

# The Philosophical Thoughts of the Five Elements and the Expression Techniques of Chinese Painting\*

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**Abstract**—The traditional Chinese painting art has a long history and is prosperous. After thousands of years, it still has a unique artistic charm. The reason why Chinese painting has such a shocking and moving charm is because of its rich internal cultural connotation and the unique external form means. There is a close connection between traditional Chinese philosophical thoughts and Chinese painting arts, and these connections have always been the ideological orientation of Chinese painting theory, and they have dominated the thinking mode and aesthetic concepts of Chinese painting. It can be said that Chinese five elements philosophy makes Chinese painting form its own unique Performance measures and expressive technique. We can talk about the expression techniques of traditional Chinese painting from the perspective of China's Five Elements Philosophy.

**Keywords**—philosophical thinking; Chinese painting; five elements philosophy; the expression techniques

## I. INTRODUCTION

The traditional Chinese painting art has a long history and is prosperous. After thousands of years, it still has a unique artistic charm. The reason why Chinese painting has such a shocking and moving charm is because of its rich internal cultural connotation and the unique external form means. There is a close connection between traditional Chinese philosophical thoughts and Chinese painting arts, and these connections have always been the ideological orientation of Chinese painting theory, and they have dominated the thinking mode and aesthetic concepts of Chinese painting. It can be said that Chinese five elements philosophy makes Chinese painting form its own unique Performance measures and expressive technique. We can talk about the expression techniques of traditional Chinese painting from the perspective of China's Five Elements Philosophy.

## II. THE PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHTS OF THE FIVE ELEMENTS AND THE EXPRESSION TECHNIQUES OF CHINESE PAINTING

From the perspective of the classification of the techniques of expression in Chinese painting, Chinese painting is generally divided into five kinds of techniques of expression, gongbi, freehand brushwork, boneless brushwork,

line drawing and ink painting. If the properties of “metal, wood, water, fire and soil” in the theory of the five elements are corresponding to the characteristics of the “technique of expression” in Chinese painting, the corresponding relationship can be as follows:

“Wood”: corresponds to “boneless painting”;

“Fire”: corresponds to “freehand brushwork”;

“Soil”: corresponds to “line drawing”;

“Metal”: corresponds to “gongbi”;

“Water”: corresponds to “ink painting”.

In the following, the corresponding relationship between the attribute of “metal, wood, water, fire and soil” and the “technique of expression” of Chinese painting is elaborated with their mutual connection:

### A. The “Boneless” Painting Method Is the Expression of the Five Elements of “Wood”

The “wood” is said the “bend and straighten”. The “bend and straighten” means the straightness of the branches of trees. This refers to the form of the growth of trees. Therefore, the “bend and straighten” has the meaning of growth, germination, tenderness, freshness, and stretch. In ancient China, everything that has the functions or properties of growth, germination, relaxation, etc. in nature belongs to the “wood” of the five elements.

Here, according to the nature of the “wood” of the five elements and the characteristics of “boneless painting” expression techniques, we attribute the expression of “boneless painting” in Chinese painting to the “wood” in the five elements. (See “Fig. 1”)



Fig. 1. Flower and bird painting, Yun Shouping, Ming dynasty.

\*Fund Project: Hubei Province Education Science Planning 2017 Project No.2017GB101

The “boneless painting” of Chinese painting is the meaning of “submerge and hiding”. The “boneless” painting method means that the painter does not need to use ink lines to depict the outer contours and boundary lines of things, but to describe things directly in color or ink. In the painting process of Chinese painting, the lines of the pens are particularly concerned with the “bone method pens”. Where the pen front passes is called “bone”, and there is no visible line in the picture of the “boneless” painting method. The artist is required to combine ink, color, and water to make the lines submerge in ink, color, and water on the drawing paper. There are no lines in the brush, but mainly through color and ink to describe things. This is the “boneless” representation of Chinese painting.

Therefore, the “boneless” performance method requires the painter to not sketch the drafts and not to delineate the outlines. Instead, “boneless” performance method needs the painter to conceive and complete the painting ideas before the paintings, embody the meaning in mind. The “implication” in the artist's mind is highly demanded. The “implication” of this kind of heart is like the nature and state of the growth of trees, and it is in line with the characteristics of the “wood” of the five elements. Therefore, we attribute the five element nature of “boneless” painting to “wood”.

#### B. The “Freehand Brushwork” Painting Method Is the Expression of the Five Elements of “Fire”

The “fire” is said the “hot and up”. The “hot and up” means “warm, rising, bright, sporting, release” and so on. In ancient China, everything that has the functions or properties of warm, rising, bright, moving, and releasing, etc. in nature belongs to the “fire” of the five elements.

