

PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTION AND ARTISTIC PRACTICE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE UNDERLYING IDEOLOGICAL AND TECHNICAL DIFFERENCES IN CHINESE AND WESTERN PAINTING

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Abstract: *Beneath the surface-level stylistic differences between Chinese and Western painting lies a profound divergence in philosophical concepts and artistic pursuits. This paper systematically analyzes the contrasting attitudes manifested in Chinese and Western approaches to “nature”: Western tradition, since the Greco-Roman era, has pursued the realistic representation of nature, striving to approximate the “ideal beauty” through imitation and idealized enhancement of the objective world. In contrast, Chinese painting, deeply rooted in Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, places greater emphasis on the creation of subjective artistic conception and the transcendence of the material world, advocating the principle that “one should learn from nature externally while drawing inspiration internally,” and seeking to express the artist’s inner realization through the charm of brush and ink. By conducting an in-depth comparison of the artistic spirits of “realism” and “expressive freehand brushwork,” this paper identifies the fundamental differences between Chinese and Western painting in terms of artistic objectives, aesthetic evaluation criteria, and historical trajectories. These distinctions not only reflect the profound divergence in philosophical thought and aesthetic taste between East and West, but also offer deeper insight into the cultural and conceptual differences underlying their artistic traditions. It is hoped that this study will enrich the theoretical depth of comparative art history and provide new perspectives for cross-cultural aesthetic dialogue in the context of contemporary globalization.*

Keywords: *Chinese and Western painting philosophy; Idealism and Realism; Artistic Conception; Realism and Freehand Brushwork; Representation and Transcendence of Nature*

Introduction

Painting has long been recognized as a central manifestation of human culture, reflecting the philosophical, spiritual, and aesthetic orientations of different civilizations. Among the most significant comparative inquiries is the study of Chinese and Western painting, which not only reveals stylistic and technical divergences but also exposes deeper cultural and ideological foundations.

In recent decades, scholars have increasingly turned to comparative aesthetics in order to understand how distinct traditions of realism and expressive freehand developed under divergent philosophical backgrounds. Yet much of this scholarship remains descriptive, focusing on techniques and visual forms while leaving the underlying philosophical frameworks insufficiently integrated.

This study seeks to address this gap by examining Chinese and Western painting from a philosophical-comparative perspective. Specifically, it analyzes the Western pursuit of mimetic realism and ideal beauty, the Chinese emphasis on artistic conception (yijing) and brush-and-ink aesthetics, and the broader divergence between realism and expressive freehand brushwork. The paper is structured as follows: following the problem statement, literature review, and methodology, the discussion turns first to Western painting, then to Chinese painting, and finally to a comparative analysis, before concluding with reflections on contemporary significance.

Problem Statement

Painting, as a vital manifestation of human culture, has evolved along two distinct trajectories in the East and the West. Numerous studies have compared the stylistic and technical differences between Chinese and Western painting, such as the development of perspective in the West and the emphasis on brush-and-ink in China. However, these studies have often remained on the surface level of form and technique. What remains underexplored is the deeper philosophical foundation that has shaped these artistic traditions.

In the Western tradition, since the Greco-Roman era, art has been grounded in the pursuit of mimetic realism and the refinement of “ideal beauty.” In contrast, Chinese painting, nurtured by Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, developed around the principles of yi (artistic conception), shen (spirit), and brush-and-ink vitality, emphasizing transcendence over material resemblance. This divergence is not merely aesthetic but reflects fundamentally different worldviews and cultural psychologies.

While there is a substantial body of scholarship on comparative aesthetics, few works provide a critical synthesis that directly connects philosophical roots to artistic practice in both traditions. In particular, recent discussions on global cultural integration and intercultural aesthetics (2022-2024) highlight the urgency of re-examining these differences, not only as historical phenomena but also as active forces shaping contemporary artistic dialogue.

Therefore, this study addresses the following research questions, which correspond to the main sections of the paper:

Western Painting - What philosophical and aesthetic ideals shaped the Western tradition of painting, from ancient mimesis of nature to Renaissance realism and the pursuit of ideal form?

