



ART FRONTIER

An International Art Journal / Vol.2 No.4 Oct.-Dec. 2024

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To cite this article: Gu Zimo, “From the Perspective of the Randomness of Folk Art: The ‘Unintentional Contemplation’ in Chinese Aesthetic Consciousness,” *Art Frontier* 2, no.4 (December 2024): 42-51, <https://doi.org/10.64212/GWVF3511>.

DOI: 10.64212/GWVF3511

ISSN: 2835-5490

EISSN: 2836-841X

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This article has undergone double-blind peer review.

Website: www.artfrontier.org

Email: artfrontier2023@outlook.com

Publishing Frequency: Quarterly (March, June, September, December)



From the Perspective of the Randomness of Folk Art: The “Unintentional Contemplation” in Chinese Aesthetic Consciousness

Gu Zimo

Abstract

This article focuses on the randomness in folk art practice and analyzes its logical connection with the traditional aesthetic concept of “unintentional contemplation.” The author believes that unintentional contemplation is a metaphysical aesthetic criterion in the practice of folk art, called the essence. Folk creators are nourished by it. As the creative practice progresses and their skills become more refined, the randomness in their creations gradually emerges. This is the physical manifestation of the function. The two are dialectically unified and shape the core characteristics of folk art.

Key Words

Folk art, Chinese philosophy, mutual learning among civilizations, aesthetics

1. The Manifestation of Randomness in Chinese Folk Art

Folk art, as an artistic production and a special spiritual production, is an aesthetic creation. This free and conscious creation combines purposefulness and regularity and is a symbol that has accumulated a certain historical culture and human aesthetic consciousness.¹ Like any other thing, folk art is a specific existing object with certain objects and has various characteristics as an objective existing object. However, as an art form, it exhibits many special properties that are different from other art forms in the evolution of its occurrence and development. The characteristics of folk art are mainly manifested in primitivity and localness, collectivity and inheritance, folk custom and regionalism, craftsmanship and practicality, etc.,² and the author has extracted a characteristic that runs through all these attributes: randomness.

Folk art aims at the needs of life, and all artistic activities cover every corner of life, including daily necessities, labor tools, birth, old age, sickness, death, festivals, and local products. In the creation of folk art, due to the limitations of nature and backward production methods as well as the obstacles of transportation and backward dissemination, the regionality of folk art is limited and it maintains a certain distance from the main-

stream culture. However, from the perspective of its survival and individual development, it provides a larger creative space. Folk art is not restricted by the functions of mainstream culture, and the themes, materials, and production methods of creation are all familiar and handy content. For example, the shape of painted pottery varies according to the different functions of use, and the patterns on painted pottery are patterns of plants, animals, and figures familiar in life. However, its painting method is extremely exaggerated and simple. It vividly and concisely expresses the state of life and charm of the depicted things through simple lines. The organization and composition of the patterns have great freedom. It can stop wherever it is painted, thus maintaining relative integrity. This is the randomness of folk art, mainly manifested in the following four points.³

1. Imaginary Modeling. Folk art creates works by using imaginary modeling means from a rational concept. The works show unreasonableness in the accuracy of objects, color, time and space, anatomy, and perspective. It is precisely this unreasonableness that forms the characteristics of folk art. Folk art cannot only simultaneously represent several characteristics of an object but also combine the attributes of several objects observed from multiple angles. Sometimes, in order not to damage the integrity of the object or purely for decoration, anti-perspective and anti-natural phenomena



Figure 1. *Civil and Military Officials*. Block-printed and hand-painted New Year picture, each 110×65cm, collected by Mianzhu New Year Picture Museum.

are adopted, such as the farther the object is, the larger it is. There are also multiple viewpoints with numerous visual centers and multiple event scenes represented in one picture, and inverse proportion where the characteristics of the object and its parts are not in direct proportion. Compared with Western painting and Chinese literati painting, folk art releases huge imagination and rational space. It is not restricted by dogma and can do whatever it wants without exceeding the rules. Folk artists can paint the most touching things as they wish, painting them in whatever way they like, and giving full play to freedom in the imaginary world.

