

Fusion into One: Exploring the Complementarity of Shitao's *Waterfall on Mount Lu* and Its Inscribed Poem

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ABSTRACT

Shitao's famous poem-painting *Waterfall on Mount Lu* has generated a great interest in the field of Chinese paintings. However, the purpose of the work remains a topic of discussion among scholars. From the standpoint of complementarity of poetry and painting, this paper discusses the work through a close examination of the painting and its inscribed poem. The interartistic features of the painting and the poem are interpreted in terms of their themes, structures, and imagery. The Chinese aesthetic concept of artistic mood (*yijing*) is employed to illustrate the connection among these elements. This paper demonstrates that the holistic approach to the poem-painting helps illuminate its Daoist theme of unity of man and nature. This paper also highlights a structural contrast between the secular world and the eternal world expressed in the poem-painting.

INTRODUCTION

Shitao (1642-1707) was a renowned Chinese painter in the early Qing Dynasty in China. He is well-known for his landscape paintings, among which the painting *Waterfall on Mount Lu* and its inscribed poem "Lushan yao ji Lu shi yu Xuzhou" by Li Bai (701-762) remains controversial in the studies of Chinese paintings. Scholars have different views on interpreting this poem-painting. Some take a realist approach to the work, arguing that the painting is a real representation of the landscape based on the painter's travel experience on Mount Lu and another inscription on the poem (He, 2013; Yu, 2004; Yue, 2017). Others offer Daoist interpretations (Burkus-Chasson, 1996; Zheng, 2016), citing the Daoist references in the poem or analyzing the painting from the Daoist ecological aesthetic perspective. Given this controversy, the relationship between the painting and the poem deserves further investigation.

In the field of interartistic study of Chinese poetry and painting, scholars have recognized the complexity of the relationship between paintings and their inscriptions. They have noticed the complementary nature of the two arts in representing the meanings of the works. For example, studying the

poem-paintings by some Chinese painters, Jonathan Chaves (1991) notices "the specific imagistic resonances between the verbal structure of the poem and the pictorial structure of the painting" (p. 442). To him, all the fully integrated poem-paintings he discusses have components which are missing in either of the two works of art, thus complementing to each other and "resonate in such a way as to add extra dimensions to the total experience" (p. 448). Similarly, James Cahill brings to our attention this complementary nature of poetry and painting in representing what is unrepresented in each art. In an intertextual analysis of Kun Can's paintings and inscriptions, Cahill (1991) notes that "the imagery of the inscriptions corresponds at only a few points to that of the paintings; the paintings can never be read simply as illustrations to the poems or the poems as simply descriptive of the paintings" (p. 518).

This paper aims to discuss Shitao's painting *Waterfall on Mount Lu* and its inscribed poem from the vantage point of complementarity of painting-poem. Based on the close reading of the painting and the inscribed poem, the author believes that the holistic approach to the integral work enables us to detect the Daoist theme, which is stated explic-

itly in the poem, but is expressed implicitly in the painting. The inscribed poem, in this case, serves as a “decoder” for the painting. The Daoist theme of unity of man with nature found in the work will be examined in terms of “*yijing*” 意境 or artistic mood—a classical Chinese aesthetic concept with the strong Daoist influence. The key to understanding the work lies in the understanding of its artistic mood, which is based on the fusion of the human feelings and the scene, the unity of the real and the unreal, and the unity of the phenomenal world and the world beyond. Thus, in this paper I will review briefly the concept of artistic mood. Then I will analyze the poem-painting in terms of their themes, structures, imagery, and examine the artistic mood demonstrated in it.

A BRIEF REVIEW OF ARTISTIC MOOD (*YIJING*)

As an important concept in Chinese aesthetics, artistic mood (*yijing*) can be traced back to the ancient Chinese Daoism and Buddhism. In Daoism, the relationship between word (*yan*) 言, meaning (*yi*) 意, and image (*xiang*) 象 is emphasized. The idea that the eternal *Dao* is ineffable is essential to the understanding of the relationship. In the book *Thus spoke Laozi*, Laozi (2016) questions the adequacy of language for expressing *Dao*. As he says, “Ways may be spoken of as *dao*, but they are not the eternal *Dao*; Names may be cited as names, but they are not the eternal name” (p. 3). The eternal *Dao* is not only nameless, but also formless and intangible. On the omnipresence and magnitude of *Dao*, Laozi (2016) makes the following comparisons, “Great music has little sound; Great Image has no form” (94). Zhuangzi (c. 369 BC.-c. 286 BC) also makes a similar comment on language in relation to meaning. He believes that language is only a tool for grasping meanings. Once one understands the meanings, one can forget the tool. In the popular story about the trap and the fish, Zhuangzi (1968) says, “Words exist because of meaning; once you’ve gotten the meanings, you can forget the words” (p. 302). Wang Bi (226-249), the Neo-Daoist in the Three-Kingdoms period, further elaborates the relationship between word, image, and meaning, stating that one can forget the words and images after obtaining the meanings (Han, 1995, p. 60). It is noteworthy that the Daoist concepts of word, image and meaning are essentially related to “the phenomenal world” and “the world beyond” in the concept of artistic mood.

