

# The Inspiration of Chinese Philosophical Thought to Contemporary Art

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## **Abstract**

A true artist is a preacher and enlightener of the public, a pioneer in the advancement of ideas. An important criterion for judging a work of contemporary art should be whether it presents the wisdom of contemporary thinking and connotation of thought. The essence of Chinese contemporary art is Chinese philosophical thought, which emphasizes the harmony between the universe and nature. Chinese philosophical thought is the principle by which Chinese people perceive the world, it is also the guideline for Chinese art, not only for traditional Chinese art but also for Chinese contemporary art. Chinese contemporary art presents traditional Chinese philosophical thought and traditional culture in artistic methods such as installation and performance. Additionally, Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist philosophies are the three pillars of Chinese philosophy and traditional Chinese culture, and the philosophical and aesthetic ideas contained therein have had a profound impact on contemporary Chinese art. This essay is mainly focused on the combination of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism with examples of contemporary artworks, to illustrate that Chinese philosophical thought is a major inspiration for changes in the way contemporary art is presented.

**Keywords:** Chinese Contemporary Art; Chinese Philosophy; Confucianism; Buddhism; Taoism

## **Introduction**

A true artist is a preacher and enlightener of the public, a pioneer in the advancement of ideas. An important criterion for judging a work of contemporary art should be whether it presents the wisdom of contemporary thinking and connotation of thought. A piece of artwork without intellectual wisdom and connotation cannot be accurately interpreted and

deeply understood. Regardless of the form and material of Chinese contemporary art, it contains Chinese philosophical ideas in one way or another. Chinese contemporary art is a new form of language to express traditional philosophical thought; by this means, traditional Chinese philosophical thought appears in a new light to the world. Chinese contemporary art has enabled traditional Chinese philosophy to remain current with the times and has given traditional Chinese philosophy a modern sense of development.

Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism have been the three pillars of traditional Chinese philosophy for centuries. Confucianism refers to the school founded by Confucius, which is the orthodox thought of Chinese feudal society. Taoism was founded by Zhang Daoling in the late Eastern Han Dynasty based on *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*<sup>1</sup>. Wei and Jin metaphysics, as well as philosophical thought from Song and Ming dynasties, have the characteristics of Taoist thought. Taoist thought is a unique philosophical thought of China. Buddhism is the religion founded by the son of the Indian King Jogi, Chaudhama Siddhartha, and is one of the four major religions in the world. Buddhism was introduced into China by the influence of Taoist thought. A sect of Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, was also influenced by Taoist thought. During the pre-Qin period, two schools of thought, Confucianism and Taoism, were formed and have since influenced the development of Chinese aesthetics. Chinese art is considered to be a vessel of Chinese philosophical thought. Chinese Taoist philosophy advocates emptiness, focuses on imagination, requires intuition, respects individuality, and naturally becomes the embodiment of emotional objects, creates an aesthetic realm in which a landscape, for example, is a state of mind, pursuing the "ethereal" and "quiet" view of nature in art, expressing flowers, snow, snow, and mountains. Confucianism, Taoism, and Zen are complementary. Taoist art implemented Confucianism's idea of personality fulfillment, while Confucius' view of art emphasized self-restraint for the purpose of benevolence.

The essence of contemporary Chinese art is Chinese philosophical thought, and within Chinese philosophical thought, aesthetics occupies a very important place. Both Heideggerian aesthetics and Taoism have studied the nature of art and have discussed in depth the relationship be-

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<sup>1</sup> Zhuang, Zi . "ZHUANG ZI." Wikipedia, n.d.  
<https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E5%BA%84%E5%AD%90>.

tween the world, the earth, the image, and truth. Taoism, on the other hand, has made Tao, qi, and image the essence of art and the basic categories—rooted in "natural images of heaven and earth"—of classical Chinese Aesthetics. After thousands of years of development, traditional philosophical thought has evolved in response to the needs of the times and has taken on new expression in Chinese contemporary art.

