

# THE SYMBIOSIS OF TAO AND ART: THEORETICAL RECONSTRUCTION OF TAOIST PHILOSOPHY IN CONTEMPORARY ART

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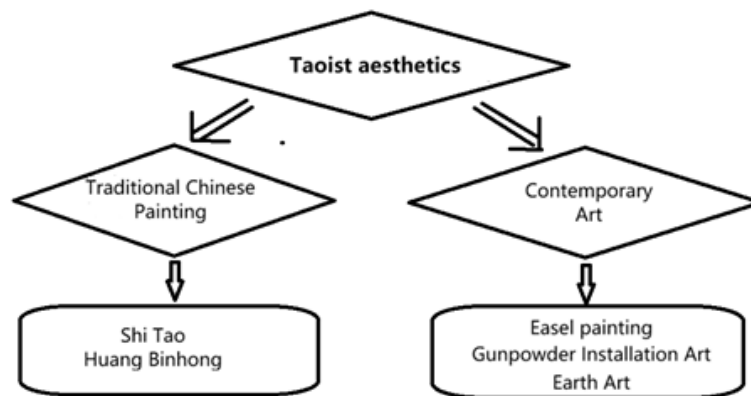
**Abstract.** This study is dedicated to examining the practical applicability of Taoist thought in contemporary art, systematically sorting out the core concepts of its theoretical system that have practical guidance significance, and exploring the paths of creative transformation of these concepts in a variety of art mediums. Using a combination of iconographic interpretation, documentary evidence, and cross-cultural comparisons, the thesis focuses on the visual transformation mechanism of Taoist core propositions, such as the concepts of nature, life, and the universe, in contemporary art practice. The thesis firstly constructs a theoretical framework of Taoist aesthetics, then selects representative traditional landscape paintings as research examples, and deeply interprets the creative concepts of two ancient artists who were deeply influenced by Taoist philosophy; based on this, the thesis focuses on the creative use of Taoist elements by contemporary Chinese artists and draws a parallel with the relevant practices in the international art world. Through the dual perspectives of temporal evolution and co-temporal difference, this study not only demonstrates the universal value of Taoist thought beyond time and space but also shows how contemporary art creations can respond to the ecological crisis and spiritual dilemmas faced by modern society by activating the Taoist wisdom, the philosophical discourse of “Taoism follows nature” in traditional painting theory is given new connotations and transformed into a new art form that is both contemporary and contemporary. The philosophical discourse of “Taoism and Nature” in traditional painting theory is given a new connotation of the times, transformed into an artistic language with both critical consciousness and aesthetic tension, and ultimately realizes the organic fusion of traditional philosophy and modern visual expression in the context of globalized art.

**Keywords:** *Taoist philosophy, Taoist aesthetics, Wu Wei, Taoism, contemporary art, Chinese painting*

## Introduction

In contemporary art practice, Taoist philosophy, with its transcendent spiritual dimension and profound cultural accumulation, has injected unique philosophical thinking into artistic creation. As an important ideological resource of traditional Chinese culture, Taoism, centered on the concepts of “doing nothing (无为)” and “the way of nature (道法自然)”, provides a spiritual path that transcends materialistic utilitarianism and profoundly influences artists' explorations of the relationship between man and nature and between the inner and outer worlds. Contemporary art is not only a testing ground for formal innovation but also a visual carrier for philosophical thinking. Taoist thought has been recoded into contemporary visual language through the creative transformation of artists, whether it is the use of natural elements in installation art, the pursuit of spirituality in performance art, or the response to environmental issues in eco-art, all reflect the vitality of Taoist philosophy. This cross-generational dialogue not only perpetuates the contemporary value of traditional wisdom but also highlights the unique contribution of Taoist aesthetics in the global art context. Through the examination of cross-cultural perspectives, we can more clearly grasp the profound

influence of Taoist thought on the world art ecology. What is more worth exploring is the unique contribution of Taoist aesthetics to cross-cultural art creation. At a time when the global ecological crisis is worsening, it is of great academic value and practical significance to study the artistic expression of Taoist ecological wisdom and its revelation to contemporary eco-art practice. In particular, the Taoist philosophy of “the unity of heaven and mankind” provides creative resources for artists to deal with environmental problems. This Eastern philosophical perspective not only expands the dimension of eco-art expression but also injects a unique philosophical paradigm into global contemporary art creation (*Figure 1*).



