An Analysis on the Function of Self-Communication of Traditional Chinese Painting

WANG Hong[a],*

[a]Associate professor, Faculty of Education, Southwest University, Chongqing, China.
* Corresponding author.

Abstract

It is widely accepted that the features of traditional Chinese painting (Guo hua) spontaneously resulted from traditional Chinese culture and philosophy, especially Taoism which emphasizes emptiness. The author of this article argues that in additional to historical and philosophical bases, Chinese artists' motivation and pressure they conform should be taken into consideration in terms of analyzing the function and characteristics of traditional Chinese painting. Basically, it is Chinese artists' motivation to build a barrier between viewers and themselves (self-communication) that partly contributes to the unique strategies and skills that shape the style of Chinese painting. The clue of self-communication can be clearly seen by analyzing the principles of traditional Chinese painting, which includes blurred representation, harmony and self-closure. Correspondingly, major painting techniques, namely, simplicity, emptiness and Chinese character (calligraphy related), were developed to achieve that goal of self-communication. The self-communication of traditional Chinese painting also leads to other consequences that have influenced western painting.

Key words: Traditional Chinese painting; Self-communication; Emptiness; Painting techniques

INTRODUCTION

Traditional Chinese painting (Guo hua) is characterized by its unique expression of using ink blots and ink lines to create spirit-based images. It is also considered a way of life in accordance with Chinese personality. The systematic theory of spirit pursuit of Chinese painting was first established by Xie He (1986), an ancient Chinese artist of Southern and Northern Dynasties. He summarized, in order of importance, Six Elements and Principles of figure painting that can be used as criteria to assess all artworks: spiritual expression (Qiyun), brush line, brush shape, color, design and copying. Although the last five are similar to some of western art principles, these were only made to serve the purpose of sovereign importance of spiritual expression. Another artist, Xie's contemporary, Jing Hao (1982), created Six Essentials of landscape painting, including vividness, implication, understanding, scene, brush stroke and ink use. These are almost the same with Xie's theory but more spiritually emphasized. Explanations for the definition of Qinyun, the core concept, vary according to different understandings. Roughly, it can be explained by breath-resonance and life-motion, as Fong (1966) put it, "When the 'breath' of the painter resonates with the 'breath' of the painted subject, life-motion is engendered in the work of art". But how to make that happen?

Spiritual expression can't be achieved only by focusing on painting shapes of objects in detail. On the contrary, ambiguity and interpretation are more important. This spirit-centered feature of Chinese painting can be best explained by two eye-painting stories that account for what and how it can be. One story from Book of Jin Dynasty tells that Gu Kaizhi, a famous artist in Eastern Jin Dynasty, asked once why he didn't make eyes of his human figure painting after finished other parts of it, answered that it was much easier to make any other parts of a human body than human eyes because the spirit of figure painting lay in eyes. Gu was quite certain that eyes

were the most crucial part of human figures so that he was cautious in painting them, and people would take it for granted that he grasped the essence of painting. The other story is the famous "Making eyes of painting dragons". It is about a painter named Zhang Sengyou in Southern and Northern Dynasties who was invited to paint four dragons on the wall of a temple. He made them but gave none of them eyes either because he was afraid the dragons would fly away if he did that. In the end, two dragons did fly away as soon as he added eyes to them while the other two without eyes remained on the wall. Obviously, by talking about eye spirit, Chinese artists didn't mean to make the painted objects look real and vivid so that viewers would mistake them for real ones. Their purpose was to claim that the ultimate goal of painting is not to paint but to imagine and contemplate.

1. THE HYPOTHESIS

A typical and well-known explanation of painting spirit is to trace back to Lao Tzu, the founder of Taoism. His ideas can be concisely understood with his famous statement "The Tao (Way) that can be told of is not the eternal Tao; the name that can be named is not the eternal name" (as cited in Chan, 1963). Simplifying his idea and using it to explain art we may say: the art that can be painted is not eternal art. The Tao that cannot be told of will end up empty things and the art that cannot be painted will result in spirit things, thus connecting the two. It is true Taoism does have an impact on Chinese painting, but spiritual expression may not be a necessary outcome of Taoism. Rather, it could be that Taoism happened to explain Chinese painting. Let's take a look at Chinese history first. Taoism emerged before Qing Dynasty, much earlier than Chinese painting had its heyday. The period before Qin Dynasty was a free, "hundred flowers bloom" period that allowed "a hundred schools of thought contend", while after it was a dark, "Ten thousand horses stand mute" period. This indicates Taoists were entitled to a freer and more open society than artists who lived after Qin Dynasty. According to Zheng Wuchang (1985), a famous historian of Chinese art, Chinese painting history can be sequentially classified into four periods: utilitarian period, ethical period—in which Lao Tzu lived, religious period and expressive period. During the first three periods, Chinese painting either focused on practical purposes or serving the society; little had been paid to spirit painting. Only during the transitional period from the first three to the last did artists start to think about the question of spiritual expression. The reason is, as intellectuals who have been afflicted by political oppression, artists desperately needed a way to act out their emotional distress and avoided offending the authority at the same time. Taoism and its emptiness theory became the best option to be applied to painting.

