

## Unveiling Taoist Principles in the 1988 Chinese Ink-wash Animation "Shan Shui Qing"

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### Abstract

This article aims to discuss the result of the analysis of the Taoism principles in the 1988 Chinese ink-wash animation *Shan Shui Qing (Feelings of Mountains and Water)*. In contrast to popular animation, *Shan Shui Qing* incorporates calligraphy and landscape paintings that are rich in the charm of Chinese traditional culture. The expression of nationalisation in the animation is not only in the superficial "Chinese elements" form but more importantly, the core of Chinese cultural thought conveyed in it. *Shan Shui Qing* takes the Taoist principles as the soul and creates a virtual purely spiritual world. It employs level shifts in the Chinese ink-wash painting technique on rice paper to convey aesthetic ideals and artistic endeavours that are not only distinctive but also have significant implications for the harmony between nature and humanity.

**Keywords:** Shan Shui Qing, Ink- Wash Animation, Taoist Principles, Chinese Landscape.

### Introduction

It is learned that ancient belief systems or principles are crucial to maintaining the balance of existence in Chinese traditional culture. Particularly Taoist principle, which is widely practiced in China, has had a profound influence on both people today and people in the past due to its philosophical notion of heaven and earth as one. But how does one go about living and working with the concept of the unity of heaven and earth? According to Wu (2012), there exist both confluence and linkage between this belief. Whether it is confluence or connection, Taoism, as the "metaphysics of thinking from the root", plays a constructive role in mainstream culture. Taoism was established and has gradually become the humanity and the culture of the Chinese (Wu, 2012).

First, the source of the Taoist principle is various. It has adopted an inclusive attitude towards many traditional cultures in ancient China. These ancient cultural thoughts were gathered in Taoism and survived by the Taoist classics. Secondly, in the long course of its development, Taoism has exerted a huge and complicated radiation effect on all fields of our

ancient thought, culture, and social life, leaving a profound influence, some of these influences still can't be ignored in the Chinese way of life and cultural composition (Qing, 2007). Taoism not only occupies an important position in Chinese traditional culture but also has a great enlightenment effect on the development of modern society. Taoist culture has also become an important spiritual wealth for the development of world civilization.

According to Li (2012), one indicator of a country's art cinema maturation is that its artworks contain more of its people's artistic interests and adapt to their appreciating habits, which is the aesthetic principle gradually formed by the nation towards art.

Since the Chinese economic reform in 1978, China would want to promote Chinese cultural humanity to the world. Meanwhile, the Chinese managed to explore the world of animation and get to notice that animation is full of a lively and fresh atmosphere, which inspires people with lovely drawings and most of them are with vibrant colours. Although animation is a young art, which has its unique artistic charm and is deeply fond by the Chinese. As it can be an independent form of artistic expression, the possesses distinctive aesthetic characteristics along with a wealth of vibrant and diverse content.

To promote Chinese humanity and culture, the traditional Chinese ink wash can be considered the right medium as it was well known since Tang Dynasty (618 AD) (Lu, 2015). Chinese ink-wash animation can be played as an important role in conserving and promoting Chinese traditional culture as well as stirring audience emotions.

At the same time, it also pays great attention to the meaning of education, adhering to "education through entertainment" in the creation of cartoons, so that the cartoons will not become superficial and purely entertaining. As Chinese animation needs to adhere to the tradition of national painting as well as create it with its unique characteristic. In 1988, China produced a Chinese ink-wash animation *Shan Shui Qing* (SSQ) (Fig. 1).it achieved the goal of showcasing the national culture subject matter.

At the same time, it also pays great attention to the meaning of education, adhering to "education through entertainment" in the creation of cartoons, so that the cartoons will not become superficial and purely entertaining. The representative Chinese animation in terms of film type is ink animation.

This research focuses on cultural connotation and stands at a macroscopic scope to article analysis of the integration of the Taoist culture of Chinese ink-wash animation in SSQ.

When traditional culture meets modern technology, new ways of expression will inevitably emerge, this article is to explore the expression forms that represent Taoism, as Chinese culture pays more attention to expression through artistic conception. This paper does not further explore the characteristics of Taoist culture in terms of text and visual presentation.