*Figure 1. Research Flow Chart.*

## Materials and Methods

This study employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach integrating philosophical interpretation, art historical analysis, and visual semiotics to explore the contemporary transformation of Daoist artistic thought. This methodological design aims to connect the theoretical framework of Daoist aesthetics with actual artistic creation across diverse historical and cultural contexts. At the beginning of the article, the documentary and literature analysis method is adopted to review classical Taoist texts systematically, such as *Tao Te Ching* and *Zhuang Zi*, as well as major scholarly interpretations in the field of Chinese aesthetics. Relevant academic studies and art treatises, including *The Mustard Seed Garden Painting Manual* and *The Monk’s Record of Painting with Bitter Melon*, are examined to construct the philosophical foundation of Taoist aesthetics and its influence on traditional Chinese painting theory. In the primary section of the study, certain visual materials were examined using image analysis and form analysis techniques. It examines representative works by traditional and contemporary artists, including Fan Kuan and Huang Binhong in classical Chinese landscape painting and Zao Wou-Ki, Cai Guoqiang, and Alberto Carrero in modern and contemporary art. Through this approach, the study explores how Daoist principles such as “non-action” (无为), “Taoism follows nature” (道法自然), and “unity of heaven and humanity” (天人合一) are visually translated into diverse artistic media and compositional strategies. Employing case studies, the research conducts in-depth examinations of selected artists whose creative transformations exemplify Taoist philosophical

influences. These cases concretize theoretical discussions, revealing the practical mechanisms through which Daoist thought continues to inspire contemporary artistic practice. Meanwhile, comparative and cross-cultural methodologies are employed to examine resonances and divergences between Eastern and Western aesthetic systems. By comparing the visual philosophies of artists like Zao Wou-Ki and Mark Rothko, this study examines how Taoist concepts such as “emptiness” and “simplicity” are reinterpreted in Western abstract art, demonstrating the universality and adaptability of Taoist aesthetics within a globalized artistic context. Within an interdisciplinary framework combining textual, visual, and comparative analysis, this study not only reconstructs the aesthetic logic of Daoism but also elucidates its enduring relevance as a philosophical paradigm for ecological consciousness, intercultural creativity, and spiritual reflection in contemporary art.

## Results and Discussion

### *Taoist aesthetics in traditional Chinese painting*

The aesthetic system of Taoism has the core qualities of reverence for nature, return to simplicity, and ultra-utilitarian pursuit of art. From the perspective of philosophical aesthetics, Taoist thought, represented by Lao Zhuang, established the fundamental aesthetic principle of “Taoism follows nature (道法自然)”, and its pursuit of artistic freedom is complementary to the natural truth (Le Guin, 1998). Classical Chinese aesthetics is closely linked to philosophical thought, emphasizing the creation of mood, relationship, and rhythm in artistic expression, rather than simply reproducing objective objects. Taoism especially emphasizes the aesthetic unity of inner spiritual meaning and outer formal expression, a unique aesthetic paradigm that transcends the boundaries of conventional cognition and becomes a constant law guiding artistic creation. As the highest category of Laozi's philosophical and aesthetic thought, “Tao” embodies the ultimate sublime realm. The Tao Te Ching laid the theoretical foundation for Taoist philosophy and aesthetics, while Zhuang Zi further systematized and developed it. Zhuangzi advocated the attainment of the Tao through transcending form, mind, and the bonds of reality. The cosmology of “Man follows Earth, Earth follows Heaven, Heaven follows Tao, and Tao follows Nature,” which is put forward in Chapter 25 of the Tao Te Ching, together with Zhuang Zi's philosophical proposition that “Heaven and Earth were born together with me, and all things are one with me,” constitutes a complete theoretical system of “unity of heaven and man (天人合一)” (Goldin, 2003). The core essence of Chinese philosophy lies in the cognition of the unity of space and time, which originates from the living organism's perception of the laws of the universe. In traditional Chinese philosophy, human beings and the universe constitute an organic and unified whole, and this harmonious relationship is condensed and expressed as “the unity of heaven and man.”

As the spiritual foundation of Chinese civilization, the core category of Taoism is not only a philosophical way of thinking but also shapes the aesthetic paradigm of Chinese art creation. The Taoist cosmology of “the unity of heaven and man (天人合一)” and the philosophical concept of “the law of nature (道法自然)” has profoundly influenced the overall aesthetic character of Chinese art. The Mustard Seed Garden Painting Manual's compositional rule of “first leave the place of heaven and earth in the painting, and then put people in the middle of it” (Zhang, 2020) vividly embodies Taoism's

aesthetic thought of revering nature and pursuing harmony. This artistic expression of harmony and symbiosis between man and nature has directly nurtured the unique aesthetic system of Chinese landscape painting. Chinese landscape painting is by no means a simple copy of nature but a visual presentation of the Taoist philosophical spirit. As Xiao Ping said, the creation of “emptiness” and “quietness” in landscape painting is the concentrated manifestation of the Taoist aesthetic essence. The works of Northern Song masters such as Fan Kuan and Guo Xi perfectly illustrate Taoism's profound realization of the nature of the universe. Unlike Western paintings, which are full-bodied compositions, traditional Chinese landscape paintings often retain more than one-third of blank space. These blank areas are either dense clouds or misty haze, which is the figurative expression of “qi”. It is this artistic treatment of “leaving white space” that gives the picture a continuous flow of qi. Fan Chi (Cheng, 2006) pointed out, “The white space that has achieved the state of perfection is when the ink and brush contain breath-like rhythms, and the air flows freely without any obstruction.” This ethereal mood transcends the limitations of concrete objects, leaving unlimited space for the viewer's imagination (*Figure 2*).



