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SYMPHONY OF THE SPIRIT – LANDSCAPES OF THOUGHT: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PHILOSOPHY OF CHINESE ART*

1. INTRODUCTION: THE MIST OF THOUGHT RISING OVER THE LANDSCAPE OF ART

Mist veils the Chinese landscape like an unspoken thought – it does not blur the contours but reveals the essence. In the silence of ink flowing onto paper lies the harmony of the world, and the empty spaces in painting, much like in life, are not voids but realms of infinite possibility. Chinese art does not emerge from the chaos of individual emotion but from the rhythm of reality – the convergence of tradition, nature, and ethics. It is not a detached expression of the creator but a manifestation of the order that permeates existence.

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Unlike the Western ideal of the artist as a solitary genius, in China, the creator is first and foremost a scholar (士, *shì*), a guardian of culture who cultivates his character with the same precision as the lines of calligraphy (書法, *shūfǎ*). His art is not merely a source of aesthetic pleasure – it is a path of self-cultivation, a tool for harmonizing the mind and the world. Beauty in this tradition does not exist apart from virtue; form cannot be separated from content, and technique cannot replace spiritual effort.[1]

This article seeks to capture this unique philosophy of art by examining how Chinese aesthetics intertwine beauty with morality, space with transcendence, and artistic creation with the harmony of the cosmos.[2] It explores classical concepts of the artist's identity, the significance of the "Four Treasures of the Scholar" (筆墨硯紙, *bǐ, mò, yàn, zhǐ*), the symbolism of colors, and the idea of emptiness (空, *kòng*) in painting. It also presents the philosophy of Feng Shui (風水, *fēng shuǐ*), where space is shaped in accordance with the rhythm of qì (氣, *qì*).

"Chinese art" is an immense and multifaceted field, one that may be explored across a historical continuum of five thousand years.[3] At the same time, there is no single "philosophy of Chinese art," no unified aesthetic doctrine; rather, a multiplicity of perspectives and conceptual frameworks has emerged over time. Likewise, a vast and seemingly inexhaustible body of studies and scholarly works has been devoted to this subject. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify certain fundamental elements that, to varying degrees, recur throughout many works of Chinese art across the centuries. The aim of this study, therefore, is to extract and offer a preliminary analysis and description of these elements, and to illuminate their distinctiveness – particularly from a Western vantage point. In the authors' view, this constitutes an original scholarly contribution. Owing to the complexity and richness of the material, the scope of this inquiry must necessarily be selective and synthetic: each of the elements identified herein could well justify a monographic study of its own. At the same time, a study that brings together the key characteristics of Chinese art – spanning various historical periods and drawing on diverse philosophical, spiritual, and religious traditions – is of further significance. This is because, through the far-reaching cultural

[1] Piotr Sękowski, "L'Editto Iconoclasta di Yazīd II (690–724). Autore, contesto di creazione, contenuto e significato [The Iconoclastic Edict of Yazīd II (690–724): Author, Context of Creation, Content, and Meaning]," in *"I dam wam serce nowe". Księga Pamiątkowa dla o. prof. dr. hab. Andrzeja S. Jasińskiego OFM z okazji 70. rocznicy urodzin* (Opolska Biblioteka Teologiczna; Opole: Redakcja Wydawnictw Wydziału Teologicznego UO, 2023), 174.

[2] Jacques Pimpaneau, *Chiny: kultura i tradycje [Chine. Culture et traditions]*, trans. Irena Kałużyńska (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Akademickie "Dialog," 2001), 211–223.

[3] Guo Huaiyu, *et al*., *5000 lat sztuki chińskiej [5000 Years of Chinese Art]*, ed. Magdalena Pluta, trans. Jeff Crosby, Coral Yee, and Anna Katarzyna Maleszko (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Arkady, 2014).

and civilizational influence of China, these elements resonate beyond the borders of Chinese art itself and can be traced throughout the artistic traditions of Asia as a whole – not only in East Asia, but also in Central and South Asia.

This reflection emerges from an interdisciplinary perspective, combining an analysis of classical sources with modern studies on Chinese aesthetics.[4] The article is original in its approach – it does not merely describe concepts superficially but reveals their philosophical depth and significance for the contemporary audience. The research topic aligns with the content, and the chosen methodology enables a coherent development of the study's objectives.

This is not merely an academic study; rather, it weaves together scientific methodology with the poetic rhetoric characteristic of Chinese sensibility. It is an invitation to a journey – along the path of literati, following the brushstrokes of calligraphy masters, through landscapes where every stroke, every stone, and every musical note forms an expression of a world governed by the principle of harmony. In the Chinese artistic tradition, there is no room for randomness – everything inscribed in ink or expressed in sound is part of a greater symphony. This symphony endures, resonating through time, flowing through successive epochs – ready to resound in the reader's mind as well.

2. THE IDENTITY OF THE ARTIST: THE CREATOR AS THE GUARDIAN OF ORDER AND HARMONY

The Chinese artistic tradition developed in close connection with the social and philosophical system that shaped a unique understanding of the artist's position. Unlike in Europe, where the chivalric ethos and the idea of the romantic artist as an individualistic, eccentric figure dominated, in China, the model of the scholar-official (士, *shì*) played a fundamental role in shaping art. This figure was not only a creator but also an administrator and intellectual. Established around the 7th century, this system defined a social hierarchy in which Confucian literati (文人, *wénrén*) occupied the highest rank, surpassing farmers, craftsmen, and even merchants. Unlike in European tradition, where the knightly class enjoyed high social status, the military class (武, *wǔ*) in the Chinese system remained outside the intellectual elite.[5]

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[4] Dariusz Klejnowski-Różycki, *Filozofia sztuki chińskiej*. 中國藝術哲學 *[The Philosophy of Chinese Art]*, (Extreme Orient; Warszawa – Zabrze: Stowarzyszenie Sinicum im. Michała Boyma SJ, Śląska Szkoła Ikonograficzna, 2015).

[5] Zbigniew Wesołowski, "Konfucjańskie podstawy porządku społecznego i zjawisko 'twarzy' [Confucian Foundations of Social Order and the Phenomenon of 'Face'],"

The artist in China was not perceived as a separate, isolated figure but as a person who combined moral excellence with creative activity. A true literatus was expected to possess a broad humanistic education, a deep knowledge of classical Confucian texts, mastery of calligraphy and poetry, and the ability to express elegance and harmony both in art and in everyday life. The imperial examination system (科舉, *kējǔ*), which lasted until 1905, ensured uniform educational and aesthetic standards, allowing literati to develop a shared artistic language and criteria for evaluating works of art.

The fundamental distinction between the Chinese and European models of the artist lay in the rejection of the notion of the professional artist in favor of the amateur, who pursued art out of spiritual and intellectual necessity. An artist's value was not determined by their position in the art market but by their internal development and pursuit of moral perfection. Literati emphasized that artistic creation was a form of cultivating virtue (德, *dé*) rather than a means of financial gain. Art was meant to serve the refinement of the human being as a social and moral entity while also providing a medium for reflecting on the order of the world.[6]

Chinese aesthetics centered around the concept of elegance (賁, *bì*), which replaced the Western category of beauty. This elegance was not about decoration or opulence but about harmony expressed in accordance with the principles of Dào (道, *Dào*), the cosmic and social order. Painting, calligraphy, and poetry were seen not only as modes of expression but also as tools for character formation and spiritual cultivation. Artistic practice was a method of exercising concentration, internal harmony, and deep existential awareness.[7]

Creativity in the Chinese tradition was also marked by its relational nature. It was not an individual act but part of a dialogue among the educated elite, who

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in *Zrozumieć Chińczyków: kulturowe kody społeczności chińskich*, ed. Ewa Zajdler (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Akademickie Dialog, 2011), 191.

[6] 子曰：「富與貴，是人之所欲也；不以其道得之，不處也。貧與賤，是人之惡也；不以其道得之，不去也。君子去仁，惡乎成名？君子無終食之間違仁，造次必於是，顛沛必於是。」" Confucius said: "Wealth and honor are what people desire. But if they cannot be obtained in accordance with the Way (*Dao*), one should not accept them. Poverty and low status are what people dislike. But if they cannot be avoided in accordance with the Way, one should not avoid them. If the *junzi* abandons *rén* (humaneness), how can he be worthy of that name? The *junzi* never departs from *rén*, not even for the space of a single meal. In moments of haste, he adheres to it. In times of peril, he adheres to it." 孔子 Kǒngzǐ, 论语 *Lúnyǔ [The Analects]* (北京: 人民文学出版社, 2002), chap. 4,5; Konfucjusz, *Analekta.* 論語, trans. Katarzyna Pejda (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2018), 47.

