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Introduction

In the artwork *The Way, a spiritual path*, Kim Hoa Tram (2005) combines images and words in calligraphy, poetry and painting to express Taoist and Buddhist philosophical concepts about the spiritual “oneness” of man and nature. In Chinese tradition, word and image are inseparable and complementary. While calligraphy and poetry are the imagistic uses of words due to the aesthetic property of Chinese characters and imagery in poems, painting is the linguistic use of images since it can evoke meaningful concepts in readers’ mind. In Tram’s artwork, calligraphy can be read as both a waterfall and a path, which leads to two possible interpretations of the artwork as both “mountain and water” and “monk in nature”. Through multiple layers of dual presence of linguistic and visual modes of representation, viewers are invited to a philosophical discussion about life, spirituality, and man’s relationship with the world.



Figure 1. Kim Hoa Tram, *The Way, a spiritual path*, 2005, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Word and Image: Through Mitchell's Framework and Chinese Literati Tradition

“The history of culture is in part the story of a protracted struggle for dominance between pictorial and linguistic signs,” stated William John Thomas Mitchell (1986, p.43), Professor of English and Art History at the University of Chicago. To explore the ambiguous relationship between visual representation and language in art history, Mitchell (1996) proposes a theoretical framework that starts with the recognition of a fundamental distinction between them. Just like two different countries with a long-established tradition of cultural intercourses, he also acknowledges possibilities for the breakdown of the boundary between word and image. For example, though words are commonly associated with verbal expressions and semantic meanings, they can also serve as a mode of visual representation with aesthetic qualities, such as illuminated manuscripts; an image is a “visual language” since the recognition and appreciation of it are only possible within a literary context, for ones who have the capacity of perceiving verbal experiences (p.52). However, the basis of Mitchell's argument still lies in the unbridgeable gap between word and image both within the composition of written signs and across different art forms. In Gu's (2000) analysis on language theories, he analyzes Mitchell's model of cognition through the example of alphabetical writing system. Mitchell explains the development of western writing system by stating that “[a] word is an image of an idea, and an idea is an image of a thing” (p.110), but he fails to provide a plausible explanation for the connection between a phonetic sign and an image. Mitchell (1996) also agrees with G.E.Lessing that the fields of painting and poetry should not impinge on each other to allow free developments for both. When one intends to show respect for the difference of two kinds of art, he puts it, “the maintenance or even policing of this border” of word and image can be beneficial (p.53).

However, according to Gu's (2000) study on Chinese linguistic tradition, word and image are inseparable in nature both in basic written signs and in traditional art forms, which challenges the theoretical framework that Mitchell sets up. The Chinese written sign originated from pictographic imitation, and it still retains a visual quality in its current form despite centuries of evolution. For example, the Chinese character 人 ("man") is like an abstract sketch of a human being, and it represents both the writing symbol of a man and an image of a man. Gu (2000) concludes, "[t]he Chinese written sign is a double face. One face is that of the articulate sign in language utterances; the other is that of a visual and aural Gestalt on the page" (p.122). In addition, even though in Mitchell's (1996) definition, poetry belongs to the "institutions of the verbal" while visual arts is an example of the "institutions of the visible" (p.53), they share the same pictographic tradition in Chinese culture. Zheng Qiao (1104-1160), a Chinese historian in Song Dynasty, traces the origin of writing to shape and paintings to image with the same pictorial principle (as cited in Gu, 2000). Unlike European tradition where the pen and the brush are known to serve literature and painting respectively, early Chinese writers and painters shared the same instrument, the brushes made of various kinds of animal hair with differences in length, width and thickness; this enabled artists to experiment writing and drawing in a wide variety of shapes, structures and movements (Yee & Read, 1973; Frankel, 1957). Over time, Chinese scholar elite ("literati"), a group of intellectuals with significant influences in public administration and cultural fields, invented and popularized a new form of writing — calligraphy, which became not only an art itself, but also a prerequisite of painting (Delbanco, 2008 & Frankel, 1957). I will now move on to discuss calligraphy, painting and poetry, the three

notable art forms practiced by the literati that can best demonstrate the unique relationship of word and image in Chinese tradition.