Another explanation is that the style of Chinese painting agrees with Chinese people's unique personality, especially scholars'. Zhou (1985) claims Chinese people are pure, simple and humble, just like the way Chinese art demonstrates, while He (1996) thinks Chinese are introverted and easy to deal with. This hypothesis makes little sense, either. First of all, Chinese people are not simple, at least not as simple as westerners. Some empirical studies show that Chinese personality structure contains factors westerners don't have. Instead of the five-factor model, which is a well-known personality structure for westerners, a seven-factor structure explains Chinese personality better (Wang, Cui, & Zhou, 2005). Another study shows the Interpersonal Relatedness factor is defined only by the Chinese Personality Assessment Inventory (Cheung, Leung, Zhang, Sun, Gan, Song, & Xie, 2001), indicating Chinese are not as simple as they look, especially when dealing with people. Second, Chinese people can make the most complicated writing characters in the world; logically they could make painting that way as well. If Chinese personality and behaviors are complicated, then it is rather appropriate to conclude that Chinese painting must tell us something about artists' hidden intent.

The uniquely spiritual expression of Chinese painting also indicates a different explanation. That is, Chinese painting is a coded system of combined symbols with regard to indirect or implicit communication (Fang & Faure, 2011), which means, Chinese artists could use art as a tool to deliver private messages. Expressing spirit is ambiguous so that artists' intentions could be hidden; expressing spirit is also changeable so that paintings could hardly be interpreted. The purpose is to cut off art from the real world so that artists could ambiguously express what they feel while at the same time avoid being in conflict with reality. In other words, artists do not intend to share their views with people through art. Instead, they intentionally try to prevent people from seeing what they really want to convey. This is the function of self-communication of traditional Chinese painting.

2. SELF-COMMUNICATION PRINCIPLES OF CHINESE PAINTING

Art can be understood as an expressive way of using visual language to communicate with viewers. The first people painted or drew for this communication purpose. They used visual language to exchange information and share attitudes or feelings with others; and they enjoyed people's appreciating their artworks. Painting is also a powerful tool to express a concrete and live self. Sometimes some viewers may find it difficult to understand an artwork because of their poor-education background, closed minds or insensitive to colors, but western artists are not supposed to make viewers feel that way because, according to its art principles, art is

imitation of the real world. People who live in the real world are supposed to understand and appreciate it. When it comes to traditional Chinese painting, imitation is no longer artists' first priority. They don't care about whether what they paint look like real objects or not. They only care about themselves. For this reason, they would rather paint spiritual abstract. In this way, they successfully built a technical barrier to prevent viewers from communicating with them directly.

Artists' hesitation to communicate with viewers was partly due to the prevailing discussion of metaphysics in Jin Dynasty during which scholars and painters had to rely on the ruling aristocrats to survive turmoil of war. Yielding to monarchs was against their self-righteous personality. So, talking, writing and painting emptiness became the only solution to the problem of being distressed in a conflict situation. Mostly, the pressure of authoritarian circumstances was responsible for self-communication of painting. Dictatorial regimes are especially vigilant against scholars and artists because they are the only groups that are well educated and know how to challenge the theoretical foundation of an autocracy. Therefore, scholars and artists are always scapegoats of persecution when social transition is about to happen. Those who complain of or criticize about the ruling class would inevitably be persecuted. The evidences of their crimes can be what they write or paint. A misused word or a symbolic image that is associated with any satire on the government would bring the offenders into trouble. The persecution of Chinese intellectuals started as early as Qin dynasty during which the First Emperor of Qin burned almost all Confucius books and buried lots of dissidents alive. Such persecution reached its zenith in Ming and Qing dynasty. Knowing the serious consequences of writing and painting and having been victims of a mounting use of repression since Qin Dynasty, artists gradually found that the way of self-communication by expressing emptiness could help them avoid being possibly humiliated or persecuted by authorities.

