

NOTES ON BRUSHWORK: Lin Haizhong' s Journey Through the Taihang Mountains

By: Fu Xiaodong

As the founding master of landscape painting in the Northern Song Dynasty, Jing Hao (850/856 – 923/936), a recluse in the Taihang Mountains during the Five Dynasties period, wrote Brushwork Notes, which inherited from Xie He's "Six Methods", and initiated the transmission of painting tradition from the Northern Song Dynasty to the Southern Song Dynasty, and was a pivotal document for the establishment of the language of brushwork and inkwork in Chinese painting, and hence the transformation of painting into ink and wash. Jing Hao was a painter who was a Confucian scholar and then a recluse, capable of poetry and good at rhetoric, thus forming a different route for the entire traditional Chinese painting style, technical path, aesthetic value and artistic spirit, which distinguished from the route of painting in red and green colors, and "became the authentic painting" (in the words of Huang Binhong). There are many versions of Brushwork Notes that have survived through history, and there are many different opinions on its authenticity, but the main viewpoint of the academic community is that the book has its origins and has been passed down in a certain way, rather than being a fabrication. Given the depth of the combination of its viewpoints with Confucian and Taoist thought, the accuracy of its experience from practice, and the influence of later generations, even if its name is removed, it is also a masterpiece that cannot be bypassed in the history of painting practice and thought. The core value presented in the book is "truth". The evaluation criteria of "six essentials" (Qi, Yun, Thought, Scene, Stroke and Ink) and "four qualities" (spirit, subtlety, strangeness and ingeniousness), and the specific requirements of "four potentials" (sinew, flesh, bone, breath) and "two diseases" (tangible and intangible), can be deeply understood by combing with Lin Haizhong's Journey through the Taihang Mountains as a clue and verifying them with his landscape painting practice. After the replacement of Western iconography and stylistics by AI algorithms, it is important to return to the origin point of independence of ink and landscape painting, to rethink the fundamentals issues of painting, and to find another possibility of modernity embedded in the Chinese tradition.

Jing Hao's Brushwork Notes begins with the question, "do you know brushwork?" This leads to the following three issues.

I. "Truth" and "Qi and Yun"

"Aiming at truth" and "Qi transformation theory" (气化论) are the core ideas of Jing Hao. He puts forward the idea of "pondering the images of things and taking their truth", which means to exhaust the name and appearance of things in experience and to investigate their true nature. "Do not stick to the appearance with colors and take it as the real": that is to say, the external form and the internal substance are not the same thing, belonging to two levels, denying the uniqueness of the meaning of the form. Rather, it is necessary to grasp the proper proportion between the real and the imaginary. We can get the truth only if we get the laws in things. "What is like gets its form and lose its Qi, and what is true prevails both in its Qi and matter." Qi cannot stay in the level of form. It is the sum of the relationship between the becoming of things, and "truth" has the dual significance of the cosmic becoming structure and material reality. "What is true prevails both in its Qi and matter", that is to say, "there are qualities, and interests are spiritual" (Zong Bing), Qi and interest are attached to matter, represented by paintings but not stick to them.

In Brushwork Notes, the "truth" is the ontological state pursued by painters, the substance of the world of Qi which has form and matter. Heaven and earth are originally chaotic, and then formed by the interplay of Yin and Yang. In the Tang Dynasty, Neidanists believed that the truth of the universe was a world in which Qi flowed around, and that the truth of the universe was Qi, which was called "true Qi". The "truth" is the unique Qi that nurtures, gives life to, and gives birth to. The truth of all things is the spirit of life forged by the non-empty Qi. A world of Qi is embodied in the physical world, which is the original meaning of "aiming at truth". How to understand the truth? Jing Hao puts forward the idea that "lusts spoil life", treating painting as a kind of self-technique, a series of self-control of thought, spirit, behaviour and existence through which achieves self-transformation, so as to connect with nature, in order to obtain the wisdom, perfection, freedom, transcendence and the state of a "true man". Being true is the re-awakening of a moral self, the way to move from the ordered moral world to the heavenly world.

