clouds and flowing water, filling the work with a relaxed and untrammled spirit.” (Description next to calligraphy)

²¹ Lothar Ledderose, “Some Taoist Elements in the Calligraphy of the Six Dynasties,” *T'oung Pao* 70, no. 4 (1984): pp. 246-278, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156853284x00107>, 273.

²² *Ibid.*, 274.

Finally, on my visit to the local Taoist Longshan temple I inspected the intent behind the specific designs of the temple.²³



Although I was unable to find a person to consult with at Longshan temple, I was able to consult with the former docent at Xingtian Taoist Temple, BiChun Chen. She stated that “there used to be a *Banyuechi* in front of the [Xingtian] temple, which is basically a half-moon pond where people can bring animals to free at this pond.” In addition, the temple is known for its motifs of dragons that are repeated on multiple places such as the walls and pillars. Thus, people have to enter from “a dragon gate” and exit through the “tiger’s mouth.” According to Ms. Chen, stepping through the dragon gate “is an auspicious act that means success and promotion,” while exiting the tiger’s mouth “will ward off evil influence.” Similar to Taoist beliefs, “dragon” represents “welcoming one into safety, benevolence, prosperity, and most importantly, kindness.”²⁴ Likewise to the Taoist core essence of “kindness”, the main altar in front of the deity is only decorated with fresh flowers and tea because Taoism bans offerings that require the action of “killing.” As stated by *Laozi* in The Five precepts of *The Ultra Supreme Elder Lord’s Scripture of Precepts*: “all living beings... are containers of the uncreated energy, thus one should not kill any of them.”²⁵

Critical Reflection and Evaluation

After conducting this research, my idea of how Taoism influences the Chinese aesthetic had been

²³ The temple maintains a very symmetric structure and along walls, pillars, and roof linings are all decorated with different sculptural designs.

²⁴ Anjie Cho, “Learn About Feng Shui Symbols,” The Spruce, accessed April 18, 2021, <https://www.thespruce.com/meaning-of-popular-feng-shui-symbols-1274693>.

²⁵ “The Five Precepts in Taoism,” The Five Precepts in Taoism, January 1, 1970, <http://ecumenicalbuddhism.blogspot.com/2008/05/five-precepts-in-taoism.html>.

changed. I started off being skeptical of how Chinese intricate artworks can have developed out of the philosophies of Taoism. However, the evidence from traditional arts such as Chinese paintings and calligraphy support many of the techniques and emphasis on the creator's state of mind. Professor Harold Coward²⁶ explained that to practice Chinese painting, practitioners must be aware of the self and avoid egotistical emphasis of making their paintings realistic.²⁷ Therefore, the presentation of a "one facet of a dynamic" is an "appreciation of nature" and "celebration... of a more abstract notion of naturalness and spontaneity."²⁸ This reflects the *Tao Te Ching* which states in verse seven that "through selfless action, he attains fulfillment."²⁹ Indeed, to truly create a masterpiece in Chinese art (paintings), one must be detached from boasting their artistic skills. In agreement with Chinese paintings, in the realm of calligraphy, Taoism also influenced the writing of Chinese characteristics through Running scripts. Without losing control of the brush, a writer's cursive should have both wet and dry, angular and round, and light and dark.³⁰ Hence, the idea of balance through opposite forces is very similar to the Taoist concept of *yin yang* recorded in the *Tao Te Ching*: "the ten thousand things carry *yin* and embrace *yang*. They achieve harmony by combining these forces."³¹ Therefore, many Taoist calligraphers have "little modulation in the width of the strokes, which contributes to the impression of a swift, almost unintentional movement."³² Supporting this statement, Professor Minghua Fan³³ further explained that "*wu wei*" of *Tao* is revealed through "mov[ing] the ink stick as if one is already complete... [and] grasp the brush as if one is without conscious effort."³⁴ Hence, supported by both professional researchers and the *Tao Te Ching*, it is reasonable to conclude that traditional Chinese arts reflect a great extent of Taoist philosophy. However, it is important to highlight that my research on Chinese calligraphy only shows the essence of *Tao* behind cursive scriptures, other scripts such as seal script, clerical script, and standard scripts were not included in the explanation of Taoist influence in calligraphy. Hence, this indicates an incomplete dominance of Taoism in the development of Chinese calligraphy aesthetic.

