

## **Philosophical Origins of Absence of Color in Chinese Painting**

**Zahra Abdollah<sup>1</sup>, Baharudin Ahmad<sup>2</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

**The suppression of color is a common mood in the Far Eastern aesthetic experience, which is best represented by the brush-ink Chinese painting. Influenced by the Taoist and Confucian philosophical doctrines, it reflects the traditional principles of loneliness, poverty, and simplicity. Visualizing the Chinese traditional dualism, the black and white system goes beyond an artistic style and resembles a state of contemplation which invites to complete unity with nature. The final goal is self-annihilation in the light of the principle of non-expression.**

**Keywords: Brush-ink Chinese painting, Far-Eastern art, Chinese philosophy, Black and white system, Dualism, Tai Ch'i diagram**

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1 . ISTAC International Islamic University Malaysia 24 Persiaran Duta, [zahraabdollah@yahoo.com](mailto:zahraabdollah@yahoo.com)

2 . Jalan Duta Kuala Lumpur 58500 Malaysia,

## Introduction

Chinese painting has a long lasting aesthetic tradition favoring a Black and White system. For centuries, the Chinese have deified black and white in their art and philosophy to the point of infallibility. In the Han dynasty the adherents of the Yin-Yang School ingeniously invented the Tai Ch'i Diagram to reveal the essence of Chinese painting based upon the dialectic of the rational and harmonious balance of negative and positive sides of things (Hu, 1995, 454). The Tai Ch'i Diagram (the Diagram of the Great Ultimate) is composed of two identical forms in black and white, representing the ancient Chinese thinking mode of dualism upon which the nation's cultural consciousness is built. At the same time, produced by a mixture of complementary colors, the black and white in Chinese brush painting promote the traditional idea of dialectics.



In Chinese painting, a distinctive spirit and aesthetic standard is fabricated based on a monochrome system using the black brush-inkwork on white rice-paper. The two colors combine the positive elements and features of an entire culture into the visual artistic language of Chinese painting.

## Chinese Painting

Although there are scattered paintings from the early periods in the form of ceramics, tiles, and tomb decorations, a clear historical development of the Chinese painting could be traced only from the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD. The Buddhist wall paintings and scrolls found in the Caves of a Thousand Buddhas date back from the late 5<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> century.

The art of figure painting reached a peak of excellence in the T'ang dynasty (618–906). The paintings of this period vary from historical subjects and scenes of courtly life to human figures and animal subjects<sup>1</sup>. Most notably, in the T'ang dynasty witnesses the rise of Chinese landscape painting in the form of brush drawings with color washes.



In the Sung dynasty (960–1279), landscape painting reached its greatest expression, mainly reflecting contemporary Taoist and Confucian views. In this period, the technique of ink

<sup>1</sup> The 8th century artist Han Kan is famous for his painting of horses. Little remains of the work of masters like Yen Li-pen, Wu Tao-tzu, Wang Wei, and Tung Yuan of the five dynasties.

monochrome was developed with great skill<sup>1</sup>. With the ascendance of the Yuan dynasty (1260–1368) painting reached a new level of achievement, and under Mongol rule many aspects cultivated in Sung art were brought to culmination. The human figure assumed greater importance, and landscape painting acquired a new vitality.

With the enthusiastic support of the emperors of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) a revival of learning and of older artistic traditions was encouraged and connoisseurship was developed<sup>2</sup>. Under the Ch'ing dynasty (1644–1912), a high level of technical competence was maintained<sup>3</sup>. However, there was little innovation in painting. Throughout the history of Chinese painting one characteristic has

prevailed, the consummate handling of the brushstroke. Paintings were executed in a dry or wet-brush technique, with an incredible versatility ranging from swirling patterns to staccato dots.

### **Black and White System in Far Eastern Art**

The shift from color appreciation and sensibility toward the suppression (and ultimately elimination) of color is a characteristic of the Far Eastern aesthetic experience (Izutsu, 1977: 249). This could be traced in all areas of Far Eastern art, from poetry and drama to dancing and art of tea; but it is best exemplified in the Chinese art of ink painting.

One of the most reticent forms of poetic expression is the Japanese poetry *haiku*, consisting of seventeen syllables arranged in three consecutive units (Ibid, 250). The suppression of externals in this form of poetry goes to such an extreme which leads experts to call it an “artistic asceticism” (Blyth, 1963). In the Japanese *nô* drama and dancing, flourished in the Muromachi period, under the surface of the splendid colorful costume of dancers, there is a spiritual depth<sup>4</sup> which could be reached only through a monochromic simplicity (Masuda, 1971:27-28).