[7] Adina Zemanek, "Wprowadzenie," in *Estetyka chińska: antologia [Chinese Aesthetics: An Anthology]*, ed. Adina Zemanek (Kraków: Universitas, 2007), VI.

exchanged reflections, evaluations, and ideas, building an aesthetic and intellectual community. This process was rooted in the aspiration toward the ideal of the sage, who combined inner wisdom with external harmony in public life (内聖外王, *nèi shèng wài wáng*). The artist, like the scholar and official, bore responsibility for upholding cultural and moral values, and their work was an expression of this duty.[8]

Within the Chinese ideal of humanity, a crucial distinction was made between 君子 (*jūnzǐ*) and 文人 (*wénrén*). 君子 (*jūnzǐ*), derived from Confucianism, refers to the "noble person" or "gentleman."[9] In Confucius' philosophy, this was a morally perfected individual who adhered to virtues such as compassion (仁, *rén*), righteousness (義, *yì*), ritual propriety (禮, *lǐ*), and wisdom (智, *zhì*). This ideal was not tied to birth but to self-cultivation and the conscious shaping of one's character. Confucius contrasted 君子 (*jūnzǐ*) with the petty person, 小人 (*xiǎorén*), who was driven solely by self-interest rather than moral principles.

On the other hand, 文人 (*wénrén*) referred to the "man of culture" – the scholar and literatus. This title was reserved for intellectuals engaged in literature, philosophy, painting, and calligraphy, who often also held official positions after passing state examinations. 文人 (*wénrén*) signified an individual educated and skilled in the arts but not necessarily meeting the high moral standards associated with 君子 (*jūnzǐ*). While 君子 (*jūnzǐ*) aspired to ethical perfection, 文人 (*wénrén*) focused on cultivating culture and aesthetics.[10]

This distinction was also evident in attitudes toward art. For 君子 (*jūnzǐ*), painting and calligraphy were means of cultivating virtue and harmonizing one's relationship with the cosmos. For 文人 (*wénrén*), art was primarily a form of intellectual expression and personal creativity – a way of conveying emotions and philosophical insights. In practice, many literati combined both ideals, though they did not always meet the moral standards of the Confucian gentleman.

The identity of the artist in China emerged as a model integrating moral, aesthetic, and social values, emphasizing that artistic creation was not an end in itself but a tool for spiritual and societal refinement. Chinese philosophy of art insisted that technical mastery must be accompanied by ethical excellence and

[8] Dariusz Klejnowski-Różycki, "Uwarunkowania filozofii i religijności chińskiej [Determinants of Chinese philosophy and religiosity]," in *Chińskie katechezy [Chinese Catecheses]*, ed. Dariusz Klejnowski-Różycki (神学 SHENXUE; Warszawa – Zabrze: Śląska Szkoła Ikonograficzna, Stowarzyszenie Sinicum im. Michała Boyma SJ, 2012), 260.

[9] 孔子 Kǒngzǐ, 论语 *Lúnyǔ [The Analects]*, 1.

[10] Feng Youlan, *Krótka historia filozofii chińskiej [A Short History of Chineses Philosophy. A Systematic Account of Chinese Thought. From Its Origins to the Present Day]*, ed. Derk Bodde, trans. Michał Zagrodzki (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2001), 12.

that the beauty of form arose from harmony with the universe and moral principles. The artist was not only a creator but also a guardian of civilization's values, whose work contributed to sustaining the harmony of the world.[11]

3. THE FOUR TREASURES OF THE LITERATI: BRUSH, INK, PAPER, AND INKSTONE AS GATEWAYS TO SPIRITUAL PERFECTION

In the Chinese tradition, the term "Four Cultural Treasures" or "Four Treasures of the Study" (四文宝 *sì wén bǎo*: 筆墨硯紙, *bǐ, mò, yàn, zhǐ*) refers to the four fundamental tools of the literatus: the brush, ink, inkstone, and paper.[12] However, their significance extends far beyond mere practicality – they are also symbols of artistic excellence, spiritual harmony, and the continuity of tradition. Together, they form a system in which each element influences the final work's quality, and mastering their use becomes not only a technical skill but also a path to a deeper understanding of the essence of Chinese art.

The brush (筆, *bǐ*) played a pivotal role in shaping Chinese calligraphic and painting aesthetics. Its history dates back to the Warring States period (475–221 BCE), and its basic construction has remained unchanged for millennia.[13] Traditional brushes were made from animal hair – such as rabbit, marten, or buffalo – mounted on handles crafted from bamboo, wood, or more prestigious materials like jade or ivory. The brush's properties allowed for a wide range of expression, from delicate, subtle strokes to bold, dynamic gestures. In Chinese art, no strict division existed between writing and painting; precise brush control was the foundation of both calligraphy and pictorial composition. Mastering this tool was not merely a technical endeavor but also an expression of the artist's spiritual connection with nature and tradition.

Ink (墨, *mò*) was equally essential in the creative process, as it provided depth and expression to an artwork. Traditional Chinese ink was made from the soot of pine trees, mixed with animal glue, and then molded into solid ink sticks,

[11] Anna Iwona Wójcik, *Filozoficzne podstawy sztuki kręgu konfucjańskiego: źródła klasyczne okresu przedhanowskiego [Philosophical Foundations of Art in the Confucian Cultural Sphere: Classical Sources from the Pre-Han Period]* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2010), 86.

[12] Edward Kajdański, *Chiny: leksykon: historia, gospodarka, kultura [China: A Lexicon – History, Economy, Culture]* (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 2005), 242–243.

[13] Miklós Pál, *Malarstwo chińskie: wstęp do ikonografii malarstwa chińskiego [Chinese Painting: An Introduction to the Iconography of Chinese Art]*, trans. Mieczysław Jerzy Künstler (Warszawa – Budapest: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe Corvina, 1987), 20.

which had to be ground on an inkstone and diluted with water before use. These ink sticks were often adorned with inscriptions and decorative motifs, enhancing their artistic and collectible value. The quality of ink was judged based on its consistency, depth of color, and ability to subtly convey emotion and dynamism in painting. In Chinese tradition, ink was more than just a tool – it was a medium through which the artist's inner world was revealed.

The inkstone (硯, *yàn*) served both practical and symbolic functions. In its classical form, it consisted of two parts: a raised area called the "hill" (丘, *qiū*), where the ink stick was ground, and a recessed area called the "sea" (海, *hǎi*), which held water. Often intricately carved, inkstones were not only indispensable tools but also works of art in their own right. It was believed that a well-crafted inkstone influenced the precision of ink grinding, which was crucial for the final outcome in both painting and calligraphy. Beyond its practical role, the inkstone symbolized stability and harmony – an artist, bowing over it, focused their energy and prepared for the act of creation.

Paper (紙, *zhǐ*), though seemingly the least significant of the Four Treasures, in reality, revolutionized Chinese art. Its invention in the 2nd century CE replaced earlier materials such as silk and bamboo slips, opening new possibilities for calligraphy and painting. Different types of paper had distinct properties – some were more absorbent, allowing for soft ink diffusion, while others facilitated precise detailing. In the culture of literati, paper symbolized intellectual and artistic freedom – it was the space where thought took material form, merging tradition with the individual expression of the creator.[14]

The significance of the Four Treasures extended far beyond their practical function. They were not merely instruments but metaphors for the relationship between the artist and their work. The brush represented movement and the expression of spirit, ink embodied the depth of emotion and thought, the inkstone symbolized stability and the foundation of creativity, and paper provided the space where art materialized. Their harmonious interplay reflected the philosophy of Chinese aesthetics, in which technique and spirit had to remain in balance.

In traditional artistic education, mastering the Four Treasures was fundamental to the development of a literatus. The practice of calligraphy and painting was not only a manual exercise but also a path to spiritual cultivation. Chinese art was never regarded as mere craftsmanship – it was a means of shaping character, fostering patience, and expressing harmony with the universe. For this reason, the Four Treasures were not seen as ordinary objects but as the cultural

[14] Viv Foster, *Chińska metoda malowania pędzlem: przewodnik [The Chinese Brush Painting Handbook]*, trans. Marta Piątek (Warszawa: Firma Księgarska Jacek i Krzysztof Olesiejuk – Inwestycje, 2007), 13–15.

foundation that enabled artists not only to refine their skills but also to draw closer to the ideal of wisdom and harmony.[15]

4. CHINESE CALLIGRAPHY: WHEN A BRUSHSTROKE BREATHES IN THE RHYTHM OF THE UNIVERSE

Chinese calligraphy (書法, *shūfǎ*) occupies a central place in the artistic tradition of China, serving as both an aesthetic expression and a spiritual practice, as well as a vehicle for philosophical thought. In Chinese culture, it is regarded as the highest form of art, as it seamlessly integrates technical precision with spiritual depth. Unlike Western calligraphic traditions, which often emphasize the decorative nature of script, Chinese calligraphy is a unique synthesis of form and meaning, where each character reflects the artist's inner state and their relationship with the harmony of the universe.[16]

The art of calligraphy in China is not merely the reproduction of characters – it is a metaphor for life and a testament to the creator's spiritual development. Every brushstroke, every line, and every space between the characters reveals the individuality of the calligrapher, their emotions, and their level of inner balance. Classical Chinese texts emphasize that ideal calligraphy must be both technically precise and infused with *qì* (氣, *qì*) – the vital energy that gives the characters life and strength.[17]

Over time, various styles of Chinese calligraphy emerged, each serving distinct artistic and contextual needs. Standard script (楷書, *kǎishū*) is characterized by regularity and clarity, making it the most structured and legible form.