**Figure 2.** *Traveling in the mountains and streams, Fan Kuan, Northern Song Dynasty.*

In the history of the development of Chinese landscape painting, Shi Tao and Huang Binhong have milestone significance. They integrated the essence of Taoist philosophy into their painting practice, forming a highly personalized artistic language system, and their aesthetic theories had a profound influence on later generations. Shi Tao systematically explained his artistic philosophy of integrating Taoist thought in *The Monk's Record of Painting with Bitter Melons*. His creative concepts were deeply inspired by the core propositions of Taoism, such as "Taoism is based on nature (道法自然)", "Doing nothing is the way to rule (无为而治)", and "Heaven and man

are one (天人合一)", among others. Shi Tao put forward the important theory of "The Theory of One Painting," believing that "one painting (一画) is the foundation of all things and the root of all images". In his view, the creation of a painting begins with the "one painting," which is the origin of art and also alludes to the Tao Te Ching's theory of the generation of the universe, "The Tao gives birth to one, the Tao gives birth to two, the Tao gives birth to three, and the Tao gives birth to all things". Shi Tao's "One Painting" and Taoism's "Tao" are isomorphic, both containing the possibility of infinite creation. As the Taoists say, "Everything under heaven is born from existence, and existence is born from nothing", were emphasizing the process of the invisible Tao that nurtures all things (Le Guin, 1998). Shi Tao interpreted this philosophical idea with his painting practice: starting from the first brushstroke on the blank paper, the brushstrokes are born from each other and eventually build up a complete art world. This creative process from scratch, from simplicity to complexity, echoes the Taoist theory of the generation of the universe and fully demonstrates the philosophical height of Shi Tao's artistic thought.

Shi Tao's artistic idea of "not learning from the ancients, not learning from the present, but learning from creation" (Xiang, 2024) profoundly embodies his aesthetic idea of "Taoism follows nature." He emphasized that artists should take nature as their teacher, obtain creative inspiration from all things in heaven and earth, and follow the laws of nature in their artistic expression, rather than adhering to the preconceived ideas of their predecessors or to the fashion of the times. This concept of creation echoes the philosophical idea of the Tao Te Ching, which states that "Man follows the law of the earth, the earth follows the law of the sky, the sky follows the law of the Tao, and the Tao follows the law of nature" (Le Guin, 1998), and reveals the fundamental law that artistic creation should follow the true way of nature. It is worth noting that the "nature" promoted by Shitao is not a simple imitation of objective objects but emphasizes an artistic realm that transcends the constraints of form and eschews deliberate artifice. He advocated taking "heart" as the source of creation, taking nature as the highest criterion, freeing himself from the shackles of technique, and pursuing the deep resonance between art and nature (Guo et al., 2022). This concept of creation is in the same lineage as the Tang Dynasty's Zhang Jade Coronet's concept of "learning from the outside and getting the source of the heart from the inside," which perfectly interprets the philosophical essence of Taoism's "unity of heaven and mankind." As Shi Tao said, "The mountains and rivers meet the gods and are transformed" (Xiang, 2024), emphasizing that the artist must reach a spiritual level of communion with nature and landscape in order to achieve artistic creation in the true sense.

Huang Binhong's paintings profoundly embody the core concept of Yin-Yang harmony in Taoist Tai Chi philosophy. In his works, the dialectical relationship between "black" and "white" is endowed with deep philosophical meanings, the two are both opposing and dependent on each other, and together they build up the rhythm and spatial levels of the picture. This artistic expression echoes the Taoist cosmology of "the interplay of existence and non-existence" and "the interplay of yin and yang." In Huang Binhong's paintings, the contrast between black and white is not only a visual language but also a symbol for interpreting the laws of heaven and earth. What is particularly subtle is that Huang Binhong creatively used the expression of "the real and the imaginary" to expand the space of the picture through the organic combination of white, ink, and brushstrokes. In his view, "emptiness" is not simply a blank space but a continuation and supplements of "reality" and the two forms an inseparable whole (Qi,

2024). This artistic approach perfectly interprets the essence of the Taoist idea of balance between yin and yang and demonstrates the aesthetic ideal of pursuing harmony in the unity of opposites (*Figure 3*).



