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Mental Space of Chinese Artists in the Ming Dynasty

by: Chong Ho Yu



Fishermen in Fall, by Tang Yin, 1523 AD.

In January 2009, a puzzle formed in my mind after I visited the Chinese painting gallery inside the Hong Kong Culture Museum. The gallery displayed the representative paintings of the *School of Lingnan*, which are said to be highly modernized. Frankly, I was bored by the narrow motifs that did not go beyond landscape and flowers. Despite the fact that those painters had lived through the turmoil of Chinese history and the transition from traditional society to modern society, it seemed that the art and reality were disconnected. After reviewing Chinese art history, I found a deep cultural root that might explain this phenomenon. It is impossible for me to cover all periods of Chinese art history in this short essay. Nonetheless, if you believe in statistics, a cross-section sampled from the Ming Dynasty could provide us with an accurate projection of the full picture.

Taoism and Confucianism are complementary

Chinese culture is mainly composed of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, but due to space constraints, the focus of this essay is on the first two. Generally, Confucianism is social, moral and humanistic oriented. In contrast, Taoism is characterized by its transcendental and escapist nature. With the foreign origin and the Sinologized coat, Buddhism, as the moderator between Confucianism and Taoism, has both humanistic and transcendental characteristics. For two millenniums, Confucianism had been claimed by both rulers and scholars as the orthodox ideology. However, if we carefully examine Chinese paintings, especially Ming paintings, we can see that Taoism, rather than Confucianism, dominates the themes.

Moralizing paintings, which remind the viewers about the brevity of life and the need for moderation and piety, were popular in the West where Christianity prevailed. Although Confucianism is also moralistic in essence, moralizing paintings were rare in ancient Chinese art. The motifs of Chinese paintings were mainly landscape, animal and bird, which came to fashion in the Tang period. This tradition spanned across Yuan, Ming, and Ching dynasties, too.



A painting of birds by Bian Wen-zhi, 1413 AD.

Apart from the Taoist religion, there are two versions of Taoism as schools of philosophy in China, namely, Taoism of Laozi and Taoism of Zhuangzi. Zhuangzi's approach was to equalize all entities in the universe, which was manifested by this statement: "I was born and live with the heaven and the earth. All things and I are identical." Contemporary Confucian Tsui Fu Kuan asserted that the philosophy of Zhuangzi is the underlying spirit of Chinese art.

Throughout Chinese history, the sphere that painters and art critics reached or established is the Taoist one. After the Sung dynasty, the influence of Zen to Chinese art was just the extension of Zhuangzi's Taoism. Tsui Fu Kuan asserted that under a tyranny, Chinese artists wanted to integrate themselves with the heaven and the earth (things in nature) in order to gain freedom in the mental space.

However, attributing credits to Zhuangzi's Taoism only for the rise of Chinese landscape, bird and flower paintings may be an over-simplification. We should ask why Chinese artists tended to escape from reality and why they pursued freedom of mind instead of political freedom. Perhaps Laozi's Taoism was also a factor contributing to the phenomenon. Laozi's Taoism was the heir of the *Yin Yang* (negative and positive) philosophy of the *I Ching* (*The Book of Change*). Laozi emphasized the power of the Yin side by saying, "the softest one of the world can overcome the toughest one." Certainly this approach influenced the mentality of Chinese scholars and artists. When Chinese people encounter adversity, they do not directly counteract

it. Instead, they try to solve the problem in a “soft” manner, and therefore Chinese people would rather pursue freedom in the mental space rather than in the political arena.

As mentioned before, elements of Chinese culture are complementary. As a Confucian, one’s life-long mission is to cultivate one’s morality, to care for the family, and then to fulfill the political ideal. A dedicated Confucian would devote most of his time to studying literature for the admission examination in order to actualize the Confucian ideal as a government officer. But in the early Ming dynasty, most artists were unsuccessful politicians, and paintings with a Taoist orientation became the escape route.

Bloody politics frightened artists

In the early Ming period a number of painters were active in the royal court of the first emperor, Hung Wu. An examination system for the selection of officials had been re-established at the beginning of the dynasty. Scholars who obtained the *Chin-shih* degree (equivalent to a Ph.D. today) were eligible for appointment to the *Han Lin Academy* (equivalent to the National Academy today), and several who received such appointment were painters. At that time there were very few professional artists specializing in art only. Probably they were employed mainly in other job functions and some of them were assigned to the “Embroidered Uniform Guard,” a team of personal guards and secret agents reporting to the emperor. The Embroidered Uniform Guard was often criticized for acting in an arbitrary and capricious manner because their power was not checked by any other except the emperor.

Since Confucian Classics were set as the syllabus and *Pa Ku* (the eight steps of writing a scholarly paper) was used as the format in the admission examination, it is no doubt that early Ming court painters were also excellent Confucian scholars. However, under the rule of oversensitive and bloody emperor Hung Wu, they hardly fulfilled their Confucian ideal. Hung Wu was a poor monk before occupying the throne, and therefore he had an anti-intellectual attitude. Beating his officers was the daily routine. In addition, he killed innumerable officers and scholars just because they were suspected of insulting the emperor by their writing.