Chinese Painting - How did Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist thought shape the philosophical foundations of Chinese painting, leading to the development of expressive freehand brushwork, artistic conception (yijing), and brush-and-ink aesthetics?

Comparative Perspectives - In what ways do these divergent traditions—Western realism and Chinese expressive freehand—reflect fundamentally different worldviews, aesthetic criteria, and historical trajectories of artistic development?

By exploring these questions, this paper offers a philosophical-comparative framework that links ideology with artistic practice. Such an approach contributes to a deeper understanding of cultural diversity in art and provides new perspectives for cross-cultural aesthetic dialogue in the context of globalization.

Literature Review

Research on the differences between Chinese and Western painting has a long history, traditionally emphasizing contrasts in style and technique—such as the Western development of perspective and the Chinese focus on brush-and-ink aesthetics. While these studies provide valuable descriptive accounts, they often remain fragmented, lacking a critical synthesis of key debates.

A major scholarly debate centers on realism versus spirit capture. Western art, grounded in the Greco-Roman tradition of mimesis, has long been characterized by faithful representation and the pursuit of idealized beauty. By contrast, Chinese painting privileges spirit resonance (qiyun shengdong), expressive freehand brushwork, and artistic conception (yijing), rooted in Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist thought. Some scholars regard these orientations as fundamentally incommensurable paradigms, while others suggest they should be understood as complementary approaches to nature and humanity (Xuan, 2023; He, 2022). However, much of the existing literature tends to emphasize stylistic descriptions or simple dichotomies, without systematically connecting these artistic orientations to their underlying philosophical foundations and evaluative standards.

Recent scholarship has sought to address this gap by exploring global art integration and intercultural aesthetics. Mikuni (2024), for example, employs a cross-cultural machine learning model to compare beauty judgments in visual art, demonstrating the influence of cultural context on aesthetic evaluation. Wang (2024) proposes a sustainable evaluation framework that bridges Eastern and Western traditions, emphasizing pluralism rather than singular standards. These studies highlight how categories such as realism and expressive freehand continue to inform artistic practice under globalization.

Chinese scholars have likewise contributed new insights. He (2022) examines traditional aesthetic pathways of Chinese art, underscoring the lasting significance of qiyun and yijing. Huang (2025) interprets ink and color in Chinese painting as cultural symbols with transnational resonance. Nevertheless, even in recent scholarship, there remains a tendency to privilege descriptive analysis over critical integration. Few works explicitly link philosophical foundations, evaluative criteria, and historical trajectories in a comparative framework.

In sum, while previous studies have offered valuable observations on stylistic and technical differences, they often stop short of developing a comprehensive and critical synthesis. This study therefore seeks to address that gap by constructing a philosophical-comparative

framework that directly connects ideology with artistic practice, thereby deepening cross-cultural understanding.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative comparative approach grounded in historical-philosophical analysis. The aim is to examine how divergent philosophical traditions shaped the artistic practices, evaluative standards, and historical trajectories of Chinese and Western painting. The methodology is aligned with the three main research questions of the paper.

For Western painting, the study draws upon primary sources such as the writings of Plato, Aristotle, and Renaissance humanists, as well as key art-historical accounts (e.g., Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*). These materials are analyzed to trace the evolution of the Western commitment to mimesis, realism, and the pursuit of ideal beauty.

For Chinese painting, the study examines classical art treatises (e.g., Xie He's *Six Principles of Painting*), Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist texts, along with major contributions from painter-scholars such as Su Shi, Dong Qichang, and Shitao. These sources are used to uncover how Chinese painting emphasized artistic conception (*yijing*), expressive freehand brushwork, and brush-and-ink aesthetics.

For the comparative analysis, the study synthesizes insights from both traditions, combining textual analysis with art-historical interpretation. Secondary scholarship in comparative aesthetics and intercultural studies (2022 – 2024) is integrated to highlight how the divergent ideals of realism and expressive freehand reflect broader cultural psychologies and continue to inform contemporary artistic dialogue.

By systematically combining primary philosophical texts, classical art theories, and modern scholarship, this study constructs a framework that links ideology with artistic practice. Such a methodology ensures that the comparative analysis is grounded in both historical evidence and philosophical interpretation, while also addressing the global significance of these traditions in the modern era.

