

Taoism and its Influence on the Arts of China

Much as Christianity has informed the development of the arts in the West thematically as well as compositionally, Taoism, one of the key philosophical systems to emerge out of China in the sixth or fifth century BCE, has left its stamp on Chinese art, literature and music. Leading translator of Asian spiritual literature, Thomas Cleary, pays tribute to the enormous impact of Taoist thought on the development of culture in China in the introduction to his translation of *The Inner Teachings of Taoism* by Chang Po-Tuan, in which he states that “So pervasive has the influence of Taoism been that it is difficult to name a single facet of Chinese civilization that has not been touched by it in some way” (211). Before we can begin to explore the impact that this esoteric ancient wisdom has had on the classic arts of China, specifically landscape painting, poetry and music, however, it is necessary to attempt to define Taoism, a challenge to be sure when we consider one of the most recognizable of Taoist maxims found in the Tao Te Ching attributed to Lao Tzu: “The Tao that can be spoken of is not the eternal Tao.”

Despite this *caveat*, there is an enormous body of specialist literature on Taoism as scholars in the East and the West have attempted to explain the Tao and the system of thinking that arose out of a belief in it. Cleary discusses the difficulty of “decoding such a literature” (211) and Alan Watts, In *Tao: The Watercourse Way*, while attributing initial difficulties faced by those in the West to the problems of language and translation, also advises the student to approach it by both studying the literature and periodically departing from it; it is only when the mind is quiet that one can enter the flow of the Tao through nature for, as Watts sees it, “Taoism is the way of man’s cooperation with the natural world whose principles we discover in the flow patterns of water, gas, and fire” (Preface xiv). This advice to approach Taoism through both study and practice is a good starting point for a brief analysis of the philosophy as it encapsulates the essential idea at the basis of Taoist thought, that of the yin-yang polarity and the interdependency of opposites. To alternately engage in thought and the intellect, on the one hand, and perception and behavior on the other, implies the balance and harmony of complements that is at the core of any discussion of the Tao and which is known as the yin-yang.



That the idea of the yin-yang has expanded beyond the boundaries of its land of origin to attain global importance is evident in the enormous popularity that its symbol has gained around the world. A perfect circle proscribed by the interlocking of balanced opposites, the yin-yang represents a cosmic whole wherein the parts are at once distinct and integrated and where each implies the other. Traditionally the yin represents the negative pole and it stands for the feminine, yielding, weak, dark, falling and earth, while yang, the positive, represents the masculine, firm, strong, light, rising and heaven. In the broadest sense, it can be applied to everything in the cosmos: man and nature, the individual and the community, life and death, existence and nonexistence, form and void, and so on. Not to be confused with the idea of opposition or conflict, the yin and the yang are governed by their mutual necessity and interdependency.

The interface where these yin-yang opposites join to become a unity is a visual representation of the Tao. The Tao both separates and joins the polarities of yin and yang and implies at once a unity and a differentiation. It is that whereby the yin-yang is at once a whole and a coupling of opposites. Where Watts argues that there is no possibility of one side dominating the other (52), in *The Evolution of Future Consciousness*, Futurist writer Tom Lombardo argues that the Tao is rather an oscillation of these complimentary forces and that it is the alternating dominance of yin and yang that produces the cyclic rhythm of time (177). Similarly, in *Principles of Chinese Painting*, George Rowley explains that the yin-yang relation was supposed to set up a tension in the universe and that is from this tension that the Tao arises (8).

Whichever interpretation one adopts, the Tao is a mutual interpenetration and interdependence of everything happening in the universe. This is an organic and relational view of the universe, like neither the mechanistic Newtonian clock nor the dualistic Creator-created conception of the West. It allows for no supreme intelligence or force outside of it. To discover or commune with the Tao, then, a church or other designated place would be irrelevant; it is in nature, of which man is an integral part, that the Tao may be apprehended.

