



Aesthetics and Philosophical Interpretation of the ‘Intended Blank’ in Chinese Paintings

Tianyi Zhang ¹

¹ Department of Art History, Arizona State University, USA

Abstract

Intended blank is a space that an artist intentionally leaves blank in Chinese paintings. Chinese painters of various dynasties and generations applied the empty space skillfully and naturally and uses composition to lead the viewers experience towards the artistic intention and emotional needs of the artist with a contrast between black and white, emptiness, and solidness. This paper reviews the aesthetics and philosophical theories of this unique visual style by collation of ancient Chinese major works of literature and paintings. The technique of intended blank, established by ancient classic theories, creates spiritual resonance, spatial hierarchy, and artistic conception for paintings. It is a classic visual feature of Chinese art developed from philosophical and aesthetic theories..

Keywords: Chinese art, Intended blank, aesthetics, Chinese philosophy, painting

Introduction

Intended blank (Liubai 留白) is a unique visual style in Chinese painting. It is a space that the artist intentionally leaves blank, which forms a more coordinated and exquisite picture. It uses composition to lead the viewer to experience the artistic intention and emotional needs of the artist with a contrast between black and white, emptiness, and solidness. This emphasis on the value of silence and emptiness is important to notice, because Chinese artists especially dedicated themselves to understanding how to make empty space a potent factor in art and design. It is generally believed that *intended blank* in Chinese painting was formed in the Six Dynasties, developed in the Tang Dynasty, and thrived in the Song Dynasty. In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, it became a mature artistic procedure.¹ Chinese painters of various dynasties and generations applied the empty space skillfully and naturally. Although there are many nuances, this work originates from the same aesthetic theories.

In the late Tang Dynasty, Zhang Yanyuan 張彥遠 proposed the genre of *white painting* 白画 in *A Record of the Famous Paintings of All the Dynasties* 歷代名畫記, which demonstrates that he further recognized the unique role and value of leaving blank space in the picture from a theoretical perspective.² The text *Nanzong Mijue* 南宗秘訣 by Hua Lin 華琳 from the Qing Dynasty, which discusses the whiteness in the paintings, is probably the only material in pre-Modern Chinese painting theory that focuses on exploring the blankness of Chinese paintings.³ There are many modern Chinese scholars discussing the creation, technology and principles of open space in Chinese painting, and some scholarship discussing the aesthetic value of the *intended blank*, but few specialize in the relationship between the blank, aesthetics, and philosophy. At the same time, because the art form of the *intended blank* is almost non-existent in Western art, academic works in English have mostly ignored it.

¹ Wan, Y. (2011). "Intended Blank"-A New Realm of Chinese Art Aesthetics. *Literary world*. 2011(04):266-267.

萬怡.“留白”——中國藝術審美的新境界[J].*文學界(理論版)*,2011(04):266-267.

² Zhang Yanyuan. (Tang Dynasty). *Li Dai Ming Hua Ji (A Record of the Famous Paintings of All the Dynasties)*, Shanghai: Han Fen Lou, 1992.

張彥遠(唐) *歷代名畫記*, 上海: 涵芬樓, 1992.

³ Hua, L. (Qing Dynasty). *Nanzong Mijue*.

華琳.(清). *南宗秘訣* Original Text: 白, 即是紙素之白。凡山石之陽面處, 石坡之平面處, 及畫外之水、天空闊處, 雲物空明處, 水足之杳冥處, 樹頭之虛靈處, 以之作天、作水、作雲斷、作道路、作日光、皆是此白。夫此白本筆墨所不及, 能令為畫中之白, 並非紙素之白, 乃為有情, 否則畫無生趣矣。畫中之白, 即畫中之畫, 亦即畫外之畫。

In this paper, I will demonstrate that as an artistic technique and principle with typical national aesthetic characteristics, the art of *intended blank* has a deep correspondence with the theory of the ‘the combination of nihility and reality 虛實相生’ of traditional Chinese philosophy,⁴ which is an allusion to Laozi’s theory of ‘existence and non-existence lies upon each other 有無相生’.⁵ First, I will analyze the relevant theories and ideas in Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism from ancient China. The theories of early thinkers like Confucius and Laozi have played an important role in the establishment of the foundation of Chinese culture. They have penetrated the developmental process of Chinese civilization and shaped some of the most basic foundational cultural aspects. For instance, the concept of emptiness and solidness in the arts such as calligraphy and painting originates from the theory of ‘rooting in nothingness 以虛無為本’ in the pre-Qin Taoist philosophy.⁶ Furthermore, I will discuss the meaning and function of the *intended blank* in Chinese painting in chronological order, combining contemporaneous Chinese classical philosophy and aesthetic theory to see how these aesthetic theories and painting skills have affected the presentation and style of Chinese fine art works. In the process of chronological development, the painters first used the technique of *intended blank* to make the paintings less crowded and let the paintings gain spirit. Then they used this method to create a sense of space and layering for the painting, making the scenery richer and more unified. Finally, with the refinement of this technique, the painters tried to render the artistic conception of the work with the technique of leaving white space. The aesthetic and philosophical theories were not only applied by artists in Chinese painting, but also communicated with calligraphy, literature, and poetry, showing a tendency to have great compatibility.