Western Painting: From “Imitation of Nature” to the Ideal of Form

The philosophical roots of Western painting can be traced back to ancient Greece and Rome, where the core value of artistic ideals centered on the imitation (*mimesis*) of nature. The Roman naturalist Pliny the Elder, in his *Natural History*, recorded several anecdotes illustrating this pursuit: Zeuxis, for instance, painted grapes so lifelike that birds attempted to peck at them; Parrhasius, another painter, famously deceived a fellow artist with a curtain so convincingly rendered that it was mistaken for a real object. These stories vividly reflect the early classical aspiration that painting should faithfully recreate reality, even to the point of illusion. This echoes the sentiment attributed to Seneca: “All art is but imitation of nature” (Wang Huansheng, 2018).

However, at the very time when this realist aesthetic was flourishing, the philosopher Plato posed a sharp challenge to it. In Book X of *The Republic*, through the metaphor of “the painted bed,” Plato proposed a hierarchy of existence: the “Idea,” the “physical object,” and the “image.” In his view, what the painter depicts is merely an image, a representation that stands two removes away from the true essence. Plato championed the “beauty of the Idea,” a

beauty that transcends the sensory world. The reality perceived by the senses was, in his philosophy, merely a flawed shadow of the true ideal world. Thus, he regarded painting, which imitates sensory appearances, as philosophically suspect—arguing that it remains at the level of superficial representation and fails to access the truth itself. This criticism raises a fundamental question about the nature of art: should painting content itself with reproducing appearances, or should it strive for a higher realm of ideal beauty?

Although this tradition of “imitating nature” temporarily waned during the Middle Ages, it was revitalized in the Renaissance. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, humanists avidly revisited the works of classical thinkers like Cicero and Seneca, seeking to reconcile the relationship between art, nature, reality, and idealism. The Renaissance aesthetic thus combined rigorous observation of nature and the application of scientific methods—such as anatomy and linear perspective—with the rational imagination needed to transcend the mundane aspects of the natural world and pursue an idealized beauty. A well-known example is Cicero’s account of Zeuxis painting an ideal beauty by combining the finest features of several women into one portrait, illustrating that true art involves not the mechanical replication of nature, but its rational selection and imaginative refinement.

This philosophy profoundly influenced Renaissance masters such as Leonardo da Vinci. His artistic practice balanced meticulous scientific realism (as seen in his anatomical studies and mastery of perspective) with an insistence that painting should become a “second nature,” using imaginative vision to create images more perfect than reality itself. Leonardo’s work demonstrated that precision in depicting reality was only the foundation; true artistic excellence emerged through the rational refinement and imaginative elevation of what was seen. Under this dual guidance of realism and idealism, Western painting during the Renaissance achieved unprecedented artistic heights.

The aesthetic principles established during the Renaissance did not diminish with time. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, classical and academic art continued to uphold and even strengthen these ideals. Academic training placed heavy emphasis on anatomical accuracy, drawing, and chiaroscuro to enhance realism, while art theorists continued to advocate for the portrayal of “ideal beauty”—seeking to depict not merely what nature presents, but what nature ought to embody. For instance, the neoclassical painter Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres stressed both anatomical precision and the idealization of form through graceful lines, while even Romantic painters, despite their imaginative subjects, often relied on vivid naturalistic detail to anchor their compositions. Thus, until the mid-nineteenth century, the mainstream of Western painting remained committed to the dual goals of realistically representing nature and pursuing aesthetic idealization. Even the Realism movement of the later nineteenth century, led by artists such as Gustave Courbet, reflected a profound engagement with the objective world, continuing the Western tradition of “seeing nature with the eye” as the basis of artistic creation.

It was not until the advent of photography that the primacy of realistic representation was fundamentally challenged. Only then did modern art gradually shift its focus toward subjective perception and formal innovation—a topic that falls beyond the scope of this discussion.