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[15] 子曰：「志於道，據於德，依於仁，游於藝。」 Konfucjusz powiedział: „Skieruj wolę ku *Dao* (道), oprzyj się na *dé* (德 – cnocie), polegaj na *rén* (仁 – ludzkiej dobroci), a swobodnie przemieszczaj się wśród *yì* (藝 – sztuk, umiejętności)." Confucius said: "Let your aspiration be set upon the Way (*Dao*), base yourself in virtue (*dé*), rely upon humaneness (*rén*), and roam freely in the arts (*yì*)." 孔子 Kǒngzǐ, 论语 *Lúnyǔ [The Analects]*, chap. 7,6; Konfucjusz, *Analekta.* 論語, 75.

[16] Mieczysław Jerzy Künstler, *Mały Słownik Sztuki Chińskiej [A Concise Dictionary of Chinese Art]* (Sztuka Orientu; Warszawa: Dialog, 1996), 62–64.

[17] 學記:玉不琢，不成器；人不學，不知道。是故古之王者建國君民，教學爲先。《兌命》曰：「念終始典于學。」其此之謂乎！ Xue Ji: The jade uncut will not form a vessel for use; and if men do not learn, they do not know the way (in which they should go). On this account the ancient kings, when establishing states and governing the people, made instruction and schools a primary object; as it is said in the Charge to Yue, "The thoughts from first to last should be fixed on learning." "禮記 Liji: Xue Ji," chap. 2, accessed July 11, 2025, https://ctext.org/liji/xue-ji.

Semi-cursive script (行書, *xíngshū*) allows for greater fluidity and freedom, balancing structure with expressiveness. The most dynamic and spontaneous style is cursive script (草書, *cǎoshū*), where characters are so simplified and fluid that they can be difficult to decipher without proper training. Each of these styles reflects a different aspect of the artist's spirituality and perception of reality.[18]

The process of creating calligraphy is not merely a technical exercise but also a form of meditation. Before beginning their work, the calligrapher is expected to clear their mind and achieve a state of inner tranquility. Traditional treatises emphasize that only a person free from worries and distractions can produce harmonious characters. Thus, the act of writing becomes not just an artistic expression but also a tool for self-cultivation and a means of attaining unity with the cosmos.[19]

In the Chinese tradition, calligraphy is also inseparably linked to painting. Many master artists combined both elements, treating calligraphy as an integral part of their visual compositions. Often, text not only complemented a painting but also enhanced its aesthetic depth. Some works even feature calligraphic characters arranged in a way that forms a painting in itself, where the rhythm, structure, and dynamics of the strokes possess the same visual value as traditional ink paintings.[20]

In Confucian culture, calligraphy was considered one of the fundamental skills of a literatus, and mastering it was seen as a sign of intellectual and moral refinement. Treatises on the art of writing emphasized that a person's calligraphic style reflected their character – an individual with sloppy, chaotic handwriting was deemed unworthy of trust and respect. Thus, calligraphy was not only an artistic discipline but also a means of shaping virtue and inner harmony.[21]

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[18] Cecilia Lindqvist, and Michael Loewe, *China: Empire of the Written Symbol*, trans. Joan Tate (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2008), 16–22; 王宏源 [Wang Hongyuan], 漢字字源入門。 *Aux sources de l'écriture chinoise [Introduction to the Origins of Chinese Characters: At the Sources of Chinese Writing]*, trans. Marie-Anne Pupin (北京: 华语教学出版社北京: Sinolingua Beijing, 2002).

[19] Lucien Xavier Polastron, Ouyang Jiaojia, and Justyna Piątek, *Kaligrafia chińska [Chinese calligraphy]* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo RM, 2007), 6–7.

[20] One of the most beautiful testimonies of a European woman practicing the art of calligraphy is the book: Fabienne Verdier, *Pasażerka ciszy: dziesięć lat w Chinach [Passagère du silence. Dix ans d'initiation en Chine; Passenger of Silence: Ten Years of Initiation in China]*, trans. Krystyna Arustowicz (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo W.A.B., 2007).

[21] 子曰：「弟子，入則孝，出則弟，謹而信，凡愛眾，而親仁。行有餘力，則以學文。」 Confucius said: "A young man should be filial at home, respectful to his elders outside, cautious and trustworthy, and love all people while drawing close to the virtuous. If he still has energy left, let him study the arts (wén)." 孔子 Kǒngzǐ, 论语 *Lúnyǔ [The Analects]*, chap. 1,6; Konfucjusz, *Analekta.* 論語, 23.

The significance of calligraphy in Chinese artistic identity extends far beyond the realm of aesthetics. As a fusion of technique, philosophy, and spirituality, it has become a cornerstone of Chinese cultural heritage, influencing not only art but also literature, ethics, and daily life. With its profound symbolism and unparalleled expressive power, Chinese calligraphy remains one of the most extraordinary achievements of civilization, connecting humanity with nature, tradition, and the spiritual dimension of existence.[22]

5. THE FOUR GENTLEMEN: FLOWERS THAT SPEAK OF VIRTUE AND IMPERMANENCE

In Chinese artistic tradition, the concept of the Four Gentlemen (四君子, *sì jūnzǐ*) refers to four plants: the orchid (蘭, *lán*), bamboo (竹, *zhú*), chrysanthemum (菊, *jú*), and plum blossom (梅, *méi*). Each of these plants symbolizes not only a specific season but also particular moral and spiritual virtues that have inspired Chinese scholars, painters, and philosophers for centuries. Their presence in ink painting (Chinese: 水墨畫, *shuǐmòhuà*; Japanese: 水墨画, *suiboku-ga*, also known as *sumi-e*), calligraphy, and poetry is not coincidental; they form the foundation of artistic education, helping students refine their painting techniques and cultivate aesthetic sensitivity. Painting the Four Gentlemen is not merely an artistic exercise but also a spiritual practice that combines the precision of brush movements with the philosophy of harmony and the cyclic nature of existence.[23]

The orchid, associated with spring, represents elegance, purity, and humility. It thrives in secluded places such as rocky crevices and forest valleys, exuding a delicate fragrance, making it a metaphor for wise and noble individuals who remain faithful to their ideals even when unrecognized by society.[24] In Confucian

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[22] PÁL, *Malarstwo chińskie: wstęp do ikonografii malarstwa chińskiego [Chinese Painting: An Introduction to the Iconography of Chinese Art]*, 180–189.

[23] 子曰：「質勝文則野，文勝質則史。文質彬彬，然後君子。」 Confucius said: "When substance exceeds refinement, one is uncultivated; when refinement exceeds substance, one is superficial. Only when substance and refinement are in perfect balance does one become a junzi (a noble person)." **孔子** Kǒngzǐ, **论语** *Lúnyǔ [The Analects]*, chap. 6,18; KONFUCJUSZ, *Analekta.* 論語, 69.

[24] 子曰：「芝蘭生於深林，不以無人而不芳；君子修道立德，不爲窮困而改節。」 Confucius said: "The orchid grows deep in the forest and does not lose its fragrance even when unseen. The noble man cultivates the Way and establishes virtue, not changing his principles even in hardship." 孔子 Kǒngzǐ, "孔子家語 Kǒngzǐ Jiāyǔ [The Family Sayings of Confucius]," chap. 在厄 20,1, accessed July 11, 2025, https://ctext.org/kongzi-jiayu/zh.

ethics, the orchid symbolizes moral perfection, whose beauty reveals itself in silence and solitude.[25]

Bamboo, linked to summer, symbolizes perseverance, flexibility, and moral integrity. Its slender yet strong stalks bend under the force of the wind but do not break, serving as a metaphor for individuals who adapt to adversity without losing their inner strength.[26] In Confucian tradition, bamboo embodies righteousness and humility, while its hollow core represents openness to knowledge.[27]

The chrysanthemum, representing autumn, signifies resilience, independence, and longevity. It blooms during the colder months when other plants wither, making it a metaphor for those who maintain composure and strength despite hardships. In Chinese tradition, drinking chrysanthemum tea has been regarded as a ritual of pursuing longevity and mental clarity.[28]

The plum blossom, associated with winter, symbolizes endurance, renewal, and spiritual purity. It blooms amid the snow when other plants lie dormant, serving as a metaphor for those who remain strong in the face of difficulties and bring light into dark times. Its five-petaled flowers are often interpreted as a reference to the Five Blessings (五福, *wǔ fú*): longevity, happiness, health, peace, and harmony.[29]

Practicing the painting of these four plants is not only a technical exercise but also a spiritual discipline. Each presents a different challenge to the aspiring artist: from the precise lines of the orchid to the dynamic strokes of bamboo, the intricate forms of the chrysanthemum, and the contrasting elements of the plum blossom. Through systematic study and depiction of the Four Gentlemen, the artist develops not only technical skill but also a deep sensitivity to nature, an understanding of Chinese philosophy, and the ability to express profound meanings with simple means.[30]

The combination of these four motifs in art is not accidental. Together, they symbolize the cycle of life and transformation, both in nature and in human development: the orchid represents youth and delicacy, bamboo – maturity and strength, the chrysanthemum – autumnal reflection, and the plum blossom – old

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[25] Foster, *Chińska metoda malowania pędzlem*, 50–53.