Chinese Calligraphy: An Art of Writing

Calligraphy is a perfect example that shows the necessity of aesthetic consideration in Chinese writing. In Yee & Read's (1973) book on Chinese calligraphy, they point out the importance of learning about Chinese characters in achieving full appreciation of calligraphy. While western alphabetical signs have limited variety in shapes and structures, Chinese is an ideographic language that relies on symbols to represent ideas, and each character is "constructed in an imaginary square, which it can fill in a variety of beautiful ways" (p.4). As a form of writing characters through ink and brush, calligraphy makes the fullest use of the imagistic nature of Chinese language. Depending upon individual artists' styles and wishes, calligraphic lines vary in strength, form and fluidity, resulting in diverse images of the same characters; calligraphers can control the speed of writing, the thickness of the ink and the orientation of strokes to develop their own artistic styles. Besides its visual property, the aesthetics of calligraphic lines make up the words of Chinese language that communicates meanings which can be read and understood. In this way, calligraphy reveals the constructive combination of word and image in Chinese tradition.

Landscape Painting: Words Without Sound

According to Shaw's (1988) discussion on the origin of literati tradition, Chinese landscape painting is another example that embodies both visual and linguistic properties, and it rises as a result of interactions between Taoism and Buddhism. In Taoist tradition, "human perfection is to be found in the free expression of one's nature rather than in being trained for a definitive social

role” (p.186). Taoists believe that human mind should return to its simple and benign state, away from the established Confucius tradition that emphasizes rigid social rules and hierarchies. Natural landscape, considered as unspoiled by civilizations, is a source of inspiration that recalls Taoist philosophies and guides humans to spiritual elevation. In the third and fourth centuries, the Neo-Taoist literati group, represented by “the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove”, flourished and furthered the association between Taoist ideals and natural landscape (p.188). Disillusioned by the social chaos and political turmoil after the collapse of Han Dynasty, the Neo-Taoists withdrew from the society and sought refuge in natural sceneries to pursue peace, freedom and harmony. They developed a culture of meditation, poetry and music in the wilderness, where the seed of connection between Taoist ideals and landscape was sown.

Similarly, Shaw (1988) suggests that Buddhists’ appreciation of nature is a one of religious and philosophical significance. Hui-yüan (334–417 AD), a respected Chinese Buddhist teacher at the Eastern Grove monastery in Mount Lu, was a major contributor to the association between an image and the spiritual essence of Buddha with his teachings of “visualization meditation techniques” (p.199). Inspired by Buddhahadra, an Indian Buddhist master, Hui-yüan engaged in contemplation in front of Buddha’s “reflection image”, a practice which “specifie[d] that the Buddha’s self-created image will aid contemplation when the Buddha is no longer on earth” (p. 197). When Hui-yüan looked at the replica of Buddha’s image in the monastery, he believed that it was more than a portrayal of the honorable object it represented; the image was a reflection of Buddha’s spiritual presence, a prime channel through which meditators could learn and acquire spiritual awareness. Hui-yüan also proposed that the natural landscape around the monastery was an essential part of the image itself and could enhance the sacred power of Buddha’s image.

Situated in a secluded, pristine mountainous setting, the Eastern Grove monastery was surrounded by misty trees, clouds and wildflowers. In his biography, Hui-yüan wrote: “the color seemed like dense atmosphere, and when one looked, it resembled smoke or mist. The radiant characteristics were now brilliant, now obscured, as if appearing though concealment” (as cited in Shaw, 1988, p.197). This intimate connection between image and landscape implies that the portrayals of nature were assigned a new meditative function similar to that offered by Buddha’s image, which established a foundation for the development of landscape painting. With the growing influence of Hui-yüan’s teachings, his monastery attracted many who came to see the famous image for meditation, and it gradually became a popular gathering place for Buddhists and Taoists literati who collaboratively promoted exchanges of two philosophies. Tsung Ping (375-443 A.D.), a lay disciple of Hui-yüan, introduced the landscape painting to not merely capture natural beauty like mountains, rivers and clouds, but also to communicate Taoists’ idea of retreating to nature and Buddhists’ practice of visual meditation. This new genre of art is later embraced by the literati group as an elegant, cultured aesthetic representation, and is also recognized as an outlet for expressing thoughts and values through images.

