



The Tao of Art: Exploring Daoist Philosophy in Contemporary Art

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ABSTRACT: This paper will explore whether Taoist thought is still applicable to the context of contemporary art and explore which theories in the Taoist thought system can be utilized by artists and rationally expressed in a variety of art forms (e.g., easel painting, installation art, performance art, eco-art, etc.). This article will use a combination of image analysis, literature research, and comparative study to explore its embodiment in contemporary art creation, including the penetration of the concepts of nature, life, and the universe. The article will first provide an overview of Taoist aesthetics, then use traditional landscape painting as an entry point, explain the fundamental painting theories of two painters who have had a significant influence on Tao, and finally analyze in depth how contemporary Chinese artists embody Tao elements, comparing and analyzing them with relevant artists from other countries. Finally, it examines how modern Chinese artists' works follow Tao principles and compares them to those of other countries. We present the article chronologically to explore the Tao's inclusivity and permanence across cultures, times, and countries. The contrast with ancient painters demonstrates how contemporary artists have used Taoist ideas to address modern society's ecological dilemma and spiritual distress, resulting in a philosophical and aesthetic creative expression.

1.1 Keywords: Taoist aesthetics; contemporary art; Chinese painting; Easel painting; Gunpowder Installation Art; Earth Art

Received: 07 January 2025

Revised: 26 January 2025

Accepted: 10 February 2025

2. Introduction

Contemporary art, as a visual presentation of the ideas of the times, is not only concerned with the innovation of art forms but also incorporates profound philosophical thinking. With its profound philosophical connotation and transcendent values, Taoist thought has deeply penetrated contemporary art creations. "As an important part of traditional Chinese culture, Taoism, with its concepts of "doing nothing (无为)" and "the way of nature (道法自然)" provides a spiritual path that transcends materialism and utilitarianism. Taoist thought continues to inspire contemporary artists, even after thousands of years, as they continue to express the subtle relationship between nature and man, the inner and the outer, in their works. This penetration embodies the reinvention of Taoist philosophy into the language and concepts of contemporary art. Whether through the natural presentation of installation art, the spiritual exploration of performance art, or the environmental care of eco-art, Taoist philosophy continues to inspire artists to reflect on the relationship between humans and nature and between matter and spirit. This cross-cultural comparative study can shed light on Taoist art's position in the global art

scene, particularly how Taoist aesthetics impact art creation in other cultures. With the escalation of environmental problems, it is worthwhile to investigate how the ecological viewpoint in Taoist thought is expressed through art forms, as well as how contemporary artists draw inspiration from Taoist philosophy to deal with ecological crises, all of which are important topics to research. Furthermore, it offers a distinct viewpoint on Eastern philosophy for creative creation in a globalized world.

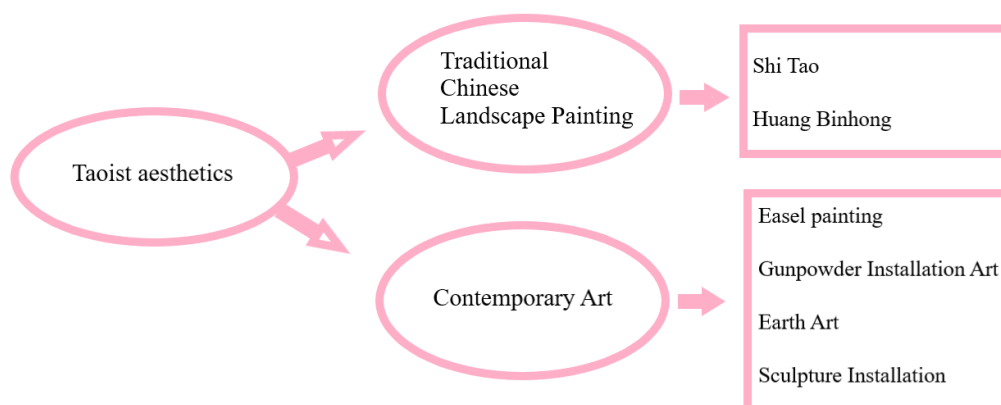


Figure 1: Research Flow Chart

3. Taoist aesthetics

Taoist aesthetic thinking emphasizes the naturalness of artistic creativity, ultra-utilitarianism, and the return to personal nature. From the standpoint of aesthetics, represented by Laozi and Zhuangzi, it has created the spiritual core of "the way of nature (道法自然)" which encourages naturalness and the quest for artistic freedom. Chinese aesthetics, like Chinese philosophy, prioritizes purpose, relationships, and rhythm over objects and entities. Taoism emphasizes the aesthetic relationship between inner, spiritual, and substantial beauty, which is a non-cognitive rule of artistic creation.