Rowley argues that the relation between man and nature in China was characterized by harmony and communion (20) and that it was precisely because China lacked a belief in a personal god, which would preclude seeking reality in nature, that they were able to conceive of a natural world which did not pit man against nature, but which saw man as an integral part of the cosmos. Moreover, the two indigenous doctrines of living, Taoism and Confucianism, while focusing respectively on the spiritual and humanistic, both “sought inner reality in a fusion of opposites.” A yin-yang complementarity itself, this dynamic union of opposites, of intuitive and resonant versus the ordered and rational, determined the cultural climate in which Chinese painting would flourish (Rowley 4).

The Chinese conceived of a world as an integrated whole, a “synthetic unity” of opposites that, far from being antagonistic to one another, needed each other for completeness. How this manifested itself in art, in particular in landscape painting of the Sung period (CE 960-1279), was a move away from a focus on the parts to a more integrated whole. In “Chinese Landscape Paintings: Journeys of the Mind in Space,” Roann Barris links this conceptual shift to the development of the characteristic styles of the period which, while paradoxically condemning verisimilitude, also achieved highly naturalistic renderings. As Barris puts it, “Paintings in this direction worked toward . . . the painting as poetry, the painting as an expressive art rather than painting as a description of the external world.” Portraying the absolute truth of nature meant not only an accurate depiction of its physical details but a mirror into its absolute inner sense as well. Thus, things from nature acquired new meaning because they were seen not as inanimate objects lacking life but as animistic and partaking of the mystery of the Tao in the same way as living entities. Indeed, the landscape became a visible symbol of an all embracing universe (Rowley 7).

The influence of Taoism on landscape painting manifests itself, then, through the theme of nature, but also in composition, design and execution. In each area the primary concept of yin and yang leaves its stamp whether in the earlier paintings of the Northern Sung or the later landscapes of the Southern Sung. Composition entailed a harmonious

balance of verticals and horizontals, usually mountains and water, (indeed the word for landscape in Chinese means mountain-waters), and the combining and scattering of pictorial elements. Qualities such as sparse and dense, light and thick, and concave and convex opposed and balanced each other, and care was taken to balance forms in the design so that, for example, if one bird was flying downward another should be flying upward (Rowley 51). In the very execution of the painting, it was the marriage of the dry brush with the wet paint that produced a final product resonant with the natural qualities of both. These couplings illustrate relationships of mutual need and, while the pictorial elements of these schools differ considerably, both are characterized by a view of nature that reflects harmony and communion between man and the cosmos. In contrast to much of Western art, these paintings celebrate the wonder and mystery of nature rather than man's domination over it.



Figure 1 Buddhist Temple in the Mountains by Li Cheng

This majestic sense of nature fairly shouts in a representative painting of the Northern Sung school (CE 960-1125), *Buddhist Temple in the Mountains* by Li Cheng. Here the rugged terrain and the dense piling up of elements in the foreground suggest the unfathomable spirit of nature. The vertical thrust of the mountains rising above the limits of the painting hint at the infinity of the universe while the suggestion that the mountains continue to unfold one after another outside the perceptual plane produces what Rowley identifies as a sequential experience of time and movement. Oppositional but harmoniously combined elements form a unified composition in which the low, dark hills in the foreground find their complement in the sweeping wash of the mountains behind them; the scattered and writhing trees to the right are balanced by the serene and angular temple on the left; and the obstructive barrier of the solid forms in the foreground opens up to the suggestion of space behind. The painter here uses a technique similar to that of a contemporary, Fan Kuan, who, as Barris notes, prevented the viewers' entering the painting too quickly by clustering smaller elements in the foreground. This has the additional effect of separating the massive elements of the distant plane from the smaller, multiple elements in the front.

Buddhist Temple in the Mountains is a good example of the tendency towards the rational in the composition of this period with its rather rigid organization of space into quarters and the regular distribution of elements in the painting. Here too, the space is characterized by a distinct division of near and far and, similarly, a balance is achieved between form and void. There is a suggestion of mist in the middle plane which, contrasted to the stark verticals of the mountains behind, speaks of a corresponding chasm of empty space below. Barris sees the mist in the middle distance as empty space as well but suggests that it contains the possibility of transformation and is thus indicative of the Taoist mind set. And the depiction of the temple illustrates Rowley's assertion that "In their choice of human habitations the Chinese tried to intimate man's experience of nature rather than his domination of it" (20). Thus unlike the views of estates, bridges or grand gardens of Western art, the temple, a place for meditation on the wonder and mystery of nature nestled in a remote and mysterious canyon, is a reflection of the Taoist sense of communion with the natural world rather than his control over it.