Nature Poetry: Painting Without Form

Even though nature or *shan-shui* poetry emerged at the same time as landscape painting, it was not until Tang Dynasty (618-907 A.D.) that poetry flourished as an art with poetic composition in Chinese literati tradition (Stepien, 2014). Stepien’s (2014) article on the relationship between poetry and Chan Buddhism explores the fertile ground on which poetry germinates and thrives. Tang Dynasty was a golden age for Chan Buddhism school in China, and its growing popularity among literati, a majority of whom exercised great social, economic and

cultural influences, provided a powerful stimulus for the development of poetry. It was a time of remarkable creativity and productivity, and poetry was in a full blossom popularized by a number of masters influenced by Buddhist doctrines. Wang Wei (701-761 A.D.), a scholar, painter and “Buddha of the Poets”, was a pioneer in “meld[ing] the literary and the religio-philosophical impulses in poetic form” (p.207). Wang’s devotion to Buddhist ideas is revealed in his use of imagery, which is often about man’s interaction with natural landscape like mountains, winds and white clouds. Since images have been historically linked to meditative experiences and spirituality in Buddhist tradition, the imagistic value of poetry can also lead readers to a more in-depth understanding of the texts themselves. In the poem “Bamboo Lodge”, Wang’s descriptive language evokes a picture of a solitary poet sitting in the moonlight enclosed by bamboos, rivers and mountains. Since portrayals of landscape have been historically associated with philosophies, the image also recalls Buddhists’ ideas of “harmony”, “exclusion” and “self-effacing” in readers’ minds (Chou, 1982, pp.121-122). Through imagery, nature poetry acquires an aesthetic property, which further promotes a more thorough understanding of the heart and mind of poets.

Matching of Calligraphy, Painting and Poetry

The constructive combination of word and image not only works separately in calligraphy, landscape painting and poetry, but also manifests itself across disciplines. Their convertibility is explored in Frankel’s (1957) article in which he proposes that painting and poetry actually “take each other’s space” (p.289). For example, Su Shih (1037-1101 A.D.), a Chinese literary painter in Sung Dynasty, commented on Wang Wei’s poetry and painting: “Savoring Wang Wei’s poems, one finds painting in his poetry. Contemplating Wang Wei’s paintings, one finds poetry in his

painting” (as cited in Frankel, 1957, p.304). Poetry is considered a “painting with sound” since the linguistic property of poems can invoke images with aesthetic values; landscape painting is a “silent poetry” since visual representations also communicate meaningful thoughts with poetic rhythms (p.306). This metaphor was introduced by Huang Ting-chien (1045-1105 A.D.), a painter, poet and calligrapher in the Song Dynasty, who once wrote, “Li had verses ready but would not utter them, With light ink he brought forth a soundless poem” (as cited in Frankel, 1957, p.306). Since calligraphy is the vehicle of expression for both painting and poetry, Chinese literati have experimented the practice of combining three art forms in one artwork. Tu Fu, a famous poet in Sung Dynasty, praised Cheng Chi'en's practice of inscribing painting with poems: “He once wrote out some of his poems in his own handwriting, matched them with paintings, and presented the work to the throne. The Emperor inscribed at the end in large letters the words: ‘The three perfections of Cheng Chi'en.’”(as cited in Frankel, 1957, p.305). The combination of “three perfections” began to dominate the hearts of Chinese literati group for centuries as a perfect demonstration of one's artistic skills and talents.

A Contemporary Example: *The Way, a spiritual path*

I will now turn to Kim Hoa Tram's artwork as a contemporary example that shows the synthesis of Chinese landscape painting, poetic and calligraphic traditions in which Taoist and Buddhist themes can be read. Tram writes a poem in the lower half of the artwork in a calligraphic style similar to that of Ts'ao-Shu, a traditional approach of calligraphy that is often appreciated for the decorative value of its texts; with emphasis on speed, energy and flexibility, it allows artists to express themselves freely with myriad possibilities of character structures (Yee & Read, 1973, pp.58-72). In Tram's casual, dynamic calligraphic style, each word has a unique

aesthetic property, and each character is alive, elegant and dynamic, just like pearly sprays when water lashes against small rocks. Beyond the expressive gesture of individual signs, the calligraphy viewed as a whole has a unique downward orientation and is arranged in a long, curved shape. Since the words are made to fit into the overall pattern of calligraphy, the poem becomes an image of a “waterfall” that unites the scattering minuscule droplets of characters.