2. Suggesting the Practical Function of Objects. Folk art can often combine two or more different object images to suggest the natural state and life characteristics of the object's growth. For example, clouds are decorated

on the bird, lotus is decorated on the fish, and a mouse is painted on the cat; the shapes of daily utensils are also decorated according to their practical purposes and functions. For example, the shape of a bowl is drawn with a circular arc at the mouth and a simple horizontal line at the bottom; the shapes of tables and chairs and the four feet of static animals have no perspective changes in distance, and all four feet are placed on a horizontal line to indicate stability.

3. Generalization of Lines. The expression of lines in folk art is not particular about details. It is concise and comprehensive, vivid, and it pursues likeness in spirit rather than likeness in form; this is another manifestation of folk art. For example, the patterns on painted pottery generalize the images of people, fish, frogs, and plants with vivid lines.

4. Exaggeration of Color. The color expression of folk art shows the method of “no method,” neither being restricted by old methods nor being limited by nature. It can be called the method of freely applying colors according to one’s heart. In folk artworks, such as embroidery, paper-cutting, kites, clay figurines, New Year pictures, folk lantern festivals, and flower festivals, the colors are mostly strong and bright contrasting colors such as bright red and green. The highly tense and bright colors fully display the self-sufficiency, harvest, and joy of the working people’s lives and the color aesthetic concept forged by the nation’s self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-improvement.

Taking Mianzhu New Year pictures in Sichuan (figure 1) as an example, the creation of Mianzhu New Year pictures first requires engraving a line plate to outline the basic image contour. However, unlike New Year pictures in other regions that mainly rely on engraving and color printing, the artistry of Mianzhu New Year pictures primarily depends on the manual painting treatment. In this process, the line plate is only the basis, and the final presentation effect of the work mainly depends on the artist’s manual painting. Different artists can create New Year pictures with different styles on the same line plate basis through their unique techniques and color applications. This creative method breaks the limitations of the expression form of woodcut prints and gives artists greater freedom and creative space. In addition, in some parts of the transparent color, the artist sometimes deliberately no longer uses the line plate to draw lines, but allows the contour of the line plate to appear naturally, enhancing the artistic effect of the contrast between virtual and real and the change of complexity and simplicity in the picture. This flexibility and richness of techniques make Mianzhu New Year pictures extremely diverse and artistically appealing in visual expression. The proportions of figures and the layout of scenes often exceed the physical laws of reality, using exaggerated or simplified methods to strengthen certain symbolic meanings or emotional transmissions, and finally present a vivid, distinct, and full-of-tension visual effect. This random creative method not only emphasizes the free expression of form but also reflects the autonomy of the people in cultural and emotional expression through the form itself.

Randomness in folk art is not a laissez-faire approach to freedom of artistic creation, but a flexible and tolerant understanding of artistic expression forms and creative freedom based on following the traditional cultural context and social needs. It reflects the creative expression of the people in the interaction between daily life and social culture and presents an eclectic artistic

pursuit. This randomness not only reflects the freedom and spontaneity of folk art creation but also reflects the profound connection between cultural inheritance, emotional expression, and social functions.

In summary, folk art, as the direct inheritor of primitive art, has a primitive and chaotic thinking mode as its core thinking foundation. The aesthetic characteristics of folk art are not only reflected in the randomness of modeling, craftsmanship, and themes; all aspects of this randomness jointly contribute to the richness and diversity of folk art. Randomness is usually closely related to the production conditions of the artist, simple tools, improvised motives, and limited cognition in the initial stage. It is precisely this randomness under objective conditions that makes folk art present a simple and natural artistic style, which in turn promotes an intuitive experience of beauty and a profound perception of natural and artistic beauty, showing the internal and natural connection between the aesthetic subject and the object. This is especially precious in modern aesthetics and is also a manifestation of the profound cultural continuity, and philosophical concept continuity, of Chinese aesthetics. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel said: “Modeling cannot simply be an imitation of nature. Imitating nature is not the only purpose of modeling. Modeling as modeling is accidental.”⁴ From the perspective of the formation of aesthetics, aesthetics is essentially random and unrestrained and this characteristic is the fundamental difference between art and industrial production. The value of art lies in its ability to transcend simple imitation, touch the emotions and thoughts of the viewer through unique creativity and expression methods, and thus produce profound cultural and philosophical significance. From this point of view, randomness is precisely one of the core characteristics that distinguish art from manufacturing.