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1. Among those who excelled in flower painting was the Emperor Hui-tsung, who founded the imperial academy. Hundreds of painters contributed to its glory, including Li T'ang, Hsia Kuei, and Ma Yüan. Members of the Ch'an (Zen) sect of Buddhism executed paintings, often sparked by an intuitive vision. With rapid brushstrokes and ink splashes, they created works of vigor and spontaneity.
  2. Shen Chou, Tai Chin, Wen Cheng-ming, T'ang Yin, and Tung Ch'i-ch'ang are but a few of the many great masters of this period.
  3. The famous four Wangs imitated the great Yüan masters. Among painters of less orthodoxy, Shih-T'ao and Chu Ta were outstanding as artists of remarkable personal vision.

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4. This is part of the eternal emptiness, vision by the master Ze-ami (1363-1443) who is rightly considered as the real founder of the *nô* drama.



The celebrated art of tea, known as *wabi-cha* which has casted its “grayish shadow” over the Japanese culture is “an art of life” based on principles of loneliness, poverty, and simplicity (Izutsu, 1977:258). Perfected by master Rikyû, *wabi-cha* invites to the “adoration of the beautiful among the sordid facts of the everyday life” (Okakura, 1964, 1). The essential simplicity of the tea room goes beyond the “state of colorlessness” and invites the participants to share their wills in subduing colors to the limit of “killing of colors” (Izutsu, 1977:260). This counterbalance between the absence and presence of color is trimly illustrated in the tea room motto of the *waka* poem by Lord Teika<sup>1</sup>.

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1. Fujiwara Teika (1162-1241) was a high rank *waka* poet in the early Kamakura period. The depth of his poems was recognized by tea master Jô-ô (1503-1553).



The Chinese tradition of ink painting has deep cultural roots epitomized by the four treasures of the study: the brush-pen, ink-slab, rice-paper, and ink stone. The history of Chinese painting witnesses the formation of aesthetic standards in favor of the black brush-inkwork on white rice-paper. These standards partly stem from the interaction between Chinese painting and calligraphy. For centuries, Chinese painting and calligraphy have been entwined, nurtured and influenced each other (Hu, 1995:456). One distinctive feature of the Chinese calligraphy, which naturally thrusts it towards the realm of the painting, is the idiographic nature of the Chinese alphabet. In Chinese calligraphy, the immediate expression is a sign of the spiritual awareness. Similarly, the brush lines of the Chinese inkwork are supposed to depict the inner energy of the painter.

While calligraphy reached its heyday as early as the Jin dynasty (265-420), the ink-wash painting style is invented during the T'ang dynasty (618-906) in the mid eighth century (Lum and Chen, 1998:444). The freehand ink-

wash style<sup>1</sup>, with its emphasis upon the harmony of the yin and the yang, has nurtured generations of artists with its unique dualistic insight ; and has remained to this day a dominant feature of Chinese landscape art. The style used different shades of ink-splash to contrast the concreteness of the visible black inkwork with the intangibility of the invisible void of the white paper, to convey a visualized art form of traditional dualism (Ibid, 445).



Later, the black-white freehand brush-inkwork of the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368) artists, which marked a pinnacle of Chinese painting, was significantly influenced by the aesthetics standards emphasizing the top priority free-floating spirit of the artist in painting. These standards are partly derived from the renowned "Six Canons for Grading

Paintings<sup>2</sup>" (*lun hua liu fa*), including "Animation through the Spirit's Harmony" (*qiyun sheng dong*) and "Mastery of Brush-inkwork In Outlining the Art Object's Form" (*gu jia yong bi*).

### Chinese Philosophy

The origins of the Chinese philosophy could be traced back to the Yi Jing (the Book of Changes), attributed to King Wen of Zhou (1099–1050 BCE), which is an ancient compendium of divination, using a system of 64 hexagrams to guide action. The Tao Te Ching (*Dào dé jīng*) of Lao Tzu (*Lǎo zǐ*) and the Analects of Confucius (*Kǒng fū zǐ*; literary Master Kong) both appeared around the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, slightly ahead of early Buddhist philosophy in Northern India and pre-Socratic philosophy in ancient Greece.