*Figure 3. Landscape Painting.*

Huang Binhong advocates the aesthetic realm of “simplicity” in his artistic creations, advocating the use of simple and natural brushstrokes to display a grand and far-reaching mood. This pursuit of art is rooted in the Taoist philosophy of “seeing the simple and embracing the simple” (Le Guin, 1998), which advocates the removal of desires and obsessions, the return to simplicity, and the transcendence of the constraints of external forms. In Huang Binhong's view, the highest state of painting is to realize the true meaning of Tao through the depiction of natural objects. His works transcend the level of visual reproduction and are elevated to the level of an artistic vehicle for a spiritual dialogue with heaven, earth, and nature (Zehou, 2023), which coincides with the Taoist concept of spiritual transcendence through the realization of the laws of the universe through practice. Although both Shi Tao and Huang Binhong used landscape as the main theme of their works, their artistic ideas radiated throughout the entire system of Chinese painting. This aesthetic concept, rooted in Taoist philosophy, highlights the unique spiritual core and cultural qualities of Oriental art. During the wave of cultural exchanges from the late 19th century to the early 20th century, Oriental art and philosophical ideas gradually entered the Western cultural field of vision, a phenomenon known in the academic world as “Orientalism.” During this period, many Western artists showed strong aesthetic interest and creative enthusiasm for traditional Chinese philosophy, landscape painting, the aesthetics of calligraphy, and Zen thought. As an important pillar of the Chinese philosophical system, Taoist thought also began to profoundly influence Western artists' rethinking of the concepts of nature and the universe (Chen, 2018).

In the modern art movement in the West, especially those artists who used natural landscapes as the theme of their works, they began to draw inspiration from the Taoist philosophy of “the unity of heaven and mankind.” Taking British painter John Piper and American artist Georgia O'Keeffe as examples, their works often conveyed the

reverence for the power of nature and the pursuit of harmony in the universe through concise modeling language and pure color composition, rather than remaining in the realistic reproduction of appearances. This way of artistic expression has a cross-cultural aesthetic resonance with the Taoist philosophy of “Wu Wei (无为)” It is worth noting that in the context of globalized contemporary art, Western artists' reference to Taoist thought has not declined but rather has become more in-depth. When contemporary art creativity explores issues such as human-earth relations and technological-ecological balance, Taoist thought often becomes an important theoretical reference point (Brubaker and Wang, 2015).

### ***Taoist Thought in Contemporary Art***

#### ***Easel painting***

Zao Wou-ki's artistic creation is unique in the history of 20th-century abstract art and is fundamentally different from the Abstract Expressionist movement that was prevalent during the same period. This uniqueness stems from his creative fusion of the expressive forms of modern Western painting with the spirit of traditional Eastern philosophy. In the 1950s, when the Paris School of abstract art was flourishing, this artist from China began his unique path of artistic exploration. Unlike Western Abstract Expressionism, which emphasized emotional catharsis, Zao Wou-ki chose a more philosophical path, exploring the nature of existence through abstract forms. The evolution of Zao Wou-ki's painting shows the conscious exploration of an Oriental artist in the context of modern art. When he first arrived in Paris, he was deeply influenced by Western modern art but soon found a way to express Eastern philosophies in abstract expression. His works gradually broke away from the constraints of figurative narratives and developed a system of abstract symbols rich in oriental meaning. These symbols are not simply formal compositions but carry thoughts on the nature of the universe, the rhythm of life, and the eternity of time. It is particularly noteworthy that he organically integrates the mood of Chinese landscape painting, the abstract structure of oracle bone inscriptions, the linear rhythm of calligraphy, and the textural expression of goldstone carvings into his oil paintings, forming a unique cross-cultural visual language.

With the deepening of his artistic practice, Zao Wou-ki reached his creative peak in the 1990s. The works of this period completely broke through the established paradigms of Eastern and Western art and realized the purest expression of inner emotion and spiritual pursuit through lyrical brushstrokes with strong calligraphic qualities. In representative works such as *Invisible Landscape*, we can clearly see the artist's profound realization of the essence of nature and the universe. Instead of simply reproducing natural landscapes, he captures the inner energy and rhythm of nature through abstract forms, transforming the majesty of mountains and rivers, the incessant flow of rivers, and the unpredictability of winds and clouds into visual symphonies full of dynamism. This artistic expression echoes the supreme realm of Taoism's philosophy of "Great Sound, Great Elephant, No Form" (Goldin, 2003). From the perspective of art history, Zao Wou-ki's creative practice is of great cultural significance. He establishes a unique coordinate in the dialogue between Eastern and Western art, which is different from the passionate catharsis of Western Abstract Expressionism as well as the programmatic expression of traditional Eastern painting. The universe of painting constructed by his works is characterized by the interplay of heaven and earth, reality and reality, and light and shadow, forming an organic whole of endless life. Every

brushstroke pulsates with the life of the universe, which not only embodies the philosophical wisdom of Taoism's "Taoism and Nature," but also highlights the eternal natural vitality. This modern expression of Eastern philosophical spirit through the medium of Western painting provides important inspiration for artistic creation in the era of globalization (*Figure 4*).