In like manner the Southern Sung painters (after CE 1127) tried to recreate the natural world as a universal system comparable to the cosmos, but they used opposite means to achieve this (Rowley 7); gone are the multiple mountains and monumental scale, and the heavy contrast between dark and light, form and void. Where the Northern Sung paintings can be said to be expressionistic in style, the Southern Sung works are decidedly impressionistic and "characterized by a delicacy of lines and colors which seem to dissolve" (Barris). They reflect both the less rugged terrain of the South and the tendency on the part of these painters to simplify. Now instead of suggesting the infinity of what lies beyond perception by towering heights that extend beyond the borders of the painting, these painters applied an abundance of watercolor mist to embody the notion of the void (Barris). Instead of stark verticals, we find gentle horizontals and in place of a heavy application of ink and the characteristic "wrinkles" suggesting the detail of the mountain surfaces, we have the barest suggestion of natural forms. Where the Northern Sung landscape is "up front" and "in your face," the Southern Sung maintains a distance. The Northern Sung may leave you feeling smothered and claustrophobic, but the Southern Sung allows you to breathe again. It is light, ethereal, and invites an equally meditative but less intimidating contemplation of nature.



Figure 2 10000 Miles of a Clear View by Hsia Kuei, early thirteenth century

All of these aspects are reflected in *10000 Miles of a Clear View* by Hsia Kuei. The edge of the plateau in the foreground with its rocks and delicate trees is sketched in

enough detail for the forms to be recognizable but the faint lines soon recede into the mist suggested by the empty space, or as Rowley puts it, “The known forms fade off into the void of the unknown.” Now the mystery of nature is suggested not by the piling up of multiple elements but by the obliteration of form and the view is simplified and clarified to the point where void and form achieve a near perfect balance. The horizontal concentration of forms in the foreground is offset by the misty void in the middle ground and by the merest suggestion of mountain peaks in the background. The delicate cluster of peaks in the upper right corner is echoed in the wispy depiction of trees on the lower left-hand side, while both the other corners are empty space. Here the empty space and vast distance suggest a limitless universe where man is no more or less significant than the rocks and trees. Unlike Li Cheng’s tranquil but highly visible temple, man’s presence is now indicated by the merest suggestion of a footbridge. And yet, the fact that majestic mountain peaks are drawn in the same minimalist way reflects the view of the cosmos as one that embraces all reality on equal ground.

This ability to express the presence of nature as a whole in which all objects, including humans, are equal, was not the exclusive domain of the landscape painters but one clearly visible in poetry as well. Just as landscape painting reflects the imprint of Taoism in its depiction of a balanced and harmonious universe, one reflected in the natural world, so poetry in China was a vehicle to express not only the “concerns that are common to men and women of whatever place and time,” as Burton Watson points out in the introduction to *The Columbia Book of Chinese Poetry*, but also impersonal, universal concerns – the beauty of nature, the eternal flux of the universe, and the transience of life. And just as landscape painting reveals a perception of the underlying and contrasting aspects of nature, so Chinese poetry embodies a yin-yang polarity on many levels, beginning with the very structure of the language itself.

In *The Art of Chinese Poetry*, James J. Y. Liu presents an exhaustive discussion of the poetic tradition in China, and takes as a starting point the concise and compact nature of the Chinese language, which, with its ideographic script, monosyllabic characters, and fixed tones creates, in a line of poetry, a “highly complex organic development of sense and sound” (19). Grammatical aspects of the language, such as the lack of case, gender, mood and verb tense, allow for both the concise and the ambiguous. The frequent omission of subject and verb and their interchangeability in the order in which they appear, and the fluidity of parts of speech in Chinese where a word, such as “master” can be noun, verb, or adjective, contribute to this effect, as does the complete lack of conjunctions and other particles. As Liu comments, Chinese words are “mobile units which act on and react with each other in constant flux (46). As such, the language itself is a reflection of the Taoist world view, and contributes to the impersonal and universal quality of the verse.