Around 500 BC, when the Zhou state weakened, is the beginning of the classic period of Chinese philosophy, known as the Hundred Schools of Thought (諸子百家; *zhūzǐ bǎijiā*; literary: various philosophers hundred schools). Among schools founded at this time and during the subsequent Warring States period, the four most influential ones were Confucianism, Daoism (Taoism), Mohism and Legalism.

1. This is believed to be invented by Master Wang Wei. After the departure from figure-painting by the T'ang masters Wu Daozi and Li Sixun, this was another revolutionary innovation in traditional landscape painting, compared to aristocratic "gold and green landscapes" of Li Sixun and his son Li Zhaodao.

2. These are attributed to Xie He, who was a man of letter along with Cai Yong, Wang Bi, Zhang Yanyuan, and Zhang Zao.

Confucianism represents the collected teachings of Chinese sage Confucius (551-479 BC). His philosophy concerns the fields of ethics and politics. The major Confucian concepts include *rén* (humanity or humaneness), *zhèng míng* (rectification of names), *zhōng* (loyalty), *xiào* (filial piety), and *lǐ* (ritual). Confucius had one overwhelming message: if we are to achieve a state of orderliness and peace, we need to return to traditional values of virtue. For him, the human order in some way reflected the divine order, or the patterns of heaven, explicitly inscribed in various rituals (*li*) and patterns of music and dance (*yüeh*) prescribed for the conduct of everyday life. He established the Chinese past as an infallible model for the present<sup>1</sup>.

Neo-Confucianism was a revived version of old Confucian principles that appeared around the Sung dynasty, with Buddhist, Taoist, and Legalist features. While Confucianism was losing popularity to Taoism and Buddhism, Neo-Confucianism combined those ideas into a more metaphysical framework. Its concepts include *li* (principle, akin to Plato's forms), *qi* (vital or material force), *taiji* (the Great Ultimate), and *xin* (mind).

Although, Buddhism originated in India, it has

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1. Confucianism was particularly strong during the Han dynasty, whose greatest thinker was Dong Zhongshu, who integrated Confucianism with the thoughts of the Yin Yang School and the theory of the Five Elements.

had the most lasting impact on China. Since Chinese traditional thought focuses greater on ethics rather than metaphysics, it has developed several schools distinct from the originating Indian schools. The most prominent examples with philosophical merit are Sanlun, Tiantai, Huayan, and Chán (Zen). They investigate consciousness, levels of truth, whether reality is ultimately empty, and how enlightenment is to be achieved.

Taoism (Daoism) is a philosophy, later developed into a religion based on Tao Te Ching (Dào Dé Jīng; ascribed to Lao zi) and Zhuang zi. The character Tao (道, Dao) literally means "path" or "way". However in Daoism it refers more often to a metaphysical term that describes a force that encompasses the entire universe yet cannot be described or felt. All major Chinese philosophical schools have investigated the correct Way to go about a moral life, but in Taoism it takes on the most abstract meanings. It advocated non-action (*wu wei*), the strength of softness, spontaneity, and relativism. Although it serves as a rival to Confucianism, this rivalry is compromised by the idiom "practice Confucianism on the outside, Taoism on the inside."

Legalism is a pragmatic political philosophy synthesized by Shang Yang and Han Fei. According to Legalism, a ruler should govern his subjects by the following trinity: *fǎ* (法, law

or principle); *shù* (術, method, tactic, art, or statecraft); and *shì* (勢, legitimacy, power, or charisma). Finally, Mohism (Moism), founded by Mozi (墨子), promotes universal love with the aim of mutual benefit.

### **Philosophical Origins of Black and White System**

The visual perceptual system of brightness in the Black and White system of Chinese painting is grounded in rationality as detached from direct, intuitive sensory impressions about the realistic world. This is a typical Chinese-style rationality tinged with a strong flavor of an abstract otherworldly consciousness. This is not unfamiliar to traditional Chinese thought including the Taoist, Confucian and Buddhist doctrines, because all the three schools of ancient philosophy or religion advocate that people should ignore their intuitive and sensory impressions about the secular world in order to create a higher-level spiritual life. Taoist teaching, with an emphasis on the individual's freedom and will-power, believes that all worldly things are suppressive of human nature and should be ideally transformable. Zenists seek release from the secular world of dust to the Western Paradise, as the highest ideal of their arduous religious practice. The attitude of Confucians towards the secular world, somehow like that of Platonists, stresses the

cultural cultivation of mind and refined knowledge rather than intuitive impressions of any kind. According to Confucian teaching, intelligence is both sacred and noble, and has nothing to do with common sense.