*Figure 4. Landscape Painting.*

Zao Wou-ki's artistic creation transcends the mere reproduction of nature and realizes the deep spiritual integration of man and nature. His artistic practice is rooted in the deep tradition of Chinese landscape painting, integrating the artist's inner life experience with the outer natural world. In the process of creation, Zao Wou-ki pursues a state of "forgetfulness," where his brushstrokes are as natural as flowing clouds and water and resonate marvelously with the rhythms of all things in heaven and earth. When viewing his works, the viewer is often able to break through the limitations of individual experience and enter into a more grandiose vision of the universe—those leaping brushstrokes seem to allow one to hear the whisper of the wind, feel the flow of the water, see the dance of the fire, and touch the texture of the wood and stone. These works go beyond the simple expression of emotions to philosophical reflections on the essential relationship between man and nature, perfectly presenting the supreme realm of "Heaven and earth are born with me, and all things are one with me" (Shouyun and Lan, 2023).

Zao Wou-ki's artistic language profoundly embodies the philosophical wisdom of Taoism, which is the "symbiosis of reality and emptiness." He creatively inherits the technique of "white space" in traditional Chinese painting, creating an imaginary space that is both real and unreal in his works. This unique way of handling space allows the viewer to feel the reality of the material world and the transcendence of the spiritual world at the same time. It is worth noting that although Zao Wou-ki's works are full of visual dynamics, they always maintain an inner serenity and contain certain mysterious life energy. In masterpieces such as *Dream of Space*, we can clearly see this dialectical unity of motion and stillness, the exuberant vitality between the unrestrained brushstrokes and color blocks, while maintaining a deep sense of stillness. This artistic

expression echoes the Taoist philosophy of Tai Chi, which is based on the idea of the interplay of yin and yang.

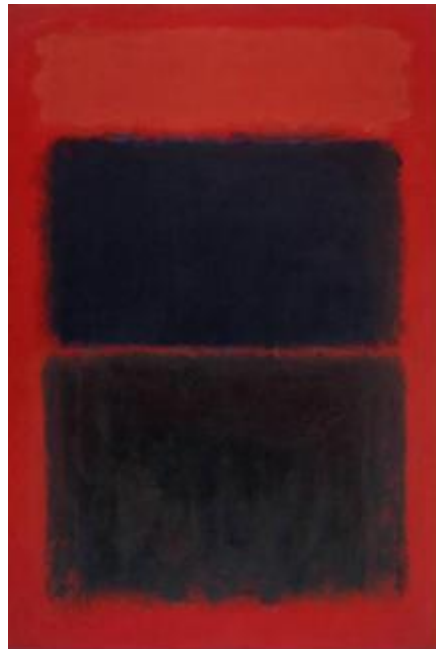
Taoist aesthetics regards "nothing" as the highest aesthetic realm and advocates transcending the constraints of material appearances and returning to the true state of life. This aesthetic thought is perfectly interpreted in Zao Wou-ki's works. His paintings are not simple imitations of natural objects but realize spiritual purification and sublimation through art forms, guiding the viewer from the finite to the infinite, from the tangible to the intangible, and grasping the essence from the form. In the artistic realm of "unity of heaven and man," we can feel the subtle changes in the operation of the universe. This artistic experience transcends utilitarian aesthetic pleasure and reaches the realm of spiritual freedom, embodying the core values of Taoist aesthetics of inaction, emptiness, and transcendence. Through his unique artistic language, Zao Wou-ki transforms this Taoist aesthetic ideal of spiritual liberation into a striking visual poem (*Figure 5*).



*Figure 5. Dream in Space.*

Zao Wou-ki's artistic practice creatively breaks through the material limitations of traditional Chinese painting and uses the medium of modern Western painting to provide a cross-cultural interpretation of the philosophical concepts of the "unity of heaven and man" and the spiritual realm of "emptiness, tranquility, and forgetfulness", an artistic expression that is both profoundly related to and distinctly different from traditional Chinese philosophical thought (Goldin, 2003). His works are not only innovations in visual form but also contemporary interpretations of Eastern philosophical wisdom. Through a minimalist artistic language, Zao Wou-ki successfully expresses philosophical thoughts about nature, the universe, and the nature of life. This practice of reinterpreting Taoist thought in the form of contemporary art has not only injected new vitality into the development of global art but also constructed a philosophical expression system that transcends Eastern and Western cultures, making it a model of cultural integration. The aesthetic concept of "blank space" in traditional Chinese landscape painting has unique philosophical connotations, and this kind of

