WEI/TASTE IN CHINESE AESHETICS, ART, AND LITERATURE: A COMPARATIVE APPROACH

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Abstract: This essay focuses on the Chinese aesthetic conception of wei 味 (conventionally translated as taste or flavor) and examines its influence on Chinese art and literature, exemplified by Chinese landscape painting and landscape poetry. The discussion also includes a comparative reading of the differences between the Chinese wei, which was shaped by Confucian, Daoist, and Chan Buddhist aesthetic traditions, and the Western aesthetic conception of taste. The conversation focuses especially on how nature is depicted through the aesthetic conception of wei in Chinese art and literature, on the role that feelings, including the pleasure of imagination, play in aesthetic judgement, and on how Chinese wei and Western taste illustrate the human (aesthetic) experience differently.

I. Understanding *Wei* 味

Like its counterparts *rasa* and taste in Indian and Western traditions, respectively, the Chinese aesthetic term *wei* has a gustatory origin. However, the concept of *wei* entered the realm of Chinese aesthetics much earlier than that of taste in the West (17th century) and as much as four hundred years earlier than the Indian *rasa* (early centuries C.E.) (Pollock, 2016, p. 7).

Scholars often use the concept of *mei* 美—the Chinese counterpart to the English words "beauty" or "beautiful"—to describe the long history of connecting gustatory experience and aesthetic experience in Chinese tradition. The Chinese character *mei* 美 combines 羊 (ram) and 大 (large). Its most popular and influential reading [2] can be traced back to Later Han lexicographer Xu Shen 許慎 (c. 55–c. 149). In his famous dictionary *Shuo wen jie zi* 說文解字, Xu defined *mei* as *gan* 甘 (delicious) and explains the composition as: "ram is one of the six kinds of domestic animals, mainly for food. *Mei* means *good* 善." [3] Later scholars then interpreted Xu Shen's definition as "when a ram is large, it is beautiful" 羊大則美 (Xu Xuan 徐鉉 916–991) and "*gan*, one of the five flavors, the beauty of the five flavors all means *gan*, later extends that all the good things are beautiful" (Duan Yucai, 1735–1815).[4]

This understanding gradually developed into the theory of *meishantongyi* 美善統一, that is, the unity of the beautiful and the good. In Confucianism, aesthetics and virtue, aesthetic value and ethical value, natural, artistic, and moral beauty do not conflict with each other; more precisely, they are inseparable and naturally tied. The subtlety of the balanced, mutually complementary, and co-creative blending of different flavors in the art of Chinese cuisine as a metaphor for the subtle art of governing is often found in classical Confucian texts. One of the Confucian-influenced articles, "Xiaoxinglan" 孝行覽 (View of Filial Conducts) in a Warring States (476–221B.C.) Zajia 雜家 (School of Miscellany) work named *Lu Annals* reads:

> The subtlety of blending flavors is that you must carefully and skillfully use the five flavors—sour, sweet, bitter, spicy, and salty-which one comes first, which one comes second,

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[2] The earlier oracle bone and bronze characters 𦍌 of *Mei* (beauty or beautiful) during the Shang and Zhou dynasties (c. 1600 B.C.–771 B.C.) most likely depict a tribe leader wearing decorated headwear.

[3] Original Chinese text: 美．甘也。從羊從大。羊在六畜．主給膳也。美與善同義。

[4] Original Chinese text: 甘者、五味之一。而五味之美皆曰甘。引伸之凡好皆謂之美。.

> which one is more, which one is less—that is very subtle, yet all start from here. The change of taste in the tripod is subtle and marvelous, it can only be understood but cannot be described in words (…) the ruler cannot govern through force, he has to know the way first.[5]

Confucians believe that the value they find in the art of cuisine can be naturally applied to moral cultivation since physical and mental sensibilities are one and the same. As Mencius (372–289 B.C.) states in *Mencius* 6A/7:

> There is a common taste for flavor in our mouths, a common sense for sound in our ears, and a common sense for beauty in our eyes. Can it be in our minds alone we are not alike? What is it that we have in common in our minds? It is the sense of principle and righteousness [*i-li*, moral principles] (…) Therefore moral principles please our minds as beef and mutton and pork please our mouths.[6] (Chan, 1963, p. 56)