Throughout the evolution of Western painting from antiquity to the modern era, a consistent trajectory emerges: a deep commitment to the faithful representation of nature, coupled with an

aspiration to transcend it through rational refinement. Western artists believed that by meticulously capturing natural details—such as human anatomy, spatial perspective, and light and shadow—they could glimpse the underlying order and truth of the universe. Through reason and imagination, they sought to elevate what was seen into an idealized aesthetic realm. This belief endowed Western painting with its outstanding technical mastery in realism and its persistent pursuit of ideal beauty. It is crucial to emphasize that this tradition was never merely a matter of visual mimicry; rather, it was deeply infused with philosophical ambition—whether it was Plato’s yearning for the beauty of the ideal or the Renaissance humanists’ advocacy of intellectual and spiritual ideals—all subtly realized through the faithful rendering of the visible world, rather than through direct recourse to abstraction or metaphysical imagery.

Chinese Painting: Philosophical Foundations and the Path of Expressive Freehand

In stark contrast to the Western tradition of striving for objective realism, the development of Chinese painting has been deeply rooted in the indigenous nourishment of its own philosophical traditions. From the pre-Qin philosophers to the Neo-Confucian scholars of the Song and Ming dynasties, the spiritual foundation of Chinese art has been profoundly shaped by the convergence of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, each providing rich and enduring sources of thought from their respective perspectives.

Confucianism: The Aesthetic of Harmony and the Ideal of Moral Cultivation

Confucianism advocates for an aesthetic centered on “the Doctrine of the Mean” and “harmonious equilibrium,” seeking a unity between humans and nature, as well as among individuals within society. As articulated in *The Doctrine of the Mean* from the *Book of Rites*: “Achieve harmony, and heaven and earth will find their rightful places, and all things will flourish.” In painting, this principle translates into works that radiate a sense of dignity, peace, elegance, and restraint. Painting is not merely a vehicle for artistic expression but also serves the Confucian goal of moral education, aimed at cultivating character and refining the spirit, while rejecting eccentricity and extravagance. Consequently, traditional Chinese painting emphasizes balanced composition, subtle tonalities, and refined expression, embodying the Confucian ideal of harmonious and upright aesthetics. Moreover, Confucianism has consistently promoted the integration of painting with poetry, ritual, and music, forming a holistic system of cultural refinement and preventing art from degenerating into mere sensory entertainment or technical virtuosity. This perspective grants Chinese painting not only aesthetic significance but also an ethical function, striving toward the ideal state of “perfection in both form and virtue.”

Daoism: The Way of Nature and the Unity of Heaven and Humanity

The influence of Daoism, particularly the philosophies of Laozi and Zhuangzi, infused Chinese painting with an ethereal, transcendent spirit of freedom and detachment. Laozi’s principle that “the Dao follows what is natural” emphasizes following innate tendencies without artificial contrivance. Zhuangzi, through a wealth of parables—such as the story of Cook Ding carving an ox—explored the subtle relationship between skill and the Dao. The master chef’s ability to effortlessly navigate the structure of the ox, achieving a state of unity between himself and his task, epitomizes the highest level of artistry: not the meticulous pursuit of technique, but an intuitive accord with the natural order. This philosophy deeply influenced Chinese aesthetic ideals: true artistic excellence lies not in the precise replication of external appearances but in capturing the underlying spirit of things—hence the dictum “learning from nature externally, and attaining inspiration internally.” The Daoist ideal of “the unity of heaven and humanity”

further encouraged artists to treat painting as a means of internal contemplation and cosmic resonance. Thus, Chinese landscape painting transcended mere depiction of scenery, aiming instead to express the harmonious integration of nature and the human spirit. Artists, through meditation and observation, would render their brushwork naturally and spontaneously, achieving the subtle beauty of “mutual generation of the real and the void” and “winning more with less.” As traditional Chinese art theory asserts: “Seek not mere resemblance, but the spirit,” for only by abandoning attachment to concrete forms can the true essence be captured.