In Xu Shen's Explanation of Characters in Chinese, the character "truth" (真) is interpreted as "the immortal who transforms and ascends to heaven, consisted of 匕, 目, 匕, and 八, the carriers he rides on."

In Tao Te Ching, "... there is essence in it, and its essence (Qi) is very true" (Chapter 21). "The matter of truth is like dirty" (Chapter 41). "Its virtue is true" (Chapters 54).

In Zhuangzi, "There is no loss or gain to its truth"; "The Tao abhors hiding itself, but there is truth and falsehood therein". (Working Everything Out Evenly) "Against its truth". (The Great and Venerable Teacher) "Being careful to keep and not to lose is the opposite of the true". (Autumn Floods) "One forgets what is true to himself when tempted by personal gains". (The Huge Tree) "What is true is what sincerity reaches [...] What is true resides inside, and the spirit moves outside, so the true is valued. [...] For its origin in the Heaven, what is true by nature does not change". (The Old Fishman) "True" is associated with the concepts of Tao, Qi, nature, wuwei, and virtue, which inherently looks to a kind of heavenly way. The term "true man" corresponds to a person who has attained immortality, and the concepts of "true master", "true knowledge", "true disposition" and "true painting"

also appear frequently.

In the Confucian classics, “truth” is replaced by “sincerity”. In *The Ruling of the State (Zhongyong)*, “Sincerity is the way of heaven, hence the way of man. A sincere person does not have to force himself to be reasonable and does not have to think about the rightness of his acts and words, reaching the Middle Way with ease and grace. Such a person is sage”. The life of the universe as conceived by the two Qi’s, i.e., Yin and Yang in the *Zhouyi*, is also close to the concept of truth in the original sense. “The endless becoming is called Yi (易), and the interplay of Yin and Yang is called the Tao”, and the endless becoming reflects a real world, while the Qi’s become the vital energy at the origin of all things. According to Chinese scholar Fang Wen, “For the ancient Chinese, painting was like the image in the *Zhouyi*, with the magic of creation, and the painter’s goal was to grasp the vitality and change of creation, not just to imitate nature”.

At the end of the Tang Dynasty, Southern Zen was in full bloom. In saying that “the place where one stands is the truth” and that “truth is reality, and reality is truth”, the Zen also pointed to the fact that the “truth” is the existence itself. This mind is Buddha, and the mind is Buddha. Lin Hai Zhong has been influenced by Zen for many years, often uses the six touches of experience to describe the state of painting. In the moment of painting, the senses are extremely close to the subtle, and the instantaneous moments are infinitely elongated in the experience, with nothing outside the mind and the concentration of the mind on the one. Others view his painting as if the camera is fast-forwarding, while he himself is like an old monk mending clothes, with a clear understanding of the needlework. It is exactly what is said in the *Brushwork Notes*: “It is Qi that allows the mind to follow the brush, with no confusion in acquiring the image. And it is Yun that hides the traces of the shape, with the representation that is not vulgar”. How to be “not vulgar”? Jing Hao also says that “lusts spoil life. Men of intelligence and integrity indulge themselves in music, books and paintings by which replace miscellaneous desires”. Music, books and paintings as a self-technology, through the daily self-management, remove all kinds of extravagant desires, cumbersome decorations, and the remains of the self, return to the realm of harmony with nature, wash the heart into the state of non-I. As in *Grasping the Purpose of Life (Zhuangzi)*, the rickety old man who sticks cicadas with a bamboo pole, the young man who swims in the water in Luliang, and Ziqing who chisels wood for his instrument, all of them talk about the inability to put the external evaluation system before paying attention to the self and the objective, and it is a kind of subversion and limitation of the external right system, and the only way to obtain the real freedom is to be connected with the internal and truth system that controls the self.