The first aesthetic connotation of *wei* is a subtle, balanced, and marvelous blending, *he* 和 (harmony). *He* is in the blending-flavor metaphor for Confucians, as well as in the correlational, reciprocal resonance between us-within (our senses, body, physical and spiritual) and the outside world (natural and seasonal items and constantly happening events) for the Daoists. To understand this dimension of harmony in the connotation of *wei,* we must look at Chinese medicine. *Huang Di nei jing* 黃帝內經 (*The Yellow Emperor's Classic*) is the earliest Chinese medicine text, composed between 400 B.C. and 260 A.D. Its connection to the legendary emperor, cultural hero, and patron of the Daoist religion, Huang Di (28th century B.C.), is very telling. The discussion of the five tastes (*wuwei* 五味: *suan* 酸 sour, *ku* 苦 bitter, *gan* 甘 sweet, *xin* 辛 spicy, and *xian* 咸 salty) is always associated with yin-yang 陰陽, the five phases/patterns of the natural process (*ziran wuxing* 自然五行), and the five organs (*wu zang* 五臟) within our bodies. The central idea of the discussion is the holistic, interrelated, and mutually beneficial balance and harmonious resonance between nature and human bodily activities:

> The essential principle of Yin and Yang is to preserve the element of Yang and to make it strong. If the elements do not harmonize and unite, then it is as though spring were without autumn and as though winter were without summer. But if they do harmonize and unite, this harmony is called "the system of the sages." (…) That which is produced by Yin originates in the five flavors; the five organs that regulate the functions of the body are injured by the five flavors. Thus, if acidity exceeds the other flavors, then the liver will be caused to produce an excess of saliva, and the force of the spleen will be cut short. If salt exceeds among the flavors, the great bones become weary, the muscles and the flesh become deficient, and the mind becomes despondent. If sweetness exceeds the other flavors, the breath of the heart will be [asthmatic and] full, the appearance will be black, and the force of the kidneys will be unbalanced. If among the flavors, bitterness exceeds the others, then the atmosphere of the spleen becomes dry, and the atmosphere of the stomach becomes dense. If the pungent flavor exceeds the others, the muscles and the pulse become slack, and the spirit will be injured. Therefore, if people pay attention to the five flavors and mix them well, their bones will remain straight, their muscles will remain tender and young, their breath and blood will circulate freely, their pores will be fine in texture, and consequently, their breath

[5] Original Chinese text: 調和之事，必以甘酸苦辛鹹，先後多少，其齊甚微，皆有自起。鼎中之變，精妙微纖，口弗能言，誌不能喻……天子不可強為，必先知道 (《呂氏春秋·孝行覽·本味》).

[6] Original Chinese text: 故曰：口之於味也，有同耆焉；耳之於聲也，有同聽焉；目之於色也，有同美焉。至於心，獨無所同然乎？心之所同然者何也？謂理也，義也。…故理義之悅我心，猶芻豢之悅我口。”

> and bones will be filled with the essence of life. If, furthermore, the people carefully follow Tao as though it were a law, theirs will be a long life. (Veith & Barnes, 2016, pp. 108–109)[7]

This ecology-oriented harmony has been very influential in Chinese aesthetics, literature, and art. However, another significant contribution of the Daoist worldview to the connotation of the aesthetic term *wei* is its association with the harmonious *Dao*. It can be traced back to the most important concept in *Laozi*'s *wu* 無. Chapter 63 of *Laozi* recommends: "do things noncoercively [*wei wuwei* 為無為], be non-interfering in going about your business [*shi wushi* 事無事], and savor the flavor of the unadulterated in what you eat [*wei wuwei* 味無味]" (Ames and Hall 175). The concept of *wu* promotes a natural, simple, unforced, yet powerful (precisely because of its minimal, non-aggressive action) order. "Savor the flavor of the unadulterated in what you eat" is but one of its expressions. Contemporary Chinese aesthetic scholar Ye Lang argues that wu should be viewed as the foundation of the Chinese aesthetic tradition. In his book *Outline of the History of Chinese Aesthetics*, Ye Lang quotes Chapter 35 of *Laozi* (approximately 4th century B.C.):[8] "But were *dao* to be put into words: It could be said to be so bland and insipid that it has no taste. Look for it, and there is nothing to see; listen for it, and there is nothing to hear; and yet in availing oneself of it, it is inexhaustible" (Ames & Hall, 2001, p. 132).