Buddhism in the Jin, Sui, and Tang Dynasties also contributes to the development of the concept of artistic mood. For example, Zhu Daosheng (355?-434), a well-known Buddhist scholar in the Jin Dynasty, comments that words and images all serve the purpose of understanding the Buddhist truth. As he says, “Images are used for getting the truth. If you stick to the images, you cannot get the truth.” “Once you obtain the meanings, you can forget the images. “Once you attain the truth, you can get rid of the words” (Han, 1995, p. 60). Sengzhao (384-414), another Buddhist scholar in the Jin Dynasty, compares the state of attaining Nirvana to a state far more beautiful than the most sublime words can convey, and to a state transcending the imagistic world (Han, 1995, p. 61). Again, the adequacy of language is questioned by Buddhism then. One example is the Zen Buddhism in the Tang Dynasty, which believes that one should go beyond

language in order to attain the Buddha-nature (Han, 1995, p. 61).

The philosophical and religious discussions of the relationship between word, meaning, and image in Daoism and Buddhism have greatly influenced the formation of the concept of artistic mood in Chinese theories of literature and arts. Commenting on the paintings of some Chinese painters, Xie He (479-502) says, “If a painter restrains himself to painting objects only, then he cannot grasp the essence. But if he tries to understand what is unrepresented beyond the phenomenal world, he will be fed up with the fertile land. And that can be called a miracle” (*Zhongguo wen shi zi liao bian ji wei yuan hui*, 1984, p. 196). It should be noted that the idea of “trying to understand what is unrepresented beyond the phenomenal world” (*qu zhi xing wai*) 取之象外 is an important element of artistic mood. In the field of classical Chinese poetry, Wang Changling (698-757) was the first person to use the term *yijing* 意境 (Han, 1995, p. 62). However, according to Han, Wang’s use of the term has the Buddhist sense of human perception instead of the aesthetic sense. What is relevant to the artistic mood as an aesthetic term is his advocacy of the unity of one’s heart and the scene when writing a poem (Han, 1995, pp. 62-63). Regarding the relationship between the phenomenal world and the world beyond, Sikong Tu (837-908) makes some insightful comments. In his view, one should “go beyond the phenomenal world in order to master the eternity” (*Zhongguo wen shi zi liao bian ji wei yuan hui*, 1984, p. 319). Another contribution made by him is the idea of “the fusion of thinking and the scene” (*shi yu jing xie*) 思与境偕 (Han, 1995, pp. 63-64). The Ming-dynasty scholar Zhu Chengjue (1480-1527) makes a similar comment. As he notes, “The excellence of writing poems lies in the fusion of the feelings and the scene. You obtain the taste beyond the sound” (Han, 1995, p. 65). To sum up, the concept of artistic mood in classical Chinese aesthetics involves the unity of the real and the unreal, the fusion of one’s feelings and the scene, and the principle of trying to understand what is unrepresented beyond the phenomenal world.

ANALYSIS OF THE POEM

The theme of unity of man with *Dao* in the poem is embedded in its structure. The original text of the poem can be divided into three parts (Li, 1980, pp. 100-101). The first part (line 1-6) describes the poet’s tension with the secular world and his intention to seek *Dao* on a journey to Mount Lu. Part two (lines 7-19) is a depiction of the landscape of Mount Lu. Part three (lines 20-29) turns back to the poet’s feelings, but with a deepened vision of unity with *Dao*.

The tripartite structure of the poem provides a good framework for the interaction between the poet’s feelings and the scene. This poetic structure constitutes a contrast of conflict of this world and the unity of man with the eternal world. Evoked by the natural beauty of the mountain, which has philosophical and religious connotations in Chinese culture, the poet projects his feelings into the objects of his contemplation, namely, Mount Lu, and comes up with a deepened insight into life. The artistic effect of this fusion of poetic feelings with surroundings is the denial of the self and the identification of man with nature.

