



The Influence of the Concept of Virtual-Actual Coexistence in Taoist Aesthetics on Traditional Chinese Painting and Landscape Art

Di Tian and Ji Xiao Zhang^(✉)

School of Art and Design, Beijing Forestry University, Beijing, China
799317276@qq.com

Abstract. With thousands of years of inheritance and development, Taoist aesthetics has become one of the core values carried by traditional Chinese painting art, and has greatly affected the formation and development of Chinese traditional aesthetic ideas, prompting the concept of Taoist aesthetics to run through the landscape design ideas of China for hundreds of years. This paper takes the concept of virtual-actual coexistence in Taoist aesthetics as the starting point, and discusses the impact of Taoist aesthetics on traditional Chinese painting art and landscape art by analyzing the application of virtual-actual coexistence in traditional Chinese painting art and landscape art.

Keywords: Taoist aesthetics · virtual-actual coexistence · traditional Chinese painting · landscape art

1 Introduction

During the Spring and Autumn period and Warring States period, Taoism is considered one of the most influential hundred schools of thought represented by Laozi and Zhuangzi, and has always played an important role in the development of Chinese history for thousands of years. Taoist thought holds an unparalleled influence on shaping the cultural character and aesthetic philosophy of the Chinese nation. In terms of methodology, the spirit behind freehand brushwork in traditional Chinese painting is briefly summarized as “pursuing writing idea rather than form, expressing the mood without figurative depiction”. Such artistic pursuit of “idea and form” precisely couples the concepts of “virtuality and actuality” in Taoist thought. Taoist aesthetics, which extends from the Taoist thought of transcending reality and focusing on achieving the “unity of heaven and man”, provides an important cornerstone for forming traditional Chinese aesthetic thought, and has permeated the landscape design of China for centuries. In this paper, the author analyzes the application of virtual-actual coexistence in the creation of paintings based on the connections between Taoist aesthetics and virtual-actual coexistence creation techniques. This paper also discusses how the concept of virtual-actual coexistence in Taoist aesthetics has influenced traditional Chinese painting and landscape art by exploring the application of virtual-actual coexistence in traditional and modern landscape design.

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2 How the Concept of Virtual-Actual Coexistence in Taoist Aesthetics Affects Traditional Chinese Painting Art

2.1 The Connection Between Taoist Aesthetics and the Virtual-Actual Coexistence Creation Techniques

In Taoist thought, it is believed that “the way of man follows the way of heaven” and that human behavior should comply with the laws of nature. This aesthetic approach requires transcendence of reality and focuses on achieving a state of unity between heaven and man. The Taoist aesthetic, which extends from Taoist thought, has had a great impact on traditional Chinese painting, especially landscape painting. Laozi and Zhuangzi believe that the concept of “virtuality” is crucial in Taoist thought, and this concept converts into the aesthetic category of “virtual reality” in the creation of paintings [1]. The virtual-actual concept has a profound impact on the creation of traditional Chinese painting, and the plain, simple and elegant aesthetic style nurtures the unique creative principles of traditional Chinese painting.

In ancient Chinese art theory, there is a profound and intricate cultural and ideological origin about the relationship between virtuality and actuality. As the saying goes, “A show of force is best where you are weak; where strong, feign weakness”, so is it in painting. The aesthetic concept of “virtual-actual coexistence” is a dialectical idea, where virtuality and actuality coexist and interpenetrate each other, influence each other, and set each other off to highlight the center. It is also the most important creative technique of Chinese painting.

2.2 Expression of the Concept of “Virtual-Actual Coexistence” in Traditional Painting

In traditional Chinese painting theory, the “theory of virtuality and actuality” emerges almost simultaneously with the rise of landscape painting. The traditional Chinese aesthetic pursuit of a “well laid out and spaced out painting layout” is derived from the Taoist concept of virtuality and actuality, and in the actual creation of paintings, the artistic creation of “virtuality and actuality” is embedded everywhere. In traditional Chinese painting, “actuality” refers to the densely painted part of the picture, while the blank space or the place sparsely painted for keeping the original color of the paper is called “virtuality”. The two complement each other to achieve a harmonious picture. As the Tang Dynasty painter Zao Zhang expressed, “paintings derive from natural life and are refined by the artist’s inner perception”. In other words, during the artistic creation, it is necessary to respect the natural reality, summarize it, and reconstruct it to convey a more profound mood. The creative technique of virtual-actual coexistence can make the picture meticulously portrayed in the “actuality” and express the emotions without figurative depiction in the “virtuality”, to express the spiritual pursuit of far-reaching writing. As Yuan Ma, the painter of the Southern Song Dynasty, said, “Where there is no painting, there is a wonderful place”, which means that the blank space in the picture often contains greater connotation and can better express the pursuit of mood and elegance.