In this ethos, the Black and White system became the most suitable visual artistic pattern to render the ancient Chinese detachment and otherworldly consciousness. It was considered an ideal visual artistic carrier for implying the very essence of Chinese-style rationality apart from reality, because it lacked the vividness and stimulation of lower-level sensory impressions as provided by the full-color artistic form. This led to the invention of the celebrated Chinese brush-ink painting. Influenced by the Taoist dialectical way of thinking, the brush-ink Chinese painting is representative of a more logical and sharper pattern than that provided by a full color type. Metaphorically speaking, because of their changeable and subtle nature, colors are often compared to a sensible yet capricious woman. In contrast, the pair of black and white is personified as a male character, full of rationality and stability (Hu, 1995:459).

Another subtle yet significant connection between philosophy and the Black and White painting system is that they both share a traditional thinking mode of dualism. The dualism in the Taoist dialectics of Lao Tze, takes the form "One yin and one yang constitute Tao". When a piece of white rice paper is

extended before a Chinese painter, it superficially contains nothing yet potentially everything. Like Lao Tze's "non-being...from which Heaven and Earth sprang", the void or blankness provided by the white rice-paper rears everything visible under depiction through its combination with black brush-inkwork. Formless yet all-embracing, it possesses the most comprehensive and far-reaching implication covering everything with a concrete form in the picture. In the context of Chinese painting, the invisible void or blankness, as a forceful illustration of Lao Tze's saying that "The most resounding sound is the sound that cannot be heard, and the greatest image is the image that cannot be formed," never refrains from transforming itself into things visible. As the great symbol and image of Lao Tze's Tao in the Black and White system, it functions like the "all-embracing first principle through which all things are brought into being".

In the aesthetic consciousness of the Far Eastern culture, the colorlessness of the Black and White system could also be understood as the consumption of the aesthetic values of all colors (Izutsu, 1977, 264). This is usually described as the principle of non-expression, which implies that the void spaces of the white paper are as expressive as the black traces of ink. In the extreme form, this principle seeks the absolute absence of expression, to propagate

the inner spiritual vigor of the painter<sup>1</sup> (Yashiro, 1954, 143-44). In this way, the painter consciously strives to capture the Emptiness of Lao Tzu or the Nothingness (*shunyatâ*) of Mahayana Buddhism.

The painting experience of some of the Zen monks resemble a state of contemplation, in which the "phenomenal" (black ink) emerges out of the depth of the formless Being (white paper). In such experiences<sup>2</sup>, the white void suggests infinity, or a realm out of the reach of senses (Izutsu, 1977, 268-69), whereas the "splashed ink" represents the essential stillness of the phenomenal world captured by an all-enveloping Silence. It also suggests the emergence of the temporal beings out of the timeless dimension of things. The latter is a spiritual space, which corresponds to the world of Mind in Mahayana Buddhism.

In contrast to the defused and vaporous haboku paintings, there are ink paintings with clearly delineated expressive inkwork, in which

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1. The techniques such as "thrifty brush" and "frugal ink" promoted by Zen (Ch'an) Buddhists in China (Sung and Yuan periods) and Japan (Kamakura and Ashikaga periods), leading to "mysteriously hazy paintings" (*wei mang hua*), refer to this principle. Two typical examples in the Chinese paintings are those of Li Ch'eng and Lao Jung. In Japan, Yôken Fujimura tried to reach "white paper inscription" (*haku shi san*).

2. Two examples are the Haboku Sansui (Tanaka, 1972, 173) of the Japanese Zen monk, Sesshû (1420-1506) and Chinese painter Mu Ch'i of 13th century.



the positive objective presence suggests the illimitability of the cosmic and metaphysical background. Sometimes<sup>1</sup> the extremely dry and astringent inkwork of the forceful presence of a sole object contrasted to the vast void of the blank surrounding suggests the Loneliness of the Ultimate Reality. On the other hand, some of the Chinese landscape paintings<sup>2</sup> essentially consist of a single object (a flower or a bamboo), yet the infinite presence of the nature beyond the object is implicit in the painting. It is as if it invites our inner eye to capture the cosmic solitude behind the bare landscape (Izutsu, 1977:273). This reminds the Hua Yen metaphysics in which what one can see in one thing takes up everything (Blyth, 1967:8).