Here, according to the nature of the “fire” of the five elements and the characteristics of the “freehand brushwork” of Chinese painting, we attribute the expression of “freehand brushwork” in Chinese painting to the “fire” in the five elements.

The “freehand brushwork” meaning of Chinese painting is the meaning of “idea and imagination”, which is a method of deciphering the “idea and imagination” of the artist. The “freehand” is different from the “realism”, the “realism” is the depiction of real things in real life, which is a true representation of real life. The “realism” requires the artist to be faithful to the original, and to describe all the details of things in real life. However, “freehand brushwork” is not the case. The “freehand brushwork” is not a true faithful object, but it mainly describes the artist’s psychological feelings and emotions of things in real life. “Freehand brushwork” is to paint the image of things in real life in a painter's heart. “freehand brushwork” is to depict the image in life in the artist's heart. This “image in the heart” may not be exactly the same as the original things in reality; it may only be the same in certain spiritual qualities or sensations.

Therefore, the things depicted by “freehand brushwork” may not exist in real life, the things of “freehand brushwork” only exists in the mind of the painter. The artist paints the image of the mind on the drawing paper. For example, the famous shrimp painted by Chinese painter Qi Baishi, the

body structure of the shrimp in real life is 6 sections. Under Qi Baishi's brush, the body of the shrimp is 5 sections, which is because Qi Baishi believes that 5 sections of shrimps are more better reflect the fresh and clever shrimp than 6 sections of shrimp. However, the five-section shrimp does not exist in real life. The five-section shrimps only exist in the artist's mind, and the artist paints the image of “in the mind” on the drawing paper, which is “freehand brushwork”. (See “Fig. 2”)



Fig. 2. shrimp, Qi Baishi, Modern.

The “freehand brushwork” depicts the artist's image in his mind. According to the theory of five-element philosophy, the heart of the human body belongs to “fire”, and the “fire” of the painting comes from the author's “thoughts and intentions”. The “thoughts and intentions” in the human heart have a warm, rising, ascending, bright and moving character, which is consistent with the nature of the “fire” in the five elements. Therefore, we attribute the expression of “freehand brushwork” in Chinese painting to the “fire” in the five elements.

#### C. The “Line Drawing” Painting Method Is the Expression of the Five Elements of “Soil”

The “soil” is said the “farming and harvesting”, it means the soil will help with planting and harvesting. That is to say, “soil” has the ability to biochemical, carrying and receiving plants. There is a saying that the soil is the mother of all things. Soil is an important basis for the growth of all things. In ancient China, everything that has the functions or properties of growth, cultivate, bearing and receiving, etc. in nature belongs to the “soil” of the five elements.

Here, according to the nature of “soil” of the five elements and the characteristics of the “line drawing” painting method of Chinese painting, we attribute the expression of “line drawing” in Chinese painting to the “soil” in the five elements.

Chinese painting's “line drawing” expression method is different from the “boneless” expression technique. The

“boneless” painting method requires the artist to use ink and color to depict the image of the object. In “boneless” painting, the lines of the brush are submerged and hidden. However, the “line drawing” expression technique is opposite. The “line drawing” expression technique is the



Fig. 3. Part of eighty-seven immortals, Wu Daozi, Tang dynasty.

In the “line drawing” paintings, the painter expresses everything with lines. Through the change of the thickness, hardness, softness and moisture of the lines, the changes of the image structure, expression and temperament, texture, space volume, even color and light and shadow of things are reflected. Everything is represented by lines. This is the “line drawing”. This is the wonderful magic of lines in Chinese painting. The “line drawing” painting method can use the most simple and concise lines and the most clear way to carry everything in the world. This characteristic of the “line drawing” method is consistent with the properties of the growth, cultivate, bearing and receiving of the “soil” of the five elements. Therefore, we attribute the expression of “line drawing” in Chinese painting to the “soil” in the five elements.

#### D. The “Gongbi” Painting Method Is the Expression of the Five Elements of “Metal”

The “metal” is said the “reform and change”, it means clear, settling, convergent, restrained and so on. In ancient China, everything that has the functions or properties of clear, settling, convergent and restrained, etc. in nature belongs to the “metal” of the five elements.

Here, according to the nature of the “metal” of the five elements and the characteristics of the “gongbi” of Chinese painting, we attribute the expression of “gongbi” in Chinese painting to the “metal” in the five elements.