Yuan Ma, a famous painter of the Southern Song Dynasty, is particularly reputable for his technique of virtual-actual coexistence to express his inner mood. Yuan Ma's landscape paintings have been referred to as "Ma Yijiao" in later times, because his unique artworks usually leave large blank spaces. He characterizes strange and solid mountains and rocks with a vigorous and powerful style, often finely portraying only the main subject in the near scene, leaving the rest parts blank or only applying light colors. His paintings echo the interplay of virtuality and actuality, forming a misty and airy rhythm that gives the viewer endless imagination, and well illustrates the spiritual pursuit of expressing profoundness through virtual-actual coexistence in the creation of paintings.

This creative technique shows a very high spiritual realm in Yuan Ma's masterpiece "Looking at the Clouds on the Stone Wall" (Fig. 1). This is a fan painting with a landscape theme, where a man stood on the bank of a stream, looking into the distance. There are surrounding trees and lush bamboo on the opposite bank of the stream, echoing each other. The rock wall on the bank blends in with the dark clouds in the sky, highlighting the blurred and hazy but infinite sense of depth. The painting features a simple composition, where people and scenes blend to create a far-reaching mood of imagination. The painting applies only simple rendering without an impression of emptiness, showing the vast space through the "virtuality", and using the combination of virtuality and actuality to produce a profound mood.

Thus, under the influence of the concept of virtual-actual coexistence in Taoist aesthetics, traditional Chinese painting pursues a kind of mood, seeking to draw a vital painting with just a few strokes under virtual-actual coexistence. Therefore, in excellent



Fig. 1. "Looking at the Clouds on the Stone Wall"

work, virtuality and actuality should not be separated from each other, so as to express the far-reaching mood through the creative technique of virtual-actual coexistence.

3 How the Concept of Virtual-Actual Coexistence in Taoist Aesthetics Affects the Landscape Art

3.1 How the Concept of Virtual-Actual Coexistence Affects Traditional Landscape Art

The creative technique of virtual-actual coexistence, which extends from Taoist aesthetics, is widely used not only in traditional painting, but also in landscape art. Gardens represent the art of time and space, and traditional Chinese gardens embody the concept of virtual-actual coexistence in every way. Both “virtuality” and “actuality” are important aspects of classical Chinese gardening theory. Actuality refers to the physical construction of pavilions, arcades and other buildings, while virtuality refers to the artistic conception shaped by methods such as plant configuration, construction and matching, and hollowing out the scenery. In some small landscapes, the actuality refers to the walls, and the virtuality refers to the corridor or the hollow windows, doors and holes, while the “semi-virtuality” elements, such as windows and grilles, play a transitional role to make the architecture and environment more natural and harmonious. Excellent traditional garden landscaping design uses a subtle combination of three elements: virtuality, actuality, and semi-virtuality. The creative technique of virtual-actual coexistence produces the artistic effect of scenery shifting along with moving, making a more profound context. Traditional Chinese gardens pursue the idea that “the man-made garden seems to be a natural creation, skillfully reflecting the beauty with the help of various materials [2]”, which perfectly reflects the Taoist aesthetics in traditional gardens (Fig. 2).

In addition to the gardens of the Ming and Qing dynasties that survive today, traditional gardens of earlier periods also paid great attention to the creation of virtual-actual coexistence, which can be reflected in landscape paintings inherited to this day. The ancient literati’s landscape theory corresponds to the traditional landscape painting theory [3]. Songnian Liu’s Four Scenic Landscapes in the Southern Song Dynasty and other works are not only classical masterpieces in the history of Chinese painting, but also a factual record of the art of gardening and garden architecture in the Song Dynasty [4]. Songnian Liu’s Four Scenic Landscapes in the Southern Song Dynasty and other works are not only classical masterpieces in the history of Chinese painting, but also a factual record of the art of gardening and garden architecture in the Song Dynasty. Among them, there are both realistic depictions of architecture and landscapes containing the freehand spirit that blends virtual-actual coexistence.