2. The Origin and Development of the Concept of “Contemplation” in Chinese Aesthetics

The concept of “contemplation” in traditional Chinese aesthetics was initially conceived in the original philosophical thought of the pre-Qin period. The classical philosophy represented by the *Book of Changes (Yi Jing)* emphasizes “observing the image to obtain the meaning” and “looking up to observe the celestial phenomena and looking down to observe the geographical features,” believing that all things in nature contain the enlightenment of the Tao and that people can grasp the Tao of heaven and earth through the practice of observation.⁵ As stated in the “*Commentary on the Book of Changes (Yi Zhuan)*”: “The sage sets up

hexagrams to observe the images and attaches words to clarify good and bad fortune,” revealing that the essence of contemplation is not only the observation of external objects but also the grasp of the laws and meanings behind the objects through intuition and speculation.⁶ This observation of images constitutes the origin of the intuitive experience in Chinese aesthetics and also lays the cosmological foundation for the aesthetic contemplation of later generations. Confucius put forward in the *Analects of Confucius (Lunyu)* that “the benevolent find pleasure in mountains, and the wise find pleasure in waters,” closely combining the aesthetic experience of nature with personal cultivation, reflecting the moral and emotional dimension of contemplation.⁷ This concept has been continuously extended in Confucian moral aesthetics, forming the thought of “harmony between man and nature” in which man and nature coexist in harmony. Taoism, on the other hand, explores contemplation with a freer and more open attitude. The thought of carefree wandering in the *Zhuangzi* advocates that the mind enters a state of unrestrainedness through contemplation: “Liezi rides the wind and travels, and it is very pleasant, but he still has something to rely on.”⁸ Here, contemplation goes beyond specific objects and becomes an aesthetic experience of returning to the Tao, emphasizing the internal harmony between nature and the human heart.

During the Wei and Jin dynasties, the concept of contemplation in Chinese aesthetics gradually became self-conscious, and the metaphysical ideological trend injected a philosophical dimension into artistic creation. Wang Bi put forward in *Commentary on the Laozi (Laozi Zhu)* that “observing the image through non-being can obtain its mystery,” clearly defining the idea of grasping the artistic conception through the non-being outside the image.⁹ Gu Kaizhi’s theory of depicting the spirit through form concretized this spirit of contemplation in painting practice. He advocated capturing the spiritual temperament of the character through careful observation and depiction of the appearance, and this concept of expressing the spirit not only influenced the development of Chinese painting but also became an important way to contemplate the essence of inner life. Liu Xie further elevated “the spirit wandering with things” to the basic principle of literary creation in *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons (Wenxin Diaolong)*. He wrote: “Observe the complete scriptures of ancient and modern times and examine the profound regions of people.” Here, observation is not only an aesthetic experience but also a philosophical reflection on history and human nature.¹⁰

