



# Interpreting Chang Yu's Painting with Taoist Aesthetics

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**Abstract.** When Chang Yu was young, he studied Chinese painting with his father. Later, he came into contact with Western Fauvism and Post Impressionism, forming Chang Yu's artistic style of integration of China and the West. In addition, Chang Yu insisted on his own way in art and pursued spiritual freedom. He experienced ups and downs in his life, thus forming a unique Chinese and Western artistic style. Aesthetically, under the principle of "Tao follows nature", Taoist aesthetic thoughts represented by Laozi and Zhuangzi pay more attention to beauty and aesthetics and the natural, super utilitarian and emotional appeal of their art, forming an aesthetic thought that advocates nature and pursues aesthetic freedom. In academic research, there are some studies between Taoist aesthetics and traditional landscape painting, while there is not much research between Taoist aesthetics and Chang Yu's paintings. In a sense, Taoist aesthetic thought is consistent with Chang Yu's painting, which plays a supporting role. Taoist aesthetic thought provides spiritual value for his paintings. At the same time, Chang Yu's paintings better show Taoist thought. This article will explore how to interpret Chang Yu's painting with Taoist aesthetic ideas by combining image analysis, literature research and comparative research. In order to deepen the relationship between Taoist aesthetic thought and art, at the same time, through the perspective of Taoist aesthetic thought to look at the painting of the integration of China and the West, it better explains that art has no borders, and verifies that art has certain similarities. Taoist aesthetic thought is also a concentrated reflection of literature, culture, philosophy and religion, strengthening the intersection and integration of disciplines.

**Keywords:** Taoist aesthetic thought · Chang Yu · Painting

## 1 Introduction

For the domestic people, compared with Xu Beihong, who is known to all, Chang Yu is rarely known. In recent years, it has been gradually known that part of Chang Yu's paintings were auctioned. In October 2019, at the Sotheby's Modern Art Auction in Hong Kong, Chang Yu's representative work, *The Nude with Curved Legs*, was sold for HK \$172 million. With the commission, the auction price of the whole painting was as high as HK \$198 million, becoming the highest priced artwork in the whole exhibition. In July 2020, Chang Yu's "Four Naked Women" sold again at the Sotheby's auction in Hong

Kong for a sky high price of 258.3 million Hong Kong dollars. Such an auction result has made this unknown painter of the last century a household name in the upper class society for a while. Therefore, there has been a lot of academic research on Chang Yu. Chang Yu's painting style has gradually evolved from "Chinese Matisse" to Chang Yu's style. His paintings are simple, vivid, and full of the charm of humanistic painting. They express emotions directly through the images in the screen, and pursue more spiritual essence. In combination with his life of ups and downs, his paintings try to go beyond reality and seek freedom and comfort in spirit. Such a background is very similar to that of Zhuangzi in Taoism. Zhuangzi lived in the Warring States Period, and the era he faced showed the changing state of realistic social relations and social ideology, the contest between the new and old political forces, the debate between the new and old ideologies, the war between the seven countries for power and land. The changing geographical boundaries and the displacement of the people made Zhuangzi, who represented the civilian intellectuals, have no way to go in reality and try to go beyond reality to seek freedom and comfort in spirit. In general, in the existing literature, most of them focus on the research of Chang Yu's own experience background, Chang Yu's painting language and style, and the combination of Taoist aesthetic ideas with Chinese traditional art and culture, such as calligraphy, ancient zither, landscape painting, tea culture, etc. There are also studies on the integration of modern design, and few studies on the integration of Chinese and Western painting. Therefore, I would like to take this article to explore how to interpret Chang Yu's painting from the perspective of Taoist aesthetics. This paper will consult relevant literature at home and abroad in recent years through journals, books, networks, etc., research and analyze the collected information, and compare the schools similar to Chang Yu, such as "Matisse", the representative figure of Fauvism, "Modigliani" of Paris School of Painting, and the surrealist artist "Kusama". It mainly analyzes the representative works of different types of Chang Yu's paintings. At the same time, Combining Taoist aesthetic thought, the painting is interpreted through the point of agreement.

