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Dao Zi's Art and Review

Rong Jian, Cheng Jiushuang, Peter J. Liu

1. The Art of Poetry and Divinity: Appreciating Dao Zi's Paintings

According to Martin Heidegger, "poetry is the adoption of the divine scale". This is also Dao Zi's basic approach to art. In Hölderlin's poems, what Heidegger experienced most deeply was the essence of poetry: to illuminate. It is through insightful illumination that things can be 'opened up', to enlighten the human soul, to enlighten the human mind to the true meaning of fields, towns, and homes, and to cast a light into the dark abyss. What would the abyss be like without the clarity of poetry? Poetry is therefore a direct revelation of divinity. As Plato posits, its inherent fullness of devotion and holiness is a treat for the gods. Thus, is Dao Zi the Hölderlin of the Chinese arts? Or is he the successor to Qu Yuan, Li Bai, and Su Shi? From the day they were written, the interpretation of his poems has always been such that they are filled with the deepest thoughts of humanity, interwoven with sentiments for the earth, affection for mothers and motherhood, enchantments in the darkness, and adoration for the eternity of life. These form a poet's responsibilities as given to them the divine, a duty to provide this spiritual illumination and maintain and continuously purify a world of truth.

Moreover, Dao Zi's paintings are a transformation of the artistic presentation of his poetry: an unquantifiable dimension of his poetic journey which opens up a new realm of poetic beauty and divine spirituality. The ancient Chinese literati painted a concept of the homogeneity of poetry and painting. It implies an aesthetic principle of escaping from the mundane towards nature and lacking something from its perception and expression of divinity, which is an abandonment of the mission of humanity's ultimate redemption. A consistent theme of Dao Zi's poems runs through his paintings, that of igniting the light of divinity in the dark cave of humanity, using poetic

language to summon a light to shine upon humans. It is the dual power of faith and poetry, and it can penetrate the high impervious barriers of history. Instead of breaking with the mundane, it rebuilds new spiritual heights which both float above and in the midst of the mundane. The art of resonating between poetry and divinity is inevitably solemn, profoundly silent, and awe-inspiring, because it rejects the playful and flirtatious ideas of art, as well as the cynical attitude to life which accepts everything as it is. The abstract artistic language nears a more idealized expression of poetry in such a context. It is the only common language for the exchange of human thoughts and feelings, allowing people living in different lands to communicate with each other, and to experience the eternal charm of poetry and divinity in art.

While the move from poetry to painting enriches and



Figure 1. Dao Zi. *Lift from Dust* (《舉自塵土》). Ink and color on paper, 43×46 cm, 2010.



Figure 2. Dao Zi. *Grace and Salvation* (《恩典與救贖》). Ink and color on paper, 91×80 cm. 2011.

expands the poet's spiritual world, it also brings about a reinvention of a form of life and artistic practice. Did Heidegger imagine what kind of masterpiece Hölderlin would create when he took up the brush? Are Dao Zi's paintings an interpretation of further potential alluded to by Hölderlin? Throughout poetry's long history, it is not an easy task for a poet to become a painter, but when one pushes the limits of the language of poetry, artistic creation continues in the forms of painting and music. These two art forms are the closest to poetry, especially abstract painting, which is the visual expression of the themes found in poetry and music. The art critic Valleyly said, "every true poet has a much greater capacity for correct reasoning and abstract thinking than generally expected. The poet has his abstract thinking and, so to speak, his philosophy". Therefore, Dao Zi's paintings embody not only a transcendental ability to think abstractly, but are also filled with the fullness of spirit across the painting's entire creative process, giving free rein to his extraordinary imagination. He used ink, the ancient medium of painting, to render and lay out a record of the flow of life. His paintings thus take on a particular quality to produce works of art summoned by poetry and divinity, to be open to the souls and minds of all.

At a time when the world is turning grey, the earth is being destroyed, and the gods are fleeing, a man dwelling upon the fate of the world is not only the utopia

poets dreamed of, but also the ultimate salvation of mankind! Let us listen to Dao Zi's stories, just as we read in Hölderlin's poems:

"What is the use of being a poet in times of need?
You'll say they're like holy priests of the wine god,
Moving from land to land in the holy night."