Fig. 1 One of the scenes of the Chinese ink-wash animation, *Shan Shui Qing* (Adopted from Chinanews.com, [http://www.ecns.cn/art/2011/06-21/151\\_2.shtml](http://www.ecns.cn/art/2011/06-21/151_2.shtml))

## Literature Review

In recent years, the Chinese animation market has had a high demand for the recreation of traditional culture, and several animated films with unique national aesthetic styles have emerged with excellent traditional Chinese culture as the creative background. Many scholars have also carried out in-depth research on Taoist culture and Chinese ink animation from multiple perspectives.

## Taoism

Given Taoist culture, Wu (2012) summarises the intrinsic characteristics of Tao from multiple perspectives. He believed that the Tao is the origin of all things in the world and at the same time the general law of the operation of the universe. Lao Tzu saw the Tao as something that came naturally. He believed that the Tao existed between the universe, born before heaven and earth, and was the origin of all things under heaven. The occurrence and development of things have their laws, and this general law of the operation of all things in the universe is the Tao. It has neither form nor sound, but it is always in motion, with the property of transcending everything and being permanent. Qing (2007) explored the aesthetic characteristics of Taoist culture. Taoism pursues the aesthetic principle of the integration of the virtual and the real and regards "Tao" as the essence of beauty. Taoism pursues the beauty of nature. Taoism advocates a quiet, transcendent personality aesthetic. As the origin of all things in the universe, "Tao" must conform to the laws of nature and take nature as beauty. Taoist culture constructs an ideological framework that allows people to feel and comprehend.

## Tao

"I-Ching" (Classic of Changes) Hacker et. al (2002) uses black-and-white opposites and unity of yin and yang to express the objective law of the endless life of all things in the universe. achievement". "The lush vegetation does not wait for the plucking of red and green; the clouds and snow flutter, do not wait for the lead powder to become white.

"Heaven and man as one" are China's unique cosmology and worldview. It is different from the Western theory of "separation of man and nature", which believes that man and nature are a harmonious and unified whole. When dealing with the relationship between man and nature, it maintains that man is an inseparable part of the universe, and that man's spirit is in harmony with nature. Get unlimited satisfaction and pleasure from it. The Chinese cosmology and way of thinking are based on the philosophy of Laozi and Zhuangzi. Laozi, on the other hand, advocates "Tao", and believes that Tao is the origin of everything in the universe, the basis for the development of the natural world and human social movements, and the objective law hidden behind everything that governs its survival and development. "Tao Chong, but use it or not profit. 'Yuan xi' (the relationship) is like the origin of all things." "Tao produces one, one produces two, two produces three, and three produces all things." Tao is the ancestor of all things, and as long as we grasp "Tao", we can deal with daily things correctly, but Tao is also chaotic and void. "Tao is a thing, but it is only trance. If it is trance, there is an image in it; if it is trance, there is something in it." How can such a chaotic thing be grasped? Lao Tzu also pointed out the method of "reaching the extreme of emptiness, keeping quiet and earnest, and I will recover by observing". Feel the presence of Tao.

This is also Lao Tzu's theory of "cleaning away Xuan Jian". "Cleaning" means washing away dirt and dust, that is, washing away people's subjective desires, prejudices, and superstitions so that the mind becomes pure and clear like a mirror (Nylan, 2001). "Jian" is contemplation, "Xuan" is Tao, and "Xuan Jian" is the reflection of Tao. It can be seen from this that to grasp the "Tao", people must achieve the state of mind of "abandoning sages and wisdom, benevolence and righteousness, ingenuity, and profit, see the simple and embrace the simple, thinks less and desire less," and get rid of the desires and prejudices in one's heart can return to the original natural and true state, which is the "innocent heart" and "returning to simplicity" advocated by Lao Tzu. Enter a state of life in which things and I are forgotten, and nature and man are one (Shaughnessy & Edward, 1993). The Tao includes the Tao of Heaven and the Tao of Humanity, and of course, it exists in the Tao of Heaven and the Tao of Humanity. The basic propositions of Laozi's philosophy include "humans follow the earth, the earth follows the heavens, the heavens follow the Tao, and the Tao follows nature.", It also shows that "Tao" unifies "Heaven", "Earth" and "Human", this "Tao" should also be the way of the unity of heaven and man. As the core of heaven and earth, human beings can also embody heaven's way. Zhuangzi inherited and developed Laozi's theory, and put forward the propositions of "heart fasting" and "sitting and forgetting". The concept of grasping the essence of life through emptiness and tranquillity is advocated, aiming to understand the essence of all things in the universe. Through this, the human spirit can establish a connection solely with the spirit of heaven and earth, ultimately reaching the state of liberated existence. Zhuangzi does not look for beauty from the external attributes of nature itself, but from the spiritual connection between man and nature, life and the universe, and regards beauty as a spiritual realm of the unity of nature and man.