Ye then comments:

> This *Laozi* paragraph is very important. It also raises the aesthetic term *wei* as an aesthetic standard, "bland and insipid (…) has no taste." The *wei* that the *Laozi* talks about here is different from *wuwei* 五味 (five flavors/five tastes).[9] It is not the flavor of food, but the taste of what is spoken—an aesthetic taste and enjoyment (…) that was the first time in Chinese philosophy [that] *wei* appeared as an aesthetic term (…) the unique aesthetic taste and aesthetic style—*pingdan* 平淡 (blandness) has developed from it and it is very influential in the history of Chinese aesthetics. The history of Chinese art was rooted in the aesthetics of the *Laozi*. (Ye, 1999, p. 33)

The conception of *wu* (exemplified by *wuwei*, *wushi*, and *wuwei*) in *Laozi* encourages a kind of creative power and aesthetic imagination through simplicity and minimalism, which is essential to understanding the creative activities of Chinese art and literature.

If the Confucian-influenced *wei* promotes the beauty of subtle, co-created, balanced harmony in concrete human affairs, the Daoist *wei*, which connotes harmony in an ongoing process of mutual generation of natural phenomena, advocates an aesthetic state of mind for appreciating the subtle, non-coercive, ecologically co-creative wholeness and the constant, changing process of *wangwu* 萬物 (things and events).

The conception of *wei* as an aesthetic term developed in its highest form during the Wei-Jin Period (3rd–6th centuries A.D). This was the period when Buddhism was introduced into

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[7] Original Chinese text: 凡陰陽之要，陽密乃固，兩者不和，若春無秋，若冬無夏。因而和之，是謂聖度…陰之所生，本在五味; 陰之五宮，傷在五味。是故味過於酸，肝氣以津，脾氣乃絕。味過於咸，大骨氣勞，短肌，心氣抑。味過於甘，心氣喘滿，色黑，腎氣不衡。味過於苦，脾氣不濡，胃氣乃厚。味過於辛，筋脈沮弛，精神乃央。是故謹和五味，骨正筋柔，氣血以流，腠理以密，如是則骨氣以精。謹道如法，長有天命。.

[8] Original *Laozi* text: 故道之出言也．曰淡呵其無味也．視之不足見也．聽之不足聞也．用之不可既也。The English translation I use here is Roger Ames and David Hall's translation of the *Daodejing* (Ballantine Books, 2003).

[9] This shows the difference between the Confucian and Daoist *wei*. While the Confucians emphasize the metaphor of a balanced, harmonious blending of the five flavors, the Daoists promote an inexhaustible taste of "no taste."

China, and Neo-Daoist unworldly "mystic learning" (*xuexue* 玄學) prevailed. This time is also called the period of aesthetic awareness. Many Neo-Daoist terms were employed to interpret Buddhist texts. As a consequence, Chinese Buddhists were enlightened to wu 無 (nothingness), and kong 空 (emptiness), and Chan Buddhism introduced a Chan-taste blandness into the conception of *wei*, which became one of the most important aesthetic ideals in the Chinese tradition.

The Chan Buddhist–infused *wei* (taste) is well described by French Sinologist François Jullien. In his book on Chinese aesthetics, *In Praise of Blandness*, Jullien talks about *yiyin* 遺音 (lingering tone) and *yiwei* 遺味 (lingering taste) (Jullien, 2004, p. 65). He traces the history of taste and observes:

> Starting in the third century, critical writings appear that begin to separate the didactic, moral uses of art from its effect (…) At times, it might be in the context of developing a political idea that one would invoke, as a comparison, the delicate taste of seasoning different flavors; or that one would identify water, which later became a common trope for blandness, as the "original" element, the basis for all other flavors; or that one would demonstrate awareness of the "ineffable" character of the harmonious blending of the different tastes; or that one might pronounce as ideal the subtle balance which determines that "spiciness is not sour" and "blandness is not too light." At other times, it would be in the course of developing a moral idea (if one can even make a distinction between the moral and the political in such a context) that one might appeal to that fertile contradiction underlying the assertion "that which is empty can, at the same time, be full; and that which is bland is, at the same time, full of flavor (…) the most beautiful music—the music that affects us most profoundly—does not (…) consist of the fullest possible exploitation of all the different tones. The most intensive sound is not the most intense (…) the least fully rendered sounds are the most promising, in that they have not been fully expressed, *externalized*, (…) and it is thus that they manage to sustain a "lingering" or a "leftover" tone (*yiyin*) (…) music such as this stays on in the spirit and "is not forgotten." The same holds true for the experience of taste. The most solemn ritual sacrifice (such as offerings to the royal ancestors) is reduced to the greatest simplicity: the fish is not cooked, the great broth is not seasoned. Such simplicity is, in and of itself, a sign of solemnity; in addition, it is the least pronounced flavor, the least seasoned dish, that possesses the highest degree of *potential* flavor. Exactly like the leftover tone, the "lingering" or "leftover flavor" (*yiwei*) evokes a potential, inexhaustible value, even more desirable as it continues to avert its own consumption. Flavor or tone, expanded by virtue of its own discretion, kept open to becoming by virtue of its own reserve. What it loses in physical manifestation, it gains in spiritual presence (…) this articulation of blandness also contains an analysis of our receptive capacities and of sensual experience, which is ripe for application in the realm of aesthetic reflection. And so it will be applied, as the motif of lingering or leftover taste or tone extends beyond the realm of music to that of poetics. (Ibid., pp. 65–68)

This "leftover taste" (*yiwei*) adds a Chan Buddhist layer to the conception of *wei*: the spirituality of the aesthetic experience of simplicity. Jullien's use of Confucian ritual music and sacrifice as an example to demonstrate the common share of the subtle and rich potential in uncooked *wei* was, in fact, promoted by both Confucians and Daoists. For the former, it is the solemn enlightenment of the sacred experience of family reverence to cultivate a sense of togetherness in the community and society. For the latter, it is the pure spiritual enlightenment of simplicity and the spiritual imaginary journey of being with one, with nature.

In summary, the Chinese aesthetic conception of *wei*, influenced by Confucian, Daoist, and Chan Buddhist traditions, perceives aesthetic, moral, social, artistic, and personal values as together in oneness/wholeness. It places the pleasure of aesthetic imagination at the center and emphasizes the holistic, co-creative spirit (between humans or between humans and nature) of Chinese tradition. The best *wei*, which is represented by blandness or *wu*, implies

this kind of experience of wholeness—intuitive, personal, immediate, concrete, yet far-reaching.

II. Nature, Aesthetic Judgement, and Aesthetic Experience: Further Defining *Wei* Through Contemporary Debates About Taste

Kant's definition of taste remains influential and representative in the Western academic world. He describes it as "the faculty for judging *a priori* the communicability of the feelings that are combined with a given representation (without the mediation of a concept)" (Kant 5:296). Unlike *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), which aims to analyze the scope and limits of the faculty of reason—which should be to "strive independently of all experience" (Kant A xii)—that defines all of the aspects of metaphysics and human cognations, and *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), which discusses the practical use of pure reason—i.e., a rational being's capacity to use his judgment (free will) to act according to the moral law[10]—The *Critique of the Power of Judgement* (1790) reveals a "system of the powers of mind (…) in relation to the feeling of pleasure and displeasure" (Kant, 2000, 20:246). In Kant's system, the power of judgment appears to serve as a transition that "connects the two parts [the theoretical and the practical] through its own special principle (…) whose principles are merely subjective, insofar as they differ from all those, under the name of logical, whose fundamental principles must be objective (whether they are theoretical or practical)" (Kant, 2000, 20:247). The judgment of taste, that is, the purposiveness of disinterested pleasure, later became the most influential theory of the judgment of beauty in Western aesthetics. As James Shelley states:

> The eighteenth-century theory of taste emerged, in part, as a corrective to the rise of rationalism, particularly as applied to beauty, and to the rise of egoism, particularly as applied to virtue. Against rationalism about beauty, the eighteenth-century theory of taste held the judgment of beauty to be immediate; against egoism about virtue, it held the pleasure of beauty to be disinterested. (Shelley, 2022)

Kant's theory demonstrates some of the typical approaches to metaphysics, aesthetics, and ethics in the West. One of these is a constant search for universality and absolute principles, and a deep belief in distinctions. The distinctions between cognitive value, aesthetic value, and moral values in contemporary aesthetics, the discussion of subjectivity and objectivity regarding the standard of taste (which also extends to defining low and high art, as well as art and non-art), emotion and reason, and instrumental and disinterested pleasure are among some of the hotly debated topics.[11]