By the Tang and Song dynasties, the concept of

contemplation in Chinese aesthetics reached a new peak, manifested as the aesthetic practice of the unity of poetry and painting and the blending of the mind and things. Wang Wei’s poetry and painting are praised as the Zen realm by later generations, and his “walking to the end of the water and sitting watching the clouds rise” is precisely the kind of static contemplation, entering the spiritual state with the heart and reflecting the heart with the environment, which turns the beauty of nature into spiritual pleasure and tranquility.¹¹ Su Shi in the Song Dynasty inherited and deepened this concept. His “judging painting by likeness is like that of a child” rejected being confined to the description of external forms and advocated reaching the state of “obtaining the meaning and forgetting the form” through contemplation. In painting, this contemplation is reflected in the prosperity of landscape painting and the pursuit of artistic conception. For example, Guo Xi in *Linquan Gaozhi* put forward that it should be “feasible, visible, inhabitable, and explorable,” guiding the viewer to enter the spiritual world of the painting with dynamic contemplation.¹² During this period, the influence of Zen Buddhism was particularly significant. The philosophy of “a flower is a world, a leaf is a bodhi” was deeply reflected in artistic creation. For example, the painters Ma Yuan and Xia Gui in the Southern Song Dynasty showed the way of “seeing the big from the small” through the composition techniques of one corner and half side, allowing the viewer to feel the infinite space and interest in the limited painting.

In the Ming and Qing dynasties, the concept of contemplation further developed in literati painting and art theory, paying more attention to the expression of subjective emotions and the creation of artistic conception. Dong Qichang’s Theory of the Southern and Northern Schools of Painting borrowed the sudden enlightenment and gradual cultivation of Zen Buddhism, and put forward different ways of contemplation in artistic creation. He believed that the freehand painting style of the Southern School expressed the artist’s state of mind and personality through brushstroke and ink, which is the embodiment of the concept of contemplation in the subjectivity of artistic creation. Garden art is also a concrete manifestation of the thought of contemplation. Through the ingenious layout of natural space, it creates an artistic realm of “although made by man, it seems to be created by nature.” As Wang Guowei said in *Renjian Cihua*: “When observing things with the self, all things are colored by the self; when observing things with things, all things are true in themselves.”¹³ This duality of observation is precisely the profound and meaningful wisdom of the concept of contemplation. Whether in

the artistic conception of classical landscape painting or the innovation of contemporary art, the concept of contemplation in Chinese aesthetics has always provided spiritual resources for human beings to transcend utilitarianism and pursue spiritual freedom with its philosophical depth and human breadth.

The original philosophy of China, which emerged in China's primitive society, is the philosophical basis of Chinese folk art. The various schools of thought represented by Confucianism and Taoism, which emerged in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods and were derived from the original philosophy of China, are the philosophical basis of literati art. The art of the literati and officials, with the philosophical view of Confucianism's theory of expressing one's aspirations and the theory of Qi as the core, is the expression of the literati and officials' aspirations and feelings, while Chinese folk art is the art that directly interprets the noumenon. Taking fish as an example, in *Autumn Floods* in the *Zhuangzi*, Zhuangzi saw the freedom and happiness of the fish swimming in the water, and the literati and officials painted the fish swimming freely in the water to express their feelings and aspirations by using fish as a metaphor for themselves.¹⁴ Then the fish in folk art is the yin and yang fish and eight trigram fish that interprets the noumenon. Another example is the mouse. In the festival customs the mouse in the paper-cut window decoration of the Spring Festival in the Year of the Mouse, "the mouse bites open the sky," is not the natural mouse in Chinese painting. In the folk tradition, the mouse is the god of children and the god of the reproduction of life. The covered bowl is not a natural covered bowl either, but a symbol of the chaotic cosmic matrix of the combination of yin and yang, heaven and earth, male and female. The mouse bites open the sky and the covered bowl is separated, symbolizing that the mouse, the god of children, reproduces human beings and all things, and generations of descendants are endless. The same is true for the rites of passage in life, such as birth, marriage, and death. Such a metaphor of life and death is precisely a kind of contemplation of the objective concrete by the subject of folk art. It can be said that this kind of contemplation is imposed, or it can be said that this kind of contemplation is unintentional. Here, unintentional does not mean careless, but a kind of convention that is separated from thinking after long-term practice, a kind of default. In *The Spirit of Chinese Art*, Xu Fuguan took the classic story of "Zhuang Zhou Dreaming of a Butterfly" as the carrier of Zhuangzi's philosophical and aesthetic concepts, revealing the profound connotation of Zhuangzi's aesthetic transcendence