### **Chinese ink-wash Painting**

Hou (2007) researched Chinese ink painting. Chinese ink painting, also known as "Chinese painting", was an earlier self-contained system in the field of world art, and the expression method was mainly a little dye. He believes that Chinese painting pursues the realm of form and spirit, and the cartoons rich in Chinese characteristics represented by Chinese ink paintings are called the "Chinese animation school". They pursue details, use the pen to be dense and meticulous, and demand a fresh, elegant, simple, and timeless picture.

### **Colour of Chinese ink-wash**

Ink and wash are closest to the great "Tao" of the universe because Lao Tzu said that it is Xuan (玄), "the Xuan is Xuan, the door of all wonders" - derives all relativity and is the root of the unity of all contradictions and opposites. Such as ink is black, and the ink itself has a deep Taoist philosophy (Cahill, 1990). Another important point is that the ink also has the Taoist realm of harmony between man and nature.

The intangible Taoist culture is visualized as a model of human spiritual ideals so that Taoist culture can be intuitively displayed in animation works. When this intuitive Taoist culture acts on people's sensory perception, it is detached from virtual colours. Jiang (2020) compared with the United States and Japan. Ultimately, he argues that Taoist culture opposes secular beauty and advocates the harmony and simplicity of nature. Therefore, early Chinese ink animation continued the concept of black and white advocated by Taoist culture in painting, and used black and white ink to express the different appearance of everything.

### **The Story of Shan Shui Qing**

This is an animation presented in Chinese ink-wash style, produced by Shanghai Animation Film Studio in 1988. The story was about an old luthier who fell ill on a ferry in a deserted village on his way home. The young fisherman left the old man to rest in his hut, and the old man felt relieved. The following day, after recovering from his illness, the old man took out his Gu Qin to play (a Chinese musical instrument with a seven-string). The sound of the piano-led the young man to his side. The young man is eager to learn about the instrument, and the old man is willing to share his skills, and soon the young man became the apprentice of the old master. When spring came after autumn, the young man managed to master the musical instrument, and the old man was very happy and intends to enhance his disciple's skill in performing the art of music from the Gu Qin to the next level. One day, the old master was enlightened by seeing an eaglet flying alone without relying on the parent. He knew that it was time to make a change in his way of guidance.

He took the young man on a boat and passed through the big river to climb up to the mountains. The magnificent nature fascinated the young man. The old master walked away after presenting him with his beloved Gu Qin. Looking at his mentor walking to the peak of the mountain among the clouds and his figure gradually disappearing into the vast mountains. The young man was suddenly inspired, sitting cross-legged on the cliff, stroking the strings of the piano, playing the song in his heart, pouring out his praise for life, and the melodious sound of the musical instrument echoed within the mountains.

### **Methodology**

This study uses qualitative research, mainly case analysis, and conducts textual research on the animation of SSQ.