Buddhism (Chan Buddhism): Spiritual Awakening and Transcendental Realms

Buddhism, particularly Chan (Zen) aesthetics, permeated Chinese art from the Wei and Jin dynasties onward, exerting a profound influence on painting from the Tang and Song periods. Chan thought emphasizes inner enlightenment and the direct realization of the essence of life and the cosmos, a philosophy that profoundly shaped artistic practice, giving rise to the aesthetic principles of “writing with the heart” and “transcending the written word.” Chan-influenced painting eschews rigid adherence to conventional techniques, instead valuing spontaneous inspiration and intuitive insight. The Tang poet-painter Wang Wei exemplified this spirit, pioneering the integration of poetic sentiment into ink landscape painting, achieving the effect of “painting within poetry, and poetry within painting”—a vivid manifestation of Chan’s ideal of sudden enlightenment. Moreover, Chan’s teaching of the emptiness of all phenomena inspired an artistic love for “blankness” or “empty space” in painting: the seemingly empty areas of a composition are laden with infinite suggestion, inviting viewers to participate imaginatively. As Chan saying goes, “Without attaching to a single word, one captures the entire spirit.” Inspired by Chan, the Ming painter Dong Qichang formulated his famous theory of the “Northern and Southern Schools” of painting, championing the expressive, freehand ink painting of the Southern School, which valued swift, spontaneous brushwork over meticulous craftsmanship. This spirit of expressive immediacy closely aligned with Chan Buddhism’s emphasis on intuitive flashes of insight. The artistic realms shaped by Buddhist-Chan thought thus present painting as a form of spiritual practice, wherein the artist attains a contemplative state—“stilling the mind to observe the Dao” and “wandering freely within landscapes”—producing works imbued with profound, transcendent resonance.

In summary, the unique philosophical orientation of Chinese painting emerged from the interweaving of Confucian “harmonious balance,” Daoist “natural spontaneity,” and Buddhist-Chan “ethereal transcendence.” As Dong Qichang remarked during the Ming dynasty, Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism together constructed the “three realms” of artistic creation: the Confucian realm of elegance and harmony, the Daoist realm of mystery and profundity, and the Buddhist-Chan realm of spiritual emptiness. This triadic foundation explains why Chinese painting consistently prioritizes expressive freehand brushwork over strict representational realism. Modern scholars have also emphasized that Chinese aesthetic tradition consistently values the cultivation of inner spiritual realms through artistic creation, focusing on the profound enlightenment of both artist and viewer (Wang Yuechuan, 2024).

The Artistic Conception, Expressive Freehand, and Brush-and-Ink Aesthetics of Chinese Painting

Under the combined influence of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, Chinese painting gradually developed a distinctive system of techniques and aesthetic traditions. This tradition can be broadly summarized by three key concepts: artistic conception (yijing), subjective expression, and the spirit of brush-and-ink.

First, artistic conception (Yijing). Yijing stands at the core of Chinese aesthetics, emphasizing the fusion of emotion and scene, the interplay of the real and the void, and the evocation of infinite feelings within a finite pictorial space. Chinese landscape painting, for instance, has never been merely a mechanical depiction of mountains and rivers, but always conveys the artist's philosophical reflections on nature and life, as well as their personal ideals. Guo Xi of the Northern Song dynasty proposed the "Three Distances" theory— "high distance," "deep distance," and "level distance" —creating layered spatial dimensions that invite the viewer into meditative wandering. In the Southern Song period, artists such as Ma Yuan and Xia Gui pushed this further with bold use of blank space and corner compositions, achieving "more with less" by evoking vast landscapes with only a few brushstrokes. The subtlety of yijing lies precisely in its emotional resonance within imagery, creating boundless poetic feeling through minimal means. For example, the poetic and pictorial ideal pursued by Wang Wei— "At leisure, the osmanthus petals fall; in the stillness of night, the spring mountains are empty" —demonstrates how sparse brushwork can inspire profound reflection and emotional immersion. Because of the emphasis on yijing rather than literal realism, Chinese painting places less importance on strict adherence to linear perspective or proportion; artists even willingly sacrifice visual accuracy for compositional freedom and rhythmic brushwork. This contrasts sharply with the Western tradition, which since the Renaissance has emphasized single-point perspective and centralized spatial logic. Chinese scroll paintings encourage viewers to "wander with the mind," experiencing shifting viewpoints as they progress through the artwork; thus, space and time in Chinese painting are fluid and dynamic rather than static. Scholars have pointed out that this divergence between the West's "centered" visual paradigm and the "scattered perspective" of Chinese painting reflects fundamentally different habits of seeing and philosophical cognition (Tang Yonghua, 2022).