"Tao" is the meta-category of Laozi's philosophy and aesthetics, with the meaning of 'sublime' and 'ultimate.' Laozi's Tao Te Ching laid the foundation and tone of the entire Taoist philosophy and aesthetics, while Zhuangzi promoted the systematization of Taoist aesthetic thought. Zhuangzi pointed out to people that the way to the spiritual realm of Tao is to transcend the self, i.e., to transcend the body, the intellect, and reality. Chapter 25 of Laozi says, "Man follows the law of the earth, the law of the earth follows the law of the sky, the law of the sky follows the law of the road, and the law of the road follows the law of nature," which, together with Zhuangzi's "Heaven and earth coexist with me, and everything is one with me," explains the philosophical concept of the unity of heaven and man (D.C. Lau, 1963; A. C. Graham, 2001). The basic concept of Chinese thought is the indivisibility of time and space, which is a rhythmic concept of the "Way of Heaven (天道)" for living entities. In the view of Chinese philosophers, man and the universe constitute a comprehensive and harmonious system. This harmonious relationship was traditionally referred to simply as the "unity of heaven and man."

Zong Baihua says: "The Tao is embodied in the system of life, ritual, and music, and especially in art. Splendid art gives image and life to the Tao, which in turn gives depth and soul to the art. It follows that not only are there similarities between the aesthetic thought of Taoism and art, but in a sense, the aesthetic thought of Taoism is another form of expression of art." (Zong Baihua, 2009).

4. Taoist Aesthetics in Traditional Chinese Landscape Painting

Taoism is deeply rooted in Chinese culture, and its core concept of "Tao" is not only a philosophical way of thinking but also influences every aspect of Chinese art creation. The Taoist concept of the universe emphasizes the "unity of heaven and man (天人合一)" and the "the way of nature (道法自然)" which has had a profound impact on the overall style of Chinese art.

In the Mustard Seed Garden of Painting, “Whenever a painting is made, the sky and the earth are left in the first place, and the people live in the middle of them.” (Shen Xinyou,2011)The treatment of the kind of picture structure reflects the ancient people's reverence for nature, and it is the Taoist religion that advocates the harmonious coexistence of man and nature and emphasizes conformity to the laws of nature. This idea has directly influenced the aesthetic concept of Chinese landscape painting.

The natural landscape in landscape painting is more than just a representation of the physical world; it is also a symbol of Taoism. Xiao Ping observes that Taoist ideology is reflected in the composition of Chinese landscape paintings in the aesthetic pursuit of "emptiness" and "quietness", particularly during the Northern Song Dynasty when the works of artists such as Fan Kuan and Guo Xi demonstrated Taoism's profound understanding of the universe. The structure of a traditional Chinese painting is not covered with paint as in Western paintings but is left blank. At least one-third of the non-painted area of the picture is free of any brushstrokes, which is a reflection of “emptiness”. At the same time, this emptiness might be interpreted as clouds, water, or fog, all of which represent "qi." Only with emptiness can the air enter and keep the picture alive, and only with "emptiness" can the picture be free of boundaries and restraints, leaving the picture to the viewer's imagination. Emptiness is consistently presented as a natural thing that does not require definition. "A painting touched by true emptiness should have dynamic breathing inside each line, between lines, and they can move freely," Fanchi said(François Cheng,2006).



Figure 2: Traveling in the mountains and streams, Fan Kuan, Northern Song Dynasty

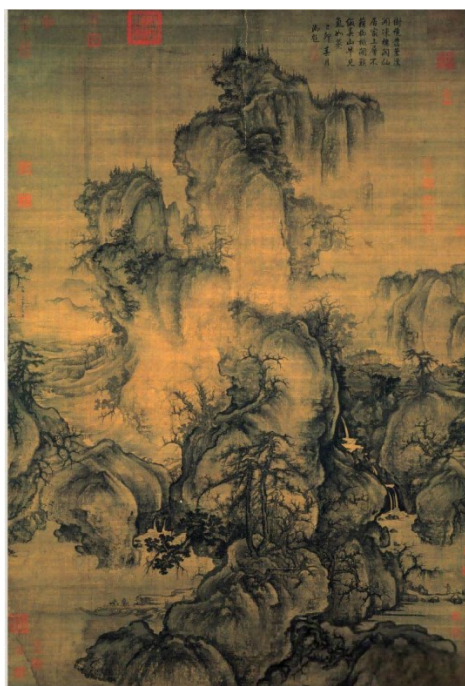


Figure 3: Early Spring, Guo Xi, Northern Song Dynasty

Shi Tao and Huang Binhong played a role in the process of landscape painting; their painting concepts combined with the doctrine of Taoism and will be a profound understanding of the injection of their works, forming a very personal style of formal language, while their aesthetic thesis has been affecting the future generations.

