

# The Philosophy of Five Elements and the Idea of Chinese Painting\*

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**Abstract**—The five elements of Chinese philosophy and Chinese painting art have profound origins. The five elements theory of Chinese philosophy and the political economy of China for thousands of years, the mutual influence and mutual penetration of ideology and culture, have become the core and skeleton of Chinese traditional culture. On the spread of Chinese painting, its development has made great impact. The connection between the five elements philosophy of China and the aesthetic idea of Chinese painting art has influenced the aesthetic idea and thought of Chinese painting art for thousands of years, and has become the ideological orientation of Chinese painting theory.

**Keywords**—philosophical thought; chinese painting; five elements of philosophy; painting conception

## I. INTRODUCTION

The five elements of Chinese philosophy and Chinese painting art have profound origins. The five elements theory of Chinese philosophy and the political economy of China for thousands of years, the mutual influence and mutual penetration of ideology and culture, have become the core and skeleton of Chinese traditional culture. On the spread of Chinese painting, its development has made great impact. The connection between the five elements philosophy of China and the aesthetic idea of Chinese painting art has influenced the aesthetic idea and thought of Chinese painting art for thousands of years, and has become the ideological orientation of Chinese painting theory.

## II. THE PHILOSOPHY OF FIVE ELEMENTS AND THE IDEA OF CHINESE PAINTING

Chinese traditional painting art presents a unique artistic charm. The reason why Chinese painting has such a shocking and touching charm is because of its rich internal cultural connotation and unique external form meaning. Chinese painting has a unique "intentional", it shows the aesthetic concept and aesthetic connotation of Chinese painting. The "ideas" of Chinese painting is the precondition and necessary preparation for Chinese painters to create paintings. The various factors of painting should be carried out around the artist's intention, and they must be designed and coordinated according to the needs of the intention. In Chinese traditional philosophy and Chinese painting art, the

concept of Chinese painting attaches great importance to the creation of artistic conception. The "ideas" is the highest level of Chinese traditional painting art, and it is the tireless pursuit of Chinese painters for two thousand years of painting art.

The "ideas" of Chinese painting is the core and soul of Chinese painting. The creation of artistic conception is the highest realm of Chinese painting. It has always been highly valued by Chinese painters and is the direction pursued by Chinese painters. The "ideas" is the pursuit of the "realm" creation. It is an atmosphere and a style that Chinese painters use to create a picture and a means of expression. It is hoped that the artist's emotional feelings and spirit will be conveyed through the "ideas" of the picture. The picture has reached a certain "realm", which also achieved the artist's pursuit of the "charm and vividness" of the purpose. The Chinese painting pursues the charm and artistic conception of the picture, expresses the artist's ideological connotation and spiritual realm through the painting, and the painting works embody the artist's mind and talent and humanistic ideal. The highest state of Chinese painting is that the painter expresses his passion on the basis of strong cultural accomplishment, and displays the author's cultural connotation and personality and moral character.

Regarding the importance of the "idealness" of painting in Chinese painting, Wang Fuzhi, the painter of Qing Dynasty, "the introduction of sunset hall forever":

"The idea is like a leader, also a soldier without a leader, called the mob".

This statement vividly shows that the "intention" of Chinese painting is the commander-in-chief in painting. It explains the very important position and function of the "intention" of painting in Chinese painting. As for the importance of the "idealness" of Chinese painting in the paintings, the Zheng Ji's "Concise Theory of Dream Painting" in the Qing Dynasty is as follows:

"The meaning of the pen is the same as that of the wishman. It means make his intention first and then write it down".

This statement tells Chinese painters that when they carry out painting activities, they must first "deliberately" before writing. As for the requirements of Chinese painting to

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"intention", the Song Dynasty Guo Xi's "Lin Quan Gao's painting meaning" is discussed as follows:

"A man must keep his mind wide and happy. This is really the way of a painter".

The "ideas" of Chinese painting requires that the painter can achieve "the width of the chest is wide and the meaning is pleasant" in the ideological and emotional sense, and cannot be in the emotional situation of "depression and stagnation"; It is necessary for painters to be "full of success" after being fully brewed, to use the image material of painting in passion, and to display the pen and ink skills of painting, so that the painting works not only reflect the objective reality of things, but also show the subjective feelings of the author. For example, in the work of Li Gong-Liang, a painter of the Northern Song Dynasty, the picture is not about depicting the pastoral environment of pine chrysanthemum, but in the expression of the aloof and tranquil ideological feelings of the characters in the painting and the aloof and aloof personality quality of the painting. With regard to the so-called "desolate management by artists" when painting by Chinese painters, Fang Xun, in the Qing Dynasty, discussed "the theory of mountain quiet living painting":

"The magic of ink and pen, the meaning of the painter is also wonderful, so the ancients do painting meaning in the first pen. Painting must be based on the intention of positioning".