Along with the absence of what Liu calls the “accidental trappings” of Chinese, there is a polarity at play in the nature of the language. At a basic level, this “antithesis” appears in the words for abstract concepts such as size and length, translated as “big-small-ness” and “long-short-ness” respectively. For Liu, this reveals a dualistic and relativistic way of thinking (146) and plays an important part in the construction of Chinese verse. In one of the most common forms called Shih or regulated verse, the four middle lines of an eight-line poem form two antithetical couplets which, while grammatically identical, contrast with each other in sense and sound. Not only does this

strengthen the structure of the poem, but it also reflects, again, the contrasting aspects of nature. While it is difficult in translation to illustrate the auditory effects of Chinese poetry, effects which include alliteration, repetition of words and onomatopoeia, the antithesis Liu describes, the deep sensitivity to nature and time, and poetic elements such as rime, imagery and symbolism are all evident in the two poems which follow by the T'ang dynasty poets, Li Po (CE 701-762) and Tu Fu (CE 712-770). These poems also reflect major themes running through the long Chinese poetic tradition: sadness at parting from a friend; nostalgia and longing; an attitude towards history which places all human activity within the realm of the eternal cycles of time and nature; and sadness at the transience of human life.

Li Po is generally regarded as the poet who, along with his contemporary Tu Fu, "raised poetry in the Shih form to its highest level of power and expressiveness" (Watson 205). In the poem here, "Seeing a Friend Off," the poet deals with the conventional theme of parting in a way that downplays despair or bitterness and reflects an attitude not so much of resignation as serene acceptance. He seems to be saying that, just as all things in nature are governed by the eternal cycles of time, so man must enjoy the time that is his and accept with grace the inevitable passing of life's pleasures. From the adherence to the eight-line traditional form of Shih with its antithetical pairing of couplets in the middle lines, to the underlying unity of its simple but associated images, this poem reveals both the influence of earlier poets and the "grace and eloquence of treatment" for which Li Po is known (Watson 205).

Green hills sloping from the northern wall,
 White water rounding the eastern city:
 Once parted from this place
 The lone weed tumbles ten thousand miles.
 Drifting clouds – a traveler's thoughts;
 Setting sun – an old friend's heart.
 Wave hands and let us take leave now,
 Hsiao-hsiao our hesitant horses neighing.

Here we have a perfect example of Liu's antithesis at work with pairings of like kind throughout: "green hills" and "white water," "sloping" and "rounding," "Northern wall" and "eastern city," "parted" and "tumbles," "drifting clouds" and "setting sun," and "a traveler's thoughts" and "an old friend's heart." The poem is a perfect balance of complementary images and syntactical similarities. The middle lines, in particular, in two antithetical couplets, juxtapose images from nature that suggest important events in the poet's life: the departure from his home, his wanderings, and his coming to rest at the end of his journeys.

In his review of the important critics of Chinese poetry, Liu discusses the idea that poetry is an exploration of 'worlds' and of language. 'Worlds' can be described as the coupling of 'emotion' and 'scene,' as the critic Wang Kuo Wei asserted (CE1877-1907). Liu interprets this to mean that 'world' is both a reflection of the poet's external environment and the expression of his total consciousness (96). In Li Po's poem, we find both of these elements, but the former is far outweighed by the latter. As Watson suggests, Li Po's poetry has less to do with the actual scenes and experience of his life than with his "search for spiritual freedom and communion with nature" (206). Thus, while the "northern wall" and "eastern city" evoke the world of men, the dominant

imagery has to do with the sense of man's place in the universe as a whole. Like "drifting clouds" and the "setting sun," he is an integral part of the natural world. There is a sense that man's spirit cannot be contained by the structures humans build; the "green hills" slope "from the northern walls" and the "white water" rounds "the eastern city," leading the poet to wander into the limitless void of the universe. This is beautifully expressed in the lines, "Once parted from this place, the lone weed tumbles ten thousand miles." Man's essence is not to be found in flesh and blood but in his thoughts and in his heart, his mind and his emotions, the yin-yang of his spirit.

