



On the Space-Time View of the Desolate Beauty of Chinese Painting and Calligraphy Art

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Abstract. The concept and essence of “desolate beauty,” the unique aesthetic category in the philosophy of Chinese painting and calligraphy art, is defined and discussed in this paper. It is pointed out that the desolate beauty of Chinese painting and calligraphy is the result of the spiritualization of the natural imagery featuring “desolation” with the elevation to the aesthetic level. The state of desolation liberates and settles the artists’ hearts, allowing them to realize the profound meaning of life from the vast universe. From both the physical level of “formal space-time” and the spiritual level of “ontological space-time,” the space-time dimension of the desolate beauty of Chinese painting and calligraphy art is explained. Then this paper further analyzes and summarizes the space-time oneness and interactivity, formality and infinity, and transcendence under “space-time vision,” as demonstrated by the desolate beauty based on the cultural background of Taoism and Buddhism. The aesthetic value and significance of the space-time view of the desolate beauty are also discussed.

Keywords: Desolate Beauty · Space-time View · Chinese Aesthetics · Art Philosophy

1 Introduction

Desolate beauty is an aesthetic category unique to Chinese art philosophy. With such kind of desolate natural imagery rising to the aesthetic and spiritual levels, it endows the desolate state with the beauty of loneliness and allows people to return to their own hearts and nature in desolation, thus discerning the value and meaning of universal life within the space-time field. Most academic studies on “desolate beauty” focus on Chinese painting and classical Chinese poetry and literature. Concerning Chinese painting, the desolate artistic conception of landscape paintings (especially those with snow scenes and dead tree imagery) of Song literati and Ni Zan’s landscape paintings are mainly analyzed from both the technical and aesthetic aspects; while the analysis and interpretation of the desolate poems of Wang Wei, Liu Zongyuan and other poets dominate the studies on literary. However, there is a lack of systematic discussions on the definition and essence of the desolate beauty in painting and calligraphy, the space-time dimensions of the desolate beauty, the space-time view characteristics of the desolate beauty and its aesthetic significance. Ni Zan’s painting and calligraphy art, as the pioneer and epitome

of the desolate beauty of Chinese painting and calligraphy, has set a glorious example for the aesthetic category of the desolate beauty of Chinese painting and calligraphy art philosophy in the field of artistic creation. Taking Ni Zan as an example, this paper aims to clarify the connotation, essence, space-time characteristics and aesthetic significance of the desolate beauty of Chinese painting and calligraphy under the “space-time vision” to enrich the theoretical construction of the aesthetic category of the desolate beauty in Chinese art philosophy and provide an important reference for the artistic expression of the desolate beauty of contemporary painting and calligraphy.

2 The Definition and Essence of the Desolate Beauty of Chinese Painting and Calligraphy Art

Desolation represents the abbreviation of a bleak and cold feeling. This is a desolate and cold state with simple and intuitive natural imagery, such as the waning moon, old trees, remote mountains, frozen pools, dry vines, blowing snow, the wilds, and chilly rain, which impress people with a sense of bleakness, silence, coldness, and loneliness just like their own characteristics, cold and lonely. Such desolation distinguishes itself more in Chinese paintings or ancient Chinese poems. Those aloof but proud literati in the desolate state generally embraced such a literati consciousness. It was this consciousness that vaguely nourished the perception and understanding of desolation in their hearts regardless of failure or success and joy or sorrow. When they no longer repented and redressed their own situation but appreciated it as an onlooker, a sense of beauty emerged from this desolate and cold state, leading to the generation of an aesthetic style and aesthetic state, the desolate beauty.

The desolate beauty of Chinese painting and calligraphy art philosophy is an aesthetic category unique in China. The desolate artistic conception symbolizes the soul home constructed whole-heartedly by many artists to settle their inner desolation and loneliness. The desolate beauty of Chinese painting and calligraphy is the crystallization of the spiritualization of natural imagery with “desolate” characteristics with its elevation to the aesthetic level. It has been constantly constructed, perfected and enriched in the process of the artist’s life experience and reflection on life. From the perception of the natural imagery of the aesthetic object, the aesthetic subject progresses to the feeling of inner desolation and finally dives into the freedom and exile of the depths of the universe, completing the healing and liberation of himself.