[26] Cyrille J.-D. Javary, *100 mots pour comprendre les Chinois* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2008), 62–63.

[27] Foster, *Chińska metoda malowania pędzlem*, 54–57.

[28] Foster, *Chińska metoda malowania pędzlem*, 58–61.

[29] Foster, *Chińska metoda malowania pędzlem*, 62–65.

[30] 惲壽平, "拟古花卉冊 (Nǐgǔ Huāhuì Cè) [Old-style flower album] 1702. Ink and color on paper," *Christies.com*, 1702, accessed July 11, 2025, https://onlineonly.christies.com/s/exquisite-eye-chinese-paintings-online/signature-yun-shouping-18th-century-1702/69937.

age and transcendence. Their study and mastery in ink painting serve as the key to achieving artistic excellence, harmony, and spiritual perfection.[31]

6. CONFUCIAN ELEGANCE: AN AESTHETIC BORN FROM MORALITY

In Chinese aesthetics, the concept of elegance (賁, *bì*) holds fundamental significance, differing from the Western understanding of beauty. Confucianism does not perceive art as an autonomous domain but as an integral part of a broader moral and social order, where elegance serves a regulatory function. When Confucius laid the foundations of Chinese culture, he drew upon the principles of the oracle text *Yì* Jīng (易經, *Book of Changes*), which emphasized harmony and grace rather than mere aesthetic appeal.[32]

The hexagram 賁 (*bì*) originates from the *Yì* Jīng and is numbered 22.[33] Its name is translated as "Adornment," "Grace," "Decoration," or "Ornamentation."[34] In classical interpretation, it denotes the relationship between the essence of a thing (本, *běn*) and its external manifestation (賁, *bì*), suggesting that true beauty and elegance cannot be merely superficial but must arise from inner harmony and coherence. The hexagram *bì* 賁 consists of two trigrams: ☶ (艮, *gèn*) – "Mountain" (above), ☲ (離, *lí) – "Fire" (below). The interpretation of this hexagram within the framework of Confucian aesthetics underscores that elegance must emerge from internal order rather than being a mere artificial embellishment.* Fire, symbolizing illumination, knowledge, and culture, is placed beneath the mountain, which represents stability and contemplation. This configuration implies that true beauty must be rooted in a firm moral and spiritual foundation. In the *Yì* Jīng, this

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[31] Pál, *Malarstwo chińskie*, 180–189.

[32] Wójcik, *Filozoficzne podstawy*, 30; Richard Wilhelm, ed., *I-cing [Yi Jing]*, trans. Małgorzata Barankiewicz, Wojciech Jóźwiak, and Krzysztof Ostas (Warszawa: Latawiec, 1994).

[33] 賁亨，小利有攸往。| 賁其趾，舍車而徒。| 賁如，濡如，永貞吉。 "Adornment brings success. It is slightly beneficial to have somewhere to go. | Adornment on the toes – abandoning the chariot and going on foot. | Be adorned, be gentle – lasting integrity brings good fortune." This hexagram 22 forms the foundation of Confucian aesthetics of elegance. It shows that "adornment" cannot be an end in itself – it must arise from inner coherence (貞, zhēn) and serve harmony, not illusion. The choice of "going on foot" instead of riding in a chariot symbolizes a preference for simplicity and humility – this is the essence of elegance in the Confucian sense. 易經 *Yi Jing [The Book of Changes]*, chap.賁 22, accessed April 20, 2019, http://ctext.org/book-of-changes/yi-jing.

[34] Cyrille J.-D. Javary, and Pierre Faure, *Yi Jing: Le livre des changements* 易經 (Paris: Albin Michel, 2007), 370–383.

hexagram is often understood as a reminder that aesthetics and adornment have their rightful place, yet they must not replace essence.[35]

Confucian aesthetics is inextricably linked to the concept of ritual (禮, *lǐ*), which shapes not only external conduct but also the inner disposition of an individual. One who has mastered the art of elegance does not merely conform to moral ideals in appearance but also expresses an inner sense of order and spiritual maturity.[36]

In Confucian thought, elegance is not merely an aesthetic concern but a means of cultivating character and fostering social harmony. The concept of 本 (*běn*) – "foundation," "the essence of things" – emphasizes that true beauty must arise from moral integrity and internal harmony. In this context, 賁 (*bì*), while it may signify "adornment" or "decoration," in Confucian aesthetics refers to the external that is grounded in a solid foundation of virtue. It is not about superficial effect but rather an expression of profound order and inner coherence.

In the *Yì* Jīng, hexagram 賁 (*bì*) illustrates the relationship between essence and manifestation, revealing that form cannot be detached from substance. Elegance is not mere ornamentation but the manner in which external beauty emerges from internal harmony. Thus, 和 (*hé*) – "harmony" – stands as a central concept in Confucian aesthetics. However, this harmony is not a static equilibrium but a dynamic interplay of elements that complement and enhance each other.

The Chinese concept of elegance finds its reflection across East Asian culture, particularly in Japan, where aesthetics is deeply intertwined with Confucian values of harmony, moderation, and noble refinement. Confucianism does not confine elegance to visual art but extends it to conduct, thought, and even the relationship between humanity and nature. In the landscape, one sees the ideal of the scholar, who does not seek to dominate the world but to exist in harmonious accord with its rhythms. In this sense, Confucian aesthetics is not a passive contemplation but an active practice of shaping one's surroundings into a space for moral cultivation and spiritual refinement.

A crucial distinction in Confucian aesthetics is that between 文 (*wén*) – culture and civilization – and 雅 (*yǎ*) – refinement and subtlety.[37] *Wén* encompasses

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[35] Krzysztof Maćko, and Oskar Sobański, *Księga Przemian I Cing [Yijing: The Book of Changes]* (Katowice: Dom Wydawniczo-Księgarski "Kos," 1999), 77–78.

[36] 子曰：「人而不仁，如禮何？人而不仁，如樂何？」 Confucius said: "If a person is without *rén* (humaneness), what use are ritual (*lǐ*) and music (*yuè*) to them?" 孔子 Kǒngzǐ, 论语 *Lúnyǔ [The Analects]*, chap. 3,3; Konfucjusz, *Analekta.* 論語, 37.

[37] 子所雅言，詩、書、執禮，皆雅言也。 The Master used refined speech (雅言, *yǎ yán*) when discussing the Odes, the Documents, and the practice of ritual. 孔子 Kǒngzǐ, 论语 *Lúnyǔ [The Analects]*, chap. 7,17; Konfucjusz, *Analekta.* 論語, 79.

a broad spectrum of cultural and aesthetic values, presenting elegance as a form of spiritual self-cultivation. *Yǎ*, on the other hand, conveys a sense of taste and sophistication, highlighting that beauty does not lie in excess but in the skillful application of artistic expression.

Elegance, therefore, is not an end in itself but a vehicle for perfecting both the individual and their relationship with the world. A person who attains elegance in the Confucian sense transcends the boundary between the self and the fundamental reality governed by 道 (*dào*) – the universal cosmic order. Through adherence to ritual and self-cultivation, they bring harmony not only to their own life but also to the broader social order. In this context, ritual (禮, *lǐ*) is not mere formality but an enacted aesthetic in which beauty, morality, and harmony are inseparably woven together.[38]

The Confucian aesthetics of elegance finds its ultimate expression in art. Yet this is not an art understood as a collection of lifeless objects for mere contemplation; rather, it is a creative process that shapes both the artwork and the artist. In the Confucian model of the scholar-calligrapher, the arts of calligraphy and painting manifest inner harmony. Their value does not reside in surface beauty but in the presence of vital energy (氣, *qì*), which imbues the work with life. A painting or calligraphy devoid of spiritual depth and vigor is but an empty form – true Confucian art must radiate moral and spiritual order. Confucianism does not regard the collection of artworks as an end in itself but views art as a means of cultivating character and refining one's relationship with the world.

Thus, Confucian elegance serves as a vital nexus between art, morality, and social harmony, demonstrating that beauty is more than a mere aesthetic impression – it is the manifestation of inner excellence and alignment with the cosmic order.