Painters faced the same fate as other scholars and officers. A painter named Shen Chu was beheaded by the emperor for illustrating a fairy riding a dragon, which is the symbol of the emperor. Needless to say, no one, even a fairy or a god, was allowed to be above the emperor. Another painter named Chou Wei once was ordered to paint all the rivers and mountains of the empire on the palace wall. He used the excuse that he was unfamiliar with the geography of China, and asked the emperor to make a sketch on the wall. After Hung Wu had completed the draft, Chou fearfully said that he could not revise the draft because doing so would spoil the flawless work by the emperor. In spite of his “humble” manner, he was still executed later due to the slander of his colleagues.

The heir of Hung Wu was his grandson Chien Wen. After a bloody civil war, which was termed by historians as *the Incident of Ching Lan*, one of Hung Wu’s sons, Yung Lo replaced Chien Wen as the emperor. In order to shield his regime from possible resurgence, Yung Lo killed many of Chien Wen’s officers, including some painters. Yung Lo was as narrow-minded as Hung Wu, and therefore painters still faced threats all the time. For example, once the founding father of the *school of Che*, Toi Chin, was unreasonably charged by his hostile colleague Hsieh Huan. When Hsieh Huan looked at one of Tai Chin’s paintings, he angrily reported to the emperor that the fishermen portrayed in the picture wore a red coat, which should be worn by high-ranking officials only. According to Hsieh’s interpretation, the painting implied that the lower class, such as fishermen, could take over the empire. Tai Chin was so frightened by the accusation that he ran away from the capital and took refuge in Buddhist temples. During the exile he earned his living by producing religious paintings. Hsieh Huan deployed agents to launch a massive man-hunt, and Tai Chin had to keep fleeing from place to place. When the emperor Hsuan-te died and was succeeded by his son, Tai returned to the royal court. This

time he was supported by two powerful officials and became the most respectable painter in the capital. Interestingly enough, after a near-death experience, Tai Chin returned to the royal court where he was almost killed.

Mental retreat instead of physical escape



Leaf album painting of flowers by Chen Hong-shou (1598–1652).

Facing brutality, unreasonable punishment, and absurd misinterpretation of art, the escapist mentality of Taoism occupied painters' minds. However, the so-called "escape" happened in the mental space only, and those painters did not physically escape until they encountered a life-threatening situation. They would rather take the risk of being killed by the enraged emperor than giving up the position in the court.

Shang Hsi, who was also a court painter, was called to serve the royal court during the Hsuan-te era and eventually became the Commander in the Embroidered Uniform Guard. As mentioned before, the Embroidered Uniform Guard was a fearsome group of secret agents. Many political manslaughter and persecutions were mercilessly implemented by this bureau. As the Commander, Shang Hsi had directly or indirectly been involved in many atrocities. This type of career was definitely incompatible with the Confusion ideal, and one might wonder how he could "inconsistently" create paintings with noble motifs.

In a different context, Canadian philosopher Govier offered an answer to this seemingly contradiction. She urged us to obtain a holistic view of a person's character rather than judging a person by morality alone. A so-called "moral monster" might love Yeats' poetry, the music of Beethoven, or the moral philosophy of Kant; a Nazi concentration camp commander might be a skilled musician. But I have another plausible explanation. In Shang Hsi's case, his painting could be viewed as an attempt of whitewashing his guilt in the spiritual sphere. The peaceful art eased the psychological tension and therefore he could continue his political life.

Another Ming painter named Li Tsai did a historical painting entitled *Illustrations to the homecoming ode of Tao Yuan-ming*. Tao Yuan-ming was a well-known poet in the Eastern Chun period. Once he took a junior position in the government, but he disliked politics and eventually resigned from the post by making an admirable assertion as follows: "I refuse to bow my head for five containers of rice (the salary of a junior official)." Afterwards, he led an isolated life at a farm for the rest of his life and later earned the title of "the father of retreat." A Hong Kong scholar named Wang Chin Ki challenged the conventional perception that Tao was a transcendentalist who willingly abandoned power and money. Wang stated that actually Tao had held an official position for many years; and as a result he had accumulated sufficient lands, houses, and money to sustain his retirement. He asserted that other scholars who had never been involved in "dirty" politics should be more admirable than Tao.

The preceding comment might also be applied to many Ming court painters. If they really hated dirty and bloody politics, why didn't they pack up and leave the royal court when there was a chance of doing so? Li Tsai's painting of Tao Yuan-ming well-implicates the dilemma of many early Ming painters and officers. Li was born in the Fukien province and later migrated to the capital hoping for an appointment at the royal court. At that time quite a few officials declared that they were passively "invited to the court," but indeed many of them chose to come to the capital in order to be "invited to the court" via social networking. On one hand, Li Tsai devoted efforts to be admitted into the royal court, and on the other hand, he hoped that he could retreat from dirty and bloody politics as Tao Yuan-ming did. But instead of prematurely resigning from his position, he might still want to have an opportunity to be a Confucian by serving the government.

Concluding remarks

Ming Court painters mentally escaped from the tyranny by creating Taoist paintings with an emphasis on the motif of nature, including landscape and flowers. However, restricted by their humanistic Confucian background, their escape is hardly physical even though they had a choice. Nevertheless, they should not be blamed for lacking courage to fight against the oppressive regime or to give up the career that was not harmonious with the Confucian ideal, because Taoism had provided them with a psychological asylum in art and philosophy. Perhaps this implicit orientation in art has been passing through many generations in China and became a part of our cultural DNA. No wonder those motifs remain unaffected in spite of many art movements of modernization.

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