Theoretical Foundation

Intended blank is also called *blank* 空白, and elsewhere elegantly called *the remaining jade* 余玉. It is an important means to create a sense of space in Chinese painting. The main purpose is to create a unique artistic composition by leaving a blank space in the picture. The nihility and reality of the changes of the brush leave the viewer with unlimited imagination. Laozi, the representative voice of Taoism, says that “everything under the heaven is born from existence, and existence is born from nothingness 天下萬物生於有, 有生於無.”⁷ Laozi also has a text on the argument of existence or nonexistence through the interpretation of space, which illustrates the dialectical relationship of interdependence and transformation between existence and nonexistence. It is written in the *Laozi* that “the wheels are composed of thirty spokes connected to the rim and the hub, because of the space it creates, it has the role and function of a chariot; the utensils made of soil are also empty in the middle and this space is where they can really be used; building windows and doors to divide the room, creates the empty space which is the purpose of building houses. It can be seen that tangible objects are the conditions by which space is formed, and space is the really useful part.”⁸ The dialectical description of the existence of space in traditional Chinese philosophy is the dialectical relationship between “existence” and “nonexistence”, highlighting the value of “nonexistence,” which is the space. The so-called “nonexistence” of Laozi is not “nothing” in the general sense, both “existence” and “nonexistence” are in the fluctuating unity of opposites. Their dialectical relationship has always influenced the beauty of *intended blank* in Chinese aesthetics. Elsewhere, Laozi wrote “the great music is without sound, the great form is without shape 大音希聲, 大象無形.”⁹ The great music and the great form can contain everything because they are invisible and silent, making everything have potential possibilities, giving people infinite imagination space, which is higher than the reality presented. The question of nihility and reality is a

⁴ Da, C. (Qing Dynasty). *Hua Quan*

笪重光. (清). *畫筌* Original Text: 虛實相生, 無畫處皆成妙境.

⁵ Laozi. (Spring and Autumn Period). *Tao Te Ching*. Chapter 40.

老子. (春秋戰國). *道德經*. 第四十章.

⁶ Sima, T. (Han Dynasty). *On the Essentials of Six Schools*.

司馬談. (漢). *論六家要旨* Original Text: 道家無為, 又曰無不為. 其實易行, 其辭難知. 其術以虛無為本, 以因循為用. 無成執, 無常形, 故能究萬物之情.

⁷ Laozi. (Spring and Autumn Period). *Tao Te Ching*. Chapter 40. 老子. (春秋戰國). *道德經*. 第四十章.

⁸ Laozi. (Spring and Autumn Period). *Tao Te Ching*.

老子. (春秋戰國). *道德經*. Original Text: 三十輻共一轂, 當其無, 有車之用. 埴埴以為器, 當其無, 有器之用. 凿戶牖以為室, 當其無, 有室之用. 故有之以為利, 無之以為用.

⁹ Laozi. (Spring and Autumn Period). *Tao Te Ching*.

question of philosophical cosmology. Taoists believe that the universe is a combination of nihility and reality, that is, a combination of *Yin* and *Yang* in the *Book of Changes*. Laozi believes that emptiness is more real than reality, and is the cause of all reality. Without the existence of emptiness, nothing can grow and there is no vitality in life. This kind of cosmology is expressed in art, which requires that art must also be combined with solidness and emptiness, in order to truly reflect the living world.

Some classical Buddhist theories also laid a philosophical foundation for the art of leaving blank space. In the *Heart Sūtra*, there is a text which reads “one looked down and beheld that five Skandhas were all empty. Form does not differ from emptiness; emptiness does not differ from form. Form itself is emptiness; emptiness itself is form.”¹⁰ This means that the outside world is illusory, and people should return to the inner world of human beings, dilute the influence of external consciousness, and not be disturbed by foreign objects. In the Confucian doctrine, Confucius put forward the saying “where the solid qualities are in excess of patterns and decorations, we have rusticity; where the decorations are in excess of the solid qualities, we have the manners of a clerk. When the decorations and solid qualities are equally blended, we then have the man of virtue.”¹¹ It reflects Confucius's belief that too many complicated decorations will appear rigid and dull, and only the perfect combination of pattern and rusticity is the finest of anything. This philosophy of life can also be abstracted into a brush-and-ink form of painting art, that is, the proper combination of ink and blank space is the best in painting. At the same time, in the philosophy of Taoism and Confucianism, there is the concept of ‘yin and yang 陰陽’.

The subtle influence of Taoist, Confucian, and Buddhist theories on Chinese artists of the past dynasties is not only reflected in their artworks, but also in their writing. Wang Wei 王微 of the Southern Dynasty mentioned in his article *Narration on Painting 叙画* that painting is not only a craft, if it reaches the highest level, it should be as important as the Confucian classic *Book of Changes 易经*.¹² “The five colors indeed enhance people’s eyes” mentioned in the Qing Dynasty's *Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden* echoes Laozi’s idea of “the five colors blinds people’s eyes”¹³. Zong Bing 宗炳 of the Southern Dynasty also mentioned the positive influence of sages such as Confucius on landscape painting in the article *The Preface to Painting Landscapes 山水画序*.¹⁴ In the book *The Outline of Chinese Aesthetics History 中国美学史大纲*, Ye Lang 叶郎 proposed that a series of unique theories of Chinese classical aesthetics all originated from Laozi’s philosophy and Laozi’s aesthetics. Whether from a historical perspective or a logical perspective, Laozi’s aesthetics should be taken as the starting point of the history of Chinese aesthetics.¹⁵ Even though there are substantial differences between Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, they all have a wide and long influence on traditional Chinese culture and values. The aesthetic thoughts of each express a unified artistic conception that combines tangible and intangible, solidness and emptiness, and limited and unlimited, thus giving birth to this unique form of artistic expression of the *intended blank*.