artistic expression, which symbolizes infinite possibilities and indeterminate space, has had a profound impact on Western abstract art. The creation of Mark Rothko, the master of American abstract expressionism, is a typical example. He expresses his inner emotion and spiritual experience profoundly and purely through the large color space and simple space composition. As the Tao Te Ching says, “Five colors make the eyes blind, and five sounds make the ears deaf”; too many formal elements will rather obscure the essence of things; the more minimalist the expression, the closer it can be to the true state of existence. This artistic concept is highly compatible with the philosophical thinking of Taoism, which advocates “quietness and inaction”, and “seeing the simple and embracing the simple.” According to Lao Tzu, the nature of Tao is as pure and natural as that of a baby, seemingly weak but with a vigorous vitality (Le Guin, 1998), which is the essence of Taoist philosophy. Rothko's practice of color field painting is in dialogue with the Taoist idea of “returning to simplicity” across time and space. His works eschew complex compositions and figurative depictions and express the deepest emotional experience through the simplest combination of color blocks. This extreme simplicity is not an impoverishment of art but a return to the essence, a transcendence of the world of appearances. Despite the extreme simplicity of the form, the artist conveys rich spiritual connotations through subtle color relationships and spatial layouts, allowing the viewer to feel the inner pulsation of life in the work. This artistic practice is completely consistent with the Taoist philosophy of removing complexity and returning to the true nature, demonstrating the commonalities between Eastern and Western art in the pursuit of spiritual purity.



*Figure 6. Oil on Canvas.*

Rothko's paintings creatively interpret the Taoist philosophical wisdom of “the symbiosis of reality and emptiness” in visual form. The color gamut of his works is unique, the picture is not completely occupied by color, but through carefully designed gaps and subtle color transitions, it creates an ethereal and tense visual space. This “emptiness” expression not only gives the work a breathing rhythm but also opens up an infinite dimension of imagination for the viewer. The treatment of the edges of the color

blocks is particularly exquisite, striking a perfect balance between blurring and clarity, vividly interpreting the oriental aesthetic concept of “the existence of nothing.” It is worth noting that this “virtual” white space is not simply a blank space but reinforces the existence of the “real” through contrast, forming a unique visual dialectic. In masterpieces such as No. 61, Rothko translates the Taoist cosmology of “creating something out of nothing” into the language of color. The juxtaposition of rusty red and dark blue not only creates a strong visual confrontation but also achieves a subtle harmony and unity, and this dialectical relationship of opposition and unity is precisely the core of the Taoist concept of the universe. According to Taoist philosophy, the seemingly contradictory concepts of “something” and “nothing” are in fact interdependent and mutually transforming, and together they constitute the essence of the world. Through the dialogue between color and background, and light and dark, Rothko incorporates this profound Eastern wisdom into his abstract expressionist creations, realizing a creative fusion of Eastern and Western aesthetics. His works prove that the simplest forms can often express the richest philosophical connotations, which is the perfect proof of the Taoist idea of “The Way is Simple” in modern art.



*Figure 7. No. 61 (Rust and Blue).*

Rothko's artistic creations transcend the limitations of figurative narratives to construct a purely emotional and spiritual field. His paintings eschew explicit pictorial symbols and, through the pure combination of color and form, open up a meditative space for the viewer to interpret freely. The artist himself emphasizes that the value of his works does not lie in self-expression, but in the creation of a direct dialogue with the viewer, the subtle tonal changes suspended on the canvas are like the emotions and desires that surge in the human subconscious. This visual language not only has a soothing sense of rhythm but also contains profound spiritual power, which can evoke strong emotional resonance in the viewer. When people stand in front of these huge paintings, surrounded by pure light and color, they will often have an experience beyond reality: the boundaries of the individual gradually dissolve, and the consciousness enters a transcendent state almost like meditation, which is exactly the realm of "sitting in oblivion" described by Zhuang Zi, forgetting the separation between

external objects and the self and achieving unity with the Tao and the self, achieving the supreme experience of unity with the Tao.

In Taoist philosophy, nature is the fundamental law of existence for all things, and art creation should also follow this law. Contemporary ink artist Wang Chuan's practice profoundly embodies this philosophy. He breaks through the programmatic expression of traditional ink and wash and adopts non-figurative techniques such as splashing and halving, allowing the ink to flow naturally on the rice paper to form an expression of imagery that is full of vitality. As a carrier of the essence of traditional Chinese art, ink and wash itself carries deep Taoist symbolism: the black hue of the ink symbolizes the "esoteric and mysterious" realm of the Tao and also embodies the character of water, which is "good for all things but does not contend for them" (Le Guin, 1998). Compared with other forms of painting, the unique material properties of ink art determine its irreplaceable aesthetic value.