Temple aesthetics also had many Taoist beliefs. The Taoist design of a half-moon pond allowed believers to release life back into the wild. Correspondingly, verse 73 of the *Tao Te Ching* states that "a brave and calm man will always preserve life."³⁵ Hence, the pond portrays value to

²⁶ Harold Coward is a Professor of Religious Studies and Philosophy at the University of Victoria and Calgary.

²⁷ Harold Coward, "Taoism and Jung: Synchronicity and the Self," *Philosophy East and West* 46, no. 4 (1996): pp. 477-495, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1399493>, 481.

²⁸ Miranda Shaw, "Buddhist and Taoist Influences on Chinese Landscape Painting," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 49, no. 2 (1988): pp. 183-206, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2709496>, 185.

²⁹ *Tao Te Ching*, English by Gia-fu Feng and Jane English, Terebess Asia Online (TAO). Accessed April 11, 2021. <https://terebess.hu/english/tao/gia.html#Kap42>

³⁰ Yi Chiang, "Technique," *Chinese Calligraphy: An Introduction to Its Aesthetic and Technique, Third Revised and Enlarged Edition*, January 1974, pp. 133-149, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvjghxvf.10>, 144.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Lothar Ledderose, "Some Taoist Elements in the Calligraphy of the Six Dynasties," *T'oung Pao* 70, no. 4 (1984): pp. 246-278, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156853284x00107>, 260.

³³ Professor Minghua Fan is from Wuhan University and specializes in the area of Chinese Aesthetics

³⁴ Minghua Fan, "The Significance of Xuwu 虚无 (Nothingness) in Chinese Aesthetics," *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 5, no. 4 (2010): pp. 560-574, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11466-010-0115-1>, 572.

³⁵ *Tao Te Ching*, English by Gia-fu Feng and Jane English, Terebess Asia Online (TAO). Accessed April 11, 2021. <https://terebess.hu/english/tao/gia.html#Kap42>

protecting nature and animal life. However, the pond was removed which takes away the philosophy of the *Tao*. On the other hand, the dragon sculptures and flower decorations all show the Taoist emphasis on living in harmony with nature. However, it is also important to be aware that Taiwanese temples, such as the Longshan Temple, are heavily influenced by Buddhist beliefs. In addition, the interviewee did not ever mention the concepts of *wuwei* or *yin yang*, and never referred to the *Tao Te Ching*. Thus, the interviewee seemed to have a limited knowledge on Taoism. Therefore, the research was flawed; it would be better to conduct further investigation on an authentic Taoist temple with pure Taoist teachings.

In conclusion, the results regarding traditional art, Chinese paintings and cursive calligraphy, have a strong support on Taoist's effect on Chinese aesthetics. The evidence was clearly backed by professional explanations and all the concepts were consistent with the teachings from the *Tao Te Ching*. The temple architecture, although had some Taoist influence, further research is needed such as evidence from pure Taoist temples and consultations with high masters in Orthodox Taoism.

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Appendices

Interview Questions:

1. To what extent do you think Taoism has influenced your life? Does Taoism have an emphasis on aesthetic tastes?
2. How do you think Taoism affects the way you dress?
3. Do you enjoy Chinese paintings? Do you think to some extent Taoism has an effect on this preference?
4. To what extent do you like your handwriting? Do you think Taoism has influenced the way you write?
5. Do you like the architectural structure of the temple you go to? What type of taoist ideas are influenced in these designs? Do you think your preference is influenced by the Taoist philosophy of *yin yang*?
6. What is the most important Taoist ritual you participate in?