The developmental history of the *intended blank* was originally based in the art form of painting, then it gradually developed into a concept used in calligraphy, poetry, literature, architecture and other fields. Dating back to the Warring States Period to the Han Dynasty, this artistic technique began to emerge in paintings like the *Silk Painting Depicting a Man Riding a Dragon 人物御龙图*, but there is no written evidence that painters were conscious about this method. In the landscape painting of the Jin Dynasty, the form of blank space continued to develop. Subsequently, Zhang Yanyuan 張彦遠 in the Tang Dynasty proposed the genre of *white painting 白畫* in *A Record of the Famous Paintings of All the Dynasties 歷代名畫記*, marking the formal formation of the theory of empty space. In addition, he also described the dense style painting and the sparse style painting 密體畫/疏體畫.¹⁶

¹⁰ *Heart Sūtra*. Original text: 照見五蘊皆空，度一切苦厄，色即是空，空即是色。

¹¹ Confucius. (Spring and Autumn Period). *The Analects of Confucius*. *Yongye*.

孔子. (春秋戰國). 論語·雍也. Original Text: 質勝文則野，文勝質則史，文質彬彬，然後君子。

¹² Wang Wei. (Southern Dynasty). *Narration on Painting*

王微. (南朝). *叙画* Original Text: 圖畫非止藝行，成當與《易》象同體。

¹³ Wang Gai, Wang Shi, Wang Nie. (Qing Dynasty) *Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden*

王概, 王翬, 王臬. (清朝). *芥子园画谱* Original Text: 五色實令人目聰哉

老子 Original text: 五色令人目盲

¹⁴ Zong Bing. (Southern Dynasty). *The Preface to Painting Landscapes*.

宗炳. (南朝). *山水画序* Original Text: 聖人含道暎物，賢者澄懷味像。至於山水，質有而靈趣，是以軒轅、堯、孔、廣成、大隗、許由、孤竹之流，必有崆峒、具茨、藐姑、箕、首、大蒙之遊焉。

¹⁵ Ye, L. (1985) *The Outline of Chinese Aesthetics History*, Shanghai: Shanghai People Publishing House.

葉朗. 中國美學史大綱. 上海: 上海人民出版社, 1985, p.23

¹⁶ Zhang, Y. (Tang Dynasty). *A Record of the Famous Paintings of All the Dynasties*

He claimed that the great thing about Zhang Sengyao 張僧繇 and Wu Daozi 吳道子 was they could make the image vivid with only a few strokes. This is the so-called barren brushwork with rich meaning.¹⁷ The dense style painting generally gives people a feeling of fullness and weight while the sparse style painting uses concise brushstrokes to show the spirit of the object. From the Tang Dynasty to the Five Dynasties, the use of blank techniques in paintings reached maturity. The aesthetic style of the Song Dynasty further changed from an elaborated style to a simpler composition, pursuing a pedestrian orientation of painting theory, which was mainly displayed in the landscape paintings of scholar-bureaucrats and literati. Before the Song, dense style paintings occupied the mainstream of painting, but after the Song, with the rise of literati paintings and freehand paintings, sparse body paintings gradually flourished, and the relationship between sparse and dense bodies also grew closer.¹⁸ The paintings of the Yuan and Ming Dynasties further pursued the ethereal realm by leaving blank space and opened up a new path with more casual approaches. The Qing Dynasty was a period of great success in the collection of ancient Chinese painting theories. It was during this period that the aesthetic value of the *intended blank* in paintings was fully appreciated by painters and critics.¹⁹ Da Chongguang, Wang Shigu, Yun Nantian, and others have all discussed the relationship between painted and unpainted areas, real scenes and empty scenes. In painting theory, the use of the artistic method of leaving blank space is raised to the level of aesthetics.

Spiritual Resonance 氣韻

The Southern dynasty art critic Xie He 謝赫 proposed in the *Old Record of the Classifications of Painters (Gu Hua Pin Lu, 古畫品錄)* that there are six elements in painting, of which the first is spiritual resonance (Qiyun 氣韻), which means vitality, and the fifth is division and planning, which means placing and arrangement.²⁰ Because Chinese painters put “spirit” (qi 氣) in the most important position for painting, they gradually let the spirit of



nature, the human spirit and the spirit of brush and ink be displayed in the picture. This is to make the original meaningless blank in the painting become the main method for expressing aesthetic spirit. The ancient Chinese often said that they did not seek resemblance, but to pursue the vividness and the spirit of the painting. The picture must create a sense of ease without density. If there is density, it brings boredom. Leaving white space seems to bring a glimmer of light to the feeling of being crowded in the painting, and the rhythm and spirit follow with it. In addition, for the first time, Lu Ji 陸機 of the Western Jin Dynasty introduced the concept of nihilism and reality into aesthetic theory. He believed that it was necessary to give abstract form to concrete forms and give sound to silent things.²¹ This view is not only widely used in Chinese literary works, but also can be applied to paintings from the aesthetic point that the combination of blank space and ink can make the painting achieve a sense of openness and clarity.