Traditional Chinese painting is based on three principles in terms of self-communication purpose. The first is blurred representation, which means expressing spirit is more important than painting form. So, Chinese artists weren't interested in paying much attention to making realistic paintings. Blurred representation also means expressing emotion through certain subjects. Often the chosen subjects are neither secular nor humanistic but nature things like mountains and waters, or flowers and birds. As Wong (1991) pointed out, the reason landscape became the most popular subject since the eighth century was that artists' aspirations to attain oneness with nature, which helped express an experience of a more spiritual journey and the presence of the artist's self. Artists are especially fond of the so-called Four Noble Characters----plum blossoms, orchid, bamboo and chrysanthemum----because they take those nature things as metaphors

of personality traits they possess such as independence, calmness, and resilience. How metaphors in paintings can be understood depends on artists' interpretation and viewers' imagination, which implies artists and viewers may have little in common. So, artists' metaphor is only an expression to themselves. Wijnberg (1999) is right when he noticed human bodies as subjects for painting in Europe since the Renaissance was a necessary ingredient of the most highly valued type of painting while in China since Yuan Dynasty the hierarchy of subjects was the reverse. But he is wrong when he said that only the social role and status of the artist in terms of economics accounted for this. Apparently he neglected the fact that art in China has always been more a question of morality and politics than a question of economics.

The second principle is harmony or excessive unity. Harmony is the core and ideal thought of Chinese culture, meaning perfect relation among people and between people and nature. Chinese artists prefer harmony not because they love it but because this is the best way of matching principle one and avoiding conflicts. Unity is easily achieved in painting by using bored lines, mono colors and similar shapes without perspective. Principles and techniques, along with controversial subjects that may result in viewers' and the government's disagreement or dislikes are considered inappropriate and completely abandoned. To attain the objective of harmony, artists need to create a calm, plain and boring atmosphere that fits unity. That's why softness is seen in every aspect of traditional Chinese painting: soft brushes, soft brush strokes, soft paper, soft colors and soft lines. Even soft or smooth personality is regarded as a basic requirement for a qualified artist. Looking at those harmonious pieces, viewers can hardly be motivated to question about, argue with and debate over them, thus shutting them off from artists' world.

Last but not least, the important principle is self-explanation that best accounts for the role of self-communication. Self-explanation refers to artists' uncertain interpretations of their artworks. Usually an artist is inclined to appreciate his artworks without considering other people' opinions about them. He designs, paints, evaluates and enjoys his artworks. He may even live in solitude to show he is completely different from others. He refuses to share his ideas with those who can't understand him. For example, simply drawing a duck swimming in a pool may indicate enjoying country life or coming spring—ducks are sensitive to change of water temperature—which is what most people think of. But it can also represent a new political era, which is what the artist really means. If someone is presumptuous to claim he has figured out the meaning of the artwork, the author will resolutely deny it; if viewers entirely ignore the artist's true meaning he will feel a little disappointed. In either case, he is not supposed to give any hint about it and gains self-esteem by doing so.

The three principles encourage artists to make no or empty explanation of their artworks to achieve the goal of self-communication. Occasionally, Individual artists would deliberately conceive some images that look unreasonable in life. For example, a depiction of flowers and fruits of different seasons growing together, or landscapes of north and south standing together, or placement of objects against linear perspective, which may make viewers confused. When asked to tell what such a painting is about, the artist's suggestion to spectators is to take it as it is. Usually, talking directly and concretely about an artist's work is believed to be superficial and unprofessional and should be avoided. If a commentary or an explanation is inevitable or necessary, talking emptiness is thought to be the proper way of neither offending the artist nor showing the commenter's ignorance, thus balancing how artists and viewers feel. However, as making and talking emptiness becomes a tradition, most people lose their interest in art, and art becomes just a game played only by artists themselves.

3. STRATEGIES AND TECHNIQUES OF SELF-COMMUNICATION

There are three techniques artists used to fulfill the goal of self-communication: free stroke, creating blank and painting text.