7. SPIRIT (氣, QÌ): THE INVISIBLE FORCE THAT BREATHES LIFE INTO FORM

The concept of *qì* (氣) is one of the most fundamental principles in Chinese philosophy, art, and spirituality. In Chinese tradition, *qì represents the vital energy that permeates everything – from the human body to the vast cosmos.* Within the realm of art, *qì* is not merely a metaphor but an essential element that imbues

[38] Anna Iwona Wójcik, *Wolność i władza: filozoficzne idee cywilizacji liberalnej i konfucjańskiej w próbie międzykulturowego porównania [Freedom and Authority: Philosophical Ideas of Liberal and Confucian Civilizations in an Attempt at Intercultural Comparison]* (Biblioteka tradycji literackich Seria 2/17; Kraków: Collegium Columbinum, 2002), 23–44.

a work with life and depth. Without *qì*, even the most technically flawless creation is regarded as lifeless.[39]

The origins of *qì* are deeply rooted in Daoist and Confucian thought, where it is considered a fundamental force of existence. In Daoism, *qì* is seen as the energy that flows through all things, maintaining the balance between *yīn* (陰) and *yáng* (陽). In Confucianism, *qì* is associated with a person's moral and spiritual strength, manifesting in their actions and creative expressions.[40] In Chinese art, *qì* represents an invisible but palpable force that animates form, connecting the artist with nature and the viewer with the artwork.[41]

In painting and calligraphy, *qì* plays a crucial role. To create a true work of art, the artist must attain harmony with nature and the flow of energy. The brushstrokes, lines, and composition should reflect the dynamic movement of *qì*, giving the painting or calligraphy a sense of life and motion. In calligraphy, every stroke of the brush carries *qì*. The lines must be fluid, dynamic, and filled with internal energy. Even the empty spaces between the characters hold significance – they capture the flow of *qì* and the balance of the composition. In painting, *qì* manifests in landscapes that seem to breathe and pulse with life, whether they depict mountains, water, or plants.[42]

The artist serves as both a conduit and a vessel for *qì*. For their work to be authentic and imbued with spirit, they must cultivate inner harmony and tranquility. The creative process requires mental stillness, purity of intention, and deep focus on the present moment. In Chinese spiritual tradition, artistic creation is a form of meditation in which the artist aligns with the cosmic energy of *qì*. Art that embodies *qì* is not merely a product of technical skill but a reflection of

[39] Élisabeth Rochat de la Vallée, "Éléments de cosmologie chinoise [Elements of Chinese Cosmology]," in *Aperçu de civilisation chinoise. Les dossiers du Grand Ricci*, ed. Institut Ricci (Paris – Taipei: Institut Ricci, Desclée de Brouwer, 2003), 157–167.

[40] Dariusz Klejnowski-Różycki 柯達理, 中国的神学。*Teologia chińska. Uwarunkowania kulturowe pojęć trynitarnych [Chinese theology. Cultural determinants of the Trinity concepts]* (Ekumenizm i Integracja 27; Opole: Redakcja Wydawnictw Wydziału Teologicznego Uniwersytetu Opolskiego, 2012), 254.

[41] 道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物。萬物負陰而抱陽，沖氣以爲和。 Dao rodzi Jedno. Jedno rodzi Dwa. Dwa rodzi Trzy. Trzy rodzi dziesięć tysięcy rzeczy. Wszystkie rzeczy noszą w sobie yin i obejmują yang, a ich harmonia rodzi się z przepływu qi. Dao gives birth to One, One gives birth to Two, Two gives birth to Three, Three gives birth to all things. All things carry yin and embrace yang. They achieve harmony by balancing the flow of qi. 老子, 道德經 *Dao De Jing [The Book of the Way and Virtue]*, 2006, chap. 42, http://ctext.org/dao-de-jing; Anna Iwona Wójcik, Laozi, and Wang Bi, *Księga dao i de z komentarzami Wang Bi [The Dao De Jing with Wang Bi's Commentaries]* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2006), 94.

[42] Pál, *Malarstwo chińskie*, 11.

the artist's profound connection with nature and the universe. Such works inspire awe, evoke contemplation, and foster a sense of spiritual harmony in the viewer.

Chinese art has always been deeply intertwined with nature, and *qì* is a key element of this relationship. The artist does not merely imitate nature in a literal way but seeks to capture its energy, dynamism, and harmony. In depictions of mountains, waterfalls, or trees, *qì* manifests in the rhythm and balance of the composition. This is particularly evident in landscape painting, where the interplay of emptiness and fullness (空, *kòng* and 實, *shí*) reflects the flow of energy and the equilibrium of cosmic forces.[43]

In Chinese artistic tradition, the presence of *qì* is the primary criterion for evaluating the quality of a work. Even if a painting or calligraphy piece is technically impeccable, the absence of *qì* renders it hollow and devoid of value. The flow of energy within an artwork is what distinguishes true mastery from mediocrity.

Qì is not only a philosophical and artistic concept but also a universal idea that can inspire contemporary creators. It serves as a reminder of the importance of inner harmony, spiritual depth, and authenticity in all forms of artistic expression. Even in modern art, often distanced from tradition, artists can draw from this ancient concept, seeking deeper meaning and a renewed connection with nature.[44]

The spirit of *qì* is the essence of Chinese art, merging technique with spirituality and imbuing works with a transcendent dimension. For centuries, it has inspired artists to create works filled with vitality, harmony, and beauty – art that continues to resonate in the hearts and minds of viewers around the world.[45]

8. EMPTINESS: THAT WHICH IS UNSEEN SHAPES THAT WHICH IS SEEN

Emptiness (Sanskrit: शून्यता śūnyatā, Chinese: 空 *kōng*, Japanese: *kū*, as well as Chinese: 無 *wú*, Japanese: *mu*) is not only an ontological and epistemological concept but also an aesthetic one. he notion of emptiness as understood in the context of Chinese aesthetics evolved from its original religious meaning in Sanskrit, giving rise to a new and distinct quality. In contrast to Western

[43] 至人之用心若鏡，不將不迎，應而不藏，故能勝物而不傷。 The perfected person uses their mind like a mirror. It does not grasp, it does not reject; it reflects but does not retain. Therefore, they prevail over all things without being harmed. 莊子 *Zhuangzi*, 2006, chap. 應帝王: 7,6, http://ctext.org/zhuangzi; Zhuangzi, *Prawdziwa księga południowego kwiatu [The True Book of the Southern Flower]*, trans. Marcin Jacoby (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Iskry, 2009), 93.

[44] Dainian Zhang, *Key Concepts in Chinese Philosophy*, trans. Edmund Ryden (Culture & Civilization of China; New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2002), 45.

[45] Klejnowski-Różycki, 中国艺术哲学, 67–75.

painting traditions, where space is often filled with detail, the Chinese notion of emptiness emphasizes the significance of the invisible, leaving room for imagination, emotion, and spiritual contemplation. Emptiness in Chinese art is not an absence but a fullness of potential and harmony, reflecting the philosophical principles of Daoism and Buddhism, as well as the aesthetic concept of balance between form and its surrounding space.[46]

In Chinese philosophy, emptiness is an essential component of universal harmony. In Daoism (道教, *Dàojiào*), emptiness does not signify nothingness but a state of potential fullness – the source of all existence, from which life emerges and to which everything returns. What is invisible is just as crucial as what is visible because it enables the flow of *qì* (氣) and the equilibrium between *yīn* (陰) and *yáng* (陽). In art, emptiness symbolizes infinity and openness while also providing space for individual interpretation and a spiritual dialogue between the creator and the viewer.[47]

In Chinese painting, emptiness is never accidental – it is a meticulously planned part of the composition. It often appears in the form of "unpainted" areas on paper or silk, which, though seemingly empty, carry profound meaning. In Chinese landscape painting (山水畫, *shānshuǐhuà*), emptiness frequently represents water, mist, or the space between mountains, giving the artwork a sense of infinity and contemplation. According to Chinese artistic thought, it is precisely these empty spaces that invite the viewer to "enter" the painting and experience it more intuitively.

The role of emptiness in Chinese painting is closely related to the idea of contrast between emptiness and fullness (實, *shí*). In traditional Chinese aesthetics, these two elements do not exist in isolation – they complement and reinforce each other, creating balance and harmony. Emptiness accentuates the significance of form, while form gives emptiness its presence. The mastery of a Chinese artist lies in skillfully balancing these two aspects so that neither dominates the other.

Emptiness in Chinese painting also serves a spiritual and philosophical function. In Daoism and Buddhism, emptiness is a metaphor for a state of mind free from attachments and limitations. An artist who consciously incorporates emptiness into their work not only achieves compositional harmony but also expresses a deeper state of inner balance and unity with nature. The process of creating emptiness in a painting requires the artist to maintain tranquility and focus,

[46] Mieczysław Jerzy Künstler, *Sztuka Chin [Art of China]* (Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna, 1991), 151.

[47] François Cheng, "Pustka w chińskim malarstwie [Emptiness in Chinese Painting]," in *Estetyka chińska: antologia [Chinese Aesthetics: An Anthology]*, ed. Adina Zemanek (Kraków: Universitas, 2007), 265.

making the act of painting itself a form of meditation. In this way, emptiness in Chinese painting is not merely a technical element – it is an expression of spiritual seeking and transcendence.

Emptiness not only shapes the composition of a work but also actively engages the viewer's imagination. Leaving space unpainted ensures that the audience is not merely a passive observer but an active participant in the artwork, invited to co-create meaning through their reflections and emotions. This interactive approach makes Chinese painting dynamic and open to infinite interpretations.