Shi Tao's “Bitter Gourd Monk's Quotations” contains a wealth of Taoist thought, and his artistic philosophy and creative concepts are deeply influenced by Taoism's core concepts such as “Taoism is the law of nature,” “Doing nothing is the way to rule,” and “The unity of heaven and man.” His artistic philosophy and creative concepts were deeply influenced by the core concepts of Taoism, such as “Taoism

follows nature," "Doing nothing and ruling," and "Unity of heaven and man." He proposed that "a painting is the root of all things and the model of all images." (Zhong Yueying, 2021). He believed that everything in a painting originates from "one painting," and the creation of a painting starts from "one painting." The "one painting (一画)" is not only the root of art but also symbolizes the generative law of the universe. It originates from the Tao Te Ching, which states that "The way begets one; One begets two; Two begets three; Three begets the myriad creatures." describing the process by which the universe derives all things from the root of Tao (D.C. Lau, 1963). Shi Tao's "One Painting," like the Taoist's "Tao," is the origin of painting, which then gives rise to endless artistic possibilities, in the same vein as the Taoist's emphasis on the logic of generating the universe.

Taoism emphasizes 'The myriad creatures in the world are born from Something, and Something from Nothing.' (D.C. Lau, 1963). believing that the invisible 'Tao' gives birth to all things tangible. Shi Tao embodied this process through his 'One Painting,' in which the first brushstroke on a blank canvas creates a second brushstroke associated with it, and so on, creating a complete art world with interactions between objects. The correspondence between this process and the Taoist concept of cosmogenesis demonstrates the philosophical depth of Shi Tao's artistic thought.

The phrase 'do not imitate the ancients, do not learn from the present, but follow the laws of creation' clearly embodies Shi Tao's philosophy of 'Taoism is based on nature.' (Zhong Yueying, 2021). He believed that nature is the ultimate tutor for artistic creation and that painters should draw inspiration from landscapes, grass, and trees, follow the laws of nature to create, and oppose blindly imitating the ancients or sticking to stereotypes. This is highly consistent with the philosophical proposition of Taoism that 'man follows the law of the earth, the earth follows the law of the sky, the sky follows the law of the Tao, and the Tao follows the law of nature.' (D.C. Lau, 1963). The way of nature is the law of all things, and artistic creation should also comply with this law, presenting the beauty of natural harmony. However, the 'nature' here is not to copy the reality of the objects, but not deliberately, not restricted to the technique. Shi Tao advocated the creation of works with the 'heart' as the main focus and nature as the law, abandoning the obsession with technique and pursuing the resonance of works with nature (Zhu, Z, 2016). Zhang Zao developed the notion of 'learning from nature on the outside and obtaining inspiration from the heart on the inside' during the Tang Dynasty. This manner of creation is an example of Taoism's 'union of heaven and man.' Shi Tao said, 'The mountains and my spirit have met and become one.' (Zhong Yueying, 2021). It means that the painter must have a spiritual connection with the mountains and rivers to accomplish the creative production.



Figure 4: Landscape painting, Shi Tao, Ming Dynasty

The balance of yin and yang in Taoist Taiji philosophy stresses the equilibrium of opposites, which Huang Binhong's paintings fully reflect. Huang's paintings focused heavily on the interplay between 'black' and 'white.' He thought that black and white worked together to produce a feeling of rhythm and space in the artwork. This concept is consistent with Taoist concepts such as 'the presence of nothing' and 'yin and yang complement each other.' The contrast between black and white is more than just a visual impact; it also represents the union of opposites in the working of heaven and earth.

At the same time, Huang Binhong's paintings frequently employ the method of 'combining reality and emptiness,' which creates a feeling of space by cycling between white space, ink, and brushwork. He thought that 'emptiness' is an extension of reality,' and the two are inextricably linked. This method is also consistent with the Taoist idea of yin-yang balance, which emphasizes the significance of finding harmony in opposites.