The above remarks all indicate that Chinese painting pays attention to the "idea" of paintings. It can be seen that the "intention" of Chinese painting is its core and soul, and it is the life of Chinese painting.

The "idea" of Chinese painting does not pay attention to the shape and pays attention to the gods. Regarding the relationship between the likeness and the god, the Yuan Dynasty painter Tang Wei "Painting criticism" discusses:

"When the flower reaches the clearness, the painting should be written in meaning, not in the form of a picture".

It can be seen that the "intent" of Chinese painting only seeks "intention", can "not ask for color similarity", but also can not worry about the appearance of the surface of the similarity or not. The "idea" of Chinese painting pays attention to the "spiritual similarities", which plays a decisive role in the "intention" of Chinese painting. Regarding the "spiritual similarities" and "be similar in form or appearance", the Ming Dynasty Wang Lu's "The Abnormal Paintings and Huashan Pictures Preface" discusses:

"Although the shape of the painting, the main meaning, and meaning is not enough, said that the non-physical can also. Although the meaning is in shape, what is the meaning of the form? Therefore, the meaning of the person who gets the form is overflowing with the form".

Therefore, Chinese painting does not seek complete reappearance of reality, and it can be outside the scene, like the image of the infinite imagination of the ideological realm.

In order to express the "spiritual similarities" of the "idea" of painting, In order to express the idea of painting, Chinese painters often give life to lifeless objects in paintings. Moreover, the whole process of the paintings of the "intentional" paintings of the paintings makes viewers feel that "the paintings are endless."

Therefore, in Chinese painting, the painters have always attached great importance to the "idea" of paintings. Comments on the paintings of Wu Daozi by Zhang Yanyuan in Tang Dynasty:

"The intention is to start with the pen, and the intention of the painting is the best, although the pen is not thoughtful".

This statement shows Zhang Yanyuan's full affirmation of the expression of "intention" in Wu Daozi's paintings and the aesthetic standards of the painters' comments on the quality of paintings in past dynasties.

The main reason why Chinese painters are so particular about "idea" of painting works is that Chinese painters always believe that the aesthetic standard of painting art is "the one that is pleasing to the eye and the one that is pleasing to the heart are superior". The "force on the artistic conception" of Chinese painting works is to make the painting achieve a state of "implied meaning" and "beyond the actual words", which are the reasons why ancient Chinese painting theory emphasizes the "idea".

There is a close relationship between the "idea" of Chinese painting art and the philosophical thinking of the Chinese Five Elements, and these relationships have always been the ideological orientation of Chinese painting theory. If classify the "ideas" of Chinese painting and correspond into the attributes of the five elements, it is proved that the "ideas" of Chinese painting is inextricably linked with the Chinese Five Elements philosophy of China. Combining the five elements philosophy of China with the "intention" of the Chinese traditional painting realm, and their corresponding relationship is as follows:

#### A. *The Idea of "the State of Slowness" Belongs to the "Wood" of the Five Elements*

Wood, known as "Curve and straight", "Curve and straight" is the nature of the growth of trees and branches, extended to the meaning of grow, comfortable. The ancients attributed everything in nature to the "wood" of five elements, which had the characteristics and properties of growth, comfortable, slack and freedom.

In traditional Chinese painting, it often appears the image pursues a kind of "slowness" intention. The so-called "slowness", generally refers to the comfort and leisure of life, or ideological unfettered, spiritual ease and serenity. The pursuit of "slowness" is expressed as the freedom, peace and natural style of life and spirit. The poem of Tao Yuanming in the Eastern Jin Dynasty, "picking wild flowers near the fence and inadvertently seeing Nanshan," is the poetic life of this paradise. In Xu Wei's "Grape Picture" of the Ming Dynasty (See "Fig. 1"), the artist's mental state of idle life shows the author's pursuit of the artistic conception of "the state of slowness" by using the wild grapes in the picture "the pearls

in the bottom of the pen are nowhere to be sold, and the wild vines are thrown idly".