Figure 1: *The Nymph of the Luo River* 洛神賦圖

Source: National Museum of Asian Art, <https://asia.si.edu/object/F1914.53/>

張彥遠 (唐) *歷代名畫記* Original Text: 畫有疏密二體，方一可議乎畫

¹⁷ Zhang, Y. (Tang Dynasty). *A Record of the Famous Paintings of All the Dynasties* 張彥遠 (唐) *歷代名畫記* Original Text: 顧、陸之神，不可見其盼際，所謂筆跡周密也；張、吳之妙，筆才一二，像已應焉，離披點畫，時見缺落，此所謂筆不周而意周也。

¹⁸ Shen, Z. (1984). *Compilation of famous works on painting in the past dynasties*. Beijing: Cultural Relics Publishing House. P.623 沈子丞. (1984). *歷代論畫名著錄編(M)*, 文物出版社. 第623頁

¹⁹ Pan, Y. (2003). *Qing Dynasty Painting Theory*. Hunan: Hunan Fine Arts Publishing House. 潘運告. *清代畫論*. (2003). 湖南美術出版社.

²⁰ Xie, H. (Southern Dynasty). *Old Record of the Classifications of Painters*. 謝赫. (南朝). *古畫品錄*.

²¹ Lu, J. (Jin Dynasty). *Essay on Literature*. 陸機. (西晉). *文賦*. Original Text: 課虛無以責有，叩寂寞而求音。

Long before landscape painting became an independent genre, Chinese painting had a unique element of leaving blank space. It is an element of painting because this kind of blank space was intentionally left out by the painter when painting on rice paper or silk. It is a symbolic element unique to Chinese painting and extremely rich in content. One of the typical examples is the large amount of blank space in *The Nymph of the Luo River* 洛神賦圖 (Figure 1) painted by Gu Kaizhi 顧愷之, one of the originators of Chinese landscape painting, with the landscape as the background. The whole painting is divided into three parts, which depicts the sincere and pure love story between Cao Zhi 曹植 and Luoshen 洛神 with a well-structured composition. A series of consecutive pictures are used to express a complete plot. The characters in the pictures are densely arranged, and repeatedly show up consistently at different points in time and space. In depicting the scenery of mountains and rivers, the painter skillfully used the elements of mountains, rocks, trees, rivers, etc., in the background to divide the picture into different plots. The main characters reappear with the display of the narratives, and time and space are blended together, making the picture both separate and connected at the same time. It is coherent and continuous from the beginning of the scroll to the end in a harmonious and unified way, showing a kind of spatial beauty. Although the spatial relationship between the figures and nature in the picture is not very coordinated, and the structure of mountains, rocks, trees and rivers is also very simple, through the blank space in the picture, a rich sense of hierarchy of layering is created, and the changes of the landscapes are also shown. The blank space in the background not only contributes to the process of pictorial narrative flow, but also aids in making the entire picture less crowded, allowing viewers to understand the narrative of the story easily and accordingly.



Figure 2: Stroll About in Spring 游春圖

Source: China Online Museum,

<http://www.chinaonlinemuseum.com/painting-zhan-ziqian.php>

Moreover, in Gu Kaizhi's writing *Record on Painting Yuntai Mountain* 畫雲台山記, he mentioned the use of similar skills of leaving blank space, as what he did in his own paintings.²² These blank spaces greatly reduce the density of the picture and create a sense of ease, providing the viewer a place to breathe and rest.

Although the term of the *intended blank* had not appeared at the time, the history of Chinese landscape painting for more than a thousand years proves that the element of blank space has always been one of the dominant elements in the artistic conception of Chinese landscape painting. *Stroll About in Spring* 游春圖 (Figure 2), one of the oldest landscape paintings in China, painted by Sui 隋 Dynasty painter Zhan Ziqian 展子虔, is a relatively small landscape scroll painting themed on a spring tour. Regardless of the small size of the painting, the overall scene is very wide open. The picture adopts the top-view method for framing, and gathers the distant scene and the near scene together into the middle scene, so that the scenes of all places are unified and harmoniously intact in the painting, with clear layers and a very distinctive composition method. The upper right part of the painting is mainly the depiction of the mountains, with many high hills painted. On the lower right side of the picture, a mountain path is drawn. The path is composed of low trees and grass and becomes an extension of the towering high mountain on the upper right. In this way, the mountains become the background of the mountain path, and the mountain path becomes the paving and display of the details of the mountains which makes the whole picture more unified and coherent. On the lower left side of the painting, the painter painted a low hill. This small hill is a counterpart to the high mountains on the right side in stark contrast. In the middle of the picture, there is a large blank space to manifest river and sky blending together. Except for some water ripples and a small boat, the middle part that occupies almost one-third of the painting is blank. This creates a picture where water and sky meet and contributes to the openness of the landscape. The blankness of landscape paintings and the beauty of their changes can make the picture harmonious with yin and yang, and create a spirit with vivid charm and infinite imagination. This is a concrete manifestation of

²² Gu, K. (Jin Dynasty). *Record on Painting Yuntai Mountain*.

顧愷之. (晉). 畫雲台山記. Original text: 西方通雲台以表路, 路左闕峰似岩為根, 根下空絕, 並諸石重勢, 岩相承以合東礪。

Chinese painters observing nature, understanding traditional Chinese thoughts, and using silk or rice paper skillfully, and it is the aesthetic nature of Chinese landscape painting.