Author: RONG JIAN

Translator: Wang Geshi

2. Metaphoric Implications of the Cross Symbols in Dao Zi's Works

In recent years, Dao Zi's Chinese ink paintings have attracted great attention and discussion internationally. Dao Zi is an art history professor at Tsinghua university. Before he became a painter, he was a celebrated poet. Since 2000, he has devoted himself to the creation of his own style of Chinese ink painting which he named "Saintism Ink Art (聖水墨)" (also known as "Chinese ink art of the Cross"). Responding to the spiritual decline in Chinese modern ink painting,¹ Dao Zi devoted himself to the innovation of Chinese ink painting. For him, the black and white, the wet and dry, the shade, the dryness and the density of the Chinese Ink, together with the ever-changing and the freestyle lines can all symbolize the word and spirit of God. He holds that "the redeemed Chinese Ink would be more sorrowful and holy, and can be a visual metaphor for suffering and redemption. Lamentation, requiem and sorrow for the martyred, the innocent land, the freedom of life and thought can be all saved by faith and be freed from fears and temptations."² Among Dao Zi's art works, the symbols of the cross can be seen all over his career, such as, *Testament: Creation* (《約：創世》, 2006), *Testament: Salvation* (《約：救恩》, 2006), *Testament: the End of the World* (《約：末世》, 2006), *Redeeming Sacrifice of Precious Blood* (《寶血挽回祭》, 2007), *Martyrdom* (《殉道圖》, 2008), *Azure* (《蔚藍》, 2009), *Miracles of Mountains and Rivers* (《山川神跡》, 2010), *Spiritual Fountain with Bamboo* (《靈泉苦竹》, 2015), *Salvation* (《救恩》, 2016), *Bitter Bamboo: Holy Nail* (《苦竹·聖釘》, 2017), *Triple Scroll of Thorns* (《荊冠三札三聯卷軸》, 2018), *Hallowed be Thou Name* (《願人都尊你的名為聖》, 2019), *Smoking Flax Shall He Not Quench* (《將殘的燈不吹滅》, 2019), *Bitter Bamboo in Tears Valley Series* (《淚穀苦竹》, 2019-2020), etc. As the titles of these works show, Dao Zi's ink paintings revealed a strong and recurring biblical narrative portrayed within the Chinese culture matrix. For example, *Triple Scroll of Thorns*,



Figure 3. Dao Zi. *Lamb Salute* (《羔羊禮贊》). Ink and color on paper, 95×95 cm. 2012.

is painter's "painting notes" created whilst meditating on the crucifixion of Christ during his devotion time. Reading notes was a common practice by the traditional Chinese literati to capture their reflections and thoughts when reading ancient scrolls. Meditating on the thorns of Christ after the crucifixion, Dao Zi painted thorns using different media and methods to represent the different dimensions of the pain and sacrifice of Christ.

Along with the spiritual dimension, Dao Zi's arts also revealed deep concerns for social justice. For example, *Demolition: Disaster and Blessing* (《拆：禍與

福》, 2016) and *Autumn Rain and Teary Valley* (《秋雨淚谷》, 2018) were two paintings produced in response to the social injustice experienced by the Christian community in recent years. In *Demolition: Disaster and Blessing*, a cross is being lifted by a huge crane, at the bottom of the canvas are buildings of southern China architectural style. In total, there are three crosses found in the painting—a large bright red cross lying on the earth, a cross suspended by crane mid-air, and a third cross is hidden in the form of a carved seal stamped on the painting in place of the artist's signature. Each of



Figure 4. Dao Zi. *The Descent of Holy Spirit Part III* (《聖靈降臨之三》). Ink and color on paper, 100×70 cm. 2013.

these cross has a different symbolic meaning: the visible crosses on top of the churches which had been demolished and publicly desecrated, the invisible cross of the nation of China battered and trampled over, and lastly the signatory cross represents the artist's strong Christian identity. Using symbolism and juxtaposition, Dao Zi highlights the tension between the persecutory violence of the authority and the suffering of the nation and its people, whilst the surrounding angels witnessing the injustice and raising their wings to symbolize the imminent arrival of the final judgment. Similarly, the painting *Autumn Rain and Teary Valley* depicts the autumn raining season which implied the name of the persecuted Chengdu Autumn Rain Church (秋雨教會) where the head pastor Wang Yi was arbitrarily arrested and the church forcibly closed down in 1998. The painter boldly used a fallen cross to demonstrate his solidarity with those in persecution. Moreover, in a series of paintings entitled *Umbrella* (《傘》, 2015), Dao Zi also painted a cross in middle of many overlapping yellow umbrellas representing a yearning for God's justice



Figure 5. Dao Zi. *Empty-chair Chronology* (《空椅子紀年》). Ink and color on paper, 70×107 cm. 2014.

and reign in response to the Hong Kong's umbrella movement and Occupy Central protest in 2014.