Fig. 1. Ink Grape Map, Ming Dynasty, Xu Wei.

The artistic concept of the "slowness" of Chinese painting art comes from the philosophical thought of Laozi's "the Tao way follows nature", and also comes from Zhuangzi's "man is an integral part of nature" theory. The state of freedom, peace and naturalness, and the faint and comfortable state expressed are consistent with the characteristics and functions of "wood", which is growth, comfortable, slack and freedom. Therefore, the pursuit of "slowness" is summed up as "wood" in the five elements.

#### B. *The Idea of "the State of Mind" Belongs to the "Fire" of the Five Elements*

Fire, known as "inflammation", "inflammation" refers to the warmth, rising, and upward meaning of things. Ancient Chinese attributed all objects with the characteristics of warmth, brightness and upward rising to the "fire" of the Five Elements.

In the traditional Chinese painting, the ideological meaning of the picture has long been "overflowing with the image" in the pursuit of the "state of mind". "The painting is easy to draw, and the outside world is difficult to seek." In the painting, the pursuit of "the realm of the soul" is the artist through the limited picture of the object image, expressing the artist's mind infinite spiritual realm, so that people have unlimited imagination and association. The transformation of Chinese painting from the pursuit of resemblance to the pursuit of gods, to the pursuit of "spirituality" is the expression of "vivid charm". What Chinese painters pursue is not the painting technique itself, but the "state of mind". The sentiment of the mind is not only the realm of the soul, but also the realm of life. It can be said that the meaning of "the realm of the soul" is the highest meaning of Chinese painting art. Many works of the Bada Shanren of the Qing

Dynasty painter are a model of the "the state of mind" (See "Fig. 2").



Fig. 2. Solitary Bird, Qing Dynasty, Bada Shanren.

According to the Chinese Five Elements Theory and traditional Chinese medicine theory, the human heart is "fire". That is to say, the spirit of "fire" shows the painter's spiritual emotion and mental talent, the painter's "mind" of the ideological realm, that is, the picture of "fire" performance. Therefore, the Chinese painting pursuit of the "mood" is summed up of the five elements of "fire". The meaning of "the realm of the soul" is consistent with the warmth, rising and bright effects and characteristics of "fire". Therefore, the idea of harmony between man and nature can be attributed to the fire of the five elements.

#### C. *The Idea of "the State of Clumsy" Belongs to the "Soil" of the Five Elements*

Soil, known as "Sowing and harvesting", the "Sowing and harvesting" means that the "soil" can make plants and other living and grow, and is extended to the meaning of bearing, receiving and biochemical. Ancient people attributed the things with bearing, acceptance, biochemical properties and functions to the "soil" of the Five Elements.

In traditional Chinese painting, most of the time, the art of painting is the pursuit of "beautiful" things. However, when people were aesthetically tired of "beauty", Chinese painters began to question "beauty" and realized the "beauty" of "clumsy ugliness". Therefore, it is proved that Chinese painters began to pursue "ugliness" and began to pursue "self-defeating", and a kind of crude ugliness was born. In the Southern Song Dynasty Liang Kai, "The Ink of the Immortal Figure", the fairy in the painting, with his chest open, his belly exposed, his body towed with broad sleeves, looks clumsy and ugly and has no sense of beauty. But such a painting does not seem to be painting skills, the author as if a few simple strokes of the "directness and action", but soundly expressed the spirit and gait of the fairy after drunkenness. The work seems clumsy and ugly, but in fact it gives people the beauty of natural simplicity.



Fig. 3. Painting of the Moody Fairy Man, Southern Song Dynasty, Liang Kai.

There are many works by traditional Chinese painters such as the painting of the Fairy Man (See "Fig. 3"), whose main thoughts come from Laozi's philosophical theory of "Still water runs deep", whose main thoughts are the pursuit of the "clumsy state" by Chinese traditional painters. The characteristics of "soil" in the Five Elements, not pursuing "beauty" and "smart", but they can carry and accommodate many imperfections and inconsistencies. The idea of pursuing the "clumsy state" has the characteristics of "biochemistry, load-bearing, receiving" like as the "soil". Therefore, the idea of "clumsy state" in painting can be summed up as the "earth" of the five elements.

#### D. The Idea of "the State of Simplicity" Belongs to the "Metal" of the Five Elements

Metal, known as "revolution", the "revolution" is the meaning of reform and change, extended to convergence, purge, clean meaning. Ancient Chinese attributed everything with the characteristics and nature of convergence, cleanliness and purification to the "metal" of the Five Elements.