In traditional Chinese aesthetics, emptiness is not a void in the sense of lack – it is potential, allowing for growth, transformation, and the completion of the whole. It is also a metaphor for art itself, in which meaning often resides not in what is explicitly depicted but in what remains unspoken. Through emptiness, Chinese art not only presents the world but also invites the viewer to a deeper understanding, leading them toward reflection and spiritual experience.[48]

This unique concept, deeply rooted in Daoist and Buddhist philosophy, gives Chinese painting its remarkable depth and transcendence, making it one of the most contemplative forms of art in the world. In Chinese painting, what is left unrepresented is just as crucial as what is captured – emptiness becomes the space where meaning is born.[49]

9. THE SYMBOLISM OF COLORS: THE UNIVERSE'S PALETTE IN THE RHYTHM OF THE FIVE ELEMENTS

In Chinese artistic tradition, colors (色, *sè*) hold meanings far beyond their aesthetic function – they serve as carriers of profound symbols, spiritual values, and cosmic principles. In painting, calligraphy, and other artistic disciplines, color is not merely a visual element but a communicative tool, conveying emotions, philosophical ideas, and the intricate relationship between humans, nature, and the universe. The symbolism of colors is deeply rooted in Chinese cosmological

[48] 三十輻共一轂，當其無，有車之用。埏埴以爲器，當其無，有器之用。鑿戶牖以爲室，當其無，有室之用。故有之以爲利，無之以爲用。 Thirty spokes share one hub. It is the empty center that makes the wheel useful. Shape clay into a vessel; it is the empty space that makes it useful. Carve doors and windows for a room; it is the empty spaces that make the room useful. Thus, what is present provides utility, but the absence provides functionality. Wójcik, Laozi, and Bi, *Księga dao*, 42; 老子, 道德經 *Dao De Jing [The Book of the Way and Virtue]*, chap. 11.

[49] 「虛室生白，吉祥止止。」 An empty room fills with light; auspiciousness settles in stillness. 莊子 *Zhuangzi*, chap. 人間世: 4,2; Zhuangzi, *Prawdziwa księga południowego kwiatu*, 57.

and philosophical systems, where each hue is associated with specific elemental forces and principles, reflecting the balance and dynamism of existence.

In the traditional Chinese system of classifying reality, colors are deeply connected to the theory of the Five Elements (五行, *wǔxíng*), according to which everything in the world is subject to a constant flow of energy and transformation.[50]

Red (紅, *hóng*) corresponds to the element of fire and is associated with summer and the south. It symbolizes joy, vitality, and prosperity, often appearing in celebrations such as weddings and festivals. Its intensity reflects strong emotions, the vibrancy of life, and a sense of auspiciousness. In traditional beliefs, red wards off evil spirits, and during the Lunar New Year, red decorations are meant to attract luck and happiness. However, red can also signify passion, boldness, and even sacrifice, making it a color of immense expressive power.[51]

Yellow (黃, *huáng*) is linked to the earth element and occupies a central position in the cosmic order. It symbolizes stability, balance, and imperial authority. Historically, yellow was reserved for the emperor, as it was believed to reflect the Mandate of Heaven. It represents harmony, intellectual enlightenment, and sacredness, often appearing in Buddhist robes and temple decorations. In art, yellow embodies the enduring connection between heaven and earth, reinforcing themes of unity and natural order.[52]

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[50] 正謂青、赤、黃、白、黑，五方正色也。不正謂五方間色也，緑、紅、碧、紫、騮黃是也。青是東方正，緑是東方間。東爲木，木色青，木刻土，土黃，並以所刻爲間，故緑色，青、黃也。朱是南方正，紅是南方間，南爲火，火赤，刻金，金白。故紅色赤、白也。白是西方正，碧是西方間。西爲金，金白，刻木，木青，故碧色青、白也。黑是北方正，紫是北方間。北方水，水色黑。水刻火，火赤，故紫色赤、黑也。黃是中央正，騮黃是中央間。中央爲土，土刻水，水黑。故騮黃之色黃、黑也。 "They define the proper five-direction colors as qing, chi, huang, bai, hei. Those not proper are the interstitial colors: lü, hong, bi, zi, liu-huang. Qing is the proper color of the East; lü is the interstitial color of the East – wood's green mixed with earth's yellow. Zhu is the proper color of the South; hong is the interstitial color of the South – fire's red mixed with metal's white. Bai is the proper color of the West; bi is the interstitial color of the West – metal's white mixed with wood's green. Hei is the proper color of the North; zi is the interstitial color of the North – water's black mixed with fire's red. Huang is the proper color of the Center; liu-huang is the interstitial color – earth's yellow mixed with water's black." 魏了翁 Wei Liaoweng, "禮記要義 Liji Yaoyi [The Book of Rites: Record on the Subject of Education]," chaps. 21, 五方正色、間色, accessed July 16, 2025, https://www.shidianguji.com/zh/book/SBCK332/chapter/1km62nkoo13j9?version=5.

[51] Wolfram Eberhard, *Symbole Chińskie. Słownik. Obrazkowy Język Chińczyków [Lexikon Chinesischer Symbole. Die Bildsprache Der Chinesen]*, trans. Renata Darda (Kraków: TAiWPN Universitas, 2001), 47–48.

[52] Eberhard, *Symbole Chińskie*, 311.

White (白, *bái*), associated with the element of metal, is a color of purity, simplicity, and truth. Unlike in Western traditions, where white signifies innocence and virtue, in China, it is often linked to mourning and funeral rites. It symbolizes detachment from the material world and is worn in times of grief as a sign of respect for the departed. Yet, in Daoist and Buddhist traditions, white also represents transcendence, spiritual cleansing, and the journey toward enlightenment. It conveys the dual nature of existence – impermanence and the possibility of achieving a higher state of being.[53]

Black (黑, *hēi*) corresponds to water and signifies depth, mystery, and profound strength. It is associated with winter and the north, embodying resilience and transformation. In Chinese philosophy, black is not a negative color but rather a symbol of potential and the unknown. It conveys wisdom, perseverance, and the quiet force of nature. In traditional ink paintings and calligraphy, black serves as the foundation of artistic expression, embodying both structure and spontaneity. The interplay between black and white in art represents the balance of *yīn* (陰) and *yáng* (陽), highlighting the philosophical depth embedded within Chinese aesthetics.[54]

Green and blue (青, *qīng*), often grouped under the same term in classical Chinese, are associated with the element of wood and symbolize growth, renewal, and harmony with nature. These colors are frequently used to depict landscapes, reflecting the vitality of forests, mountains, and rivers. Green embodies youth, health, and prosperity, while blue conveys tranquility, wisdom, and depth. In Daoist thought, both colors represent a connection to the natural world and the principles of balance and cyclical change. Their presence in art underscores the importance of living in accordance with the rhythms of nature.[55]

Chinese painters used colors with deep symbolic intent, often prioritizing their spiritual essence over realistic representation. In landscape painting (山水畫, *shānshuǐhuà*), color is applied with restraint, allowing ink to dominate compositions and reinforcing the idea of inner balance. Even subtle accents of color add depth and emotional resonance, ensuring that each hue contributes to the overall harmony of the piece. Ink washes of varying intensities create a dynamic interplay of shades, enhancing the contemplative experience of the artwork.[56]

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[53] Eberhard, *Symbole Chińskie*, 25–26.

[54] Eberhard, *Symbole Chińskie*, 47.

[55] Eberhard, *Symbole Chińskie*, 167, 302–303.

[56] 「五色令人目盲，五音令人耳聾，五味令人口爽。」 The five colors make the eyes blind, the five sounds make the ears deaf, the five flavors dull the palate. 老子, 道德經 *Dao De Jing [The Book of the Way and Virtue]*, chap. 12; Wójcik, Laozi, and Bi, *Księga dao*, 43.

The symbolism of colors in Chinese art also relies on contrast and the balance of opposites. The fundamental relationship between black and white represents the tension between emptiness and fullness, light and shadow, motion and stillness. In calligraphy and painting, the dynamic interaction of these two colors not only lends structure to the composition but also conveys the philosophical principle of complementary duality. Black, as the most essential and expressive color, embodies the spiritual force (氣, *qì*) of the artist, while white provides space for interpretation and meditation.

Beyond aesthetics, color in Chinese art carries a profound spiritual dimension, reinforcing harmony between humans and *dào* (道). Colors are not just decorative elements; they function as pathways to inner balance and attunement with the surrounding world. In traditional painting, color is never arbitrary – it exists in dialogue with the composition, shaped by philosophical and cosmological thought. As such, color symbolism is not confined to artistic creation alone but is woven into a broader system of meaning in which art, nature, and spirituality are inseparable.

In this way, colors in Chinese art serve as a bridge between the material and spiritual realms, articulating concepts of harmony and transcendence. Their nuanced meanings and careful application distinguish Chinese aesthetics from Western traditions, emphasizing an artistic vision that seeks to reveal the deepest essence of reality. Through color, the artist does not merely depict the world but invites the viewer into a contemplative space, where balance and the cyclical nature of existence become visible through artistic expression.