Second, subjective expression and the spirit of capturing essence. Throughout its history, Chinese painting has never reduced art to mechanical reproduction of the external world. Instead, it has always stressed the artist's subjective emotional expression and spiritual communication. Art theory across dynasties repeatedly emphasizes the importance of "writing the spirit through form" and achieving "harmony between spirit and form," arguing that painting must convey not only the outer appearance but also the inner essence of its subject—and indeed, of the artist himself. Su Shi of the Northern Song period famously stated: "To judge painting by resemblance alone is to see with the eyes of a child." For Su Shi, true artistry lay not in superficial likeness, but in the ability to express spirit and emotion through brush and ink. Following this view, literati painters such as Su Shi and Mi Fu treated painting as an extension of poetry, often accompanying paintings with poetic inscriptions and colophons, using scenery as a vehicle for personal reflection and emotional resonance. For instance, Zheng Banqiao's paintings of orchids and bamboo, though composed with only a few strokes, conveyed his noble and unyielding spirit, while Shi Tao's landscapes, though seemingly spontaneous, embodied a deep yearning for spiritual freedom. In Chinese painting, the brushwork itself—*bimo*—became a direct extension of the artist's character and inner cultivation. "One sees the person through the painting" became a common saying: the quality of line (its thickness, strength, pliancy) and the modulation of ink (its density, dryness, richness) directly reflected the artist's temperament and emotional state. The Qing dynasty painter Bada Shanren, for example, captured a stark, lonely spirit with just a few exaggerated brushstrokes depicting fish—sacrificing anatomical accuracy to express psychological depth. Such

subjective expressiveness stands in stark contrast to Western art's traditional insistence on objective fidelity: a Chinese artist could accept distortion of form, but never a work devoid of spirit or vitality. As early as the Southern Qi dynasty, Xie He, in his Six Principles of Painting, ranked "spiritual resonance and vitality" (qiyun shengdong) above "faithful representation of form," setting the enduring tone for Chinese artistic evaluation. Later literati painters elevated "capturing the spirit" (shensi) to orthodoxy, while dismissing mere "likeness" as the work of craftsmen, not true artists.

Third, the spirit of brush-and-ink and calligraphic expression. Because Chinese painting employs brush, ink, and paper—the same materials as calligraphy—the two arts have always been intimately connected. Historically, most painters were also skilled calligraphers, and techniques between the two disciplines permeated each other. Chinese painting places great emphasis on the independent aesthetic value of brushwork and ink manipulation. As early as the Tang dynasty, Zhang Zao proposed that "brushwork should flow like drifting silk" (Wang Bomin, 2010), highlighting the importance of continuous, elastic lines. By the Song dynasty, artists further developed techniques such as "the five shades of ink," using variations in density, wetness, and dryness to create rich spatial effects and visual rhythms. In this context, lines and ink were not mere tools for depiction but became direct expressions of the artist's character, emotional states, and cultivation. As the saying goes, "to view a painting is to see the person behind it." Even when portraying the same subject, each painter's brushwork style—its rhythm, energy, and ink modulation—revealed their unique inner world. Shi Tao, a key figure of the early Qing dynasty, famously asserted that "brush and ink must follow the spirit of the times" (Zhonghua Book Company, 2015), encouraging artists to innovate and develop personal styles. This emphasis on calligraphic expressiveness led to a highly systematized yet infinitely variable tradition of brush-and-ink painting: for example, although there are conventional brush techniques for painting orchids and bamboo, each artist infused the forms with their distinctive temperament, much like different calligraphers impart diverse characters to the same written word. This pursuit of emotional expression through brush-and-ink meant that Chinese painters were far less concerned with mastering the rigid scientific techniques of perspective and anatomy that preoccupied Western artists. Instead, they poured their creative energies into the exploration of expressive brushwork, achieving what they termed "painting from the heart." Remarkably, this aesthetic orientation even foreshadowed aspects of twentieth-century Western Abstract Expressionism—such as Jackson Pollock's drip painting—which emphasized the artist's direct recording of inner emotional trajectories through brushstrokes.