The essence of the desolate beauty of Chinese painting and calligraphy art lay in the placement and relief of the ancient literati’s hearts when they encountered frustration, thus giving rise to the aesthetic creation that elevates the life and situation of the ancient Chinese literati to artistry. From the perspective of aesthetics, the confusion of life was solved, the value of life explored, the realm of life perceived, and the philosophy of the universe pursued. Ni Zan is a representative figure of the desolate beauty of Chinese painting and calligraphy. In his early years, when living in a privileged condition, he engaged in phrasemongering and extensive book reading and associated with literati, enjoying a poetic life. But in that war-torn era after 1352 A.D., he gave up his family business and wandered around, escaping from the world and finally living a recluse life

of leisure. Ni Zan's situation itself would make his heart a bit more depressed, open-minded, bleak, and lonely, and it is this encounter that established a representative figure expressing the desolate beauty of Chinese painting and calligraphy. The combination of the subjective desolate and cold state of mind and the constant adaptation of objective expression techniques (technique of writing, lettering, art of composition, and use of ink) has formed the desolate beauty of calligraphy and painting, which has profound significance for the perfection and supplementation of calligraphic aesthetics. The desolate beauty of calligraphy, also boasting a unique realm, reveals the inner world of the calligrapher, which is precisely what is known as that calligraphy works reflect the calligrapher's virtues. The spiritual efforts made by these Chinese literati, such as Ni Zan, can be concluded as the care for the deeper spirit of human life. Desolate beauty is not simply a state of "negative energy," nor is it an empty moaning of imaginary sickness. As an aesthetic object, the painting and calligraphy artworks rich in desolate beauty realize the construction and docking of the main spirit and aesthetics. The artistic expression of the desolate beauty represents the manifestation of the artist's life and aesthetic experience of desolation in the form of art, so as to place and soothe the wounded heart. In other words, it is the artist's spiritual healing and self-redemption with an extraordinary life meaning.

3 The Space-Time Dimension of the Desolate Beauty of Chinese Painting and Calligraphy Art

"Space and time are the forms in which all things exist in nature and also in the spiritual world" [1]. It is necessary for the desolate beauty in Chinese calligraphy art, as an important aesthetic category in classical Chinese aesthetics, to find the fulcrum of aesthetic expression and aesthetic experience through the space-time dimension, both in terms of the external formal expression of the work and the inner realm and life pursuit implied and conveyed in the depth of the work. Therefore, the interpretation of the desolate beauty of Chinese calligraphy from a space-time perspective becomes reasonable and necessary.

What reflects the desolate beauty in Chinese art under space-time vision is not only the physical level of "formal space-time" but also the deeper spiritual level of "ontological space-time."

The "formal space-time" of the desolate beauty of Chinese painting and calligraphy in the physical dimension is manifested as a "space-time symbiosis" relationship in the writing method, structure, art of composition and ink method. As a more abstract objective existence, time reflects the objective laws of continuity, sequence, non-stopping, irreversibility, and other multi-attributes shown in the process of material movement and change, which are explored, discovered and summarized by human beings. Space, as an objective form of existence of things relative to time, is measured by the length,



Fig. 1. Inscription to Narrow Room Painting.

width, height, size and volume of things and other criteria. Ni Zan's calligraphy is taken as an example (as shown in Figs. 1 and 2) in the context of "formal space-time" of the desolate beauty of Chinese painting and calligraphy. As the lines move backward with the passage of time and leave rigid and composed or skinny and tender traces on the flat space of Chinese art paper, the completion of each stroke naturally reflects changes in ink content and concentration. And the movement and speed of the lines themselves, as well as the sequence in which multiple strokes are completed, all symbolize time. Then, the space of "a horizontal connection with randomness" in the structure gradually emerges with the passage of time. As this timeline continues, the "dense but uncluttered" composition of the work slowly takes shape, and a larger and richer space comes to life along with the brush and ink over time.