### **Textual Research Analysis**

#### **Taoist culture in SSQ**

Aiming at the application of Taoist culture in the Chinese ink animation SSQ, Yu (2017) believes that ethical and moral laws and natural laws, heavenly ways and humanity, and nature and human interrelationships are all connected. Humans and nature should maintain a harmonious relationship. SSQ has made a fairly harmonious combination of the relationship between man and nature, with a fresh style, lyrical scenery, and blending scenes, real in the virtual, and virtual in the real. SSQ shows the harmony and communion between man and nature. Zhang (2016) Research pointed out that SSQ uses a semi-composition and white space to show the fresh and flowing smoke and water vapor. SSQ integrates the artistic conception and pen and ink of traditional Chinese painting into the animation and creates a beautiful artistic conception of scene integration through the sound of flute, wind, water, geese, etc. In the end, he believes that Taoist culture expounds on the relationship between existence and absence, movement and static, virtual and real, and animation design mostly adopts the method of virtual and real coexistence. Sky, clouds, and water are often represented by blanks, producing the effect of virtual and real life, dwelling the infinite in the finite, creating the artistic conception of the image outside. Zeng (2022) believes that in the animation "Landscape Love", the emotional expression of music is even more vivid and exquisite, becoming an important part of the entire animation work. At the beginning of the film, in the sound of wind and water, a melodious and gentle tune brings the audience into the ethereal landscape's artistic conception. In the end, he pointed out that music is the soul of the entire

work, an expansion of the artistic conception of the picture, and shows the "unity of heaven and man" of Taoist culture in the change of tune.

### **Taoist principles in Chinese ink-wash of SSQ**

The realm of "harmony between man and nature" in the plot of the Chinese ink-wash SSQ reflects the Taoist view of the universe. Ink animation itself has the spirit of Taoism, and it conforms to the Chinese view of the universe, which is inherited from the founder of Taoism—Lao Tzu.

The emergence of the ink animation style has achieved a glorious period of Chinese animation. Zhang (2010) pointed out that ink animation is a new form of film art produced by combining traditional Chinese ink-wash painting with film art, a product of the emerging industrial revolution. It demands a high level of line summarization, utilizing less for more, and employing skillful and precise pen techniques within a subtle context.

Given the application of Taoist culture in Chinese ink animation, SSQ Sun (2013) pointed out that Taoist culture, as the highest essence of art, is the freedom and liberation of the spirit and the pursuit of beauty when implemented in animation works. The pursuit of Taoist culture continues in ink animation works, which is to give a more specific explanation of Taoist culture. Zheng's (2010) research suggested that ink animation adheres to Taoist cultural ideas. Follow the principle of simplicity in image space and lens switching, and pursue the expression of artistic conception. Therefore, in the design of the sub-shot, it also possesses a gentler and more lyrical quality.

### **Taoist principles in Chinese Musical instrument of SSQ**

SSQ incorporates the Chinese Taoist idea of learning from nature and indifference to the world and the inspiration of Zen Buddhism, which is full of metaphors. The Gu Qin is shaped like a human, and the music of the Gu Qin embodies the spiritual quality of Chinese literature. The giving and gifting of the qin by the old qin masters symbolize the inheritance of the cultural spirit. The soul of the literati with "aspirations higher than the sky". In this very Chinese-style reference in the short film, there is no sense of bluntness at all.

Gu Qin music is used throughout "Shan Shui Qing", and some faint sounds of leaf flutes, water, wind, and animals are integrated into it. The combination of these elements is full of Chinese-style beautiful rhythms. The melodious and carefree flute sound of the young man reflects his innocent and lively personality; the melodious and ethereal sound of the piano is sometimes soft and sometimes dignified, sometimes melancholy and bold, which fully reflects the complex and resolute psychology of the old piano player (Zhang, 2018). The harsh sound of the wind makes the harsh environment in the wind and snow more realistic, and the sounds of various animals make the arrival of spring extremely lovely. These elements are integrated into one, which expresses the connotation that the animation should embody profoundly. The music style of the whole film is fresh and elegant, full of poetry, making people completely intoxicated by the landscape made of ink. In particular, the boy's Gu Qin at the end pushed the cartoon to a climax. He integrated his admiration for the old Qin player and the friendship between the two masters and apprentices into the landscape and the whole of nature with the plucking of the strings, making people feel relaxed and happy, soul-stirring.