The “gongbi” method of Chinese painting is contrary to the “freehand brushwork” mentioned. The “gongbi” is a kind of “realistic” expression technique. The expressive technique of “gongbi” painting requires the painter to be faithful to the true appearance of things in real life and to represent every detail and part of the reality realistically and objectively. The “gongbi” method focus on the subtle delineation of the details of things, and express the shape, texture, space and the slight changes in light colors of things, which has strong authenticity and reproducibility. (See “Fig. 4”)

expression of a simple line delineation and description of things, which is to outline and depict things with lines alone. The colors and ink are not used in the “line drawing” paintings, and the colors are not used to decorate and render anything. (See “Fig. 3”)



Fig. 4. The meticulous figure painting, He Jia Ying, Contemporary.

The expression technique of “gongbi” requires the painter to have an objective and calm mind, to carefully observe the original appearance and original features of things in real life. For example, the “gongbi” painting requires the painter not only to paint the tree species and the texture of the tree, but also to paint the sense of life of the tree. By reproducing the details of real life, the “gongbi” painting makes people feel and get inspiration from it.

This “objective and calm” feature of the “gongbi” painting method is in line with the “clear, settling, convergent and restrained” of the “metal” in the five elements. Therefore, we attribute the expression of “gongbi” in Chinese painting to the “metal” in the five elements.

#### E. The “Ink wash” Painting Method Is the Expression of the Five Elements of “Water”

The “ink wash” is said the “moisten and dawn”. The “moisten and dawn” means moisturize, flow down, run and so on. In ancient China, everything that has the functions or properties of moisturize, flow down, run, etc. in nature belongs to the “water” of the five elements.

Here, according to the nature of the “water” of the five elements and the characteristics of the “ink wash” of Chinese painting, we attribute the expression of “ink wash” in

Chinese painting to the “water” in the five elements. (See “Fig. 5”)



Fig. 5. Qing Li mist map, Li Keran, Modern.

The “ink wash” method of Chinese painting is to use water and ink to paint, only “water and ink”. When the Chinese painters used the “ink wash” painting method, to combine water with ink each other, they showed different levels of “dry, thick, heavy, light, and clear” of ink on the paper. It shows the rich changes of black and white ash, forming the unique painting language and artistic effect of Chinese painting. This kind of artistic effect has a unique flavor. Through the blending of water and ink, the “ink wash” painting method displays the image features of objects that seem to be unlike them, to resulting in the imagery of the picture, giving people a rich sense of association and delusion. And this kind of “image effect” that gives people “rich associations and delusions” is in line with the characteristics of “water” in the five elements, such as “moisturizing, running, and flowing”. Therefore, we attribute the expression of “ink painting” in Chinese painting to the “water” in the five elements.

In short, Chinese traditional philosophical thoughts are extensive and profound. The philosophical thoughts of the Five Elements are closely related to Chinese paintings. The philosophical thoughts of the Five Elements have influenced all aspects of Chinese painting. There is only a preliminary and shallow discussion here. The research on the five elements of philosophy in the “performance techniques” of Chinese painting needs to be further studied. It is hoped that more scholars and experts will put forward more comprehensive and systematic insights in this regard in the near future.

### III. THE PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHTS OF THE FIVE ELEMENTS AND THE REPRESENTATION TECHNIQUES OF CHINESE PAINTING

From the standpoint of Chinese painting techniques, pens in Chinese painting are generally divided into five kinds of pen techniques: “sketch, Cun, rub, point, and dye”. If the properties of “wood, fire, soil, metal and water” of five elements are corresponded with the characteristics of

“expressive techniques” of Chinese painting, the corresponding relations can be as follows:

- “Soil”: corresponds to “sketch”;
- “Metal”: corresponds to “Cun”;
- “Fire”: corresponds to “rub”;
- “Wood”: corresponds to “point”;
- “Water”: corresponds to “dye”.

#### A. The Painting Techniques of “Sketch” in Chinese Painting Belong to the “Soil” of the Five Elements

In the painting techniques of “sketch” of Chinese painting, the painter applying lines to delineate the external contour of the object image. The artist generally uses the “sketch” painting method to express the main context of the structure of the thing. The “sketch” painting techniques is usually painted with light ink lines for correction and modification. The “sketch” method of Chinese painting has the saying of “eighteen descriptions”. According to different objects, the artist selects the appropriate lines to express the texture of different objects.

The “sketch” painting method is the most basic painting technique in Chinese painting; it plays an important role in supporting the frame of the whole picture. It can be said that the “sketch” painting method is the basis of all other painting techniques. The “foundation and basics” feature of the painting method is consistent with the “growth, cultivate, bearing and receiving” features of the “soil” of the five elements. Therefore, we attribute the painting techniques of “sketch” in Chinese painting to the “soil” of the five elements.