Figure 5: Landscape Painting, Huang Binhong, 1910

Huang Binhong emphasized the beauty of 'blandness' in painting, aiming for a simple, natural, and expansive creative domain. This pursuit of 'blandness' stems from the Taoist concept of seeing the simple and embracing the simple, less selfish, and less desirous,' which emphasizes the spirit of returning to the true nature, removing the beautiful appearance, and returning to the natural nature without being disturbed by external things (D.C. Lau, 1963). Huang Binhong believes that the ultimate kind of painting is to communicate one's grasp of Tao via natural forms. His paintings went beyond just visual expression and became a method of communicating with nature and the universe (Li Zehou, 2021). This is related to the Taoist concept of 'attaining the Way,' which means seeing the rules of the cosmos via creative practice and achieving spiritual sublimation.

Although the two painters are inspired by landscape painting, their ideas encompass the whole Chinese painting system, which is the core of aesthetics rooted in Chinese culture and Taoist philosophy and has strong oriental features.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Eastern art and philosophy began to enter the Western consciousness, a phenomenon often referred to as Orientalism. Some Western creators were fascinated and inspired by traditional Chinese philosophy, art forms (such as landscape painting and calligraphy), and Zen aesthetics. Taoism, a vital part of the Chinese system of thought, has also gradually influenced Western artists' understanding of nature and the universe in this context (Sun, Zhong-feng, 2005).

Some artists in Western modern art, especially those devoted to the representation of nature and landscapes, began to draw inspiration from the Taoist idea of the 'unity of heaven and man.' For example, the works of British artist John Piper and American artist Georgia O'Keeffe often show a kind of reverence and awe for natural landscapes, attempting to express the power and harmony of nature through simplified lines and blocks of color, rather than realistically reproducing nature, which to a certain extent echoes the 'Wu Wei (无为)' principle of Taoism. This parallels the notion of Taoism's 'Wu Wei.' In contemporary art, Western artists' interest in Taoism has not waned but has deepened in the context of globalization (Xun, Jiang, 2003). Contemporary artists frequently refer to Taoism while examining the link between man and nature, technology and the environment, and how to engage with the world in a peaceful and balanced manner.

5. The Embodiment of the Tao in Contemporary Art

5.1 Easel painting

Zao Wou-ki's paintings are distinct from the wave of abstract expressionism in that he employs expressive Western techniques to express his oriental spirituality. In the 1950s, when Paris was an active period for abstract art, Zao Wou-ki, who arrived in Paris shortly after, turned to abstract exploration, and his paintings detached themselves from narrative elements and used abstract symbols to express pure symbolic meanings other than physical objects. Zao Wou-ki's paintings are distinct from the wave of abstract expressionism in that he employs expressive Western techniques to express his oriental spirituality. In the 1950s, when Paris was an active period for abstract art, Zao Wou-ki, who arrived in Paris shortly after, turned to abstract exploration, and his paintings detached themselves from narrative elements and used abstract symbols to express pure symbolic meanings other than physical objects. With an unusual vision to observe all things, he took the nature of the universe, life, and the transmutation of time as the theme of his creation and began to depict all kinds of invisible things. At the same time, he combined abstract elements such as Chinese landscape painting, oracle bone inscriptions, calligraphy, inscriptions, and carvings. In the 1990s, Zao Wou-ki's works were gradually free from all laws and regulations and combined with the lyrical brushwork of his calligraphy practice to express his inner needs and feelings.

Zao Wou-ki's paintings are full of observations and perceptions of nature and the universe, and this view of nature is sublimated in his abstract language. Zao Wou-ki's works express the dynamics and vitality of nature in abstract forms, such as *Landscape Is Invisible*. Instead of simply reproducing natural scenes, he captures the rhythm and energy of nature, turning mountains, rivers, wind, and clouds into dynamic lines and colors. This kind of naturalized abstract expression embodies the Taoist idea of 'The image that is without substance. This is called indistinct and shadowy.' (A.C. Graham, 2001). In Zao Wou-ki's paintings, the earth, the sky, light, and shadow blend, forming a vibrant cosmic world. He captures the rhythm of life in the universe through his brushstrokes and colors, showing the operation of the Tao and the endless life of nature.



Figure 6: Landscape Painting, Huang Binhong, 1910

Zao Wou-ki's art is not only an expression of nature but also an embodiment of the spiritual integration of man and nature. He draws inspiration from the tradition of Chinese landscape painting, emphasizing the unity of the painter's inner perception and the outer nature. In the process of painting, he pursues the harmony between himself and heaven and earth, and his brushstrokes flow freely as if breathing with nature. In Zao Wou-ki's paintings, viewers often feel a cosmic vision that transcends individuals and specific situations. Looking at his works, one seems to feel the sound of wind, the flow of water, the dance of fire, and the clash of trees and stones. His works are not a single projection of personal emotions but a profound meditation on the relationship between mankind and nature, embodying the oneness of man and nature.