through "not knowing that he is Zhuang Zhou."¹⁵ This state of "not knowing that he is Zhuang Zhou" is the key to Zhuangzi's philosophical thought of deconstructing self-consciousness and achieving the unity of the self and the object and the unity of the subject and the object, which is a typical case of the unintentional contemplation referred to by the author. If Zhuang Zhou still has self-consciousness in the dream and realizes that "I am Zhuang Zhou," then there must be thoughts of discussion in his heart, and he cannot reach the pure happiness of satisfying his aspirations. Therefore, the spiritual state of "not knowing that he is Zhuang Zhou" makes the butterfly in the dream become Zhuang Zhou's complete existence, without any previous or subsequent logic for reference. This state of cutting off the connection between the front and the back is exactly in line with the so-called "true state appearing in front" in Buddhism, and Guo Xiang's words of "forgetting the connection between the front and the back" are an accurate interpretation of this meaning. Tracing the connection between the butterfly in the dream and Zhuang Zhou, we find that if there is still a sense of self it is the habitual thinking of usually examining the object in the context of the flow of time and space in the process of cognition. Only in the isolated perceptual state after materialization can the self and the object be cut off from the fetters of time and space together, leading to the natural unity of the subject and the object and reaching the ultimate state of absolute freedom and harmony. This unified state is exactly the manifestation of Zhuangzi's so-called wandering: the emergence out of nothing in psychological experience, forgetting all theoretical and practical connections in reality which forms the current isolated and absolute non-active contemplation, that is, the so-called unintentional contemplation.

3. The Construction of the Discourse System of Chinese Aesthetics

In 1911 the French sinologist Raphaël Petrucci first proposed the term Chinese aesthetics (Esthétique chinoise) in his work *The Natural Philosophy in the Art of the Far East*, and defined the Six Laws of Xie He as the six basic principles of Chinese aesthetics.¹⁶ The use of this term marked the first appearance of the concept of "Chinese aesthetics" and has far-reaching academic significance. In the 1960s, the Ministry of Education began to compile aesthetics textbooks and commissioned scholars such as Wang Zhaowen, Zhu Guangqian, and Zong Baihua to write corresponding aesthetics course textbooks. Although the compilation of

History of Chinese Aesthetics was not completed smoothly, this process produced important academic achievements, and *Selected Materials of the History of Chinese Aesthetics* is one of them.¹⁷ In 1979, Zong Baihua published *Preliminary Exploration of Important Problems in the History of Chinese Aesthetics*, summarizing the compilation of ideas and experiences of the history of Chinese aesthetics.¹⁸ In 1981, Li Zehou published *The Path of Beauty*, further laying the disciplinary framework of Chinese aesthetics.¹⁹

Although there were understandings and thoughts about aesthetics in ancient China before the introduction of the concept of “aesthetics,” China did not form a systematic aesthetic theory at that time and was in a state of “having beauty without theory,” which can only be called a potential aesthetic. In other words, although the concept of beauty existed, the theoretical system of beauty had not been constructed. The true sense of aesthetics as a disciplinary concept began in modern China. In the current discussion of Chinese aesthetics, the issues of its legitimacy and rationality have always aroused in-depth thinking and doubts in the academic community. How can Chinese aesthetics combine both Chineseness and aestheticness in theory and practice? This core question still lacks a systematic and clear answer. What exactly are we discussing when we talk about Chinese aesthetics? How can we ensure that Chinese aesthetics cannot only carry the profound connotations of Chinese culture but also obtain an academically legitimate status in the modern aesthetic system?