Spatial Sense

The traditional Chinese landscape paintings have led the changes in the “partial blanks” with the large space of the

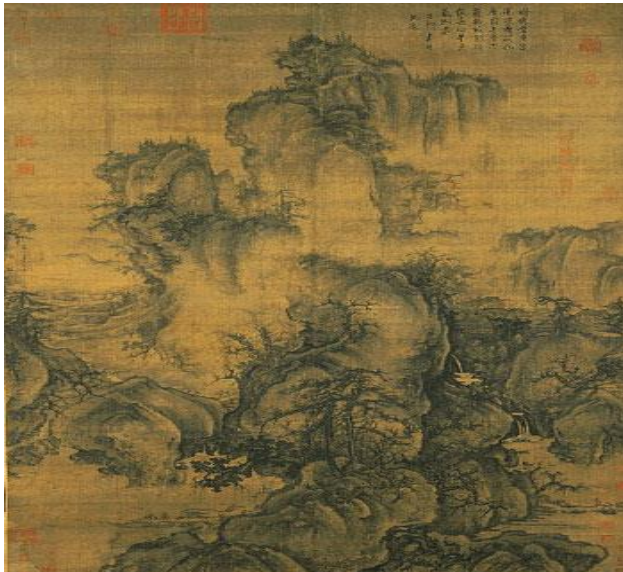


Figure 3: Early Spring 早春圖

Source: China Online Museum,
<https://www.comuseum.com/painting/masters/guo-xi/early-spring/>

smog covers the half-mountainside, so that the distant peaks have a rising trend, which highlights the towering height and momentum. The artist's treatment of the water cloud is close to leaving a large blank area. There is no clear-shaped cloud in the picture, and it is cleverly covered with fog and mist with partial blanks. The distant mountains gradually disappear with the water vapor of the hilltop of the middle scene, and the sense of depth is very strong. The main scenery is concentrated on the central axis. The near-view boulders and tall pine trees connect to the curved rocks of the middle scene and the distant mountains are separated by clouds and fog. Those large blank areas together with the partial blanks that form the mists, clouds, streams, or the air between trees and rocks play a pivotal role in constructing this sense of distance and space, and they also give a balance to the composition.

In *Canglang Poetry Talks* 滄浪詩話, a Chinese poetic criticism compiled in the Southern Song Dynasty, Yan Yu 嚴羽 evaluated the poets of the prosperous Tang Dynasty, saying “There’s an end to the words, but not to their message 言有盡而意無窮”²⁴ which is also reflected in the literati paintings: although the ink is limited, the emotion and imaginary space conveyed are infinite. This theory is derived from Zhuangzi's dialectics of “tangible” and “intangible”, “words” and “meaning”.²⁵ Among the traditional landscape paintings with *intended blanks*, the most representative are the works of the Southern Song Dynasty painters Ma Yuan 馬遠 and Xia Gui 夏圭. These two painters are often called “Ma Yijiao” (literal meaning One Corner, 馬一角) and “Xia Banbian” (literal meaning Half Space, 夏半邊)²⁶ because they often left large blanks in their paintings. Among them, Ma Yuan's *Fishing*

²³ Guo, X. (Northern Song). *The Lofty Message of Forest and Streams*

郭熙. (北宋). 林泉高致

²⁴ Yan, Y. (Southern Song). *Canglang Poetry Talks*.

嚴羽. (南宋). 滄浪詩話

²⁵ Zhuangzi, (Warring States). *Zhuangzi Autumn Water*

庄子·秋水. Original text: 夫精粗者，期于有形者也；无形者，数之所不能分也；不可围者，数之所不能穷也。可以言论者，物之粗也；可以意致者，物之精也；言之所不能论，意之所不能察致者，不期精粗焉。

²⁶ Li, Z. (2001). *Huaxia Aesthetics*. Tianjin: Tianjin Academy of Social Sciences Press

李泽厚. 华夏美学[M]. 天津: 天津社会科学院出版社. 2001.

Alone in the Cold Mountains 寒山獨釣圖 (Figure 4) uses a lot of blank space as the background. In the middle, there is an old man fishing on a boat. In addition to a few waves, there are only a few strokes representing sandy shores. The large blank spaces in the picture represent both water and sky, making people feel that the water surface is vast, and the water appears to stretch endlessly to the horizon, creating a lonely and tranquil atmosphere. The painter paints very little, but viewers wouldn't think the picture is empty. It is this blank space that shows the vast river and the strong sense of space, and it also highlights the sense of being alone, which sets off the cold and sorrowful atmosphere on the river, and provides room for imagination and allows viewers to fit into the painting. Painters like Guo Xi, Ma Yuan and Xia Gui use the large space of the blank to guide the details between the mountains and rocks, setting off the brushwork and ink on the "one corner" or "half space". They pushed the creative methods of concise composition, partial framing, and imagination to an extreme. In their works, although the objects only occupy one corner or less than half of the picture, the whole picture is very vivid and full of potential. In fact, this is a painting composition method that is dominated by the large blanks, and assisted by the subtle blanks created by the stiff and variable hooks, cracks, dots, and dyes that create landscape paintings with flexible spirit and profound influence.