The observation which is an detachable part of visual arts, has a deeper meaning in the Chinese brush-ink painting. The painter contemplates on the object until a complete penetration into the invisible reality of the object is achieved. The aim is to give a visual expression of the principle of identification with the Cosmic Life, which could be attained through intense meditation, bridging the external observation to the internal penetration. This becomes possible when the subject is entirely subsumed in the object; so a man, who

wants to depict a bamboo, should first become the bamboo, and then let it depict itself. This is reflected in the philosophy of *li*, the eternal principle which transcends time, space, and sensation<sup>3</sup>. Here *li* is the single reality common between man and nature, through which man revisits the original unity to grasp the spirit of the nature. In order for the artist to go beyond the surface of things, it is necessary to surpass the primitive forms of external cognition, such as shape and color.

### **Black and White System and Meaning of Life**

The philosophical quest in the Chinese culture is not an abstract curiosity. Chinese treatment of philosophy (in contrast with the logical approach of Greeks) avoids general concepts and mainly focuses on concrete realizations. For Chinese, philosophy is a tool to search a meaning for life. The same is more or less true about the Chinese art. A deep analysis of the interplay between the Chinese philosophy and visual art should reflect on this feature of the Chinese culture. To emphasize the concrete aspect of the Chinese art and its underlying philosophy, one has to treat both as a human experience in the context of the Chinese culture.

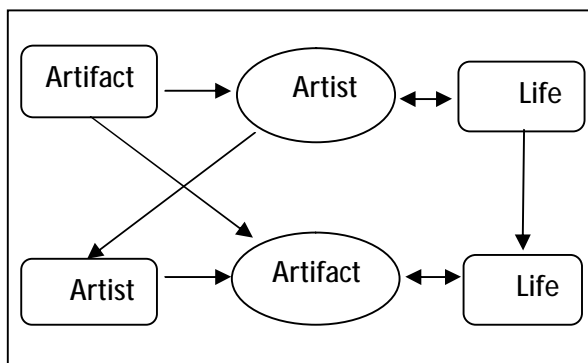
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1. A typical example is the "Mynah Bird on a Pine Tree" by Mu Ch'i, which reminds us of the poems of the peerless haiku saint, Bashô (1664-94).  
 2. The "Six Persimmons" of Mu Ch'i is a typical example.

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3. The concept appeared first in Hua Yen Buddhism and then in a more elaborate form in neo-Confucianism of the Sung period. The latter could be traced in the Ta Hsüeh of Chu Tzu (1139-1200).

For Chinese an artifact is a medium through which the artist ties with the ultimate meaning of life buried under the phenomenal qualities. At the same time, artifacts have a spirit, and potentially can make ties with the meaning of life by bridging through their creator. In this case, the artist becomes the medium of this bound. This is a dualistic interpretation in which the artwork and the artist interchange their role as the medium of association with the meaning of life



The reality of life “manifests” itself through the artifact. The artifact “discloses” some of the hidden aspects of the reality. The difference is that the manifestation is unintentional and is a way that life shows itself to the artist; whereas the disclosure is planned by the artist to show the life to others. In the dual picture, the tie between artist and life is also twofold. The artist gets an “impression” through the experience of life, and gives an “expression” to convey the life experience.

One the other hand, an artwork is composed of some elements. These are the so called

“elements of design”. There are different categories of these elements, but in general they Lie in two categories of the “local” and “global” elements. A local element is a feature of the composition which occurs in a specific location. Two major local elements are “shape” (or form) and “color”. A global element makes sense when the totality of the picture is considered. Two of the main global elements are the space (total distribution of the forms and colors) and movement (the change of local elements as one move through the picture). The above relations between visual features and conceptual meanings are conveyed through a reminiscent configuration of these local and global elements.

The following table schematizes the interplay between prevailing Chinese philosophical doctrines and the aesthetical standards of the Chinese brush-ink painting. The vertical side represents four major “elements of design”. In the horizontal side, the impacts of these elements are examined in four categories of the human experience. Inside each block, an instance of the interplay between the visual effects of the Black and White Chinese painting and its philosophical implication is provided.