From the Western context, aesthetics as a discipline mainly studies how art, nature, and other objects trigger aesthetic experiences and at the same time explores the essence of beauty and its cognitive path. This academic construction is deeply rooted in rationalist philosophy and is based on formal analysis, which has significant differences in logical structure and value orientation from traditional Chinese aesthetic thought. In traditional Chinese culture, aesthetic concepts did not form an independent disciplinary system but permeated various fields such as philosophy, literature, art, and religion. For example, Confucianism emphasizes the beauty of rites and music, Taoism advocates harmony between man and nature, Zen aesthetics focus on emptiness and formlessness, and ancient literary theory attaches importance to image and strength of character. These traditional thought processes have distinct comprehensiveness and practicality, focusing on embodying the harmony between art and life, nature and humanity. However, when these are incorporated into the Western academic framework of modern aesthetics, their

original context and integrity are inevitably localized or even simplified. Taking image (*yi xiang*) as an example, this core concept in classical Chinese poetics emphasizes the blending of subjective emotions and objective scenery, reflecting the uniqueness of traditional Chinese aesthetic thought. However, when image is placed in the Western aesthetic framework, it often faces the dilemma of semantic transformation. For example, Immanuel Kant’s theory of aesthetic judgment emphasizes the disinterestedness and universality of the aesthetic subject, while Chinese image aesthetics pays more attention to individual feelings and the unique experience of the blending of scenes. This difference not only reveals the profound heterogeneity between Chinese and Western aesthetic thoughts but also highlights the internal tension faced by Chinese aesthetics in the process of absorbing Western aesthetic discourse.

At the same time, the construction of modern Chinese aesthetics has triggered another academic paradox: scholars often inevitably rely on Western aesthetic theories and terms when exploring local aesthetic discourse. For example, scholars such as Liang Qichao and Cai Yuanpei introduced Western aesthetic ideas and at the same time tried to combine them with traditional Chinese culture in an attempt to realize the theoretical transformation from aesthetics in China to Chinese aesthetics. However, this practice is based on the theoretical framework of Western aesthetics, making Chinese aesthetics gradually become a hybrid concept: it not only has the disciplinary characteristics of Western aesthetics but also tries to carry the unique connotations of Chinese culture. This situation reflects the embarrassing situation of Chinese aesthetics in the process of modern transformation. On the one hand it tries to get rid of the dependence on Western theories, on the other hand it is difficult to completely break away from the norms of the Western academic system.

From the perspective of the discourse system, Chinese folk art, as an important representation of national culture, is not only an important part of the visual art field but also an indispensable cultural phenomenon and practice in traditional Chinese social life. However, the definition of this concept itself and its legitimacy and cultural reconstruction in the academic system are also complex theoretical issues. In the contemporary context, Chinese folk art not only needs to be recognized as an art category but also needs to be deeply understood as an integrated expression of a cross-cultural visual art system and life practice. The popular use of the term folk art began in the 1970s.²⁰ It is similar to folk music and folk dance and is borrowed from the label of folk literature; folk literature was habitually called vulgar literature

until it was renamed in the 1950s. Since the term folk art went into general use, few people have made a stricter definition of its concept and connotation in lexicology. When determining whether a specific category or work belongs to folk art, or generally discussing the characteristics of folk art, this term is used by convention. However, as long as we calmly think about what folk art is and what categories folk art includes, we will feel that this has not completely solved the problem. In many cases, our use of the concept of “folk art” is still in a rather vague and uncertain grasp.

As the German aesthetician Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten said: “Without a name, one cannot grasp the named thing.”²¹ It is precisely because aesthetics is translated into Chinese as aesthetics (*mei xue*)—rather than philosophy of art or study of sensibility—that we can rediscover and construct the ancient aesthetic thoughts before the establishment of the aesthetic discipline. In Western aesthetics, Kant put forward the concept of “disinterested satisfaction,” emphasizing the purity of aesthetic experience, that is, aesthetic satisfaction should be separated from any personal interests or practical purposes.²² This does not mean being uninterested in beauty but means that when making an aesthetic judgment, the mind has no interest in the actual existence of any object. When aesthetic pleasure is only generated by the appearance of the object and is not related to any external goal, this pleasure reaches the true state of disinterestedness. That is, an aesthetic judgment is not a cognitive judgment, and it is only related to whether the mind is pleased or not.²³ We are pleasantly surprised to find that Kant’s so-called disinterested satisfaction is the same as the unintentional contemplation in Chinese aesthetic consciousness.