#### B. The Painting Techniques of “Cun” in Chinese Painting Belong to the “Metal” of the Five Elements

In Chinese painting, the “Cun” painting method expresses the nature of the object and expresses the rigidity or softness of the stone. The “Cun” painting methods include Peima Cun, Jiesuo Cun, Shedai Cun, etc.

Various methods of the “Cun” have different organizational structures and requirements. The “Cun” painting method goes beyond the expression of the external shape of the object and tends to show the inner unique texture. This kind of observation and feeling on the inner material of things requires the artist to analyze things objectively and rationally. The feature of “objective and rational” of the “Cun” painting method is consistent with the “clear, settling, convergent and restrained” nature of the “metal” of the five elements. Therefore, we attribute the painting techniques of “Cun” in Chinese painting to the “metal” of the five elements.

#### C. The Painting Techniques of “Rub” in Chinese Painting Belong to the “Fire” of the Five Elements

In traditional Chinese paintings, the method of “rub” is similar to that of “crack”, but in the case of insufficient rub lines we use the “rub” technique to increase the heavy rough

feeling of the rocks. The “rub” method emphasizes gently wiping the picture with a dry pen. It can be rubbed multiple times from light to heavy, and it must not damage the original texture of the stone. After applying the “rub” painting method, the picture created a fluffy and deep feeling, as if to make the picture enveloped in a hazy and wilderness atmosphere.

The “rub” painting’s characteristics of “hazy and wilderness” are consistent with the characteristics of “warm, rising, ascending, bright and moving” of the “fire” of the five elements. Therefore, we attribute the painting techniques of “rub” in Chinese painting to the “fire” of the five elements.

#### *D. The Painting Techniques of “Point” in Chinese Painting Belong to the “Wood” of the Five Elements*

In traditional Chinese painting, “points” are often used to represent small plants that grow on trees or stones, such as grass moss. The “point” painting method of Chinese painting is generally carried out at the end of the painting. The “point” painting method pursues the effect of “point” the stone into gold. The “point” of brushwork requires clean and neat, according to the needs of the scenery, there are scattered, sparse and dense. It needs to focus on the relationship between the near and far of space, rather than the fragmented and disordered, rather than destroying the overall sense of the picture. The “point” painting method can make the picture achieve a kind of spiritual feeling, play the role of reminding the picture

The “point” painting techniques of Chinese painting can enhance the artistic conception of the picture, add the interest of the picture, and achieve the aesthetic ideal of Chinese painting that focuses on the artistic conception. It has the artistic effect of “being likes a landscape with long eyebrows”. It can thus be seen that the painting techniques of “points” in Chinese traditional paintings are in accordance with the characteristics of the growth, rise, extension, and stretching of the five elements “wood”. Therefore, we attribute the painting techniques of “points” in Chinese painting to the “wood” of the five elements.

#### *E. The Painting Techniques of “Dye” in Chinese Painting Belong to the “Water” in the Five Elements*

The ancient painter said: “It takes ten days to draw water and five days to draw stone”. The “ten waters and five stones” refers to the “dye” painting method in Chinese painting. The “dye” can be dyed with ink or dyed with color, gradually from shallow to deep. The “dye” painting pursues harmony and unity of the hue of the picture, separating cool and warm colors, and increasing the sense of color of the picture. Meanwhile, attention should be paid to wait for the ink to dry before dye, and “dye” color can’t destroy the ink line of the picture.

The “dye” painting method can’t be separated from water. After “dyeing”, the work can make the picture produce the feeling of moistening and flowing, at the same time, it can also produce the momentum of rhythm, and bring the soft and moistening beauty to people. The feature of “moisturizing and flowing” of the “dye” painting method is

consistent with the “moisturizing, running, and flowing” nature of the “water” of the five elements. Therefore, we attribute the painting techniques of “dye” in Chinese painting to the “water” of the five elements.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

From what has been discussed above, Chinese traditional philosophical thoughts are inextricably linked with Chinese painting and have deep roots in the source, which has had a profound impact on Chinese painting. It can be said that Chinese philosophical thinking has become the spiritual source of Chinese painting creation and criticism. It has enriched the theoretical system of Chinese painting and has played an important role in supporting and leading Chinese painting’s thinking and aesthetic concepts. It is the philosophical thoughts of China that make Chinese paintings have unique aesthetic ideas and expression techniques, and they are unique in the world art trend.

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