The Daoist theme is symbolized by the major images that occur in both the painting and the poem. In the poem, there are more images than in the painting. The major images that occur in both pieces include human figures, mountains, mountain peaks, clouds, sky, waterfall, and wind. The poem starts with a tension between Daoism and the secular life, which is revealed in the following lines:

At heart I am the madman of Chu
Singing 'O phoenix', laughing at Confucius.
With a green jade staff in my hand
I set out at dawn from Yellow Crane Tower.
(Harris, 2009, p. 117)

Here the poet compares himself to Jie Yu (接輿), a hermit and a madman of the Chu state, who ridiculed Confucius' effort to get involved in politics and govern the secular world. Determined to seek Dao in nature, the poet leaves the Yellow Crane Tower and starts a journal to Mount Lu.

The poet praises the famous mountains wholeheartedly, especially Mount Lu and its peaks, for their beauty and divinity. He tries to identify himself with the mountains, which are traditionally connected with Daoism for their naturalness, sacredness, and tranquility. Daoism as a philosophy and a religion share important values, such as return to nature, mysticism, and freedom. To demonstrate the implications of the mountain images, let us turn to the following lines:

I look for immortals on the five sacred peaks,
No matter how far away;
All my life I've loved to go roaming
on celebrated mountains.
Mount Lu rises beautifully high,
close to the South Dipper,
A folding screen in nine parts,
cloudy brocades spread wide.
I love to sing for Mount Lu;
Mount Lu rouses my spirits.
(Harris, 2009, pp. 117-118)

Besides the image of mountains, the images of the clouds and the sky also have Daoist connotations. In Chinese culture, clouds and skies are often considered as empty, mysterious and sacred. So the images in the poem play very important roles. In a way, skies are associated with Heaven. Heaven and earth are all born through *Dao*—the ultimate reality and the first all-embracing principle in Daoism. Laozi (2016) highlights the connections between *Dao*, Heaven, earth, and man: "Man follows the ways of Earth; Earth follows the ways of Heaven; Heaven follows the ways of *Dao*; *Dao* follows its own way" (p. 58). The magnificence and holiness of the clouds and the sky are depicted below:

Far-away precipices, ridge after ridge,
mount above the heavens,
And blue shadows and rose-coloured clouds
reflect the morning sun.
Birds cannot fly as far as the length
of the sky over Wu—
Climbing up high the view is sublime,
caught between earth and sky—
For thousands of miles yellow clouds
move where the wind blows

While white waves flow in snowy crests
along nine river paths.

(Harris, 2009, pp. 117-118)

As the poet makes connection to the clouds and the sky, there is a perfect unity of man and nature, the real and the unreal, and the phenomenal world and the world beyond. The dynamic unity of the poet and the eternal world is signified by the images of the clouds and the sky in the lines below:

From far off I see immortals
in clouds of many colours,
Lotus flowers in their hands,
Facing the Jade City.
I've made a date with Floating Free
To meet me in the Ninth Heaven,
And I'd like Rambler Lu to join me,
roaming in Great Purity.
(Harris, 2009, p. 118)

Here the depiction of the clouds parallels with the sky and the human figures, thus creating a sense of mysticism with the visible emerging out of the invisible. Like the clouds, the sky in the poem is described as vast, mysterious, and sacred, suggesting the boundless infinity of *Dao* and the breath of the rhythmic spirit throughout the landscape. It is compared to "Heaven" as in "the Ninth Heaven" (*jiu gai*) 九垓 and to the outer space "Great Purity" (*tai qing*) 太清 (Wuhan da xue zhong wen xi, 1986, p. 102).

Water is another important image in the poem symbolizing Daoism. While there are images of lake and rivers, the images of the waterfalls are more relevant for our comparison here. The spectacular views of the waterfalls are presented in the following lines: "The Milky Way hangs inverted below Three Stone Bridge, And Incense Burner Waterfall looks across at it from a distance." (Harris, 2009, p. 117). In Daoism, water is often associated with *Dao* due to its special characteristics. Water is shapeless, soft, and endless, but it nurtures everything just like *Dao*. Although water may seem soft and weak, it has its power to beat the hard and strong. As Laozi (2016) remarks: "The highest good is like water: Water brings good to all things and does not contend; it goes to places which most people detest, And is therefore akin to *Dao*" (p. 20). "Nothing in this world is softer than water, Yet nothing can better attack the strong than water, For nothing can replace it" (p. 164).

It is worth mentioning that there are unique images in the poem that are also suggestive of Daoist theme. For example, the Daoist images in the following lines indicate the poet's intention to seek *Dao* in nature:

I've long taken immortality pills,
I have no worldly desires;
I've just achieved the way of a calm
mind in three layers.
(Harris, 2009, p. 118)

The image of "immortality pills" (*huan dan*) 还丹 refers to the elixirs Daoists take in their practice of alchemy in order to become immortal (Wuhan da xue zhong wen xi, 1986, p. 102). "A calm mind in three layers" (*qin xin san die*) 琴心三叠 is another expression for Daoist alchemy, indicating the high level of achievement in Daoist alchemy (Wuhan

da xue zhong wen xi, 1986, p. 102). Further, the image of “Jade City” in the lines quoted before also reveals the poet’s desire to be one with *Dao* as “Jade City” is the place where *Yuanshi Tianzun*, 元始天尊, one of the highest deities in religious Daoism, resides. The image of nature is referred to as “Floating Free” (*han man*) 汗漫. (Wuhan da xue zhong wen xi, 1986, p. 102).