If Li Po's poem deals with a conventional theme in a highly expressive way, Tu Fu's "By the Winding River II" exhibits yet a greater "compression of language and thought" and achieves, through a similar use of antithesis and parallelisms, a poem that is "densely packed with meaning" (Watson 218-219). Where Li Po's poem, on the surface, deals with the theme of parting, Tu Fu packs his with ruminations on history, the nature of universal laws and principles, and the eternal cycle of death and renewal. In a series of antithetical pairings rich in symbolism, the poet achieves both an evocative description of his physical 'scene' and an expression of his inner emotions.

Everywhere petals are flying
And spring is fading. Ten thousand
Atoms of sorrow whirl away
In the wind. I will watch the last
Flowers as they fade, and ease
The pain in my heart with wine.
Two kingfishers mate and nest in
The ruined river pavilion.
Some unicorns, male and female,
Guard the great tomb in the park.
After the laws of their being,
All creatures pursue happiness.
Why have I let an official
Career swerve me from my goal?

In this poem, just as there is often a hint of man's presence in a Chinese landscape painting, natural images are balanced against those of man's temporal world in a structure that underscores the essential yin-yang relationships of happiness and sorrow, death and birth, male and female, human concerns and the universal oneness: "petals are flying" while "atoms of sorrow whirl away in the wind"; "flowers...fade" while the poet eases his heart with wine; "kingfishers mate and nest in / the ruined river pavilion." The endeavors of man, as suggested by the pavilion and the tomb, are submerged in the eternal cycle of time, and like all creatures, humans are governed by *li*, the natural order and pattern found in nature: "After the laws of their being, / all creatures pursue happiness." When the poet asks in the final lines "Why have I let an official / Career swerve me from my goal?" he is expressing his desire to be "freed from the fetters" of his ego "and be united with nature" (Liu 99). In this, he reflects not only the anti-individualism of Taoist thought but also the desire to leave behind the conflicting affairs of men and return to the infinite flux of the Tao.

If Tu Fu's tone seems more earnest than Li Po's, he achieves, along with his friend, the ideal of Chinese poetry as Liu sees it. In each case, the spirit of life is embodied and distilled through an individual sensibility which stamps its personal tone on the work (84). And in each case, both the external world, as reflected through the poet's mind, and the internal realm of feeling are revealed in a way that not only expresses the poet's personality, but which conveys a vision of reality that speaks deeply to readers across time, distance and cultural barriers.

If poetry can speak across such divides despite the problems of translation, music is perhaps an even better medium by which to express the essence of a sensibility as highly tuned to both nature and human emotion as that of ancient China. And yet, as with poetry, Asian music differs from Western music to such a degree that, while a melody is discernable, a piece as a whole can sound out of tune or even discordant to a Western listener. And where a selection of Western classical music, such as Bach's Brandenburg Concerto no. 6, for example, has distinct parts with clear breaks between them, Chinese music seems to carry a barely sustained melody through to the end with little or no segmentation into parts.

Writing of his Western-influenced compact disc of variations on traditional Chinese music, *Echoes of China*, composer Hans-Andre Stamm attributes some of the differences between these two traditions to the underlying world views out of which they sprang. As in painting, Western music arose out of a Christian world view with its emphasis on the worth of the individual, its belief in a God outside of and superior to the universe, and, for Stamm, its aggressive longing for superiority and authority. Stamm also sees Western music as sublimating the gentle, soft, female element in favor of the strong and assertive qualities associated with males. In contrast, Chinese music, which can be traced as far back as the third millennium BCE (Columbia Encyclopedia), shows the strong influence of Taoism, which not only is frequently associated with maternal, rather than paternal images, as Watts points out (41), but also carries with it a message of a harmonious cosmic order that encompasses the opposing elements of nature in a delicate balance.