The desolate beauty under the space-time vision also embodies the "ontological space-time" of the subject's spiritual dimension. In this state, the desolate beauty represents the subject's consciousness of life to choose to exile the self-soul and return to the true nature of the self in the face of the helpless situation. To a certain extent, the desolate state coincides with the "empty" realm of "constant purity of self-nature" [2] emphasized by Buddhists. It was once pointed out by Zong Baihua that Zen is the realm of philosophy and art that the Chinese have splendidly expounded and propagated when recognizing the depths of their hearts after exposure to Buddhism [3]. This "ontological space-time" is also the time and space of the subject's life of desolation, which fully embraces the subject's own internal feelings and life consciousness. After Ni Zan experienced several ups and downs in his life, he constructed a spiritual home for his mind, a place of tranquility to escape from the earthly world.



Fig. 2. Narrow Room Painting.

4 The Space-Time View Characteristics of the Desolate Beauty of Chinese Painting and Calligraphy Art

The artistic conception shown by the desolate beauty is culturally supported by the ideas of “no-action” and “no-mind” promoted by Taoism and Buddhism, which are accepted

by the subject. Such a state of art hints at the relevance of desolate beauty to space-time, demanding the space-time view as the fulcrum for finding the aesthetic core of desolate beauty in painting and calligraphy. Under the “space-time vision,” the aesthetic style of desolate beauty manifests the following three characteristics.

First of all, the artistic realm of desolate beauty presents a remarkable oneness and interactivity of time and space. Time and space have always been characterized by their inseparable oneness, generating a new concept, space-time. Stephen Hawking mentioned in *A Brief History of Time* that the idea we must accept is that time cannot be entirely separate and independent from space, but must be combined with space to form what is called space, the object of time” [4]. Space-time is an ensemble concept of both time and space in human civilization, and the interaction and dependence between these two reflect the evolutionary order of everything in the world. The space-time scene mapped by the desolation is “with the endless rainfall, the depression saddens people” and “looking into the wilderness, rivers and lakes interflow” [5] 8. The passage of time, like the flowing water, occurs in the open space of the “wild world.” And the deepness, serenity, silence, and solitude created are just the aesthetic tone of desolate beauty.

Meanwhile, the atmosphere created by the desolate aesthetic style implies two kinds of space-time relationships, namely “time with space” and “space with time.” In the relationship of “time with space,” time plays a leading role, and the space felt in the aesthetic process of desolate beauty gradually merges into time. With distant mountains submerged in the smoke and mist, the silent passage of time can be more deeply experienced in this pure space. When the rendering of “silence” in the desolate artistic conception reaches an extreme, everything seems to be still with all dusty thoughts filtered out and the mind placed in this desolate environment, by which time gains eternity.

For the relationship of “space with time,” space plays a unifying role over time, and time, led and melted by space, gradually dissolves into the space of “the wide world.” Both the creative subject and the viewer are easily pushed by this desolate beauty into the realm of “the one and only way” advocated by Buddhism. In this realm, the subject forgets his own existence, transcends the “separate wisdom” of subject and object as well as time and space, forgets his feelings and merges into things, and finally enters a state of silence without time and intuition. The description of such a realm can also be found in the *Essay on the Uniformity of All Things* by Zhuangzi: Heaven, Earth, and I were produced together, and all things and I are one [6].

Secondly, the space-time of the aesthetic tone of desolate beauty presents the formality and infinity in the Chinese aesthetic structure of the trinity of “Tao-Qi-Thing.” Those artistic works with the aesthetic sense of desolation have the wonderful energy to pull the viewer’s mind into the realm of desolation the moment the attention is caught. And this phenomenon is based on some supra-temporal ontology, namely, the Tao, Qi and Thing. The “Tao” here mainly refers to the life realm of spiritual return and nature advocated by Taoism, which is originally nothing, void and quiet. “Qi” conveys the core of the aesthetic life meaning of desolation. In contrast, “Thing” represents the spiritual pattern and life reflection of art itself. The three interplay to reveal infinity and eternity in the space-time of desolate beauty.