## 2 Text

### 2.1 The Relationship Between Taoist Aesthetic Thought and Art

The influence of Confucianism and Taoism on the field of aesthetic art is far-reaching. The complementary role of Taoism and Confucianism has played an important role in shaping Chinese people's life values, cultural psychology and artistic aesthetic interest. The essence of art focuses more on the appearance of intangible things, transcends the shackles of external secular standards, and pursues things at the spiritual, emotional and spiritual level, thus forming a natural, simple, and mysterious flavor. The highest realm of art is to linger around, like and like [2]. Taoist aesthetic thought pays more attention to beauty, aesthetics and the naturalness, super utilitarianism and emotional infection of art. From the aesthetic point of view, the Taoist aesthetic thought represented by Laozi and Zhuangzi has formed the aesthetic thought of advocating nature and pursuing aesthetic freedom under the principle of "Tao follows nature" [1]. Similar to Chinese philosophy, Chinese aesthetics focuses more on function, relationship and rhythm than on objects and entities. The aesthetic relationship emphasized by Taoism is internal, spiritual and

substantive beauty, and is a non cognitive law of artistic creation [2]. “Tao” is the meta category of Laozi’s philosophy and aesthetics, with “loftiness” and “ultimate” [4]. If Lao Tzu is the founder of Taoist philosophy and aesthetics, because his five thousand words in *Tao Te Ching* laid the foundation and keynote for the entire Taoist philosophy and aesthetics, then Zhuang Tzu is the real representative of Taoist aesthetics, after all, he promoted the systematization of Taoist aesthetic thinking [1]. Zhuangzi focused on the noumenon of individual life and perceptual people. Chuang Tzu pointed out to people that the way to the spiritual realm of Tao is to transcend oneself, that is, to transcend the body, intelligence, and reality [3]. If Xunzi emphasizes that “without hypocrisy, one cannot be beautiful”, Zhuangzi emphasizes that “heaven and earth have great beauty without words”. The former emphasizes the artificial production and external utility of art, while the latter highlights nature, that is, the independence of beauty and art. “What can be said is thick. What can be intended is fine. What cannot be said is not observed (Chuang Tzu · Autumn Water) “The world values books. Books are not words, but words are valuable. Words are valuable, but meanings are. The world values words, but words are not words (Zhuangzi · Tiandao) In these seemingly mysterious sayings, it has more grasped the basic characteristics of art, aesthetics and creation than Confucianism and any other school: image is greater than thought; Imagination is more important than concept; Great as clumsy, unable to express one’s meaning; To use one’s will without confusion is to concentrate on God [2]. The Twenty fifth Chapter of Laozi says that “man follows the earth, the earth follows the heaven, the heaven follows the Tao, and the Tao follows the nature”, and Zhuangzi’s Theory of Unification of Things says that “heaven and earth live side by side with me, and all things and I are one”. They all express the philosophy of art, that is, “heaven and man are one”. Zong Baihua’s Birth of Chinese Artistic Conception said: “Tao is embodied in life, ritual and music system, especially in art. Brilliant art gives image and life to Tao, and Tao gives depth and soul to art.” It can be seen that Taoist aesthetic thought and art not only have similarities, but also, in a sense, Taoist aesthetic thought is another form of expression of art [5].

## **2.2 The Coincidence Between Chang Yu’s Experience, the Evolution of His Painting Style and Taoist Aesthetics**

Chang Yu was born in Sichuan in 1900. When he was young, he studied Chinese painting with his father. Later, he learned calligraphy, painting and literature from Zhao Xi, the first poet of the late Qing Dynasty. Later, Chang Yu went to the east to study, and he came into contact with many western painting arts. At the same time, he was influenced by the styles of Impressionism, Fauvism, Futurism and Cubism. As a result, he began to apply Chinese traditional ink painting techniques to western painting, forming a style of integration of China and the West, which has an oriental flavor [6, 7]. In Changyu’s paintings of naked women, traditional Chinese symbols often appear, such as Chinese knot, longevity pattern, Panchang pattern, copper coin, crane, deer, etc., followed by signature and traditional Chinese seal style. In the early period, Changyu mainly painted figures, mainly nude women, and still life flowers and animals. His creation reached its peak in the 1930s, and it was the “pink period” of Changyu art in the 1940s. During this period, he successfully completed the evolution from “Chinese Matisse” to “Changyu style”. From the late 1930s to the early 1940s, Chang Yu’s painting style changed.