Besides an image of water flowing gracefully, Tram’s poem can also be read as an image of a “path” through an understanding of the texts of the poem, which can be translated as follows:

Led by our karma, we come to this life. Loaded with karma, we depart from this world.

In life, so many anxieties, a lot of confusion[.] We simply cannot free ourselves from the perplexities of delusions. Perhaps, in this state of confusion, the Way (*[T]ao*) [to spiritual enlightenment] will sprout forth. (Pang, 2013, para.14)

Deeply influenced by Buddhist and Taoist philosophies, Tram embraces philosophical concepts of “karma” and “Tao” in his poem. In Krishan’s (1981) analysis on Buddhist ethics, he discusses Buddhists’ belief of the continued existence of being after the death of the physical body. “Karma”, the automatic, universal factor of causation, foresees sufferings, delusions and inequalities in the subsequent existences of the soul; it can be seen as a moral path of individuals, about the good or bad actions they took this life or previous lives. “Tao” literally means “path” or “road” in Chinese; in Taoist philosophy, it is a substance that unites all the entities in the universe to a harmonious one, an approach for contemplation and spiritual enlightenment, and an ethical path through which people free themselves from competitions, desires and selfishness to reunify with their nature (Creel, 1956). With insights to the philosophical background of the poem, viewers can perceive an image of a “path” through a symbolic reading of calligraphy. The texts

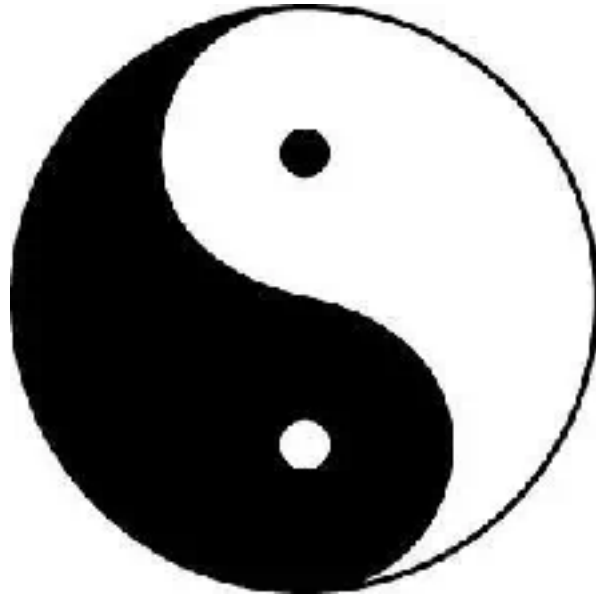


Figure 2. Yin-Yang Symbol (I Ching, ninth century B.C.E.)

of the poem are fit into the long, curved pattern of calligraphy; more characters are placed at the right bottom of the artwork closer to viewers compared to the top, a “near-far” composition that creates a sense of depth and an impression for a rising path meandering into a distant field. Therefore, calligraphy is more than a vehicle of linguistic expression for poetry; its imagistic nature of Chinese calligraphy and its unique arrangement in the artwork make possible the dual interpretations of the poem as images of water flowing downwards and a path rising upwards.

Merging images of a rising path and a falling waterfall also reveals the intertwining of “Yin” and “Yang”, which enables viewers to better understand Taoist ideas behind the artwork. In McMahon’s (2003) interpretation on Taoist theory, the universe is created by a mysterious “Ultimate One” from which come Yang and Yin, two cosmic agents that create everything in existence. Yang is the masculine element that shows hardness, light and dryness, while yin represents softness, darkness and fluidity. Despite opposite characteristics, Yin and Yang complement, balance and give rise to each other; they can also transform into each other, just like the light-dark cycle and the alternation of four seasons. To apply the inseparable nature of

word and image, the famous image which originally came from *I Ching (the Book of Changes)* can be used to explain the concept of Yin-Yang polarity. The dynamic cycle shown in figure 2 seems to be divided into two halves of Yang (white) and Yin (black), but it is continuously blending around the curvy line; when one force advances, the other withdraws to maintain balance of the united whole. Yin and Yang exist together and complete each other by having in themselves an opposite element represented by the small white and black dot. Taoism embraces the idea of “No departure without return” (McMahon, 2003, p.70), which echoes the cyclic relation of Yin and Yang: an advance forward is also a move of retreat. There are in reality no distinctions between right and wrong, venturing forth and returning home, or rising and falling, and all divisions are superficial human constructions. Despite tensions and contradictions, everything is engaged in constant transformations in accordance with its nature, which can ultimately lead one to become another.