In Zao Wou-ki's works, the Taoist concept of 'the unity of reality and emptiness' emphasizes the union of opposites. Zao Wou-ki's work is influenced by traditional Chinese painting of 'leaving white space,' and his images frequently depict a strange and imaginative feeling of space. The picture's layout varies between the real and the imaginary, allowing the observer to experience the physical materiality of the image while also entering the ethereal spiritual world. Zao Wou-ki's works appear to be full of activity, but there is always some type of tranquil force supporting the whole picture, with a mysterious power stated within. In the painting 'Dream in Space,' there are both flowing dynamics and harmonic stillness between the brushstrokes and color blocks. This creative impression, which combines motion and static and reflects the actual and imaginary, relates to the Taoist dialectical idea of Tai Chi and Yin Yang. Similarly, in Taoism, 'nothingness' is regarded as very beautiful. After transcending all material forms of beauty, Taoism restores true aesthetics to the everlasting world, self-nature, and the natural essence and fundamentals of life. It cleanses the universe of dirt, purifies the mind, and experiences the transcendence of the finite to the infinite, the tangible to the ethereal, and the formal to the necessary. Simultaneously, in the sphere of "the unity of heaven and man," we sense the unpredictable cosmic weather. This is the transcendence of aesthetics and art to utilitarianism and spiritual liberation, and it is the aesthetic world of Taoism's aesthetic thinking, with inaction, emptiness, and freedom.



Figure 7: Dream in Space, Zao Wou-ki, 1990

Zao Wou-ki employs non-traditional Chinese painting materials to carry out a supposedly Western interpretation of the theoretical framework of 'the union of heaven and man' and the spiritual attitude of 'emptiness, calm, and oblivion,' which are distinct from Chinese philosophy. (A.C.Graham,2001).His works are not only a visual enjoyment but also a deep meditation on oriental philosophy. He uses minimalist formal language to express his profound thoughts on nature, the universe, and life. He has reinterpreted Taoist thought in contemporary art forms, giving it a new lease of life, providing cross-cultural philosophical expression for world art, and becoming an important model for the fusion of Eastern and Western cultures.

The 'blankness' of Taoist art plays an important role in traditional Chinese landscape painting, where blankness symbolizes infinite possibilities and undefined space. This understanding of 'blankness' has influenced the development of Western abstract art. For example, Mark Rothko, an American abstract expressionist painter, conveys emotion and spirituality through colorful blankness and large expanses of space. Behind the simplicity of his paintings is a richness and breadth of emotion, spirituality, and mood. 'The five colors make man's eyes blind; The five notes make his ears deaf.' Too many things mixed may not be able to accurately and directly express what is wanted to be expressed; the simpler it is, the easier it is to return to the original state of things(D.C. Lau, 1963). This also follows the Taoist idea of maintaining purity, weakening desires, presenting the original appearance of each person, and returning to the original state to achieve the 'see vegetarian, embrace simplicity' and 'return to the baby,' because Lao Tzu believes that the nature of Tao is as innocent as a baby, natural, soft, but with a vigorous The essence of Tao, according to Lao Tzu, is to be as innocent, natural, soft, and vigorous as a baby(D.C. Lau, 1963).

The Taoist idea of returning to simplicity' emphasizes removing complexity and pursuing a pure and simple condition. Rothko's color field paintings express the deepest feelings in the simplest form, which is entirely consistent with this concept. His works are free from complex compositions, discard lines and images, and present the emotional world with only simple color blocks. This minimalist style is an artistic practice that removes appearances and returns to true nature. Although the form is minimalist, the choice of colors and the arrangement of color blocks in the picture convey deep emotions, allowing the viewer to feel the inner life force.



Figure 8: Oil on Canvas, Mark Rothko, 1958

It's worth noticing that the color blocks in Rothko's paintings don't fill the screen, but rather create a type of 'empty' space with the gaps and gradations between them. This 'emptiness' not only gives the area a sensation of breath but also allows the observer to experience the endless imagination. The color block borders are both fuzzy and apparent, demonstrating a nuanced link between the 'virtual and the real,' and this 'virtual' gap reinforces the impression of the existence of the 'real.' Rothko's paintings encapsulate the Taoist dialectic of 'the existence of nothing' in their connection between color block and backdrop, light and dark. Taoism holds that implying that 'something' and 'nothing' are interconnected and comprise the core of the cosmos (JuueN,F,2003). The tension between No. 61's hues (rust and blue) displays both resistance and harmony. This dialectical connection is consistent with Taoist philosophical concepts of cosmic equilibrium.