Unlike most of Christian artworks, Dao Zi's art often delivers a strong gospel message focusing on individual salvation, yet at the same time remains closely relevant to the prevailing social and cultural issues of its time. More recently, in response to the "Chained Girl" news this year, Dao Zi created another painting, entitled *Chain of Sorrow* (《鏈之殇》, 2022). This incident concerned a woman who was trafficked, sexually abused and imprisoned in a rural village in China and was forced to give birth to 8 children to 3 men in the same family which eventually caused her to lose her sanity as result. This news went viral on social media and caught a lot of social and political attention. In *Chain of Sorrow*, Dao Zi painted images of female genitalia bound by iron chains overlaid with various forms of crosses, which represents that Christ was suffering alongside of those women who were victims of sexual slavery and human trafficking. Dao Zi remarked that "spiritual Chinese ink



Figure 6. Dao Zi. *Sacred Lady Lin Zhao Festival* (《聖女林昭祭》). Ink and color on paper, 70×68 cm. 2014.

painting is an art of revelation, prophesy, awakening, foundation-building and presentation.”³ Dao Zi’s works not only touch on the current social maladies, but also were exploring the theological concept of “already

but not yet” kingdom of God.

Author: CHENG JIUSHUANG

ENDNOTES

1. Dao Zi, (2018). *The Principles of the Spiritual Chinese Ink*. Iartsee, [online] Available at: < <http://www.iartsee.com/sharecontents/>

index.php?id=60366.> [Accessed last modified April 21, 2018].

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

3. Dao Zi's Art and Review: Dwelling of Thought and Spirit

Everyone who has systematically studied the history of art has a clear idea about the spiritual and ideological support in the artistic image. Every change and development in art is closely related to these, especially the position of thought in the history of philosophy and art. It can be said that images lacking in thought are sentimental, and art lacking in spirituality is not profound. Dao Zi's overall impression in the academic world is that, first of all, he is a poet and thinker; he picked up a brush to express his thoughts and spirit through images. At the same time, he also spent a substantial amount of time traveling around the world to draw ideas and wisdom from classic physical images which opened the wall between them, making words and images complement each other, forming a system, and embarking on a solo artistic path.

Firstly, the most prominent feature in Dao Zi's works is the creation of contemporary ink painting art forms guided by spirituality. At the same time, through the courage of "turning blood into ink", he completed the enlightenment of "turning Tao into flesh". It reminds us of the trap of globalism on the one hand and challenged extreme nationalism on the other through his ink painting works, which confirmed Slavoj Žižek (1949-) and others' classic statements on globalization and nationalism: "The development of our own culture depends on recreation. My paradox is that traditional culture can really survive only if we re look at it and create it from scratch in each era" (see the *Beijing News*, June 15, 2007). From the perspective of culture, Dao Zi's works are a creative inheritance in the true sense; from an international perspective, he translated international thoughts and

content from all parts of the world through ink painting, so that more people could understand Chinese ink painting through the international spiritual theme. In particular, his works *Spiritual Fountain with Bamboo*, *Bitter Bamboo · Holy Nail and Don't Meekly Walk Into That Good Night* deeply reflect the characteristics of this kind of artistic thought. Among them, *Spiritual Fountain With Bamboo* is the most worthy of discussion. The formal language of this work purified the essence image of literati painting and made it contemporary. The most important thing is to use this image to convey the profound philosophical thought and the spirit of bitter bamboo under spirituality. His painting in the new sense is highly simple, not straight and not melodious, which has been different from the artistic thought category of Zheng Banqiao and other ancient literati paintings. It seems that the literati's lofty and unsophisticated moaning has been removed, and instead the art reflects on our lives and the significance of life today.

Secondly, he effectively introduced the elements of light such as gold, blue, red and yellow into ink painting. He developed the application of gold in freehand brushwork (most of the fine brushwork green landscapes or emerald landscapes were used in the past), while he enhanced the light sense of the screen with the gold colors, effectively conveying the ideological purpose of holy Chinese ink painting. It can be said that the gold used by Dao Zi is different from the gold of Chinese traditional painting. The former makes us feel the power of sacred art and spirituality, and the latter makes us experience a sense of decoration in landscape painting. Therefore, the color used by Dao Zi has broken through the limitation of Chinese ink painting, which is "color according to category". The color in holy ink painting reveals a unique expression of thought and wisdom. As far as the classic work *God, Golden* (《上帝與黃金》) is concerned, I overheard this comment about this kind



Figure 7. Dao Zi. *Golden Heart Angel I* (《金心天使之一》). Ink and color on paper, 68×70 cm. 2014.