### ***Earth art Gunpowder installation art***

Cai Guo-Qiang's art practice achieved a revolutionary breakthrough in the 1990s, and his most notable contribution was the groundbreaking construction of a new paradigm of deep dialogue between Eastern and Western cultures. This pioneering idea has injected brand-new ideological resources into the conceptual development of Chinese contemporary art, and his philosophy of art has always played the role of a bridge connecting the civilizations of the East and the West, continuing to promote the development of cross-cultural dialogue to a deeper level. The core value of Cai Guo-Qiang's works lies in his creative transformation and contemporary expression of the spirit of traditional Chinese culture. He not only accurately grasps the essence of the ancient wisdom of the East but also integrates it into the context of contemporary art, forming a unique cultural expression. In his exploration of the popularization of art, Cai has inherited Duchamp's avant-garde concept of "art as life" and developed the public dimension of Beuys' "social sculpture," achieving a double breakthrough.

Using infectious visual forms as a carrier, the artist sublimates artistic skills into a channel for emotional expression and accomplishes the transcendence from finite matter to infinite spirit while expressing the beauty of nature. What is most groundbreaking is that he chooses gunpowder, one of China's four great inventions, as the main medium of creation, a choice that in itself has a profound cultural symbolism. Through elements full of uncertainty, such as the fleeting smoke produced by gunpowder explosions and the random traces left behind on rice paper, Cai breaks the linear perception of time and space in traditional art and creates a unique artistic language that is in line with the philosophical meaning of Taoism's "Great Elephant, No Shape". The Ladder is one of Cai's most iconic works: a 500-meter-long ladder is suspended in the air by a giant balloon, which instantly transforms into a golden flame that shoots up into the sky as gunpowder is ignited. This work originates from the artist's childhood dream and yearning for the unknown world and perfectly blends personal memories and family and friends' emotions with natural elements, forming a romantic expression with very oriental characteristics. This creative way of placing humanistic feelings on natural imagery demonstrates the unique cosmic view and life sentiment of Chinese culture. The works perfectly interpret the Taoist philosophy of "unity of heaven and man" through instantaneous outbursts and eternal poetry, leaving a colorful mark in the history of contemporary art.



*Figure 8. The Ladder of Heaven.*

Cai Guo-Qiang once profoundly explained the core essence of his artistic philosophy: "The essence of my creation lies in expressing the 'invisible' truth of the universe through 'tangible' art forms. In the context of the digital age, with the rapid advancement of virtual reality technology, especially the rise of the concept of the metaverse, the virtual world has become a mirror extension of the physical world. This realization inspired me to develop the idea of constructing an 'artistic meta-universe'—a dimension of artistic expression that can break through physical limitations and achieve greater freedom and creativity." Cai's artistic practice fundamentally reconfigures the way matter exists in contemporary art, with the focus of his creations not on the material entity itself, but on revealing the temporality and energy flow in the process of material transformation. This concept of art profoundly embodies the Taoist philosophy's cosmic concept of "all things are negative and hold the yang, and the energy is in harmony," elevating art from a static presentation of physical objects to a dynamic interpretation of eternal change.

In Cai Guo-Qiang's works, material transformation becomes the core artistic language, solid gunpowder is transformed into brilliant flames and rising smoke in an instantaneous burst of fire, and the rigid material structure is transformed into a flowing energy form in the explosion. This transformation process is not only a transcendence of material properties but also a visual interpretation of Taoism's concept of eternal movement, which is "to move around without being in danger." Through the transient creation of gunpowder explosions, the artist subverts the obsessive pursuit of static and eternity in the Western art tradition and transforms the abstract concepts of "time" and "energy" into perceptible visual experiences. What is particularly noteworthy is that Cai Guo-Qiang creatively builds a bridge between Eastern and Western aesthetics. Using gunpowder, an ancient Chinese invention, as a medium, he injects the philosophical wisdom of Taoism about change and flow into the context of contemporary art, giving the traditional Chinese cosmology a new space for interpretation on the global art stage (Rivenc, 2025). This cross-cultural art practice not only expands the expressive dimension of contemporary art but also allows the world to understand the concept of life and the aesthetic ideals of the Eastern philosophy of "endless life" and "the

symbiosis of reality and emptiness” through visual language. As the Taoist saying goes, “Greatness is said to pass away, passing away is said to be far away, and far away is said to be opposite,” and Cai Guoqiang’s art is a contemporary interpretation of this eternal return and cyclical cosmic rhythm.

### *Earth art*

Only through the creative expression of natural elements can an artist touch the inner micro-essence of things. Zhuangzi's philosophy reveals to us that the highest level of artistic creation should be like the natural creation of nothing, and the true aesthetic experience is the intuitive realization of the “Tao.” In Zhuangzi's view, the most beautiful exists in the true state of nature, a metaphysical existence that transcends the limitations of the senses and points directly to the source. The creative practice of Portuguese artist Alberto Carneiro is a brilliant echo of this Eastern aesthetic concept in Western contemporary art. Carneiro's artistic creation constitutes a visual poem of the relationship between man and nature, and his works cover a variety of forms such as sculpture, installation, and earth art, always with the core concept of exploring the symbiotic relationship between man and nature. His artistic language is a blend of Portuguese local cultural traditions, deep ecological thinking, and personal spiritual experience of nature, building an artistic world full of poetry and profound ecological philosophical thinking. His early apprenticeship in a wood carving workshop in his hometown has made him instinctively sensitive to the materiality of natural materials and the rituals of handmade crafts. Many of his works try to awaken modern people's emotional memories of the land, rivers, and forests and reconstruct the spiritual connection between human beings and the earth through artistic natural elements.