|   |   |   |   |          |
|---|---|---|---|----------|
| Vaporizing gray shades remind moving from <i>temporal</i> to <i>timeless</i>  | Repeated shift from black to white refers to the <i>dualistic</i> nature of the reality | Moving from black to white resembles moving from <i>phenomenal</i> to <i>spiritual</i>  | Contrast between still and moving objects reminds of the <i>vital force</i> | Movement |
| Single objects in vast void refer the principle of ultimate <i>loneliness</i> | Void refers to the common reality ( <i>li</i> )   | Void refers to the <i>formless</i>  | Scattered objects in void resemble the principle of <i>no-action</i>        | Space    |
| Harmonious objects refer to the <i>unity</i> with nature                      | Detached objects invite to the <i>otherworld</i>  | Simple shapes imply going from <i>sensory</i> to <i>intelligible</i>                    | Shapeless objects suggest no <i>sensory</i> impression                      | Shape    |
| Void refers to the <i>infinite</i> presence                                   | Lack of clear boundaries refers to <i>illimitable</i>                                   | Lack of color implies no expression, leading to <i>emptiness</i> and <i>nothingness</i> | Lack of color means going beyond common <i>sense</i>                        | Color    |
| Manifestation   | Disclosure  | Expression  | Impression  |          |

## Conclusion

The art of figure painting in China which reached its peak in the T'ang dynasty turned to the black and white brush-ink style during the Sung dynasty, reflecting the contemporary Taoist and Confucian philosophical doctrines. The black-white system proved to be a suitable visual artistic vehicle to render the ancient Chinese detachment and otherworldly consciousness.

The suppression of color is one of the common moods of the Far Eastern aesthetic experience, from the Japanese *haiku* poetry and *nô* drama to the traditional *wabi-cha* tea art and brush-ink

Chinese painting, reflecting the traditional Far Eastern principles of loneliness, poverty and simplicity. In the Chinese calligraphy, the exposed idiographic characters convey a sense of spiritual awareness.

While the freehand ink-wash style conveys a visualized form of the Chinese traditional dualism, it also resembles a state of contemplation which invites to complete unity with nature. This becomes possible by self annihilation in the light of the principle of non-expression. Only when the subject is subsumed in the object, the phenomenal emerges out of the depth of the formless Being. At this stage, the white void of the rice-paper takes the painter to the realm of

infinity, out of the reach of senses, to experience identification with the Cosmic Life

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## مبدا فلسفی و نبود رنگ در نقاشی چینی

زهرا عبدالله<sup>1</sup>، بهرادین احمد<sup>2</sup>

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حذف رنگ از روال های غالب در تجربه زیبایی شناسانه شرق دور است که در ژاپن در سنت درام موسوم به نو، در شعر هایکو و مراسم چای وای چا، و در چین در خطاطی چینی بروز یافته، و به بهترین وجه در نقاشی جوهر و قلم موی چینی تبلور یافته است. اگر چه خطاطی چینی از قرن سوم میلادی در سلسله جین در اوج شکوفایی بوده است، نقاشی سیاه و سفید چین در نیمه قرن هشتم میلادی در دوران سلسله تانگ ابداع، و در قرن سیزدهم میلادی، در سلسله یوان به اوج شکوفایی رسید.

این شیوه نقاشی، ضمن داشتن ریشه های عمیق فرهنگی که در سنت چهار گنجینه یادگیری در چین باستان متبلور شده اند، متأثر از دیدگاه فلسفی تائو و کنفوسیوس، اصول سنتی تنهایی، فقر و سادگی را منعکس می نماید. سیستم سیاه و سفید در نقاشی چینی، ضمن به تصویر کشیدن دوگانگی سنتی فرهنگ چینی، از یک شیوه هنری فراتر رفته و ظهور حقیقت از دریچه نگاره را به تصویر می کشد، و با بازآفرینی حالت مراقبه، ناظر را به وحدت کامل با طبیعت فرا می خواند. غایت نهایی این مراقبه، نیل به فنا در پناه اصل بی بیانی است.

سنجش روشمند تعامل بین اصول فلسفی و معیارهای زیبایی شناسی در فرهنگ چین از طریق ارزیابی تاثیر چهار عنصر هنری (حرکت، فضا، شکل و رنگ) بر چهار حوزه تجربه بشری (ظهور، تجلی، بیان و حس) امکان پذیر خواهد بود.

کلید واژگان: نقاشی جوهر و قلم موی چینی، هنر شرق دور، فلسفه چینی، سیستم نقاشی سیاه و سفید، دوگانگی، نمودار تائی چی.

1. دانشجوی دکتری، موسسه بین المللی تفکر و تمدن اسلامی دانشگاه بین المللی اسلامی مالزی

2. دانشیار، موسسه بین المللی تفکر و تمدن اسلامی