### **The Inspiration of Taoist Thought for Chinese Contemporary Art**

The essence of Taoist philosophy is to have the spirit of overcoming the strong with the weak, overcoming the strong with the soft, overcoming the strong with the small, and so on. This reminds people to not always act on the basis of ordinary thinking, e.g., overcoming the small with the big, overcoming the weak with the strong, etc. Such methods are not optimal but rather the clumsy methods of ordinary people, who should be encouraged to try to pursue the optimal solutions. The contemporary artist Xu Bing has abandoned the serious, non-joking character of traditional Taoist thought and used a modern, relaxed, and humorous context to reflect the essence of Taoist philosophy in reverse. *The Book of Earth*<sup>2</sup> took seven years to compile. Xu Bing went through seven years of collecting materials, conceptualizing, experimenting, rewriting, adjusting, overturning, and starting over, without a single word throughout the book, which is all described in various types of sign language and symbols. With a new way of expression, this book wonderfully records the typical twenty-four hours in the life of a modern urban white-collar worker. This is a book that can be published anywhere without translation, regardless of cultural background and language, as long as people with contemporary life experience can read and understand it. The various symbols in the book are inundated in all corners of our lives, things we all take for granted, yet Xu Bing connects these most common symbols together with wit, humor, and accuracy. His work "Phoenix"<sup>3</sup> is one of his few public artworks. This work, made of construction waste,

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<sup>2</sup> XU, BING. "XU BING." XU BING, n.d.  
<http://www.xubing.com/cn/work/details/188?classID=12&type=class>.

<sup>3</sup> XU, BING. "Xu Bing's Phoenix Appearance in New York Is given a More Profound Meaning." New York Times, n.d.  
<http://cn.nytimes.com/culture/20140219/t19xubing/>.

forms the image of a phoenix with Chinese Han Dynasty characteristics. The use of the cheapest materials to create beautiful images is a characteristic of contemporary Chinese folk art, such as peasant paintings and woodblock prints, etc. It is through this material property that the author hopes to create a formal contrast, between roughness and cheapness, on the one hand, and nobility and brilliance, on the other hand.

### **The Inspiration of Confucianism for Chinese Contemporary Art**

The Chinese philosophical idea that "landscape pleases the Tao with its form, and the benevolent are happy" (*Preface to Zong Bing's Landscape Painting*)<sup>4</sup> is a major shift in the concept of "man and nature" in Chinese painting and calligraphy. The philosophical thought of Confucius' benevolence has firmly established the artistic values of contemporary Chinese art in the pursuit of the regulation of "self-worth" and the perfection of "ideal personality" and the "unity of heaven and man." The rituals of Confucianism, the nature of Taoism, and the wondrous enlightenment of Zen Buddhism are all ideas closely linked to the achievement of an ideal personality. According to Confucian philosophy, man should follow the development of nature and adapt and conform to nature; in this way, both man and nature will develop. Confucianism advocates benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and faith, and emphasizes spirituality over materiality. It can also be said that Confucianism emphasizes, theory over practice. This is consistent with contemporary conceptual art, or program art, where the artist pursues a minimum of materialization. "Program art is conceptual art in name only; you don't see any outward visual image of materiality or behavior. Thus, program art is again very much like a 'fashion show' in which you are completely naked."<sup>5</sup> Although program artists aim for the minimum materialization of artworks, they ultimately cannot avoid the materialization process of artworks when the program as an artistic ontology finally becomes an artwork.

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<sup>4</sup> Bing, Zong. "Preface to Zong Bing's Landscape Painting." BAIDU, n.d. <https://wenku.baidu.com/view/7fc78441336c1eb91a375db2.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Yin Ji-nan. *Post-Maidenism in Contemporary Chinese Culture and Art* [M]. Beijing: Life, Reading, New Knowledge, 2002.23.