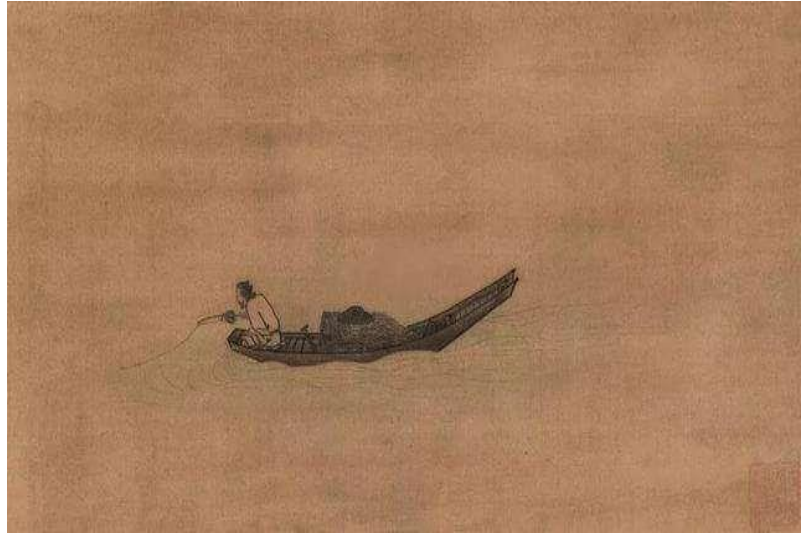


Figure 4: Fishing Alone in the Cold Mountains 寒山獨釣圖
Source: WikiArt, <https://www.wikiart.org/en/ma-yuan/angler-on-a-winery-lake-detail-1195>

Artistic Concept 意境



Figure 5: Six Gentlemen 六君子圖
Source: China Online Museum, <https://www.comuseum.com/painting/masters/ni-zan/#ni-zan-six-gentlemen>

In the Yuan, Ming, and Qing Dynasties, painters paid special attention to "learning from the ancients 師古", and literati landscape paintings and freehand paintings were all vigorously developed on the basis of the inheritance of previous generations of painters. Chinese painters had become more proficient in the application of the technique of leaving blanks, and at the same time, there were many painting theories and art criticisms preserved. The Yuan Dynasty painter Ni Zan's *Six Gentlemen* 六君子圖 (Figure 5) adopted the three-stage composition method, with distant mountains, a lake, and a low hill and trees. The close view of the painting is the tenacious growth of six trees between the rocks. The middle view is some cloud-like, fog-like and water-like blank space that occupies most of the space of the painting, reflecting profound and quiet charm, and a touch of distant mountains at the top makes the whole picture very wide. The harmonious rhythm, the neat picture, and the painter's ink and brush are just right. It seems that adding an extra stroke will make the picture dirty. The gently rolling distant mountains are located at about a quarter of the way from the top of the painting. Taking this as the boundary, the upward blank space is the sky, and the downward blank space is the water surface, which constitutes the distant view of the painting. Close to the bottom of the picture are the trees, which occupy less than a quarter of the entire picture. A large part of the blank water surface in the middle of the picture, that is, an empty space that occupies half of the entire picture, looks so open and comfortable, and the whole

picture is sparse and tranquil. Ni Zan can often create a unique aura in his landscape scrolls, leaving infinite reveries in the emptiness, so that the audience has a stronger sense of participation when viewing the paintings. His style of painting is simple, and the mountains are often separated by open space, which not only shows the sense of distance, but also explores the true characteristics of things in a unique perspective arrangement. Keeping the white space just right and making the paintings present a profound artistic conception is the embodiment of Ni Zan's profound painting skills and elegant aesthetic taste. Grand, vast, and many-layered landscape paintings gradually gave way to “bland and faint” scenes of bleak winter trees or wide-open undefined spaces. This is the reason that we often find in later Chinese painting theories ideas like “unpainted space becomes the finest space,” and why the emphasis came to be on the lingering flavor of the ink and the art of sketching with a dry brush.²⁷ Traditional Chinese painting attaches great importance to the treatment of blank space, and pays attention to the artistic conception of scene blending, which has been prominently confirmed here.

The brushstroke techniques and creative painting methods of previous painters had tremendous impact on painters of later times. Qian Du's 錢杜 *Painting Memories of Pine Pot* 松壺畫憶 in the Qing Dynasty says that if mounds and hills are too solid, they should be placed with waterfalls in between, if the mounds and hills are not enough, it should be placed with clouds and mists in between, and the most important point in landscape painting is that it is better to leave blank spaces than to make the picture too crowded.²⁸ In the development of the painting technique of leaving intentional blank spaces, the artistic conception created in the blank space is often the key in a painting. Artistic conception, a core issue of Chinese traditional aesthetics and artistic creation, is the soul of the art of poetry and painting, which has always been regarded as the highest aesthetic pursuit, especially among literati. It refers to a state where the scene described in an artistic work reflects the sense and sensibility intended. In the Qing Dynasty, Da Chongguang 笪重光 proposed that by combining nihility and reality, where there is no ink, there is the finest space.²⁹ This raises the use of the art of leaving blank to the level of aesthetics in theory. In the Qing dynasty, Tang Yifen 湯貽汾 commented on this: “People know that where there is ink is painting, but do not know that where there is no ink is also painting. The empty space in the painting is the key to the overall situation and this is the method of combining nihility and reality.”³⁰ Yun Ge's 惲格 *Nantian Painting Postscript* 南田畫跋 in the Qing Dynasty also says that the attentive intention of the ancients lies in the place where there is no ink.³¹ The creation and formation of artistic conception are closely related to the construction and appreciation of the image. The Qing Dynasty painter Fang Shishu 方士庶 said in his *Tian Kang An Essay* 天慷庵隨筆 that the mountains, rivers and trees are natural, and this is the reality. The painter creates the scenes by heart, and transports the heart by hand, and this is the nihility. What makes the nihility into reality is the existence and non-existence of the brushwork.³² The insubstantiality of the idea in the artist's heart is realized on the paper by means of brush and ink. The so-called “creating the scenes by heart” is not to ignore nature, but to emphasize understanding. The literati painting opened a precedent of “reflecting one's aspiration by portraying image of objects 託物言志” and “expressing one's emotion by using the scenes 借景抒情”, and strove to create an ethereal artistic concept through painting. Blank space plays a crucial role in the creation of Chinese paintings. The so-called “reality” is the real objects and materials of paintings and the “nihility” is the blank space. To combine them together perfectly is to make the perfect balance of the two and achieve the best realm of the artistic concept.