Figure 9: No. 61 (Rust and Blue), Mark Rothko, 1950

Rothko's images do not present a specific story but rather create an emotional and spiritual space for the

spectator to interpret independently via color and shape. Rothko thinks that works of art should communicate directly to the observer and that he creates works not to express himself, but to provide a space for calm observation and meditation. The hovering and floating hues of the paintings, with their subtle shifts, symbolize people's subconscious feelings and wishes. This beat is both relaxing and deep, delicate and forceful, and it moves the viewer's heart. Wrapped in pure light and color in front of a massive canvas, engrossed in a meditative mood, the body and mind appear to gradually melt into a dreamlike and magical place, forgetting cares and distractions. This method helps the observer to forget himself and become entirely involved in the picture, achieving Zhuang Zi's "forgetfulness of things." (D.C. Lau, 1963).

According to Taoism, nature is the genesis of all things, and everything, including art production, should adhere to natural rules. Wang Chuan's ink paintings are primarily created using non-figurative techniques such as splashing, and they are full of natural flowing imagery, demonstrating a reverence and expression of nature's way. Ink, as a material for traditional Chinese painting, has a profound Taoist symbolism in itself, and the deep hue of ink signifies the world of "the mysterious and esoteric," as well as the quality of water, which is 'helpful to everything under the sun without competition.' Ink painting is one of the most common styles of Chinese painting, and it differs from other types of painting (D.C. Lau, 1963).

Through the natural diffusion and penetration of ink, water, and rice paper, Wang Chuan makes the images show natural traces of non-human intervention. This practice gives the works an unrepeatable quality, as if every leaf and drop of water in nature is unique and uncut. In his creations, he is often not confined to the traditional rules of ink and wash in shaping images; he avoids binding the picture with specific symbols or images, but rather, through the free flow of ink and wash, dryness and wetness, the penetration and change of the ink and wash material shows its own vitality. Wang Chuan uses techniques such as splashing and flinging ink, in which the distribution and form of the ink on the paper are not totally controlled and instead allow the material and nature to take center stage. This method stresses the artist's function as an observer rather than a producer in full command. This dependence on chance and limitation of personal will stresses respect for and adherence to natural growth rules, a mindset consistent with the Taoist idea of 'Wu Wei.' The abstract picture of mountains and rivers represents the Tao due to the non-interventionist attitude and the incorporation of chance. This type of organically arising formal production is the most accurate definition of "doing nothing."



Figure 10: Ink Experiment, Wang Chuan, 1991

5.2 Gunpowder Installation Art

Cai Guoqiang's primary creative success is that he introduced a novel concept of 'deepening the conversation between Eastern and Western cultures' into the 1990s art setting. This serves as a significant source of inspiration for the development of the notion of Chinese contemporary art. His artistic philosophy has functioned as a conduit for communication and exchange between Eastern and

Western civilizations. Cai Guo-Qiang's works are defined by his unique use of the spiritual connotations of traditional Chinese culture, and his accurate comprehension and perception of the spiritual connotations of old Eastern culture is what makes his works so important.

Cai Guo-Qiang's art has brought elite art closer to the general public, expanding on Duchamp's 'life is art' and Beuys' "social sculpture" ideals. His art shapes and charms, correctly changing art and methods into moods, expressing the beauty of nature, seeking the infinite in the finite, and embodying meaning in the infinite. Over the years, his works, with oriental wisdom and language, have used one of China's four ancient inventions, 'gunpowder,' for artistic exploration, shattering the idea of time and space in the previous art scene. The scent of the gunpowder explosion, the rising smoke, the fuzzy color dots on the rice paper—all contain uncertainty, resulting in unpredictable imagery, which is the Taoist world of 'the elephant without shape.'

The Ladder of Heaven, a 500-meter-long ladder, is brought into the air by a large, sculpture-like balloon filled with gunpowder. The ladder ignites instantly and rushes into the sky, forming a burning golden fuse. The origin behind this creation comes from the author's childhood longing for the unknown and dreams, as well as the close dialogue between humans and nature and the expression of the thoughts of family and friends, placing them in nature and connecting them, which is uniquely romantic for the Chinese.