Gu Qin music has a single melody, loose, slow, and fast speeds without obvious rhythm points, just like Chinese calligraphy and ink paintings, which pursue the charm of linear life rhythms. There is thickness in thinness and depth in shallowness. It is an emotional and

intuitive experience. Gu Qin is the musical instrument with the highest status in Chinese culture. It ranks first among the four arts of Chinese traditional culture, "qin, chess, calligraphy, and painting". To achieve such an artistic conception, the piano player must combine the external environment and the leisurely inner state of mind, to achieve the artistic realm of the unity of mind and body and the unity of humans and piano pursued in the music. In "Shan Shui Qing", under the guidance of an old qin player, the young fisherman climbed high and looked at the magnificent peaks of Gu Qin Mountain. Since there is no line, the use of the qin sound contains multiple layers of deep meaning, such as the high pitch or low depth of the qin sound symbolizes Changes in the mood of the characters, like the disappearance and appearance of the sound of the piano, symbolize changes in the plot of the story.

Taoism and the Gu Qin are closely related, and Taoist teachings have a profound influence on the aesthetics of the Gu Qin. Taoism emphasizes nature, carelessness, and detachment from the fetters of the world. The music it pursues is "big sound and rare sound", which has the realm of Tao. Therefore, Taoism attaches great importance to the spiritual level of music and emphasizes the aesthetic ideal of the sound beyond the string. In addition, Nan Hua Zhen Jun's thought of "being proud but forgetting to speak" was suppressed. Inherited by Tao Yuanming (a famous poet and musician, 356-427 AD) and other Qin masters, the pursuit of implication and implication has become an important feature in the aesthetics of Gu Qin music. Many high-level patriarchs of Taoism are also masters of Gu Qin playing.

### **Discussions**

The reflection of the painting style of Chinese Taoist elements in the short film. Although the production technology of cartoons was invented by the West, ink animation is unique to China. It uses the smudges of ink and water to play with the shades and virtuality of ink. Let's first understand the aesthetics of the Taoist concept of colour. Taoism advocates the simplicity of the colourless world, and the attitude towards art represented by Lao Zhuang is to deny art. Lao Tzu believes: "The five colours make people blind, and the five tones make people deaf." From the special feelings of Taoist aesthetics, mainly Lao and Zhuangzi, for colour, it can be concluded that Taoist colour claims a negative sense of colour. Taoist culture advocates "black and white" and opposes colour, which is a concrete manifestation of Taoism's low-level conscious maintenance of the original colour nature, and it is also the result of a high degree of refinement and generalization.

Taoism's aesthetic attitude towards black directly affects the aesthetic thinking of Chinese painting colours and establishes the status of Chinese ink-wash in Chinese painting. Chinese painting pays attention to verve. Therefore, the highest painting environment is to create objects in one's spiritual world. The ink and wash also pay attention to positive and negative shapes. It is like the ancient "Tai Chi Diagram" that contrasts Yin and Yang with virtual reality, existence and non-existence, and positive and negative. SSQ has reached the highest artistic conception of Chinese ink animation has no contour lines, and the natural rendering of ink on rice paper is natural. Each scene is an excellent ink painting, and the movements of the characters are full of poetry. The beauty of artistic conception advocated by the Taoist "Unlike Between" culture. Especially when dealing with the climax of "Parting Master and Apprentice", the characters and scene settings of this film invited the famous Chinese painting masters Wu Shanming and Mr. Zhuo He Jun to use the method of painting on the spot by the painter and shooting by the photographer on the spot, and then use the animation lens Synthesising, the film fully demonstrates the layering and rhythm brought by the artists and ink. The traditional Chinese ink painting is introduced into the animation production, and the

virtual and real artistic conception and the light and elegant picture make the animation show a unique artistic style.

Chinese ink animation expresses a quiet, unearthly, and dashing artistic conception. The flowing ink painting contains a metaphorical art space, and the connotation and extension of the space are rich in Ink-wash colour blending and virtual and real changes, highlighting the appeal of ink art. The embodiment of Chinese Taoist philosophy and music in the SSQ. The ink and wash animation SSQ not only brings us a wonderful audio-visual experience but also highlights the many cultural connotations contained in the pictures and music. It embodies the application of Taoist philosophy and music.