This characteristic is also evident in contemporary discussions of the aesthetic appreciation of nature. Nature plays a unique role in Chinese aesthetics, art, and literature. It is the co-creative force in Chinese artistic creativity. It can even be said that removing nature from the equation would make a discussion of the Chinese aesthetic tradition very difficult. However, this is not the case for the Western aesthetic tradition. The latter mainly focused on the fine arts; in *The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature* (2002), Malcolm Budd comments that

[10] As Kant states, "A practical rule is always a product of reason because it prescribes action as a means to an effect, which is its purpose. But for a being in whom reason quite alone is not the determining ground of the will, this rule is an *imperative*, that is, a rule indicated by an 'ought,' which expresses objective necessitation to the action would without fail take place in accordance with the rule" (Kant, 1997, 5:20).

[11] Contemporary mainstream analytic aesthetics also demonstrates this tradition well. The issues discussed in the book *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art* (2006) include "How are Artistic Experience and Value Interrelated?" (9–35), "Should We Value Works as Art for What We can Learn from Them?" "Can Emotional Responses to Fiction be Genuine and Rational?" and "What are the Relations between the Moral and Aesthetic Values of Art?"

"prior to the last decades of the twentieth century there had been little serious philosophical reflection on the aesthetics of nature" (vii). He thus proposed an "aesthetic appreciation of nature as nature." This idea is

> a response to a natural item, grounded on its naturalness—on its being a part of nature or on its being a specific kind of nature item—focused on its elements or aspects as structured or interrelated in the item, the item being experienced as intrinsically rewarding, unrewarding, or displeasing, the hedonic character of the reaction being 'disinterested' (…) the question is whether—and, if so, how—nature, or a particular natural item, can be the intentional object of such a response. In what way, if any, can the fact that something is natural, or a certain kind of natural thing, ground an aesthetic response to it? (Budd, 2002, p. 16)

Nonetheless, I argue that Budd's discussion of the appreciation of nature also falls within the framework of a typical Western discussion: what kind of natural items are qualified to be appreciated aesthetically? Will they be considered artistic enough? How is this different from appreciating art? Will scientific knowledge be involved? Should it be categorized as environmental aesthetics, theory of aesthetic respect for nature, or positive aesthetic about nature, and so on?

This new interest in the aesthetic appreciation of nature in Western academic circles differs sharply from the Chinese conception. First, being one with nature is the main lens through which to read the Chinese appreciation of nature. There is no historical distinction between an inferior natural beauty and the beauty of art. Instead, nature is the core of artistic creation. Second, the discussions about harmony and balance in the appreciation of nature are often oriented towards quantity and quality in the Western tradition (for example, Kant's discussion of the judgement of the beautiful and the sublime), whereas the Chinese appreciation of nature, which is oriented towards harmony, should only be understood from a holistic perspective as an appreciation of the inseparably co-creative process.

Kant uses disinterested pleasure to measure aesthetic taste. However, the focus is still on "the objective or subjective status of aesthetic properties" (Korsmeyer, 2013, p. 260). His idea of a moral end of nature seems to align with Confucian and Daoist traditions, but in the Kantian context, morality and knowledge are closely connected to reason and God's will. In the Chinese tradition, although an aesthetic attitude describes the beholder's state of mind, this cannot be a one-way direction. The aesthetic attitude represented by the bland taste is an aesthetic experience that demonstrates the subject–object relationship in its co-creativeness and oneness. The idea is that one's aesthetic attitude reflects not only the nature of one's aesthetic taste but also the pleasure of appreciating the wholeness of the non-mediated aesthetic experience of the object. As Tu Wei-ming states in his article "The Continuity of Being":

> Many people, ancient and recent, primitive and modern, would feel uncomfortable with the idea of a willful God who created the world out of nothing. It was not a creation myth as such but the Judeo-Christian version of that that is absent in Chinese mythology. But the Chinese, like numerous peoples throughout human history, subscribe to the continuity of being as self-evidently true. An obvious consequence of this basic belief is the all-embracing nature of the so-called spontaneously self-generating life process (…) they perceive the cosmos as the unfolding of continuous creativity that it cannot entertain "conceptions of creation *ex nihilo* by the hand of God, or through the will of God, and all other such mechanistic, teleological and theistic cosmologies." (Tu, 2004, p. 28)