Free stroke is opposed to fine brushwork. Both are basic line-related techniques of traditional Chinese painting but differ in expression. Fine brushwork is used to create complicated and detailed shapes while free stroke is good at depicting simple and spiritual things. When artists want to express something personal, he would prefer free stoke; when they want to be recognized, they would rather use fine brushwork. That's why fine brushwork contributes to the popularity of most celebrated Chinese paintings in history. This seems fine brushwork paintings are more popular and representative, yet in most cases, artists only make detailed artworks upon requests or invitations of those who have a preference for fine and magnificent settings. Even court painters that engage in fine brushwork for much of his life will eventually turn to free stroke painting.

Comparing with fine brushwork, free stroke plays a more economic and more effective role of following the three principles. Almost all Chinese painting techniques descended from strokes of Chinese calligraphy. Fine brushwork is a little like regular style (Kai Shu), neat and recognizable; free stroke, in contrast, is like grass style or swift style (Cao Shu), scribbled and barely decipherable. Because free stroke largely depends on variations of strokes, unity can be more conveniently brought about without considering color, value and space. Though the technique of free stroke may fail to arouse viewer's immersive experience, it is a basic skill that enables Chinese artists to express themselves.

The second technique is using blank or emptiness, which is closely related to the technique of free stroke. By using free stroke, artists can only create sketchy shapes and may neglect other elements, thus leaving blanks of different sizes in different places in a painting. The purpose is to motivate imagination as much as possible. The more blanks left in a painting, the more possibly imagination can be motivated and self-communication can be served. So, it is not rare to see blanks account for over half of a whole painting sometimes. In short, emptiness in painting attaches as little importance to form expression as to spiritual expression. It is a sort of artistic conception of self-explanation manifestation, allowing artists adding varieties to the interpretation of what has been painted and what has not, particularly.

Painting Chinese characters (calligraphy and seals) is the technique that is associated with creating blanks. Painting, calligraphy, along with seal are regarded as indispensable parts of traditional Chinese painting. If simplicity and emptiness favor artists' self-communication, then adding characters to their paintings may just do the opposite because calligraphy and seals are always the embodiment of semantic sentences or poems that may help viewers guess artists' intentions. However, this is not the case at all. Meanings of characters have never been as important as forms of characters. The function of characters here is not to exhibit artists' talent of writing so as to make viewers more understandable of the artworks but to fill parts of blanks to make a more balanced and more abstract design. The more emptiness is created, the more necessary it is to add characters. It is technically evident that when images and characters are presented simultaneously, no matter what meanings the characters convey, viewers tend to naturally adopt a bottom-to-top, perception-driven process by giving priority to visual stimuli. That is to say, it is always images, including forms of calligraphy that are noticed by viewers first. Characters attached to a painting would neither change the way viewers appreciate it nor make artists more open to viewers. It is for this reason that almost all the artists in history hardly mentioned any importance of content of characters in their art theories, neither did Xie He and Jin Hao. For them, characters are no more than an ornament to emptiness. Therefore, they only serve as additional function of blanks and thus help serving the function of self-communication.

CONCLUSION

Self-communication still works for the present-day Chinese artists. The evidence is that Chinese painting hasn't changed much since it was born. Its four major classifications of subject matter—figures, mountains and waters (landscape), insects and fishes, and flowers and birds—still account for most of contemporary Chinese artworks. Free stroke is still the main style that most

artists prefer. One important period of possible innovation of Chinese painting happened between late 1800's to early 1900's during which it was influenced by western art. Giuseppe Castiglione, also known as Lang Shining, an Italian missionary and a court painter in Qing dynasty, was thought to be the first who brought western art theories and practices into China. Lang Shining's idea of painting the Emperor and Empress with western style was rejected because the Emperor didn't like shadows. So he had to make a compromise to blend European sensibility with Chinese technique and themes. Artists after Lang Shining tried to introduce western painting techniques into Chinese painting but only found out they were defined to variations of skills based on western art techniques. Actually, as long as Chinese artists refuse to change their minds, the unique style of Chinese painting will not be changed and neither will the function of self-communication.

On the other hand, Chinese artists' idea of self-communication did have an impact upon its counterpart. For example, considering the purpose and principles and techniques of traditional Chinese painting, one may easily find that China has a much longer history of abstract painting than western nations. Western abstract painting, including impressionism, was more or less adapted from traditional Chinese painting. Some research (Guinzbourg de Braude, 2008) even pointed out that it was because Rorschach might have realized the traits of monotony and ambiguity of Chinese painting that he created his well-known testing instrument of inkblots. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that as western art switches from imitation to imagination, it will naturally resort to the solution of traditional Chinese painting.

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