In summary, Chinese painting's aesthetics and techniques are inseparable: form is but the means, while spirit (yi) is the ultimate pursuit. As generations of Chinese art theorists have emphasized, painting is essentially "the painting of the mind." In contrast, Western tradition has historically placed greater weight on expressing ideas or religious doctrines through accurate and objective imagery. Thus, while Chinese painting emphasizes yi (spirit and intent), Western painting emphasizes xing (form), leading to fundamentally different developmental paths and artistic ideals. This divergence is vividly encapsulated in the contrast between "expressive freehand" and "realistic representation," a critical distinction that will be explored further in the following comparative analysis.

Comparative Perspectives on Chinese and Western Painting: The Divergence Between Realism and Expressive Freehand

Influenced by differing philosophical backgrounds and cultural psychologies, Chinese and Western painting developed fundamentally opposite approaches to the relationship between nature and art. Western painting tends toward the realistic reproduction and idealized refinement of nature, aiming to approach objective truth; in contrast, Chinese painting emphasizes the subjective transcendence of nature, prioritizing the expression of the inner world and artistic conception (*yijing*). This fundamental difference is vividly reflected in the divergence between the artistic ideals of “realism” and “expressive freehand brushwork.”

First, the difference in artistic objectives. In the Western tradition, the faithful depiction of the objective world has long been regarded as a primary goal of art. From early explorations of perspective in ancient Greece and Rome, to the systematic establishment of mathematical perspective during the Renaissance, and on to the pursuit of objective accuracy in nineteenth-century realism, Western art consistently strove for the faithful reproduction of what the eye perceives. Consequently, Western artists developed a highly refined and rigorous system of realist techniques: anatomical representation guided by scientific study, linear and atmospheric perspective, and sophisticated oil painting methods that layered pigments to create a vivid illusion of three-dimensionality. In Western thought, nature was seen as the wellspring of beauty and truth, and the artist’s mission was to rationally select and enhance the finest elements of nature, crafting images even more perfect than reality itself. Even religious artworks emphasized visual plausibility to better convey spiritual ideals. Thus, “representation” and “realism” in Western painting were not mere technical criteria but carried profound philosophical and theological significance: to understand nature was to move closer to the divine order of creation.

By contrast, Chinese painting never pursued the mere replication of external appearances. Instead, it seeks to express the artist’s internalized perception and transcendence of nature. As Zhang Zao asserted during the Tang dynasty, “Externally learn from nature; internally attain inspiration” (Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 2010). While Chinese painters drew inspiration from nature, their works did not aim for direct correspondence with specific real-world scenes; rather, they manifested the ideal landscapes conceived within the artist’s mind. The landscape paintings of Dong Yuan and Juran from the Five Dynasties period, for example, do not depict identifiable locations but synthesize the characteristic features of southern China’s landscapes with the artists’ poetic sensibilities and personal ideals, creating worlds that are “habitable, viewable, traversable.” Daoist and Chan Buddhist ideas—particularly the notion of “grasping the spirit beyond the form”—deeply influenced this view, stressing that art should transcend objective forms to achieve spiritual elevation. Consequently, Chinese painting did not rigidly follow unified perspectives or strict rules of realism; a single composition might integrate multiple viewpoints—high distance, deep distance, and level distance—to best capture the essence of the scene. Figures and flora might be exaggerated or abstracted to convey emotional resonance. Although these practices might seem to violate realist principles from a Western perspective, in Chinese painting they are regarded as legitimate means of expressing inner truths.

Second, the difference in evaluation standards. In the Western tradition, “realism” long served as a principal criterion for judging artistic merit; the greater an artist’s ability to