III. W*ei* as the Aesthetic Appreciation of the Beauty of No-Distinction and Co-Creativity in Chinese Art and Literature

In my analysis of the conception of *wei* in the first part of this essay, I attempted to show that *wei* represents the wholeness of the aesthetic experience. Harmony and *wu* or blandness are at

the center of an aesthetic imagination that promotes a co-creative process between subject and object. Traditional Chinese mountain-and-water painting and poetry (conventionally translated as landscape painting and landscape poetry) illustrate this idea well. First, Chinese mountain and water painting and poetry are not so much concerned with the appreciation of nature as with the appreciation of *Dao*. However, this *Dao* cannot be separated from nature, as it represents the unity and resonance between nature and human beings. The concept of *wei* specifically describes the pleasure of an imaginary journey into or an experience of this constant process of resonance and unity. The aesthetic judgment of *Wei* essentially focuses on how well the artist demonstrates this unity rather than on distinctions between objectivity and subjectivity, objective knowledge or truth, and subjective knowledge and truth, among others. This sense of unity and co-creativity means that Chinese society does not intend to separate its aesthetic life from everyday life.[12] According to Tu, "The Chinese belief in the continuity of being, a basic motif in Chinese ontology, has far-reaching implications in Chinese philosophy, religion, epistemology, aesthetics, and ethics" (Tu, 2004, p. 27).[13] The cultural sensibility shared by classical Daoism and Confucianism—and, later, Sinicized Chan Buddhism—promotes a human–nature relationship that is an ongoing process of augmenting meaning in this correlated world.

In an article published in 2014, I used "co-creativity" to describe this unique cultural sensibility in Chinese art, listing several aspects that demonstrate its spirit. First, for a Chinese artist, the significance of artistic creativity is that consummating a work is a means of self-consummation. Second, co-creative sensibility is characterized by openness, embodied in the Chinese artist's attitudes toward nature, history, the viewer, and so forth. Handscroll painting is a fine example because its unique format often allows others besides the artist to participate in its creation. For instance, a 15 x 41-inch framed landscape masterpiece from the Song dynasty was extended to 20 times its original length over the ages. Paintings, poetry, comments, and styled seals were added by friends, collectors, and viewers, and collectors from later generations continued to participate in this creative process. The moment the viewer unrolls the handscroll painting, they also participate in this historical co-creative process. The masterpiece itself becomes an ongoing, open "system" that contributes to artistic history and an enduring self-creating process. The co-creative sensibility is the key to this distinctive Chinese tradition of art appreciation and creation.

Another example of this co-creative and open artistic relationship is the traditional art gathering, where artists jointly create a work of art. A famous illustration is a work co-created by the Yuan masters Gu An (ca. 1289–1365), Yang Weizhen (1296–1370), Zhang Shen (dates uncertain), and Ni Zan (1301–1374) titled *Old Tree, Bamboo, and Rock* (1370–1373). The first three artists co-created the original work in 1370; the old tree was painted by Zhang Shen, and the bamboo by Gu An. The inscription in the center-left was written by Zhang Shen, and that in the upper left by Yang Weizhen. Three years later, after Gu An and Yang Weizhen had passed away, Ni Zan saw the painting and added a rock and a poem (upper right) to memorialize the late masters. The spirit of artistic co-creativity is thus well expressed in this single painting.

Additionally, a unique characteristic of traditional Chinese art theory is that literature, painting, and other art forms share the same critical standards and employ the same aesthetic terms. For example, famous poet and painter Wang Wei (ca. 699–761) was viewed favorably by later artists and poets because of the convertibility of his art: "painting in poetry, poetry in painting" (Su Shi 37). As the legend goes, the famous calligrapher Zhang Xu (8th century), considered the sage of the cursive style (caoshu), was inspired by the sword dance of the

[12] This is similar to many non-Western cultures. See the discussion of the aesthetics of everyday-life experience by Santo and Carter and Liu.

[13] Ames and Hall use "correlative cosmology" to describe this sense of a "continuity of being" (13–21). In fact, they use it as the philosophical interpretive context for many of their translations of classical Chinese texts, both from Daoism and Confucianism.

martial arts dancer Gongsun Daniang. Aesthetic terms such as *yun* (韻, rhythm), shen (神, spirituality), and wen (味, taste) are applied to all kinds of art, from calligraphy to painting, poetry, dance, sculpture, and music (He, 2014).