The screen color tends to be “black”, entering the so-called “black period”. In the late period, Chang Yu created a series of profound and solemn animal landscapes, which tried to highlight the freedom of life and the transcendence of spirit. This coincided with Zhuangzi's Taoist theory and had aesthetic appeal. At the same time, it had an unexpected return to literary and artistic aesthetic theory [3, 8]. The background of Chang Yu's ups and downs led him to express his pain and helplessness through his paintings, trying to seek freedom and comfort beyond the real spirit, which is more consistent with the background of Zhuang Zi, a Taoist. Zhuang Zi lived in the Warring States Period, and the times he faced showed the changing state of real social relations and social ideology, the contest between the new and old political forces, the debate between the new and old ideologies. The war of seven countries for power and land, the uncertainty of regional boundaries and the displacement of people made Zhuangzi have no way to go in reality, so he also tried to seek freedom and comfort in spirit beyond reality [3]. Taoism seems to shield the sorrow and helplessness of real life, pointing directly to the mind and the ideological world, in order to seek spiritual comfort and compensation. Taoist aesthetics explains that no matter how unbearable life is, we should also face it optimistically and positively, which requires the free spirit of Zhuangzi to transcend the heaviness and helplessness of reality, and do practical things to enter the world with the spirit of birth [4]. Therefore, in a sense, Taoist aesthetic ideas and Chang Yu's overall painting style have a certain agreement. Chang Yu's paintings are simple and concise, with profound artistic conception, freedom and tension, simple and natural, vivid and flexible. There are not too many rules and regulations to limit and restrict the painting surface, nor does he blindly pursue painting skills while ignoring the overall idea of the picture, but more focused on the expression of personal feelings and spirit. Through the limited pictures, we can show the unlimited ideological connotation behind the pictures, and reach people's innermost feelings directly. For example, from the “Dayin Xisheng” proposed by Taoism, the most beautiful music is to let people forget the sound and directly experience the connotation expressed by the music, rather than just stay at the level of sound stimulation. The most exquisite music is to reach people's heart directly, so that people can experience the ups and downs of the heart, not just the rhythm or melody of external sounds. For example, “great ingenuity is like clumsiness”, which means that the most ingenious art is plain, even simple and clumsy. Taoism believes that the art of calligraphy is like that of China. At the beginning, it pays attention to the use of the brush, the standardization of the “eight methods of permanent characters”, the layout and the smooth flow of qi. When we entered the highest realm of calligraphy, we could not see the traces of the calligraphers' attention to these aspects [9].

### 2.3 Interpretation of Chang Yu's Painting Through Taoist Aesthetics

Chang Yu's works are created by using western oil painting pigments and painting techniques, but also retain the oriental flavor. Paintings tend to express emotions more, but they do not pay too much attention to the changes in the composition of the shape, nor do they have much decoration. The tone of the picture is simple and simple. No matter the lines, shapes or colors, they all pursue a very simple beauty, just like the simple lines actually contain the beauty of rhythm and simplicity. Behind the simplicity of the picture is a rich and broad range of emotions, spirits and moods. Compared with

all kinds of things mixed together, simplicity is more a force. Too many things mixed together may not show what they want to show and express, but simplicity can return to the original state of things [6]. As Lao Tzu said in Chapter 45 of the Tao Te Ching: “Five colors make people blind, five tones make people deaf, and five tastes make people happy... Because we regard saints as our belly and not our eyes, we choose one from the other.” Lao Tzu said that too many colors will make us see nothing clearly like blind people. If five tones come out at the same time, our ears will lose hearing like deaf people, and we will taste different flavors together, The taste function of the tongue will be damaged. Sages should cultivate themselves with limited things, be indifferent to desires, not use things to enslave themselves, and not pursue the pleasure of sound and color [10]. The simple style of Chang Yu’s painting was influenced to some extent by the Fauvism painter Matisse. In Matisse’s painting “Dance” and Chang Yu’s painting “Five Nude”, there is a connection between the painting language forms. For example, in Matisse’s Dance, five naked women holding hands and dancing are depicted, which almost occupy the whole picture. In addition to the flat background, the composition is simple and balanced, and the overall picture is easy and harmonious. The bright blue, green, and brick red are finished in a flat painting way, with clear color blocks and rich decorative colors. The human body is not depicted in too many details, but is outlined by simple lines with rhythm and rhythm, which makes the happy dance in the painting very fluid. Similarly, in Chang Yu’s work Five Naked Women, he also simplified the images, sketched them with simple lines, flat painted them with flat colors, and set off them with geometric backgrounds to form a simple picture with bright color blocks. However, the colors he used were not as bright and bright as those of Matisse, but rather dark and solemn. Under his concise portrayal, the five standing naked women with different shapes present a state of contentment, and the overall picture is simple and elegant [7].