The artistic concept also fully reveals the implication and the heightened aesthetic sense that the artistic work is intended to deliver. The concept is extended to include other notions such as sentiment and scene, actual and implied meanings, or mind and object. It also raises literary and artistic works to a new realm of aesthetic appreciation. In addition to landscape painting, Zen painting and freehand painting also fully apply the technique of

²⁷ Li, Zehou. (2010) *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*. University of Hawai'i Press, p.179

²⁸ Qian, D. (Qing Dynasty). *Painting Memories of Pine Pot*

錢杜. (清). *松壺畫憶*. Original Text: 丘壑太实, 须间以瀑布, 不足, 间以烟云, 山水之要宁空毋实

²⁹ Da, C. (Qing Dynasty). *Hua Quan*

笪重光. (清). *畫筌*. Original Text: 虛實相生, 無畫處皆成妙境.

³⁰ Wang, B. & Ren, D. (2002). *Painting Theory Integration (Ming-Qing)*. Shijiazhuang: Hebei Meishu Publishing House. 王伯敏,任道斌. (2002) *畫學集成 (明-清)* 石家莊: 河北美術出版社. Original Text: 人但知有畫處是畫, 不知無畫處皆畫, 畫之空處全局關, 及虛實相生法。

³¹ Yun, G. (Qing Dynasty). *Nantian Painting Postscript*

惲格. (清). *南田畫跋*. Original Text: 古人用心, 在无笔墨处

³² Fang, S. (Qing). *Tian Kang An Essay*

方士庶. (清). *天慷庵隨筆*. Original text: 山川草木,造化自然,此实境也。因心造景,以手运心,此虚境也。虚而为实,是在笔墨有无间。

leaving blank to create an artistic conception. It is often thought that Wang Wei 王維 is the first who initiated Zen painting in the history of Chinese painting.³³ His Zen painting initiated the landscape arts in Tang Dynasty and has a widespread and great influence on later painting. In the book *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, Li Zehou 李泽厚 states that the artistic conception of Zen is characterized by “blandness”, and the emergence of Zen has enriched the psychological structure of Chinese people.³⁴ The blank space in Chinese painting is perceptual, it is irrational, and it does not have to be realistic. As a kind of thought phenomenon in Chinese cultural history, the prosperity of Zen Buddhism has brought a deep impact on arts in the expressive content and expressive form, and especially exerted a direct influence on the vigorous growth of literati painting. As one of the most important artistic expressions in Chinese painting, leaving a blank space pays attention to the changes and echoes between blanks. Such echoes and changes are asserted through expressions, gestures and trends of the figures constructed by the movement of lines and the depth of ink.

The Five Dynasties 五代 painter Shi Ke's 石恪 *Two Patriarch in Contemplation* 二祖調心圖, the Song Dynasty painter Liang Kai's 梁楷 *Li Bai Chanting in Stroll* 李白行吟圖 and Muqi's 牧溪 *Six Persimmons* 六柿圖 all have simple and light ink outlines; there is no other brushstroke except the main body of the picture. Nevertheless, the viewer can still feel the vividness from the simple brushstrokes, and the paintings leave a lot of room for imagination. The Ming Dynasty painter Xu Wei's 徐渭 and the Qing Dynasty painter Zhu Da 朱耷 (Also known as Bada Shanren 八大山人) often used simple lines to depict very few elements such as flowers, birds, stones or fishes to compose a painting. In Xu's *Grapes* 墨葡萄圖 and Zhu's *Two Birds* 二鳥圖, elements are very few, but the blank technique is exquisite. The painters are good at painting with refined brushstrokes such that a few strokes become a painting with a few inscriptions. The composition of the picture has a clear relationship between black, white and gray, with bold white space of extraordinary charm and strong artistic concept of Zen. The blank space is one of the most distinctive features in Zen paintings. The sceneries are highly summarized, with different degrees of black ink, but at the same time, they can also express the artistic conception that the painter wants to create.

Conclusion

The space in Chinese painting is constructed with association and imagination, and the method of combining reality and nihility is an essential technique to create a vast and far-reaching space. Just like the core content presented by the thoughts of ancient Chinese Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism, nihility and reality are closely linked, and they are a unity that is both opposite and indivisible. If any one side is lost, it will not be able to reach the artistic effect of spatial sense. Without the exchange between existence and nonexistence, there would be no rhythm and spirit in art. In the Ming Dynasty, Gu Ningyuan 顧凝遠 mentions in *Painting Introduction* 畫引 that the spirit resonance can be in the scenes or out of the scenes.³⁵ Wang Yu 王昱 of the Qing Dynasty in *Dongzhuang's Painting Theory* 東莊畫論 commented that the wonderful part of Wang Yuanqi's 王原祁 paintings is not in position, but in the spirit resonance; not in the visible, but in the invisible.³⁶ This is an evaluation of the charm and spirit produced by “nonexistence.” Qing Dynasty Qin Zuyong's 秦祖永 *Tongyang On Painting* 桐陽論畫 said that when talking about the position and the composition, there always has to be an exchange of spirit without being crowded. This means that if the left part is empty, the right side should be solid, and vice versa.³⁷ From the perspective of the spatial structure of Chinese painting, the blank plays the role of dividing the picture. Only when there is a blank, can there be a spatial relationship of up, down, left and right. Qing Dynasty painter Shi Tao 石

³³ Zou, J. (1988). *Summary of Chinese Painting Theories*. Jiangsu: Jiangsu Fine Arts Publishing House.
周積寅. (1988) *中國畫論輯要*. 江蘇美術出版社.