These two very different philosophical stances prompted the development of distinct musical theories and resulted in differences along all lines of comparison – scale, rhythm, melody, harmony, tonality, musical motifs and the intervals of silence and sound. In a general vein and to synthesize, if we take the Brandenburg Concerto no. 6 as a representative piece of music from the West and compare it to ancient music of China played on the ch'in, or seven-stringed zither, a primary difference seems to revolve around the concepts of motion and direction. This may derive from the way the West and the East view time – as a linear progression with beginning and end in the former case, and as a circular system in the latter.

The Baroque piece displays just such a linear quality with its clear distinctions; it starts off with a rousing *allegro* followed by an *adagio* and finishing off with another *allegro*. Indeed, the word for these distinctions or breaks is called "movement," and the overall feeling of the piece is one of swift and exhilarating runs, or ascents, punctuated by a slow and contemplative rest in the middle. Compounding the sense of motion is the repetition and variation on the melodic line created by the interplay of the four violins and one harpsichord, (or in *The Academy of Ancient Music* recording, a viola, viola de gamba, violoncello, and violone). The melody is echoed by variations running behind,

above, around, and under it, and the complex harmonies which ensue arouse strong and conflicting emotions in the listener. This music evokes feelings of exhilaration, excitement, and joy, as well as melancholy. It aspires to the heaven that Bach believed in and transports one to a higher plane of experience. It is removed from the majestic natural world in ways that a Romantic symphony, for example is not.

In contrast, music played on the ch'in, like Asian music in general, is not about motion but about symmetry and rest (Course Guide). Pauses achieve as much significance as the sounded notes, and the sounds produced by the plucking of a single string are balanced by those resulting from strumming all five strings together. (Though the ch'in is a seven-stringed instrument, two strings are not plucked directly but resonate from the vibrations of the nearby strings). While there is a "twanging" and, to the Western ear, an often out-of-tune effect, the resulting music is also reminiscent of the harp. In the same way the harp is associated with an otherworldly, celestial sound, this music achieves a tranquil and meditative effect in keeping with its Taoist theme of harmony and balance. And yet, it speaks, too, of the rhythms and patterns found in nature and, like these, suggests a progression of sound that ebbs and flows rather than move from a beginning to a climax and to a finale.

Where melody and harmony predominate in Western music, here "the single tone is of greater significance than the melody" and, as the tone is an important quality of the material from which it is made, Chinese music remains inseparably bound to the philosophy of China (Columbia Encyclopedia). As a main current of thought, Taoism, with its focus on the integration of all things in nature, is thus manifested in ch'in music through the interaction of silk string and wooden body, set into play by human touch. Each element is an essential part of nature, and music, like painting and poetry, can be seen to represent a unified cosmos in which the complementary elements of sound and silence, of flow and rest, combine to form the music. This is carried through to a supremely sensitive level in the hands of a skilled player; in *Ancient and Oriental Music*, edited by Egon Wellesz, the author explains that a "vibrato is prolonged long after the audible sound has ceased" and that "the unplucked string, set into motion by a sudden glissando, produces a sound scarcely audible even to the performer." This reflects, as in the other arts of China, a concern for the essence of things, not just the external manifestations, in this case the audible sound that results. Heard or not, "the orderly generation of sounds . . . was equated with other types of order in the universe; with the four directions, with the categories of substance, with the orderly sequence of the seasons." What mattered was not simply the music, but the harmonious correspondence between their system of sounds and the order of the universe.

This preoccupation with harmony, order, and universal balance runs through all of the Chinese arts discussed here, as does a highly developed sensitivity to nature. While the West may have its paeans to the majesty of the natural world – Wordsworth, Beethoven, and Rousseau to name just a few, what makes Chinese art so compelling to those who would explore it is the subtlety with which man's relation to the natural order of things is expressed. Whether in the yin-yang symmetries of its poetic tradition, the deeply contemplative nature scenes of the Sung landscape schools, or the traditional ch'in compositions which evoke the serene order of flowing water and wind in the pines, the difference here is the indelible stamp of the Taoist tradition in China. One can never approach the arts in quite the same way after experiencing it.

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