ANALYSIS OF THE PAINTING

The theme of man seeking unity with *Dao* is also embodied in the structure of the painting. The painting can also be divided into three parts: the lower section, the middle section, and the upper section. In the lower section, two viewers are present, one standing, the other sitting with a stick, with trees surrounding them. It is most likely that the standing man is the major figure and the sitting man is his companion. The middle section consists of the waterfall and the mountain peaks covered by the clouds, whereas the upper section is occupied by the other two mountain peaks with clouds, and the sky beyond. The painting has a typical “high distance” perspective, from which the two viewers at the bottom face the huge mountains and the sky up above them. Symbolically, the scene indicates the viewers’ yearning for harmony with nature and return to *Dao*, which is symbolized by the mountain peaks and the sky.

The images of the mountain peaks, the clouds, and the sky in the painting also invite Daoist interpretation. In the lower section of the painting, the viewers stay at the top of a small peak surrounded by the clouds. This symbolic view reoccurs in the middle and the upper sections with the mountain peaks. It is important to note the symbolism displayed by the different shapes of the clouds here. The clouds in the lower section



Figure 1. *Waterfall on Mount Lu*, Shitao (1690?)

look swift indicating something turbulent. In the middle and the upper sections, the clouds appear to be serene and calm, suggesting harmony and eternity. In addition, the sky looks misty, mysterious, and extensive. This magnificent view of the sky insinuates eternity and mysticism of Daoism. While the lower section of the painting can be taken as a symbol of the secular world, the middle and the upper sections are more like the eternal world the poet is seeking. This may also correspond with the tripartite structure of the poem where the first part describes the poet’s conflict with the secular world, and the second and third parts depict the natural beauty of Mount Lu and the Daoist kingdom the poet is looking for.

The image of the waterfall in the painting is a good example showing the Daoist idea of simplicity, naturalness, and power. Just as *Dao* pervades everywhere, the waterfall, following the nature’s course, flows downward from the mountaintop. Its movement is natural, effortless, and free, yet its power is enormous. The fact that the rest of the waterfall is covered by the clouds adds to the mystical nature of the scene.

The conflict between Daoism and the secular world is suggested by the images of the wind and trees in the painting. One may discern a tension between the viewers and the bent trees driven by the wind in the lower section. Compared with the favorable image of the wind in the poem, the wind here seems to be an opposing force against the human figures. This is further symbolized by the drifting clouds driven by the wind. Note that the human figures and the pine trees in the lower section do not yield to the force of the wind. The identification of the viewers with the pine trees, which are the symbol of integrity, longevity, vigor, and strength in Chinese culture, implies the viewers’ lofty ideal.

Lastly, the idea of fusion of man and nature is echoed in the painting. The merging of the nature images and the human figures in the painting presents a vivid picture of the unity of the phenomenal world and the world beyond. It seems that the mountain peaks, the waterfall, the trees, and the human figures are emerging from the clouds. The clouds increase the depth of the mountain by separating the lower, the middle, and the upper sections. Though the sections covered underneath the clouds are invisible, obviously there are real things there, as suggested by the emerging trees, the mountain peaks, and the waterfall. The vast sky above the peaks is the symbol of the eternal world. The scene of the visible and invisible nature leads the viewers to speculate about the significance of *Dao* that lies beyond.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, this paper has attempted to study the complementarity of Shitao’s *Waterfall on Mount Lu* and the inscribed poem from the perspective of classical Chinese aesthetics. The concept of artistic mood (*yijing*) has been utilized as a paradigm for the interartistic analysis of both the painting and the poem. The examination of the images in the poem and the painting has demonstrated a metaphorical relationship, which shows strong Daoist connotations. As has been indicated, the complementary text in the poem helps illuminate the theme of unity of man with *Dao* for the whole work whereas the painting visualizes this message in a vague

and subtle fashion. With a focus on the structures and major images in the poem and the painting, the paper has made a parallel study of concept of artistic mood, which exhibits an interplay between the human feelings and the scene, and a unity of the reality in this world and the world beyond. The integral work created through the interaction of the two pieces points to the concept of *Dao*--the important meaning the poet and the viewers are seeking.

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