The general root of Taoist aesthetic thought is the ontology of “Tao”, and its context is “Tao follows nature”, “returning to nature”. One of the general characteristics is to take Tao as the foundation, follow nature, and highlight the naturalness of beauty, aesthetics and art [1]. In Zhuangzi’s view, the real art is natural, the creation of non-human Tao, and the real aesthetic is the experience and feeling of the Tao. When the subject grasps the Tao, he will feel the beauty, and when he experiences the Tao, he will truly grasp the beauty. Zhuangzi believed that the real beauty is in nature, that is, it is a natural existence that transcends sight, hearing, color and taste [12]. In the painting “Vase Chrysanthemum” created by Chang Yu in the pink period in 1929, in terms of composition, the Vase Chrysanthemum occupies the whole picture as the main body. In Chang Yu’s still life painting, most of the still life compositions tend to occupy the whole picture in the middle, which is similar to the representative pumpkin series of Japanese contemporary female artist Kusama Yasuo. For example, in this work “Pumpkin”, the pumpkin is delineated by single point perspective, Spotted pumpkins are distributed on the red infinite reticulated background. The thin lines of direction change are connected and extended. The color is changed to less used red than the previous general yellow. The color is bright and eye-catching. The black and red reticulated patterns and repeated dots in the picture are very directional in the changing sequence, making the viewer feel like entering the spiritual world of life among the grass, Wandering between the illusion of concrete and abstract, and switching back and forth between rationality and

sensibility, the whole picture has a very strong visual effect [11]. On the contrary, Chang Yu's "Vase Chrysanthemum" works appear natural and simple, more in line with the essence of Tao. The whole picture is shrouded in a light pink color. There are several blooming chrysanthemums in the white jar. The chrysanthemum color is integrated with the background. At the bottom of the whole picture is a black square like the desktop, which adds weight to the whole picture. The light elegance and simplicity of white chrysanthemums are vividly displayed. The whole picture looks natural, simple and elegant without too much decoration. This also follows Lao Tzu's idea that people should return to nature, present the original appearance of everyone, keep pure, and weaken desire, so that they can understand the "Tao", because he believes that the essence of the "Tao" is to be naive, natural, skillful and interesting like a baby Nature is not carved [10, 13].

Compared with Chang Yu's human body and still life paintings, his animal paintings can better show his mood and thoughts. As the work "Lonely Elephant" is Chang Yu's last work in his lifetime, in this work, the whole picture seems to be an ethereal field. In the middle of the picture, there is a small elephant that seems to be moving forward, which seems to belong to a group animal. But in the picture, only one elephant stands alone, just like Chang Yu's situation at that time, because Chang Yu in his later years lives alone in France, without relatives, Therefore, the little elephant was personified, and the humanized animal was integrated into the world and the universe, reflecting Zhuangzi's philosophy of the unity of heaven and man. In fact, almost every piece of Chang Yu's painting about an elephant adopts the same form, that is, a large piece of wilderness similar to a desert is painted flat with a single color, and the bottom is like a dark mountain range. The small elephant in the middle has no details, only a little simple movement, and the overall painting surface looks nihilistic [14]. Just as Taoism believes that great beauty is nihility, Taoism, after transcending the beauty of all material forms, returns the real aesthetic to the eternal universe and the natural nature and root of life. "Get rid of metaphysics", wash away the world's lead, clarify the mind, and feel the transcending realm from limited to infinite, from tangible to intangible, and from form to essence. At the same time, in the realm of "the unity of body and Tao", feel the unpredictable cosmic weather [12]. In Taoist aesthetic thought, "inaction", "virtual tranquility", and "free travel" are the aesthetic realm, This shows the transcendence of utilitarianism and spiritual freedom of beauty, aesthetics and art [1]. Chang Yu's paintings in this respect, in a sense, just echo the Taoist aesthetic thought.

### 3 Conclusion

In a word, this study links Taoist aesthetic ideas with Chang Yu's paintings, mainly to provide a new perspective to look at Chinese and Western paintings, such as Chang Yu's paintings. Compared with Confucianism, Taoist ideas pursue a broad and free realm, which makes people feel that life is in harmony with Tao. Confucianists use a series of hierarchical relationships to keep people in a certain order, which restrains people's nature of pursuing freedom. Chang Yu's painting itself pursues more freedom, expressing personal feelings and spiritual expression through painting. Thus, the relationship between Taoism and art can be further deepened. Taoist aesthetics supports the creation

of art and provides spiritual value for art. At the same time, Taoism can be better displayed through art. For disciplines, the existence of art is not independent, but a combination of literary culture, religious philosophy and other disciplines, reflecting the intersection and integration of disciplines.

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