In the winter landscape section of “Four Scenic Landscapes” (Fig. 3), it is evident that the garden form depicted is influenced by the concept of virtual-actual coexistence.

The depicted garden architecture shows the spatial relationship shaped by the creative technique of virtual-actual coexistence, the miniature landscape shaped for the taste of painting and calligraphy, demonstrating the pursuit of artistic conception through the gardening method of virtual-actual coexistence. The garden form depicted in the



Fig. 2. Landscape features of Suzhou Lion Forest



Fig. 3. “Four Scenic Landscapes”

painting, with the wall as the reality and the window as the virtuality, is dedicated to the function of ventilation and light, the communication between the actual building and the virtuous nature, and the intersection of man-made space and natural environment.

Besides the influence of the intuitive landscape design, the concept of virtual-actual coexistence in Taoist aesthetics also expresses the ideals of the literati and the cultural connotation that the garden holds. The “actuality” in gardening expresses the pursuit of ideal scenery, while the “virtuality” gives vent to emotional culture, and the idea of the unity of heaven and man in Taoist thought endows natural elements with symbolic connotations. This concept reflects the literati’s objective pursuit of the garden. They regarded the garden as a spiritual station in life and career, and they would retire to the garden if they failed in their career [4]. Thus, in traditional garden scenery, the creation of virtual-actual coexistence not only shapes the ideal scenery, but also expresses the spiritual pursuit contained in the garden.



Fig. 4. Modern Chinese landscape design

3.2 How the Concept of Virtual-Actual Coexistence Affects Modern Landscape Art

Nowadays, the pursuit of artistic conception with the creative method of virtual-actual coexistence still serves as an important expression and purpose of modern landscaping. The popular “new Chinese landscape” uses the creative method of virtual-actual coexistence, combining traditional Chinese gardening forms of architecture, patterns, colors and vegetation space, as well as modern aesthetic elements, to create a landscape environment with both local cultural characteristics and modern aesthetic requirements (Fig. 4).

In modern landscape design, the technique of virtual-actual coexistence still serves as the most common way of creation. The framed landscape form in traditional gardens remains prevalent in modern garden design, mainly manifesting by using corridors or permeable windows, doors, grilles, and holes to selectively shape the spatial scenery [5]. In the framed landscape, the buildings or walls serve as the actuality and the plants serve as the virtuality, which is transitioned by doors, windows, or grilles to produce a landscape effect with artistic conception.

The landscape art reflects Chinese people’s relentless pursuit of the unity of heaven and man in Taoist thought. All Chinese gardens in any period have always taken natural beauty with a humanistic mood as the highest pursuit. Originating from nature and superior to nature, Chinese gardens feature a blend of architectural and natural beauty, poetic and pictorial interest, and connotation of artistic conception [5]. Due to Chinese people’s love for landscape with spiritual connotation, the depiction of the landscape is not only expressed in painting but also deeply rooted in landscaping from ancient times to the present day. In Chinese gardens, the water arrangement and stone placement always represent the two most important elements to express virtual-actual coexistence. The water refers to virtuality, boasting a unique vitality and charm, while the stone refers to actuality, boasting a variety of forms and eternal quality. The combination of virtual-actual coexistence between the water and the stone gives the Chinese garden a freehand feeling of landscaped gardens, which manifests how the concept of virtual-actual coexistence in Taoist aesthetics has influenced the Chinese garden (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Comparison of landscape performance between modern and traditional Chinese Gardens

4 Conclusion

In conclusion, the concept of virtual-actual coexistence in Taoist aesthetics has had a great influence on the formation and development of Chinese art creation and even aesthetic concepts. Derived from the cultural tradition of Taoism, the creative technique of virtual-actual coexistence has become the most important and widespread form of expression in traditional painting and gardening and has developed into an artistic spirit. Therefore, the concept of virtual-actual coexistence not only becomes a representative creative technique in traditional art creation and classical gardens but also plays an important role in modern Chinese landscape design. This paper explores the connection between the creative technique of virtual-actual coexistence and the Taoist aesthetics, and discusses the embodiment of the virtual-actual coexistence in traditional painting and its application in traditional and modern Chinese landscape design, reflecting the profound influence of the Taoist aesthetics and the new vitality of the creative technique of virtual-actual coexistence in contemporary art creation.

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