Figure 8. Dao Zi. *Golden Heart Angel II* (《金心天使之二》). Ink and color on paper, 47.5×70 cm. 2014.

of work from an ordinary person: “The painting is simple, which makes us understand at once, and leaves behind an unspeakable imagination.” The large pieces of gold and broken gold in this work represent not only gold in the real sense, but the picture also conveys the Holy Spirit-like brilliance, reaching out to grasp a large piece of gold and suddenly turning into broken gold or even nothingness—what a profound artistic thought and philosophy. This work won the 20th Misul Social Development Foundation Art Creation Award in Germany. Since 1976, tens of thousands of artists have competed for this award. In 2015, Professor Dao Zi’s

God, Golden won hundreds of awards.

Thirdly, Dao Zi’s ink painting works show the success of ink painting in exploring the modernist style. Since the 1980s, a large number of people have been exploring the contact between Chinese ink painting and western Modernist art. Many people have not achieved an effective result because they have rigidly grafted western abstract styles onto Chinese ink painting language. Many years later, Dao Zi directly combined the ink painting image with the most primitive religious art in the Middle Ages using the holy ink painting as the entrance, and even sought ideological support from the



Figure 9. Dao Zi. *Green Lamp and Ancient Scrolls* (《青燈古卷》). Ink and color on paper, 70×68 cm. 2016.

classic teachings. Those of us who have studied western Modernism understand the close relationship between western Modernism and medieval art. In this way, Dao Zi aims directly at the source of modern abstract language, so his abstract ink painting works appear natural, content and rooted. For example, works such as Taichu Youdao (《太初有道》) in this exhibition epitomize the success of the exploration of typical modernist ink painting, especially in Taichu Youdao, which makes us feel the rationality and reasonableness of the abstract ink painting, more able to feel that Taichu YouTao is with the highest spirit, and feel a simple philosophical idea in the former period. The ink painting work Narrow Gate and Plain Coffin makes us see the possibility of cubism and ink painting narration and experience the subtlety of the abstract in conveying ideas; he often emphasizes that the pictures should be concise, purified and improved. At the beginning, we failed to understand his ideas; with the accumulation and reflection in recent years, we have gradually realized the foresightedness of his artistic understanding.

I remember a paragraph of Deng Xiaomang's microblog, which is still fresh in my memory: "The

Chinese people lack the dimension of Christianity. The advantage of Christianity is that God represents absolute justice, and they have a sense of holiness for the value of justice. On the contrary, the Chinese people have no sense of holiness for justice. The most respected morality of the Chinese people is filial piety, honesty, loyalty, and kindness, which is the most respected by the Chinese people, but they do not pay much attention to justice. People who are kind are the most kind, and tend to become hypocritical, an unconscious hypocrisy." In his later articles, he also said bluntly: "Chinese intellectuals have not fulfilled their duty of enlightenment." These words seem to point directly at many of us—we are always analyzing ourselves. In fact, Dao Zi's ink painting works awaken many problems in our mind and spirit in terms of image depth.

Author: PETER J. LIU

DAO ZI (1957-), Professor Wang Min (pen name Dao Zi), a famous poet, painter, and art critic.

Editor: Li Yang

INTERNATIONAL AWARDS

- 1997 Received HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH Hellman-Hammett Grants Writer's Award, World Human Rights Watch, New York, USA.
- 2014 Award for Artistic Creation from MISEREOR HUNGERTUCH 2015/2016, Misereor Foundation for Social Development, Aachen, Germany.
- 2016 won the Korean Art Association KOREAN FINE ARTS ASSOCIATION [KFAA] Art Merit Award, Seoul.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

Souls of Living Water/ The Elegy and Hymns/ Vision or Revelation/ My Soul Who is at Your Feet/ Zeichen and Wunder-China Time/ Double Construction/ Vision and Situation/ Miracle and Witness/ Image of Faith/ Surely I am Coming Soon/ A White Bird Black Flying Through the Dark Night/ Dao Zi's Wash-Ink Art Exhibition and Seminar/ Recurring Commencement.

MAIN WORKS AND TRANSLATIONS

Dao Zi Experimental Poetry/ Selected American Confessional Poetry/ Burning Witch: Selected Sylvia Plath's Poems/ The Artistic Genealogy of Postmodernism (2 volumes)/ The Artist's Reality-Philosophies of Art / The Elegy And Hymns/ Dao Zi Selected Poems/ Saintism wash-ink painting 2007-2015.