³⁴ Li, Zehou. (2010) *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*. University of Hawai'i Press, p.177

³⁵ Gu, N. (Ming Dynasty). *Painting Introduction*.

顧凝遠. (明). *畫引*. Original Text: 气韵或在境中，亦在境中，亦在境外。

³⁶ Wang, Y. (Qing Dynasty). *Dongzhuang's Painting Theory*

王昱. (清). *東莊畫論*. Original Text: 奇者不在位置，而在气韵之间；不在有形处，而在无形处。

³⁷ Qin, Z. (Qing Dynasty). *Tongyang On Painting*.

秦祖永. (清). *桐陽論畫*. Original Text: 章法位置，总要灵气来往，而不可窒塞，大约左虚右实，右虚左实。布景一定之法，至变化错综，各随人心得耳。

writes in his *Discourse on Landscape* 石濤畫語錄 that painters are those who follow their heart³⁸, which affirms the important role and key point of the subjective emotional “heart” in painting; it is the painter's state of mind that created a painting's artistic conception. This kind of aesthetic character not only permeates the philosophy of the Chinese painting, but also shines in other art categories such as literature, music, and architecture. The research on the technique of the *intended blank* in art works can be used as a basis for future research on the technique of *intended blank* in other art forms, and more related similarities and differences need to be further studied.

20th century Chinese aesthetician Zong Baihua 宗白華 believes that Chinese painting attaches the most importance to blank space. The blank space is not really blank, but the place where the spirit moves.³⁹ Also, he argues that if you take the emptiness as whiteness then it becomes complete nothingness; if you take the solid part as concrete completely, then the object will lose its liveliness; only by putting emptiness into solidness and turning solidness into emptiness, there is endless imagination.⁴⁰ The white space carries the dual function of nihilism and reality; that is the white space representing the artistic concept and atmosphere and the actual whiteness (white walls, high-gloss surfaces of leaves and stones, water waves and waterfalls, etc.). Looking at the Chinese landscape paintings from the Jin 晉 dynasty, the painter's handling of the blank space shows how high their artistic composition ability is. The ability to deal with the relationship between the size, shape, density, unevenness, and other elements of the blank space represents the strength of his brushwork and modeling skills. The ability to deal with the grayscale changes of the white space and the black-and-white contrast with the adjacent objects reflects his ink using skills and the degree of sublimation of his thoughts and feelings. Under the guidance of traditional Chinese philosophy and aesthetics, Chinese artists used the intended blank space to create the spirit resonance 氣韻 and help guide the narrative in their paintings, creating an exquisite sense of space and giving the paintings a unique artistic conception.

Since the 20th century, Chinese painters such as Pan Tianshou 潘天壽, Huang Binhong 黃賓虹, and Qi Baishi 齊白石 are not only good at leaving white space to create a unique charm, but also good at using ink to compose their paintings. Nowadays, Chinese painters go deep into the tradition and derive nourishment from the tradition. They use the techniques of solid and blank, sparseness and density, dark and light to shape the space. According to different themes and different objects, they can flexibly deal with the relationship between nihilism and the reality in the space, giving full play to the advantages of completeness, narrative nature and flexibility of Chinese painting, so that their works have more national characteristics. The research on the application and development of the technique of leaving blank in Chinese paintings of various dynasties can also help us better understand the aesthetic theories contained in modern Chinese paintings.

³⁸ Shi, T. (Qing Dynasty). *Discourse on Landscape* 石濤. (清). 石濤畫語錄

³⁹ Zong, B. (2011). *Idea-scape: Understanding Imagery in the Chinese Poetic Tradition*. Commercial Press

宗白華. (2011). 藝境. 商務印書館. Original Text: 中國畫最重空白處。空白處並非真空，乃靈氣往來生命流動之處。且空而後能簡，簡而練，則理趣橫溢，而脫略形跡。然此境不易到也，必畫家人格高尚，秉性堅貞，不以世俗利害營於胸中，不以時代好尚惑其心志：乃能沉潛深入萬物核心，得其理趣，胸懷灑落，莊子所謂能與天地精神往來者，乃能隨手拈來都成妙諦。

⁴⁰ Zong, B. (1981). *Aesthetic walk*. Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House

宗白華. (1981). 美學散步. 上海人民出版社. Original Text: 以虛為虛，就是完全的虛無；以實為實，景物就是死的，不能動人；惟有以實為虛，化實為虛，就有無窮的意味，幽遠的意境。

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Notes on Author

Tianyi Zhang is a second-year Ph.D. student in the Art History Department of Arizona State University, with a concentration in 20th century Chinese art. She graduated from the University of Pennsylvania with an MA degree in the East Asian Languages and Civilization in 2020, and University College London with an MA degree in Art History in 2018. Her research focuses on art during the Second Sino-Japanese War and the artistic interaction between China and the wider world, with particular attention paid to female artists and the migration of artists during the war.