replicate visual reality, the higher their reputation and standing. In contrast, Chinese painting has historically placed greater emphasis on whether a work embodies “spiritual resonance” (qiyun shengdong) and aesthetic vitality. In his Record of Ancient Painters, Xie He of the Southern Qi dynasty articulated the famous “Six Principles of Painting,” ranking “spiritual resonance” as the foremost standard, above “faithful depiction of form.” Northern Song literati such as Su Shi criticized works that emphasized mere likeness, regarding them as childish in vision; Ouyang Xiu likewise disparaged paintings overly obsessed with surface resemblance, advocating instead for a focus on spirit and poetic resonance. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, Dong Qichang further systematized this evaluative logic, likening the contrast between literati painting and court (academic) painting to the division between the Southern and Northern Schools of Chan Buddhism—elevating expressive literati painting and relegating highly realistic court painting to secondary status. Consequently, notions such as “artistic conception,” “brush-and-ink spirit,” and “spiritual vitality” became the primary standards for judging Chinese painting. A work that achieved mere formal resemblance but lacked inner vitality or aesthetic resonance was unlikely to be regarded as true art (Higher Education Press, 2024). Even in Western Romanticism and Impressionism, despite greater emphasis on subjective perception, there remained a commitment to capturing the optical truth of light and atmosphere. Thus, the two traditions reflect fundamentally different aesthetic priorities: one centered on objective reproduction, the other on subjective resonance.

Third, the difference in historical trajectories. The divergent attitudes toward “representation” and “transcendence” shaped the historical evolution of Chinese and Western painting along distinct paths. In the West, following the Renaissance, painting progressed through Baroque, Classicism, and Realism, consistently advancing toward greater refinement of realist techniques and expansion of representational subject matter. Even when stylistic revolutions occurred, such as Impressionism, the foundation remained the faithful capture of natural phenomena. This developmental trajectory paralleled and reinforced the broader Western embrace of scientific rationality.

In contrast, Chinese painting increasingly evolved toward expressive freehand brushwork. Although the Tang and Song dynasties produced highly realistic court paintings (yuanti), from the Song-Yuan transition onward, the literati painting tradition—which emphasized subjective expression and brushwork vitality—gradually gained dominance. By the Ming and Qing periods, Chinese painting had largely transitioned into a highly expressive, calligraphic mode that prioritized the spirit of brush-and-ink over the optical imitation of reality. This shift was not due to a technical deficiency but reflected a conscious cultural choice: the Chinese literati valued painting as a medium for emotional and philosophical expression over the objective depiction of the external world. Thus, the two traditions diverged sharply, embodying fundamentally different cultural psychologies and aesthetic values.

Conclusion and Outlook

This study has been organized around three research questions corresponding to the main sections of the paper: the philosophical and aesthetic ideals of Western painting, the philosophical foundations of Chinese painting, and the comparative perspectives that highlight their divergence and contemporary relevance.

Western Painting

By tracing the trajectory from ancient mimesis of nature to the Renaissance pursuit of realism and ideal beauty, this study has shown that Western painting centers on the faithful representation and rational refinement of nature. Through the development of anatomy, linear and atmospheric perspective, and layered oil techniques, Western art pursued not only technical accuracy but also an epistemological quest for order and truth.

Chinese Painting

Drawing on Confucian harmony, Daoist natural spontaneity, and Buddhist-Chan transcendence, this study has demonstrated that Chinese painting prioritizes *yijing* (artistic conception), spirit-resonance, and brush-and-ink aesthetics. Rather than replicating external appearances, it emphasizes “learning from nature externally, attaining inspiration internally,” using calligraphic brushwork and the interplay of emptiness and fullness to achieve expressive transcendence. In this framework, *qiyun shengdong* (spiritual vitality) ranks above formal likeness, establishing the enduring evaluative standard of Chinese art.

Comparative Perspectives

At the broader level, the Western paradigm of realism — rational, perspectival, and representational—contrasts sharply with the Chinese paradigm of expressive freehand—subjective, scattered, and transcendent. These differences have guided two distinct historical trajectories: the West toward ever-greater refinement of realist techniques, and China toward literati painting and expressive brushwork. While the twentieth century witnessed increasing cross-cultural exchange, with mutual borrowing and experimentation, the conceptual divergence between realism and expressive freehand continues to shape artistic creation and evaluation today.

Outlook

In the context of globalization, acknowledging and respecting these differences is essential for fostering genuine intercultural dialogue. Realism and expressive freehand should not be treated as closed categories but as dynamic resources that continue to inspire artistic innovation. By approaching both traditions with openness, future scholarship and practice can generate new syntheses, enriching the ongoing evolution of world art.

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