Figure 11: The Ladder of Heaven, Cai Guoqiang, 2015

As he explains himself: 'The heart of my art is to employ the "visible" to communicate the "invisible," as well as universe-related ideas. With the evolution of the virtual world, including the creation of the so-called meta-universe notion, the virtual world has become the invisible counterpart to the visible world. So I came up with the idea of establishing a 'virtual'—one that could be freer, bolder, and do things that would be difficult in the physical world(Yang Zhao, 2010).

In terms of time, Taoism values both 'eternity' and 'the present'. Eternity, according to Taoism, is a state that transcends time and exists in every current instant. The sculpture 'Blossoms and Falls' portrays the transitory beauty of time. He responded, 'Even if something is eternal, you can't have it forever. Eternity and eternity are distinct ideas in Chinese. Eternity exists beyond time, whereas everlasting exists inside time. So, when we talk to eternity and connect with him through art, while grasping it in moments, it appears that the wonder of eternity can only be tasted in a moment of turmoil(Cai Guoqiang, 2021).

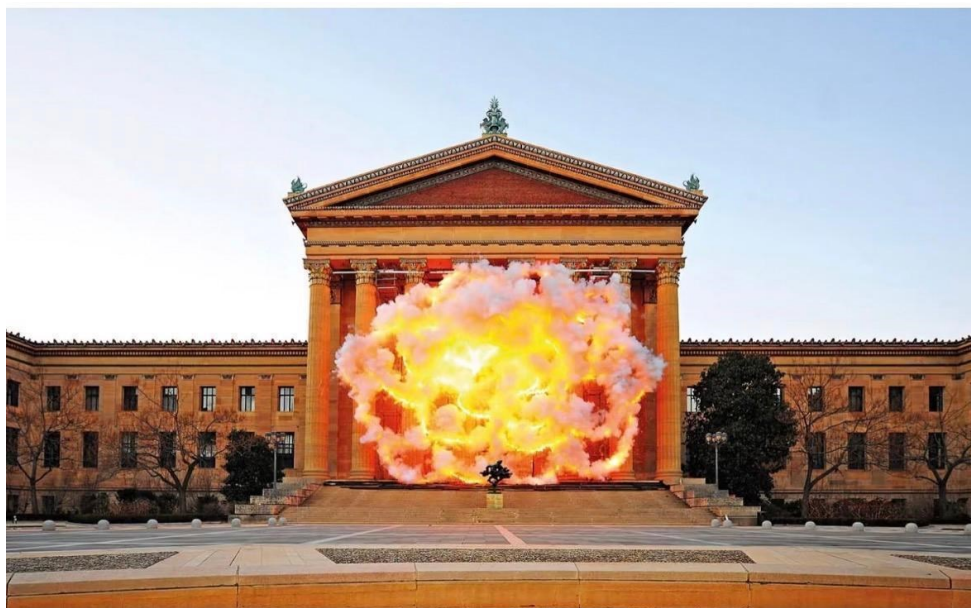


Figure 12: Blossoms and Falls, Cai Guoqiang, 2009

Cai's artworks are through materiality, emphasizing process and time rather than object. A central theme in Cai's work is the transformation of structures, whether it is the transformation of cold, solid gunpowder into sizzling fire and gas or the transformation of a static structure into a dynamic one, which is based on Taoist principles and the idea that the universe is in constant flux. The concepts of transformation and energy express an acceptance of the fluidity of everything, freeing objects from the limitations of their materiality. He breaks away from the static form of art and embodies the concepts of 'time' and 'energy' through dynamic explosions, changing the traditional pursuit of static and permanence in art. By combining Eastern philosophy with Western art contexts, Chinese philosophy has gained wider attention and understanding globally.

5.3 Earth Art

It is through the expression of natural elements that the artist can resonate with this microcosmic interiority. For Zhuangzi, true art is natural and inhumanly created, while true aesthetics is the experience and feeling of the Tao. According to Zhuangzi, true beauty exists in nature, a natural existence that transcends sight, sound, color, and taste. Another artist who works with natural materials is Alberto Carneiro.

Deeply inspired by nature, Alberto Carneiro's art crosses the boundaries of sculpture, installation art, and conceptual art, with the symbiotic relationship between man and nature as its central theme. Carneiro's creations blend local traditions, ecological philosophy, and personal spiritual insights into nature to create a poetic and deeply philosophical art world. His early studies in a wood carving studio have given him a deep appreciation for natural materials and handcrafted techniques. Many of his works recall the emotional ties between people and the land, rivers, and forests, and through art, they evoke people's reverence and concern for nature. In the face of modern society's exploitation and exploitation of nature, Canelo's works reflect on the impact of industrialization on ecology and the human spirit. He tries to rebuild the balance between man and nature through art, calling on people to return to nature and re-examine its nature. He believes that nature is not only the material basis for human survival but also the habitat of the soul.