10. MUSIC: SOUNDS WEAVING TOGETHER HEAVEN, EARTH, AND THE HEART

Music (樂, *yuè*) holds a unique place in the Chinese tradition as an art, a discipline, and a path to spiritual cultivation. Unlike Western conceptions of music, which often emphasize emotional expression and technical mastery, Chinese music is deeply rooted in Confucian and Daoist philosophy, where it serves as a means of harmonizing both the individual and society as a whole. For the ancient Chinese, music was not merely a form of entertainment but a manifestation of cosmic order, a key to attaining inner balance, and an expression of humanity's alignment with the rhythm of the universe.[57]

In Chinese philosophy, music reflects the harmony between *yin* and *yang* (陰陽, *yīnyáng*) and the Five Phases (五行, *wǔxíng*). Sounds are not merely

[57] Pimpaneau, *Chiny*, 224–235.

acoustic phenomena but bear profound symbolic meaning, with their composition serving as a reflection of universal order. In Confucianism, music functioned as a tool for moral cultivation, shaping both the individual and the social fabric. Confucius maintained that refined music (雅樂, *yǎyuè*) inspires virtuous living and reinforces social order by fostering harmony and inner balance. The structured arrangement of sounds was believed to cultivate a person's character, teaching restraint, serenity, and proper interpersonal conduct. Daoism, by contrast, emphasized music as the free-flowing movement of energy (氣, *qì*), where sound mirrors the natural rhythms of the cosmos and the interconnectedness of human beings with nature.[58]

In Confucian thought, music played an essential role as both an educational and ritualistic instrument, capable of shaping society when used correctly. The Book of Songs (詩經, *Shījīng*), the oldest collection of Chinese poetry, presents music as both an expression of human emotions and an element that upholds moral and social life.[59] Confucian ritual music was characterized by its simplicity and structured rhythms, designed to promote internal harmony and reinforce societal order.

The Daoist approach to music, in contrast, was more intuitive and naturalistic. In Daoist tradition, music was an expression of harmony with the *Dao* (道, *Dào*), with sounds meant to flow freely, mirroring the rhythms of nature. A crucial element of Daoist music was silence (靜, *jìng*), which carried as much weight as the sounds themselves. In Daoist philosophy, emptiness (空, *kōng*) is the source of all existence, and the pauses between notes were seen as leading to a deeper understanding of their essence. Many traditional compositions imitate the sounds of nature – the rustling wind, the flow of rivers, the calls of birds – reflecting the desire to merge with the natural world and attain unity with the cosmos.

Chinese music is built upon a rich tradition of instruments, each imbued with profound symbolic meaning. The *guqin* (古琴, *gǔqín*), an ancient seven-stringed instrument, was revered as a symbol of wisdom and spiritual refinement. Playing the *guqin* was not simply an act of entertainment but a means of intellectual and spiritual cultivation. It was the instrument of scholars, often accompanying meditation and contemplation, and its subtle, almost ascetic tones were intended to calm the mind and foster self-improvement.

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[58] Curt Sachs, *Muzyka w* świecie *starożytnym [The Rise of Music in the Ancient World]*, trans. Zofia Chechlińska (Kraków: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Muzyczne, 1988), 107–162.

[59] Konfucjusz, and Mieczysław Jerzy Künstler, eds., 詩經 *Szy-cing Księga pieśni [Shijing: The Book of Songs]*, trans. Marzenna Szlenk-Iliewa (Rara Avis; Warszawa: Alfa-Wero, 1995); 詩經 *Shijing [The Book of Songs]*, accessed April 20, 2019, http://ctext.org/book-of-poetry.

The *sheng* (笙, *shēng*), a Chinese mouth organ, symbolized the harmony between heaven and earth. Its light, ethereal sound, reminiscent of birdsong, led Daoists to regard it as an instrument that connects humans with the forces of nature.

The *pipa* (琵琶, *pípá*), a four-stringed lute, was renowned for its rich and expressive tones. Used in both court and folk music, it became a symbol of emotional depth and virtuosity. In many Chinese legends, the *pipa* is portrayed as an instrument that narrates tales of love, war, and travel, with its dynamic range capable of conveying both delicate melancholy and passionate, battle-like rhythms.

Drums (鼓, *gǔ*) played a crucial role in both ritual and military music. Their deep, resonant sound symbolized the power of *qì* and the pulse of life. They were used in religious ceremonies as well as in martial arts, where their rhythm synchronized warriors' movements and bolstered their resolve.

Silence in Chinese music was considered just as important as the sounds themselves. Rather than being treated as a mere pause, silence was seen as a space for deeper contemplation and a fuller experience of the music. Traditional Chinese aesthetics emphasized that the beauty of music lies not only in the sounds but also in the skilled use of silence, allowing the listener to engage in an inner dialogue with the composition and better grasp its harmony.[60]

Music in traditional Chinese culture was also regarded as a tool for spiritual transformation. It was believed that listening to and creating harmonious music purified the heart, strengthened virtues, and nurtured human relationships, aligning individuals with the cosmos. Good sounds had healing power, and a well-composed melody was considered a remedy for the soul. In the Confucian system of education, music held a pivotal role, as it was thought that a person could not be fully morally cultivated without developing the ability to listen to and understand harmonic relationships in sound.[61]

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[60] 大音希聲，大象無形。 The greatest music has the faintest notes; the greatest form is without shape. 老子, 道德經 *Dao De Jing [The Book of the Way and Virtue]*, chap. 41; Wójcik, Laozi, and Bi, *Księga dao*, 91.

[61] 樂者，天地之和也；禮者，天地之序也。和故百物皆化；序故群物皆別。樂由天作，禮以地制。過制則亂，過作則暴。明於天地，然後能興禮樂也。 Music is the harmony of heaven and earth; ritual is the order of heaven and earth. Harmony makes all things change; order makes all things different. Music is created by heaven, ritual is regulated by earth. Over-regulation leads to chaos, over-exertion leads to violence. Only when you understand heaven and earth can you promote ritual and music. 禮記 *Liji [The Book of Rites]*, 2006, chap. 樂記 14, http://ctext.org/liji. The entire chapter on music, *Yue Ji* (《樂記》), from the classical Book of Rites (*Liji*, 禮記), is a "goldmine of musical philosophy" in Chinese art.

Traditional Chinese music, with its profound connection to philosophy, nature, and spirituality, remains one of the great achievements of Chinese civilization. For centuries, it has inspired scholars, philosophers, and artists, offering a path to understanding the relationship between human beings and the universe. It was not merely a form of artistic expression but also a means of attaining moral and spiritual excellence. Its legacy endures to this day, providing contemporary audiences with not only a wealth of musical traditions but also a profound inspiration for seeking harmony and balance in life.[62]

11. FENG SHUI: THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE COSMIC BREATH

Feng Shui (風水, *fēng shuǐ*), literally meaning "wind and water," is an ancient Chinese practice of spatial arrangement aimed at achieving harmony between humans and the cosmos. Unlike the Western approach to architecture, in China, a structure was never considered an isolated entity. Every element of space – cities, homes, rooms, beds, and even desks – had to be placed within a broader context of energetic and topographical forces to maintain alignment with the universal order.[63]

The art of Feng Shui is deeply rooted in Chinese cosmology and philosophy. Its foundation lies in the concept of the harmonious flow of *qì* (氣), whose proper direction fosters health, prosperity, and stability. Feng Shui specialists assessed the placement of residences, tombs, and temples, analyzing their orientation in relation to wind, water, and terrain features. Their task was to ensure an uninterrupted flow of *qì* so that energy could circulate freely without encountering obstacles that might lead to disorder or illness.[64]

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[62] Curt Sachs, *Historia instrumentów muzycznych [The History of Musical Instruments]*, trans. Stanisław Olędzki (Wiedza o Muzyce; Kraków: Polskie Wydaw. Muzyczne, 1989), 142–171.

[63] Zbigniew Królicki, *Feng shui: niech przestrzeń pracuje dla ciebie [Feng Shui: Let Space Work for You]* (Łódź: Ravi, 1999).

[64] 氣乘風則散，界水則止；古人聚之使不散，行之使有止，故謂之風水。 *Qi* rides the wind and scatters, but is contained by water. The ancients gathered it to prevent dispersion and guided it to settle – hence the name *Feng Shui*. 郭璞 Guo Pu, "风水经典《葬书》[Fengshui Classic: The Book of Burial (Zangshu)]," accessed July 16, 2025, https://www.sohu.com/a/www.sohu.com/a/377634226_120337031; 郭璞 Guo Pu, "葬經 [Zangjing: The Classic of Burial]," accessed July 16, 2025, https://www.stdans.com/a/202101/341161.html. Guo Pu (郭璞, 276–324) was a distinguished scholar, writer, and commentator of the Jin dynasty, renowned for his profound expertise in philology, esotericism, and geomancy. He gained fame as the author and commentator of classical works such as the *Zhuangzi* and the *Shan Hai Jing*, as well as the foundational

This tradition developed based on the principles of *yīn* (陰) and *yáng* (陽), the Five Elements (五行, *wǔxíng*), and geomantic theories. A significant role in shaping space was also played by the Four Mythical Creatures, which symbolized the cardinal directions.[65] The Black Tortoise (玄武, *xuán wū*) in the North provided protection and stability. The Green Dragon (青龍, *qīng lóng*) in the East fostered growth and expansion. The White Tiger (白虎, *bái hǔ*) in the West represented strength and vigilance, while the Red Phoenix (朱雀, *zhū què) in the South ensured openness to new opportunities.* Proper alignment of terrain formations according to these symbols guaranteed a favorable flow of *qì* and the well-being of the inhabitants.