## The Inspiration of Buddhist (Zen) Thought for Chinese Contemporary Art

Zen Buddhism attaches importance to inner experience as the only way to reach the highest state of life, where all things in the universe are born of the mind. It advocates a lively, natural, ethereal, transcendent, and liberated realm, where all images are delusions; the notion of “delusion” itself is still a delusion, and reality is born out of nothingness. Zen Buddhism believes that the less prescriptive, the greater the room for imagination, so that less is better than more, and only when simplicity is at its extreme can it give people great imagination. Guangdong artist Yang Jiechang, replacing traditional textual expressions with modern ink-splash painting, used the minimalism advocated by Buddhist thought and integrated it into modern aesthetics to create the work "Thousand Layers of Ink"<sup>6</sup>. "These works not only abandon concrete images but also intend to deconstruct the painting itself. He obsessively applies ink to the paper over and over again, eventually forming mirror-like black holes." Hebei artist Hu Yataban's work "Big Ink Statue" shares a similarity with Yang Jiechang's work, in that by repeatedly shaping the painting material, rice paper, with ink, the work takes on a striking relief effect. Together, their works contain the Zen idea of emptiness and the Taoist idea of the unity of heaven and man. In Warsaw in 1992, the artist Zhang Jianjun produced Inner Fog, "a work that can be described as minimalist in nature - a shallow flat cylinder filled with black ink"<sup>7</sup>, with the rising vapor of the ink bringing a meditative sense. The work reflects the artist's philosophical musings. Qiu Zhijie's writing photography, in which he writes in the dark with a flashlight and uses the camera's delayed exposure technique to give shape to the written image, gives us a deep sense of Zen thought, of the transience and fallibility of time, of the way the world becomes a different place in the blink of an eye as

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<sup>6</sup> Yang, Jiechang. "Open a Larger Version of the Following Image in a Popup: Yang Jiechang 杨诒苍, One Hundred Layers of Ink 千层墨, 1990 YANG JIECHANG." inkstudio, n.d. <https://www.inkstudio.com.cn/zh/artists/62-yang-jiechang/works/1413-yang-jiechang-one-hundred-layers-of-ink-1990/>.

<sup>7</sup> Zhang, Jianjun. "A Shallow Flat Cylinder Filled with Black Ink." exhibit.artron, n.d. a shallow flat cylinder filled with black ink.

time passes. This thought is also reflected in his work "The Twenty-Four Solar Terms": "From the beginning of spring to the winter solstice, at every season, Qiu Zhijie seeks for a suitable place and situation to write down the naming of a certain solar term in the darkness and emptiness", "those things under the name of the twenty-four solar terms, those scattered and unknown in aging, slowly fall into the ruins of time"<sup>8</sup>. The rebellious and anti-logical ideas of Chinese philosophy and Zen Buddhism have a certain compatibility with the mentality of contemporary Chinese artistic works, such as Fang Lijun's "Yawn", a hip-hop flirtation with the Chinese people, whose hearts share a flirtatious state of mind with Zen Buddhism. When it comes to traditional Zen philosophy, contemporary Chinese experimental ink and wash conveys the emotion of the state of no-self through brush strokes, emphasizing the state of mind of one's enlightenment. This can be said to be a typical "Southern Zen" metaphysical concept.

The influence of Chinese philosophical thought on contemporary artists is also reflected in the artwork of contemporary Chinese artist Yue Minjun, who portrays an exaggerated "self-image" on canvas. The works of this artist address the developments and struggles of Chinese culture over the last decade, the cultural relations between East and West, and the economic and political (violent) events of globalization. The images involved in these works are a constant reference to Taoism's "exhaustion of change" and Buddhism's "karmic emptiness." There are also installations by female artists that show a beautiful "calm and emptiness." For example, Shi Hui's works "Knot No. 3", "Knot No. 4", "Nest", and "Drift" are characterized by repetitive, calm, and monotonous manual work, which resembles the persistence of ancient Zen monks. She presents a sense of floating, expressing an "uncertain nature of things - a mood or a thought, a fleeting hallucination, or a wisp of memory... ..a floating association that cannot be determined"<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Gao Shiming. *All Deadly Things Thrown Unspeakable - A Case Study of Chinese Contemporary Artists* [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Jinxiu Article Publishing House, 2012.70.

<sup>9</sup> Xu Hong. *Women's art* [M]. Changsha: Hunan Fine Arts Publishing House, 2005.170.

## **Conclusion**

In short, Chinese philosophical thought has a long history and has had a great and profound influence on both traditional Chinese art and contemporary art. A variety of contemporary artworks with oriental characteristics have brought the contemporary interpretation of Chinese philosophical thought to a new climax, attracting widespread attention in the Chinese and international art world. At the same time, this new contemporary art requires a certain level of cultivation and thoughtfulness to understand. These works do not include simple paintings that tell a story or a narrative, for example, and is different from modernist work concocted by the painter according to his subjective thoughts. A person without grounding in Chinese philosophy cannot appreciate the value of Chinese contemporary art.