

*The Characteristics and Spirit of Chinese Paintings*

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There are roughly two cultural systems in the world: the East system and the West system. The West system is currently a mainstream system. The East system usually refers to the Far East, mainly China. China was one of the four ancient civilized countries; its culture has experienced five thousand years of development and has exerted great influence on the cultures of neighboring Asian countries since ancient times.

Fine art, as an important part of Chinese culture, started its brilliant history five thousand years ago along the Yellow River basin and gradually extended its development to the Yangtze River areas. Chinese painting is a system with unique characteristics and spirit.

Chinese people have long painted with brushes. In the earliest days of painting, they painted on tomb walls with paint, ash, ink, and pigment. Later, they painted on silk cloth and paper; *Nu Shi Zhen Tu* (pictures serving as adages for women living in the royal palace), one of the earliest Chinese paintings drawn by Gu Kaizhi from the East Jin Dynasty, was drawn on silk cloth. This painting is now in the collection of the British Museum. More Chinese paintings on silk cloth and paper from the Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing Dynasties can be found in museums around the world, especially the Taipei National Palace Museum, a bonanza of Chinese fine arts.

Chinese paintings have acquired different characteristics after many generations of development. In general, two methods of using the brush exist: *Gong Bi* (fine strokes), that is, drawing details with fine strokes and rich colors, and *Yi Bi* (rough strokes), drawing with rough strokes and light colors. There are three things that we should notice in terms of composing methods.

1. **Brushes.** The greatest difference between Western paintings and Chinese paintings is that Chinese paintings are composed primarily of lines. This fact has to do with another fine art, calligraphy, which began to develop three thousand years ago. Calligraphy is an art of lines. The methods of drawing lines vary greatly from school to school. Roughly speaking, two types of lines exist: iron lines and leaf lines. Iron lines normally go straight without any changes in width. Characters carved on shells, bones, bells, and metal plates in early history used iron lines. Leaf lines are generated with varied strength, as seen in different styles of Chinese calligraphy.

Artists also study different touches such as swift dragging, slow turning, pivoting, and sudden stops in creating lines. Chinese painters prefer freestyle and curving lines than mechanical, straight lines. They get inspiration from their pursuit of calligraphy, especially cursive writings of different styles. For instance, *shi* means “spreading a brush with an intense power like an eagle flying up,” *zhuan* means “switching direction like a crane dancing,” *zhe* means “turning around like a scared snake,” and *dun* means “suddenly spreading the brush like dropping a mountain.”

2. **Ink and Pigment.** More than one thousand years ago, Chinese painters began to emphasize the importance of using ink. Black ink has been used as the key tone. No matter whether a drawing carries colors, dark black ink and the gray color created by light ink have been used to organize the entire drawing so as to make the drawing solid and stabilized. This practice is consistent with the Western color theory that black is the basic color of all colors.

3. **Paper.** Chinese painters painted mostly on water-resistant silk cloth. Now painters use water-absorbing cotton paper. In terms of composition, painters have used an increasing amount of rough and simple strokes rather than fine and complicated strokes. Calligraphers' writing has become more and more cursive since ancient times and this has influenced contemporary ink painting. In the past few decades, ink wash paintings have increasingly borrowed the calligraphers' method of using ink.

Guided by their philosophical ideas, the Chinese people's view of the universe, human beings, and moral code have evolved into a unique system. The humanistic spirit promoted by this system is greatly different from the spirit of the West. Therefore, the empty images and solid images in Chinese painting are often compared to the concepts of emptiness and nothingness in the Confucian theory. Confucius regarded emptiness as the fullest and nothing the biggest. Such theory has governed art production in China through many generations. Another way of thinking unique to the Chinese is personifying scenes or subjects such as mountains, rivers, animals and plants in paintings so as to identify with the ethics and humanistic spirit revealed in the Confucian theory.

Confucius esteemed gentlemen, beautiful women, high-ranking officials and hermits, and all these people have their respective analogies. Also, painters create analogies using mountain peaks as longevity, the hollow inside (such as bamboo) as humbleness and integrity, the early blooming of flowers as loneliness and pride, the late withering of flowers as escaping, the tiger as king, and the crane as long life. Therefore, when we see a mountain in a Chinese painting, we should see not only the mountain but also the object that painters want to show respect to in their minds. Likewise, when we see running water, we should think of what the painters are expecting in their minds. Such analogies are often further emphasized in poems that painters write on their paintings. As such, painters express and develop the humanistic spirit in their own ways. If someone wanted to find traces of real life—such as the chairs the painters sat on today or the crossroads the painter walked through—in a Chinese painting, they would have missed the point, because painters pursue something that is soul-stirring, something long-lasting, and the reflection of the immortality in the Chinese humanistic spirit.