The pursuit of the Chinese literati painters' paintings on the "simple realm" of "seeking simplicity and taking the liberty" has not stopped. The works of Liang Kai, a painter of the Southern Song Dynasty, "Li Bai Xingyin Graph" (See "Fig. 4") is a model of the "simple realm" of the creative paintings. The works use a few strokes to outline the poet Li Bai's exuberant style and charm when he looks up to the sky when he sings. The whole picture has no background, but is intriguing with less than more. In the painting of the Northern Song Dynasty, Xuan He painting spectrum, a commentary on the simple paintings of Guan Tong, a painter of the five generations, said:

"Guan Tong's paintings, the less the picture and the longer the meaning is, the simpler the pen is and the stronger the breath is, the less the scenery and the longer the meaning is".

The aesthetic pursuit of Chinese artists for the art of simplicity is due to the influence of Laozi's philosophy of "Rare voice of big sound, elephant invisible".

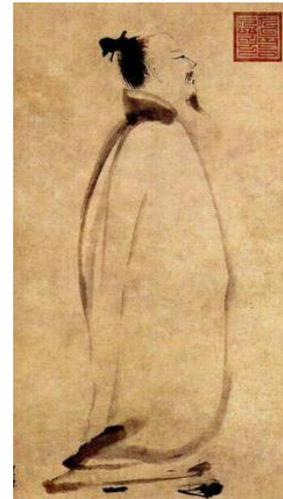


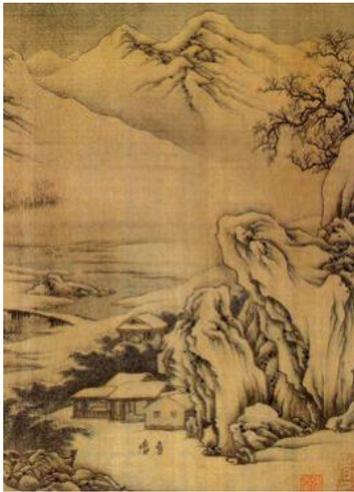
Fig. 4. Li Bai Xingyin Graph, Southern Song Dynasty, Liang Kai.

In traditional Chinese painting, a concise and clean pen and ink is used to describe the essential features of things, so that the works can produce cleanness, and convergent picture effects. The effect of this picture is consistent with the function and nature of the five elements of "metal". Therefore, the concept of pursuing a "simple environment" in this painting can be attributed to the "metal" in the five elements.

#### E. The Idea of "the State of Faraway" Belongs to the "Water" of the Five Elements

Water, known as "moist and flowing", the meaning of "moist and flowing" is to say that the water is moist, cold and flowing downwards. Ancient people attributed everything with the characteristics and nature of moistening down and flowing cold to the "water" of the Five Elements.

In traditional Chinese painting, it often appears a kind of paintings with the idea of "empty spirit". For example, Ma Yuan of the Southern Song Dynasty, "The Cold River Single Fishing Figure" describes a state of tranquility, solitude, coldness and etherealness, used to express the feelings and emotions of the author's lonely depression, depression and anger. In the Tang Dynasty, Wang Wei's work "River Dry Snow and Snow Stream Map" (See "Fig. 5") uses ink to express the lonely and lonely picture. The painter in the Qing Dynasty, Bada Shanren further expanded and deepened the moral and connotation of "quiet and deep, empty and far away" in the desolate and cold land.



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Fig. 5. River Dry Snow and Snow Stream Map, Tang Dynasty, Wang Wei.

Chinese traditional painters have a lot of works on the artistic conception of "the state of faraway", and their thoughts mainly come from the influence of Zhuangzi's "quiet, silent, empty, void" philosophical thoughts on Chinese painting. The pursuit of the "the state of faraway" picture has the characteristics and functions of cold, moist, far, and downward. Therefore, the idea of "the distant realm" pursued in this painting can be summed up as "water" in the five elements

### III. CONCLUSION

Generally speaking, the relationship between the "idea" of Chinese painting and the five elements philosophy of China is inseparable. The artistic conception and realm of traditional Chinese painting all show its corresponding philosophical thought of five elements. The ideological system of Chinese five elements philosophy has a wide and far-reaching influence on the art of Chinese painting. By understanding the relationship between the five elements philosophy and Chinese painting, a new way of thinking can be provided for guiding the creation of Chinese painting.

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