In the contemporary context where industrialization has caused serious damage to the natural ecology, Canelo's works have a special critical value. Through his artistic practice, he reflects on the double alienation of modernity on the ecological environment and the spiritual world of mankind and tries to reconstruct a new type of human-earth relationship based on reverence and symbiosis. For Carneiro, nature is not only the material basis for human survival but also the ultimate spiritual habitat, a realization that echoes the Taoist cosmology of “Heaven and earth are born together, and all things are one with me”. Carneiro's artistic creations are characterized by a distinctive diversity of forms, and he is particularly known for his creative use of natural materials. He rejects industrialized processing methods and insists on using native materials such as tree trunks, vines, and river rocks, a choice that not only embodies a humble attitude towards natural creation but also implies a profound reflection on modern material civilization. The artist does not intentionally change the natural form of the materials but allows the texture and energy of the materials to be fully realized through minimalist spatial configurations. His works often form an organic dialog with the display environment, transforming natural elements into an immersive experience space. In his masterpiece “O Canavial,” the artist fills the entire exhibition hall with carefully arranged reeds, and when the audience walks through them, they can feel the oppression of the natural creation, and at the same time, they can also experience the healing power of being embraced by nature—this contradictory and unified aesthetic experience is precisely the contemporary interpretation of the Taoist realm of “being alone with the spirit of heaven and earth.” This aesthetic experience of paradoxical unity is the contemporary interpretation of Taoism's realm of “alone with the spirit of heaven and earth.”



*Figure 9. O Canavial.*

Carneiro's artistic philosophy is in deep dialogue with the Taoist philosophy of “the unity of heaven and mankind,” and his creative methodology perfectly interprets the Taoist philosophy of “doing nothing to rule,” which is the highest state of art. In his art practice, the artist abandons the forced intervention of human beings, and instead, he humbly allows the natural materials to self-manifest in their truest state. This creative attitude breaks the anthropocentric stance of traditional art creation, elevating nature from an object to be expressed to the subject of creation itself, which coincides with the idea of “de-anthropocentricity” advocated by contemporary ecological philosophy. Canelo's artistic presentation of the natural decay process of materials constitutes the most philosophical dimension of his works. He deliberately preserves the cracks in the wood, the weathering traces in the stone, and other marks of time so that the materiality of his works is always in a state of flux and change. This persistent exploration of “impermanence” not only echoes the Taoist cosmology of “life is only as good as death, and death is only as good as life,” but also creates an “anti-monumental” artistic language that transcends the illusion of material eternity (Liangzhi, 2006). In his works, viewers can clearly feel that human beings are not the conquerors of nature but ordinary members of the ecological network, this cognitive innovation is particularly precious in the context of the ecological crisis of the Anthropocene.

## **Conclusion**

In the practice of contemporary art in the context of globalization, artists from the East and the West, deeply inspired by Taoist philosophy, have continued to explore the possibility of harmonious coexistence between human beings and nature as well as the cyclical nature of the universe with their diversified forms of art, be it easel paintings, spatial installations, or geomantic art. These artistic creations go beyond simple imitation of forms to the philosophical level of following the laws of nature, vividly interpreting the core meaning of “Taoism and Nature” in Taoist thought. Through the creative use of natural materials and symbolic artistic language, the artists transform the Taoist philosophy of “doing nothing,” the dialectical thinking of “Yin and Yang,” and the spiritual realm of “emptiness and quietness” into perceptible visual experiences.

These contemporary art creations rooted in Taoist wisdom not only convey a deep reverence for nature and philosophical reflections on the nature of life but also echo the global concerns of sustainable ecological development, environmental protection, and other contemporary issues. Their unique cultural value lies in the fact that they have successfully broken through the barriers of geography and culture, transforming the ancient wisdom of Eastern philosophy into artistic expressions of universal significance, providing creators with a new paradigm of thinking, and opening up a unique aesthetic experience and spiritual revelation for viewers. The practical achievements of contemporary artists are strong proof of the eternal value of Taoist thought that transcends time and space and demonstrate the continuous and far-reaching influence of this oriental wisdom on modern society. As the Taoist saying goes, “Tao is the mystery of all things.” Tao is not only the fundamental law of the universe but also a never-ending source of inspiration for artistic creation, it guides artists in the dialog between tradition and modernity, between East and West, and in the continuous development of new dimensions of artistic expression.

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### **Conflict of interest**

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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