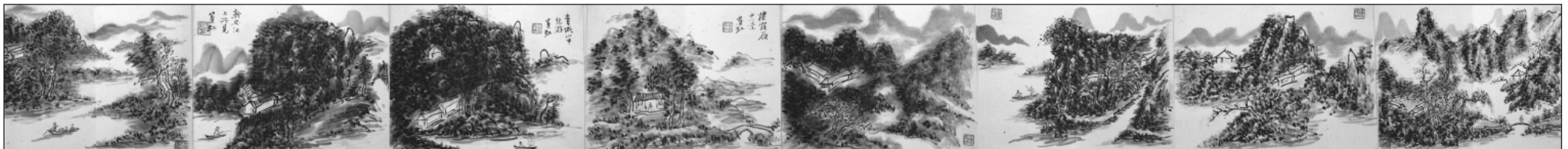


Tradition in twentieth century Chinese painting

The principles of the Chinese painting tradition derive from Daoism, which emphasises the unity of humanity and nature together with the release of an individual's creativity. The stressing of empty space or void is also a Daoist feature. Twentieth century China experienced enormous political and cultural changes, that had tremendous impact on the traditions of Chinese painting, which faced unprecedented challenges from both political interference and from the massive influx of Western ideology. Followed the May 4th Movement in 1919, Chinese painting started the process of 'wedding of the East to West', during which its historical traditions were challenged. Politically, since the 1940s, Chinese art centered around Mao Zedong (1893–1976)'s dictum that 'art should serve the masses', consequently traditional forms and subject matters suffered, especially during the so-called 'Cultural Revolution' (1966–76), when very few well-known artists escaped persecution, losing their right to create artworks. Together with traditional philosophies which were replaced by Marxism, Leninism and Maoism, the literati painting tradition was replaced by a revolutionary realism, based on a Western-derived academic realism. Following the implementation of the 'Open Door Policy' in 1978, freedom gradually returned to the artists, the Chinese painting tradition was painfully revived and since the mid 1980s, Chinese artists have explored and experimented with a wide range of ideas in response to the forceful tide of Western art, causing a fierce debate about whether traditional Chinese painting should be abandoned as an art form or whether it should be modernized or westernized. However, looking back over twentieth century Chinese painting, its unique traditions have not only miraculously survived but have been infused with a new vitality by artists

Huang Binhong (1864 – 1955)
Landscape, Ink and colour on paper
Album of eight double leaves



Qi Baishi (1863 – 1957)
Chicks, 1933, ink and colour
on paper

is emptiness, what is emptiness that is form' (*Pāramitā Hridaya Sūtra*). Chinese painting has been mainly influenced by these two schools, therefore, the concept of empty space has had a significant impact on Chinese painting.

such as Wu Changshuo (1844–1927), Qi Baishi (1863–1957), Huang Binhong (1864–1955), Huang Qiuyuan (1914–79), Pan Tianshou (1897–1971) and many others.

The concept of empty space

Empty space is a philosophical concept, it is a synonymy of void or nothingness. Daoism advocated 'attaining the limit of empty space, retaining extreme stillness (*Lao Zi* 16), further regarding that 'only the Dao (Way) accumulates space. Space is the fasting of the heart' (*Zhuangzi* Chapter 4, *Worldly Business Among Humans*). Empty space is regarded as the beginning of the myriad things, so it can be regarded as a foundation of Daoist philosophy. The Chan (*zen*) school of Buddhism also emphasises that 'what is form that is



Guan Liang (1900 – 1986)
Opera figure, 1979, ink and colour
on paper

Empty spaces and solids

One prominent characteristic of Chinese painting is its treatment of empty space as solid space. Lao Zi stated, 'Knowing the white, retaining the black, it is the form of the world' (*Lao Zi*, Chapter 28). White in Chinese painting suggests emptiness whilst black signifies solidity. In Chinese calligraphy, empty space is named 'designing the white'; The very charm in Chinese literature lies where it is without words; in music, where it is soundless conveys more than



Pu Ru (1896 – 1963)
Figure in a mountain landscape,
ink and colour on paper

sound; in painting it is that if one's mind can reach there, there is no need for the touch of any brush and 'formless is the image grand' (*Lao Zi*, Chapter 41). In Chinese art, empty space is usually more difficult to deal with than solids, as it needs to convey information by means of a lack of image, the sizes and contours of the spaces are usually various, often akin to living creatures, so the very absence of content can itself create rhythm and consonance. If the picture space is filled, it is blocked making the viewer take a glance yet leaving no after taste. Certainly, the relationship of the two elements is that if there is no solid likewise there is no empty space and vice versa.

In a landscape painting empty space often indicates cloud, mist, sky, water or smoke, partly depending on the suggestions that the solid forms supply. Nonetheless, the real mystery of the emptiness is that empty space refers to *qi (chi)*, a cosmological term which is formless, but bestows life to Chinese painting.

If one is able to realize how the ancients applied their minds to the absence of brush and ink, one is not far from reaching the divine quality in painting.

Yun Shouping (1633 – 1690)



Zhao Shao'ang (1905 – 1998)
Flower, Ink and colour on paper

Empty space and *qi*

Without *qi*, empty space cannot be differentiated from blank space. The first canon of Chinese painting describes its rhythmic vitality, which refers to *qi*, a metaphysical concept of a cosmic power. The original meaning of *qi* is applied to the air we breathe or to all gaseous substances. Since air is essential for us to breathe, *qi* has been considered as the principle of life in painting, and if *qi* is lacking, a painting will appear lifeless. *Qi* comes from an artist's inner self, it is a result of the interaction between the artist and the object. Empty space in a painting is where *qi* dwells or flows. When *qi* is still, a painting appears tranquil; when *qi* moves then a painting is dynamic and full of life.

Text by Weimin He

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