Therefore, to solve this series of confusions and anxieties, the most crucial thing is to clarify the relationship between origin and noumenon and distinguish between terms and discourse. We cannot equate the origin of terms with the noumenon of aesthetic discourse. The origin of aesthetic terms is not equal to the content of the discipline they express, and the foreignness of terms does not mean that they cannot become a part of the Chinese academic context. To construct an aesthetic discourse system with Chinese characteristics, it is not necessary to abandon Western concepts. Instead, we need to get rid of the excessive anxiety about the origin of terms and focus on how to reshape the uniqueness and innovation of Chinese aesthetics in the global academic discourse and truly realize the organic integration and dialogue between local and foreign concepts.

4. The Essence and Function of Chinese Folk Art

From the concept, the term folk has two interpretations: one refers to the non-official existence domain; the other refers to the existence domain among the people.²⁴ As for people alone, it generally refers to a certain kind of people. For example, in ancient times, it mostly referred to the people ruled by the rulers—common people—and now it also refers to non-military people or ordinary people; domain refers to a certain spatial existence field. Therefore, in general, folk refers to the ordinary human group that is non-official and non-military. However, “in the field of art, the term ‘folk’ does not refer to all people in general.”²⁵ At the same time, the concept of “folk” cannot be “simply understood as the opposite of ‘official’”. Even the works of handicraftsmen, due to the service nature of their production, some works belong to folk art. In contrast, others are typical of the literati and officialdom nature. Specific problems need to be analyzed specifically.²⁶ Overall, the folk referred to in the specially named folk art mainly refers to ordinary groups of people such as farmers, citizens, and fishermen. In other words, the creators of folk art are ordinary and intelligent people living in different regional cultural circles.

Folk art refers to the art form created by ordinary



Figure 2. *Five Ghosts*. Woodblock New Year picture (paper horse), 11.7×13.6cm.

people in a certain society using specific media and following the spirit of self-adaptation, which is highly characteristic of regional cultural customs. For example, *Five Ghosts* (figure 2) is one of the forms of folk artwork popular in Yunnan, namely Yunnan paper horses (idol images for people to burn after sacrifice). “Paper horse art is a kind of folk art that adapts to certain religious beliefs and folk activities.”²⁷ The so-called “ordinary people in a certain society” refers to the people who create folk art, that is, ordinary farmers, citizens, herdsmen, fishermen, and other specialized craftsmen and artists engaged in labor in specific social regions and cultural circles, that is, those who engage in folk art creation, not the bureaucratic class, the literati and officialdom class, the aristocratic class, and the religious class. In other words, the people who create folk art are not the people who create non-folk art, that is to say, at least the art of the court, the literati and officialdom, and religion belong to the category of non-folk art. However, folk art is the fundamental basis of non-folk art. That is to say, folk art is the most basic level, not a type. It is an art level because in addition to the characteristics shared by other arts such as region, symbol, and narrative, the creation of folk art has the original and conscious randomness and self-contemplation.

The creators of folk art do not create without purpose but create with certain desires. Desires include practical needs, spiritual needs, value promotion, hope demands, and other ideas that emerge in reality and want to be realized. This is the connotation of self-adaptation. On the one hand, compared with professional artists who carefully plan the composition and design details before creation, folk art creators seem to create casually. They combine the treasure trove of life materials accumulated in daily life with the torrent of simple and passionate emotions in their hearts and naturally integrate the available materials, skilled techniques, and current state of mind. Seemingly without any rules, they follow the underlying logic of regional culture. On the other hand, the creators have no intention of replicating the perfect paradigm of academic art that is meticulous and refined. They immerse themselves in their creative rhythm and unconsciously integrate the true face of life, the unique folk customs of the region, and the voices of the people into the works. This process abandons the traces of deliberate carving and presents a natural and unadorned state. The value orientation and condensed form of their creations are influenced by factors such as the cultural spirit, subjective psychological characteristics, living needs, customs, and dream tendencies of their local regions and groups, resulting in an unintentional contemplation. This technical process has reached a very

strong randomness in long-term practice, thus showing the comprehensive characteristics of the regionality, self-adaptation, simplicity, and hierarchy of folk art.