Finally, the space-time of desolate beauty of Chinese art displays the transcendence of “instant-eternity” and “finite-infinite.” The moment when the subject’s mind dives

into the realm of desolation with the artwork, he or she experiences forgetfulness, merging with heaven, earth, and everything else, and “casting aside all the objective and subjective.” The inner time suddenly stops, and this moment becomes eternal, completing the transcendence of time. At the same time, what comes with “limited” eyes is the visual experience of “attracting attention.” Before one can carefully appreciate the deep meaning of the objects in front, he or she, without thinking about it, is dragged by the realm of desolation into the “infinite” space. Time and space are experienced directly by the senses of sight, sound, and touch. While this direct experience of time and space through the physical senses is limited, the desolate beauty allows people to comprehend the realm created by desolation through the special aesthetic, psychological and cultural support, to feel the flow and tension between “instant-eternity” and “finite-infinite,” and thus to achieve the ultimate transcendence in space-time level.

5 The Aesthetic Value and Significance of the Space-Time View of Desolate Beauty

The desolate beauty can bring solace to the human spirit, whose value lies in returning to oneself by “clarifying the nature of the heart” and then endowing the subject’s spirit and artistic life with an unyielding and burgeoning tension, leaving a clean and empty resting place for one’s soul in the depths of one’s heart. Meanwhile, it also implies the hope and expectation that life is about to usher in.

Placing the desolate beauty of Chinese art under the “space-time vision” makes it more beneficial to notice the injection and integration of time consciousness and space consciousness in the expression of the desolate beauty of Chinese painting and calligraphy, based on which an aesthetic activity with space-time consciousness and space-time perception as the source of experience can be built up. In the process of exploring the aesthetic psychology, cultural support, aesthetic expression and aesthetic experience of the desolate beauty, the space-time dimension injects a far-reaching and extensive research perspective and thinking space and provides a new entry point for the creation mode of the desolate artistic conception.

As a representative of the desolate beauty in Chinese art philosophy, the desolate beauty in Ni Zan’s painting and calligraphy plays a complementary role to the aesthetic category of Chinese painting and calligraphy. Gu Zhengyi’s evaluation of Ni Zan’s creation of the desolate state under the “space-time vision” can not be more perfect than with elegance implied in the bamboo paintings, the desolation stands as the best” [5] 395. In Ni Zan’s painting and calligraphy art realm under the space-time vision of desolate beauty, there is the sentiment of “across the remote antiquity” in the time dimension and also the freedom of “desolation and remoteness” in the space dimension. What desolate beauty represents is a “traceless” “true state of coldness and loneliness.” And such a state of loneliness and coldness to the extreme allows the tranquil and empty heart to be liberated and settled and the profound meaning of life from the vastness of the universe to be realized.

6 Conclusions

The desolate beauty in the philosophy of Chinese painting and calligraphy is a unique aesthetic category in China. It originated from the unique literati consciousness generated by the various life experiences of ancient literati, and then forms the attitude of “appreciation” in the face of their various situations from the perspective of bystanders, in which the desolate beauty is quietly born. About the essence of the desolate beauty, the desolate beauty of Chinese painting and calligraphy is the result of the spiritualization of the natural imagery featuring “desolation” with the elevation to the aesthetic level. As for the space-time dimension of the desolate beauty of Chinese painting and calligraphy art, there are two levels: the physical dimension of the “space-time symbiosis” relationship in the writing method, structure, art of composition and ink method, that is, “formal space-time”, and the “ontological space-time” dimension of the spiritual consciousness of the subject’s life in which the artist exiles the soul and returns to self. The desolate beauty is based on the cultural background of Taoism and Buddhism in Chinese traditional culture, which makes the desolate beauty show oneness and interactivity of time and space of the two space-time relations of “time with space” and “space with time” under the “space-time vision”, and the formality and infinity in the Chinese aesthetic structure of the trinity of “Tao-Qi-Thing.” And the transcendence of “instant-eternity” and “finite-infinite.”

The hidden and subtle power in the desolate beauty of Chinese painting and calligraphy enables people to enter the invisible, ethereal and gorgeous world the moment it is unveiled. The uniqueness of its space-time view lies in the “momentary-eternal” and “tangible-infinite” experience of life that coincides with the Zen state. In the desolate artistic conception, the blending of time and space into one can be felt. With no self, no time, no emptiness, no thought, no dwelling, no appearance, a cosmic life pattern featuring blending space and time, forgetting things and self, and uniting heaven and man, can thus be built up.

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