The Chinese applied Feng Shui on both a macro and micro scale – ranging from city and temple planning to interior arrangements. Even the placement of a bed, desk, or doorway was believed to impact the psychological and emotional comfort of the residents. Feng Shui specialists not only identified optimal locations but also modified spaces through the use of specific shapes, colors, and materials. Rituals were performed to neutralize negative energies, including the use of incense, strategic lighting, and the placement of stones and plants in key positions.

The contemporary popularity of Feng Shui extends beyond China and the Far East. Although many of its principles are now adapted to modern architectural trends and environmental psychology, the idea of a harmonious space remains highly relevant. In a world where people continue to seek balance, tranquility, and well-being, Feng Shui emerges as a timeless practice – one that bridges the wisdom of tradition with modern approaches to spatial organization.

Feng Shui is often dismissed as an unscientific, esoteric phenomenon, lacking any foundation in rational principles.[66] Regardless of such assessments, and despite its markedly eclectic nature – interweaving philosophy, spirituality, art, architecture, superstition, and more – it remains deeply embedded in Chinese

figure in feng shui theory, especially through the text attributed to him, the *Book of Burial* (《葬書》, *Zangshu*). His writings combined Confucian erudition with Taoist cosmology and symbolism, making him one of the key figures in the history of Chinese cultural and aesthetic thought. Donald Holzman, "Guo Pu 276-324," in *Dictionnaire de littérature chinoise*, ed. André Lévy (Quadrige Référence 316; Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2000), 98–99.

[65] Jean-Claude Martzloff, "Étoiles et constelations [Stars and Constellations]," in *Aperçu de civilisation chinoise. Le Dossiers du Grand Ricci* (Paris – Taipei: Institut Ricci de Paris, Institut Ricci de Taipei, Desclée de Brouwer éditions, 2003), 137–156.

[66] Livia Kohn, *Taoizm: wprowadzenie [Introducing Daoism]*, trans. Justyn Hunia (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2012), 277.

culture. To overlook this element in any account of the "philosophy of Chinese art" would constitute a significant omission.[67]

12. CONCLUSION: ART AS THE ECHO OF THE UNIVERSE THAT ENDURES IN SILENCE

Chinese art, like water flowing over the smooth surface of a stone, is not merely an aesthetic phenomenon but a reflection of a profound philosophy in which every element coexists in harmony with the whole. Space and emptiness, movement and stillness, form and spirit – these are not opposites but complementary aspects of a singular reality. In this world, the artist is not an isolated creator detached from society but a guardian of values, who, in every brushstroke, every note of music, and every spatial arrangement, reflects the order of the universe. Chinese art, in a mysterious and subtle way, bears witness to the fact that the human being – and the human spirit – holds aspirations, desires, a directed intention of the soul, a guiding idea of life open to the Unnamed Infinity.[68] It evokes and provokes through remarkably simple means – like Giussani's *Povera voce*, like the wisdom flowing from the first songs present in every culture.[69]

The analysis presented in this study reveals that Chinese aesthetics extend beyond technical or formal concerns – they constitute a path of spiritual and moral cultivation. The identity of the artist is shaped by literary erudition and ethical refinement, and art becomes not only an expression but also a testament to living

[67] Elizabeth Moran, Joseph Yu, and Val Biktashev, *Feng shui*, trans. Robert Bartołd (Poznań: Rebis, 2002).

[68] 子曰：「三軍可奪帥也，匹夫不可奪志也。」 Confucius said: "The commander of an army may be taken, but the will of a common man cannot be taken (zhì 志) from him." 孔子 Kǒngzǐ, 论语 *Lúnyǔ [The Analects]*, chap. 9,26; Konfucjusz, *Analekta.* 論語, 102.

[69] The song *Povera voce* is a signature piece of the Comunione e Liberazione movement. The original lyrics are as follows: "Povera voce di un uomo che non c'è | la nostra voce se non ha più un perché: | deve gridare, deve implorare | che il respiro della vita non abbia fine. | Poi deve cantare perché la vita c'è, | tutta la vita chiede l'eternità; | non può morire, non può finire | la nostra voce che la vita chiede all'Amor. | Non è povera voce di un uomo che non c'è, | la nostra voce canta con un perché." It may be a "poor voice," but it is full of dignity, for like a compass, it points toward Infinity. Luigi Giussani, "Chwila nie była już dla mnie czymś banalnym [The moment was no longer something trivial to me]," in *„Chrystus jest życiem mojego życia". Luigi Giussani 1922–2022 Stulecie Urodzin. Audiencja Ojca Świętego Franciszka dla Comunione e Liberazione* (Vatican: Fraternità di Comunione e Liberazione, 2022), 15–16; Luigi Giussani, "Mądrość płynąca z pierwszych pieśni [The Wisdom Flowing from the First Songs]," *Komunia i Wyzwolenie*, August 5, 2000, https://pl.clonline.org/archiwum/luigi-giussani/mądrość-płynąca-z-pierwszych-pieśni.

in accordance with dào (道, *dào*). Just as in calligraphy (書法, *shūfǎ*), where the precision of movement conveys the harmony of the spirit, so too does the entire artistic tradition of China unite beauty with virtue, form with transcendence.

From a scholarly perspective, this article contributes to the understanding of the fundamental principles of Chinese aesthetics by presenting their philosophical and historical foundations. It has been demonstrated that Eastern art is not merely decoration or an expression of emotion – it is a tool for shaping both the individual and society, a medium through which the harmony of the universe manifests itself.

However, this reflection cannot be confined within the boundaries of academic analysis. Chinese art remains a living space for contemplation – a realm where time does not flow linearly but moves in cycles, where every line and color invites immersion into its metaphysical depth. Ultimately, it is not theoretical discourse but the personal experience of beauty and harmony that allows for a true understanding of this art. Just as emptiness in painting is not an absence but a space for the imagination, so too is this text merely an introduction – the first note in a symphony that continues to resonate in the thoughts of the reader.

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SYMPHONY OF THE SPIRIT – LANDSCAPES OF THOUGHT: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PHILOSOPHY OF CHINESE ART

Summary

Chinese art integrates aesthetics, ethics, and spirituality, presenting the artist as a scholar and guardian of harmony. Calligraphy, painting, and music serve as tools for self-cultivation and expressions of cosmic order. The "Four Treasures of the Literati" form the foundation of artistic practice, while emptiness plays a crucial compositional role, emphasizing the significance of the unseen. Colors reflect the theory of the Five Elements, and feng shui harmonizes space according to the flow of qi. Music embodies the balance between heaven, earth, and the human heart. Confucianism stresses the moral dimension of art, Daoism emphasizes spontaneity, and Buddhism highlights spiritual transcendence. Art functions not as an isolated entity but as a means of shaping both individuals and society. The analysis of classical sources and contemporary studies presents Chinese aesthetics as a dynamic dialogue between tradition and modernity. The article offers an interdisciplinary perspective on Chinese art philosophy, underscoring its role in fostering harmony and spiritual growth.

Keywords: Chinese aesthetics; calligraphy; emptiness (空); qi (氣); feng shui (風水); harmony; Confucianism; Daoism; Buddhism in art; Chinese art; chinese philosophy

SYMFONIA DUCHA - PEJZAŻE MYŚLI. WSTĘP DO FILOZOFII SZTUKI CHIŃSKIEJ

Streszczenie

Chińska sztuka integruje estetykę, etykę i duchowość, ukazując artystę jako uczonego i strażnika harmonii. Kaligrafia, malarstwo i muzyka służą samodoskonaleniu i wyrażaniu kosmicznego ładu. „Cztery skarby uczonego" stanowią fundament praktyki artystycznej, a pustka pełni kluczową rolę kompozycyjną, podkreślając znaczenie niewidzialnego. Kolory odzwierciedlają teorię pięciu elementów, a *feng shui* harmonizuje przestrzeń zgodnie z przepływem qi. Muzyka wyraża równowagę między niebem, ziemią i ludzkim sercem. Konfucjanizm kładzie nacisk na moralny wymiar sztuki, taoizm – na spontaniczność, a buddyzm – na duchową transcendencję. Sztuka nie jest oddzielnym bytem, lecz narzędziem kształtowania człowieka i społeczeństwa. Analiza klasycznych źródeł i współczesnych badań ujawnia chińską estetykę jako dynamiczny dialog między tradycją a nowoczesnością. Artykuł przedstawia interdyscyplinarne ujęcie filozofii chińskiej sztuki, podkreślając jej rolę w budowaniu harmonii i duchowego rozwoju.

Słowa kluczowe: chińska estetyka; kaligrafia; pustka (空); qi (氣); feng shui (風水); harmonia; konfucjanizm; taoizm; buddyzm w sztuce; sztuka chińska; filozofia chińska