Folk artists form an unconscious self-emptying in the infinite proficiency of artistic techniques, which is the crucial void in artistic creation. Only by keeping the mind empty can one achieve the aesthetic unintentionalness in artistic creation, which directly contributes to the so-called aesthetic characteristic of randomness. The vividness often lies in the creator’s profound understanding of the object and the liberation of the form itself, which is a comprehensive manifestation of visual imagination and inner essence. The author takes the story of “Paoding Dissecting an Ox” in the *Zhuangzi* to describe the occurrence of randomness.

Paoding was dissecting an ox for Lord Wenhui. His hand touched it, his shoulder leaned on it, his foot stepped on it, and his knee pressed against it. With a swish and a hiss, the sound of the knife was in harmony with the “Mulberry Grove Dance” and in line with the rhythm of the “Jing Shou.” Lord Wenhui said, “Excellent! How did your skill reach this level?” Paoding put down the knife and replied, “What I am fond of is the Tao, which is beyond mere skill. When I first began to dissect oxen, all I saw was oxen. After three years, I no longer saw the whole ox. Now, I meet it with my spirit rather than my eyes. My physical senses stop, and my spiritual desire moves. I follow the natural principles... When I move the knife slightly, the ox is already dissected and falls to the ground like earth. I stand there with the knife in my hand, looking around, feeling extremely satisfied, and then carefully store the knife.”²⁸

Paoding pursues not only proficiency in technique but also a profound understanding of philosophy in technical practice. This view reveals the close connection between technique and principle; that is, technical practice is not only a display of skills but also an embodiment of philosophical ideas. The state of no longer seeing the whole ox demonstrated by Paoding in the slaughtering technique symbolizes the dissolution of the opposition between him and the object. Through the practice of meeting it with the spirit rather than the eyes, Paoding achieves the unity of the mind and the object and transcends the boundary between the inner and the material world. For Paoding, the excellence of technique is no longer the goal, but through technique, he achieves the freedom and play of the mind. This spiritual liberation achieved through technique is an example of the practice of the Tao in individual life and also the manifestation of the artistic spirit in reality, and the so-called randomness of folk art is precisely the result of the unconscious contemplation formed in countless practices.

In summary, from a philosophical perspective, the unintentional contemplation in Chinese aesthetic consciousness is the metaphysical, which is the Tao; the randomness of folk art is the physical, which is the Qi; unintentional contemplation is the essence (Ti), and randomness is the function (Yong); unintentional contemplation is the moon in the sky, and randomness is the moon in all rivers.

“The author of traditional Chinese painting, because he stands far above the painting realm and overlooks nature, is not easy to find the position of the author in the painting realm. It is a desolate and seemingly uninhabited and self-sufficient realm.”²⁹ This realm is exactly the uninhabited realm pursued by Chinese art philosophy. If the technical cultivation is not based on the spirit of this aesthetic contemplation, then the technique will be confined within the scope of

practicality and cannot reach the Tao and cannot be called art. The randomness of folk art is precisely a kind of detachment from technique and a manifestation of tending towards the Tao. This randomness is not an arbitrary disorder but a form of free expression after a profound understanding of the essence of things, reflecting a deep integration of form and content, the external and the internal, and an unintentional contemplation. This is the unique beauty embodied by folk art, which is consistent with traditional Chinese aesthetic consciousness and contributes to its endless charm.

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ENDNOTES

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民間美術隨意性視閥下：看中國審美意識的“無心關照”

顧子墨

摘要：本文聚焦民間美術實踐的隨意性，剖析其與傳統審美“無心關照”理念的邏輯關聯。筆者認為，“無心關照”在民間美術的實踐中是形而上的審美準則，可以稱之為“體”。民間創作者受其潤澤，隨創作實踐推進，技藝精湛，創作漸顯隨意性，此為形而下的“用”，二者辯證統一，塑造了民間美術核心特質。

關鍵詞：民間美術；中國哲學；文明互鑒；美學