Based on these characteristics of ink animation, most of the overall lens use presents flat characteristics, with long shots and parallel montages. Montage refers to "the way of thinking that combines parts into a whole, and the film arranges and combines a series of shots shot in different places, at different times, from different distances and angles, and in different ways to narrate the plot and portray the characters"

Influenced by global expansion, multicultural ecology, and digital technology update and iteration, the national nature of Chinese ink animation films has been transformed from traditional to modern. In terms of expression, art style, and technical means, Chinese ink animation has changed the times. Many scholars have discussed the value orientation, character shaping, plot conception, and other aspects of Taoist culture in Chinese animation creation from different perspectives, and also provided new perspectives for the development of contemporary domestic animation films.

## **Conclusion**

One of the three pillars of traditional Chinese culture (Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism), Taoist culture has a history of around two thousand years since the establishment of Taoism. There have been numerous scholars throughout history who have extensively studied Taoist culture. Examples from ancient times include Zhang Tao Ling, Lie Zi, and Laozi. Modern researchers such as Tang Yong Tong, Meng Wen Tong, and Hu Shi have also contributed to the study of Taoist culture. Contemporary scholars like Li Jinbo, Zhang Gao Cheng, and Wang Liping continue to explore the Taoist culture. Taoist culture advocates for a philosophy of embracing nature and the concept of non-action (Wu Wei). It not only permeates Taoism itself but also fosters the advancement of literature and art. This has resulted in the creation of a plethora of literary scriptures, paintings, music, and more, with a strong literary essence. The Taoist perspective on language provides a valuable outlook for today's society. Emphasizing harmonious coexistence between humans and nature, it underscores a people-orientated approach in education and respects the natural growth patterns of individuals. When it comes to interpersonal interactions and self, The Taoist culture encourages self-reconciliation and reconciliation with the world. With the changing times, many new opportunities have emerged, and the research of integrating Taoist culture into new artistic domains has begun to take root. This evolution aligns with the pace of the era.

The analysis of the ink animation short film SSQ shows that SSQ is an excellent masterpiece of ink animation. It fully demonstrates the spirit of Taoist culture through the use of plot, colour, brush and ink, and audio-visual language. It unveils the essence of Taoist philosophy. Its unique creation is deserving of our study and research. The exploration of using a new artistic form (animation) to represent Taoist culture began to be explored. In the 2006 Annecy International Animated Film Festival in France, China's animated film "Shan Shui



Qing " was selected as one of the world's 100 greatest animated short films (the one and only from China). This film astonished the world, and its appreciation remains till now, with every frame still as picturesque as ever. The alternating balance between reality and emptiness, the graceful and fluid ink painting style, coupled with the serene and melodious sounds of the ancient qin, refreshed the world's perception of Chinese animation. The incorporation of Taoist culture into these animated works has truly left a profound impact, greatly benefiting the dissemination and development of Taoist culture. To effectively integrate Taoist culture into animation works and foster ongoing innovation, it is crucial to extract the essence of Taoist culture while discarding any irrelevant elements. We need a good script of Taoist culture, use the unique colours of Taoist culture, determine the tone of the animation, and integrate calligraphy and painting into the film. The music is Gu Qin with a Taoist keynote. The sub-camera design can be arranged to be more "fashionable", which is in line with cultural innovation and is more popular with current audiences. This study holds positive significance in promoting the Taoist, the implication of research in this study is to confer the harmony between man and nature beliefs among the Chinese, as the harmonious relationship can balance humanity and nature. Although the SSQ animation was produced 35 years ago, it has become a legend in merging the philosophy of Tao culture, the subject itself becomes a representative of transmitting the Tao philosophy and theory. The Chinese ink-wash animation can inspire Chinese art lovers to continue to bloom the artistic of the medium with the combination of Chinese instruments in the new era. It also offers theoretical references for scholars researching similar topics in the future and the coming future, the study can expand to work on analysing the visual aspect and or the composition of the SSQ animation.

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