Another dual-perspective image is revealed in the painting on top half of the artwork. Instead of painting two images in separate spaces, Tram uses a few gentle strokes to construct an image that can represent man and mountain in the same time. The long, curved stroke in the top of the painting can be seen as the contour of a bare peak of a mountain, and it can also be associated to the back of a monk; the thin, semi-circular brushstroke resembles the moon hiding behind the mountain and the back of the monk’s head. The merging of two images into one implies the philosophical idea that man *is* nature, which can be demonstrated in a famous Taoist parable about Zhuang Zhou (369 B.C.E.-286 B.C.E.), an influential Taoist philosopher. His “Dream of the Butterfly” can be translated as follows:

Once, Zhuang Zhou fell into a dream-and then there was a butterfly, a fluttering butterfly, self-content in accord with its intentions. It did not know about a Zhou. With a sudden awakening there was, fully and completely, a Zhou. One does not know whether a Zhou dreams and then there is a butterfly, or whether a butterfly dreams and then there is a Zhou. When there is a Zhou and a butterfly, there has to be a distinction [between them]. This is called the changing of things. (Möller, 1999, pp. 446-447)

This parable draws attention on the definition of reality, identity and consciousness and reflects on one's relationship to oneself and to the world. Zhuang Zhou's notion of "the changing of things" suggests that things are continuously transforming to one another and will never reach an absolute clear and distinct state of existence. While Zhuang Zhou acknowledges some distinctions between man and butterfly, dreaming and waking, or truth and illusion, he advocates for a philosophy of integration rather than differentiation. In order to live an ethical and spiritually fulfilled life, one needs to contemplate nature, accept the barriers and fit oneself into its order and eventually become nature; and it is through living in accordance with natural operations of the world that one achieves harmony and peace. Thus, by merging man and natural landscape into one image, Tram allows viewers to savor rich philosophical implications of his painting.

By combining all interpretations above about individual segments of the artwork (calligraphy, poetry and painting), two ways of reading the artwork as a whole become accessible — a "mountain-water" or a "monk in nature" painting. Since the poem in the lower half of the artwork resembles a waterfall, and the image at the top can be seen as a mountain, we can push the analysis further to conclude that the overall image conveys to us a waterfall flowing from

behind a mountain. In “The Sign System in Chinese Landscape Paintings”, McMahon (2003) describes Taoist influences on Chinese art and the common mountain-water (*Shan-shui*) theme in landscape painting. Taoists believe that Yang is embodied in hard, bold and assertive elements, just like mountains made of concrete rocks, while the gentleness and fluidity of Yin manifest themselves in water. The Taoist principle of Yin-Yang balance and their dynamic transformations can also be demonstrated through the stereotypical portrayal of mountains (the force of Yang) — a bare peak uncovered by vegetations, suggesting the effect of erosion by water (the force of Yin). By allowing viewers to read the image as a classical combination of mountain and water, Tram reinforces the idea that linguistic concepts and image are complementary. The second interpretation of the painting is “man in nature”. Since the image on top outlines a monk and the poem below reveals a path, the whole painting can be seen as a monk climbing slowly along a path up to a mountain. The monk is steadfast in his journey to nature, and he seems to be immersed in deep contemplation, which mirrors Buddhist’ traditional practice of living and meditating in the purity of nature for self-cultivation and spiritual elevation. In order to live a moral life, one needs to forget the self and to engage in meditative practices, eventually unifying with natural force in “oneness” (Shaw, 1988, p.188).

According to R. Ormsby Martin (1948), “All Chinese art, whether it be Chinese painting, poetry, philosophy, or the Chinese garden, is the expression of a philosophical idea, or a philosophical quest, the quest for Harmony”(p.63). Profoundly influenced by Chinese philosophies and traditional arts, Tram explores the relationship of word and image in calligraphy, landscape painting and poetry, a duality repeated multiple times in the artwork. The cross-fertilization of two modes of representations not only allows a glimpse into China’s art

history, but also accentuates the long-lasting legacies of Taoist and Buddhist philosophies on Chinese culture.

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