Chinese mountain-water 山水 painting contrasts with the usually fixed perspective of traditional Western landscape painting. The totalizing angle of Chinese *shanshui* painting suggests that the viewer is on a tour with the artist, participating in the journey of appreciation. This is a process of interaction. The harmonized *qi* received by the Chinese master from his ongoing encounter with nature is carried to the brush, and the brush becomes part of his body and of this harmonized *qi*. Therefore, the work consists of two natures coming together in utmost harmony: that of the artist and that of the cosmos. The artist uses their imagination to paint the harmony of a beautiful journey rather than a particular, static scene (as in a photograph), inviting the viewer to join them and thus extending creativity outward in an ongoing movement (He, 2014).

The philosophical concept of *qi* plays a crucial role in understanding the aesthetic effect of *wei*'s harmonious blandness, as it creates a special aesthetic attitude for meditating on the co-creative experience of time and space. The Chinese practice of self-cultivation emphasizes "cultivating oneself's flood-like *qi* to be with the *qi* of the cosmos" (*Mencius* 2A2). This method is emphasized by both Confucians and Daoists, and later by Chan practitioners. *Qi* 氣 (lifeness, vital energy) is essential to grasping the meaning of *kong* in the Chinese philosophical and cosmological context. In Chinese *shanshui* painting, leaving an empty space (*liubai*) to achieve an aesthetic effect requires precise aesthetic imagination and a sense of wholeness of aesthetic experience. *Qi* is the life force and is at the heart of *kong*. Consequently, *qi* becomes the primary principle of artistic creativity in China. Indeed, the importance of *qi* in all forms of Chinese art cannot be overemphasized. Through *qi*, the landscape painters appreciate and express *kong*. Spatial composition is especially important in landscape painting. "Space" in Chinese corresponds to *kongjian* 空間, which translates literally as "between *kong*" or "within *kong*."[14]

The literati painters and poets (who were sometimes both, as the abovementioned Wang Wei and Su Shi) are a unique case in Chinese art and literary history. From a "professional" perspective, they were considered amateurs. These scholar-artists, in fact, strived to keep their distance from "professional taste." To borrow the famous words of the great scholar, official, and poet Su Shi 蘇軾 (1036–1101) once again, "to discuss paintings in terms of 'form-likeness' is to show the understanding of a child" (Sullivan, 184). Rather, the scholar artists claimed to be only "playing with ink." The roughness and awkwardness of their painting strokes evidence the unaffected sincerity of their hearts, personalities, and spontaneity, which is why they are described by art historians as having "marvelous *qi*" (*yiqi* 逸氣).

The blandness of the Chan taste (*Chanwei*) 禪味 is also one kind of *yiqi*. Late Chinese art historian Wen Fang penned a book on the literati landscape masters of the Song and Yuan dynasties and concluded that their work is the "Image of Mind" (Fong, 1984). Most literati landscape painters liked to employ *xieyi* 寫意 (literally, "sketching the mind") brushwork in their paintings.

Wang Wei is also famous for infusing his Chan Buddhist recluse poetry with this bland *wei*:

> A fire on shore, a lone boat spending the night,
> Fishermen's houses, there evening birds return.
> Vast and empty, heaven and earth grow dark—
> The heart is as clam as the broad stream.[15] (Owen, 1981, p. 46)

Compared to the pure practice of detachment of Buddhist religious art, this poem implies a

[14] See He for a detailed discussion.

[15] Original verses: 岸火孤舟宿 漁家夕鳥還 寂寥天地暮 心與廣川閒

quiet yet persistent participation of the subject—the scenery/realm (*jing* 景/境) cannot be complete without the feeling of the subject, and the heart and mind of the subject cannot resonate without nature: "there is a true meaning in this, I lose words when trying to distinguish it," as the famous lines by nature poet Tao Qian (365–427) go.[16] This true meaning dwells precisely in the inseparability and co-creativity of nature and human beings. The marvelous *wei*/taste in Chinese art and literature suggests a spiritual transformation of this co-created aesthetic experience and a unique state of mind that appreciates it.

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[16] Original verses from the fifth of Tao Qian's twenty *Drinking Wine* poems: 此中有真意，欲辯已忘言.

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