Carneiro's art is diverse, focusing on sculpture, installation, and earth art, and he is adept at using natural materials and integrating them into space to explore the dialogue between man and nature. Canelo chooses to use unprocessed natural materials, reflecting his respect for and reliance on nature. For example, tree trunks, rattan, and river rocks are given new meaning in his hands. He does not try to

change the natural form of the materials but rather presents the texture and power of the materials themselves through simple arrangement or combination. Cano's installations frequently interact with the exhibition area, incorporating natural materials into the larger surroundings. He stresses spectator interaction by incorporating walk-in rooms and interactive design, allowing them to perceive the presence of nature in the work. In his piece 'O Canavial', he utilizes precisely organized reeds to fill the room, allowing the visitor to stroll through them and experience the oppression and tolerance of the natural environment.



Figure 13: O Canavial, Alberto Carneiro .1980

Cano's artistic theory is consistent with the Taoist concept of the 'union of heaven and man,' which holds that the artist should 'do nothing' like nature, allowing nature to express itself with minimal intervention. Carneiro's works never attempt to impose an artificial order, but rather adhere to the properties of the materials and the environment, allowing nature to be the protagonist. In many of his works, the decay and disappearance of materials is an integral part of the art, and this concern for the passage of time echoes the concept of 'impermanence' in Taoist thought. Canelo's work rejects anthropocentrism and calls for ecological equality. His art aims to make the audience realize that humans are not the masters of nature, but rather a part of it, which is consistent with current eco-philosophical thought.

After being exposed to Lao Tzu during his years in London, he began to work with a different kind of 'emptiness.' The sculpture 'On the River' from 1996-1998 shows two horizontal Agbar logs, mainly carved on the inside. They were slowly carved by the river. Carneiro knows the power of water and how softness can overcome hardness, a visualization of the Taoist principle of 'softness overcomes hardness.' His work is full of empty trees, and he realizes that there is an immaterial emptiness that can create mutations in his work. It exists in the interior of all things, in the core of their essence, which is 'emptiness.' Emptiness is not only the highest state that everything must conform to; it is also an entity, like the valley, where only emptiness can give birth to life. Water is an element of change; it has shape only in emptiness, and the traces it flows through are its existence.



Figure 14: On the River, Alberto Carneiro, 1998

5.4 Sculpture Installation

Taoism emphasizes the cyclical nature of the operation of heaven and earth, which is also reflected in its concept of resource utilization. In the traditional Taoist concept, waste can be returned to nature and become nutrients for new life. This circular thinking resonates with the modern concept of sustainable development and contemporary art's reflection on ecology. Xu Bing's Phoenix is one of the most representative installations. Xu Bing does not use exquisite materials or complicated craftsmanship but directly adopts the waste and tools from the construction site, following nature and the nature of the materials. This respect for the nature of the materials is the embodiment of the 'Taoism of nature.' Xu Bing transforms industrial wastes such as steel bars, iron sheets, and pipes directly into the artistic language, neither disguising the rough and natural nature of these materials nor beautifying them deliberately. At the same time, the phoenix, as a sacred bird symbolizing vitality and regeneration in Chinese culture, creates a strong contrast with its material sources. Through the image of the phoenix created by the waste materials, Xu Bing demonstrates the 'Tao' of the endless cycle of nature (Binghui,Huangfu,2003).The Phoenix reminds people of waste and natural resources in the process of modernization, presenting a spiritual quest to return to nature's origin.



Figure 15: The Phoenix, Xu Bing, 2008

6. CONCLUSION

Contemporary artists from China and the West influenced by Taoist ideas, whether through easel paintings, installations, or land art, investigate the harmony between man and environment or the universe's cyclical principles. Their works are often created by following nature, reflecting the core ideas of Taoist philosophy. The use of natural materials and symbolic elements expresses Taoist philosophical reflections on doing nothing, the balance of yin and yang, and the realm of emptiness. Through their works, these artists not only convey a reverence for nature and life but also echo contemporary society's concern for issues such as ecology and sustainable development. The relevance of this East-West fusion resides in its ability to transcend geographical and cultural barriers, translating old Eastern philosophy into a visual language of modern worth and giving artists and spectators new routes of thinking and modes of expression. The works of contemporary artists attest to the universality of Taoist thought and demonstrate its continuing influence on modern human society. The Tao, like the eternity it represents, provides a constant source of art inspiration.

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