In his *Examination and Explanation of Tang Dynasty Paintings*, Weibin says (Chapter 5), “But how is the truth of painting? The truth of man is to follow nature, and the truth of object is to get its primitive matter, and the truth of painting is said to be ‘prevailing in both its Qi and Matter’. Then we know that painting is based on Qi and ended in Form. Why? It turns out that what we call Matter is Form. The real is Qi. Therefore, the debate of Chinese painting, the difference between authenticity and likeness, are all attributed to Qi”.

As the highest value in Jing Hao’s theory of painting, truth has an inward moral and spiritual orientation, and is the way to access Qi and Yun, so that, by acquiring the truth, people can generate Qi and Yun, and things can generate Qi and Matter. Aiming at truth is not only to get the Qi of heaven and earth, but also to reach the harmony of man and heaven and earth; through the personal charm of the painter, Qi is generated. In the special essay *Qi-Yun is Unavailable from Being Taught (Insights into Painting)*, Guo Ruoxu in the Northern Song Dynasty says, “Looking at the talents since ancient times, I find that many of them are high-ranking officials or reclusive Confucian scholars. They wander all over the world of art in their kindness, exploring the profound and subtle knowledge, and their perfect good tastes completely reflect in their paintings. Given their character, Qi-Yun in their paintings cannot be low; and given the strong Qi-Yun, the livingness has to come in. All paintings must have a good sense of Qi-Yun before they can be called treasures”. Here, the world of morality and the world of heavenly principles are connected to each other, and Qi-Yun is the representation of personal morality and spiritual cultivation in painting, which can only be realized through self-awareness and practice, and is the display of the artist’s disposition that is constantly being polished. After returning to a thorough understanding of one’s authenticity, one can acquire the “truth” by removing complex concepts and the inertia of inherent thinking with no falsehoods, and by connecting one’s free self to the world of heavenly principles which is the essence of all things.

II. “Brush and Ink” and “Four Potentials”

Brush and ink are two essentials in *Brushwork Notes*, and the in-depth excavation, inheritance and development of the brush-ink system is also an important achievement that Lin Haizhong has explored in his paintings over the years. “The brushwork, although following rules, operates flexibly, without matter or form. Ink is a type of painting that shades in representing things, seemingly unrelated to brush”. Moreover, four potentials are further normalized: “there are four potentials in all brushes, which are called sinew, flesh, bone, and breath. That brush ceases but not broken is called sinew. That undulation into a real is called flesh. That life and death are represented rigidly is called bone. That traces of painting are not tarnished is called breath. So, I know that ink outdoing matter loses its body; the vanishing looks spoil normal breath, and the stiff sinews have no flesh; the broken traces have no sinew, and the obsequious has no bone”.

Why has “brush-ink” become an inherent attribute of Chinese painting? And why has it constantly become the focus of discussion in the modern transformation of Chinese painting? In the end, the material property of “water-ink” can only be

used to replace the title of Chinese painting with “brush-ink” as its core. Is Picasso’s painting with brush and Xuan paper wash painting? Is Wang Dongling’s writing with acrylic materials not calligraphy? The term “brush-ink” is related to the self-construction, self-training and conscious maturity of Chinese art. Brush and ink is a form of life. In the Han Dynasty and the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties, calligraphy first completed its artistic self-awareness and established its own language system. During the Han Dynasty, the cursive script of Chinese calligraphy was detached from its utilitarian function, and Zhang Zhi, the sage of cursive script, made calligraphy an expression of the writer’s personality. The real comprehensive self-consciousness was the emergence of running script, regular script and present cursive script, i.e., “present style”. Wang Xizhi’s rich and varied calligraphy system with aesthetic ideals became the representative of the self-consciousness of calligraphy, and also became the foundation for the development of the later generations. Cui Yuan’s Cursive Script’s Potential in the middle of the Eastern Han Dynasty, Cai Yong’s Seal Script’s Potential and Brush Fugue in the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty, and Zhao Yi’s Non-Cursive Calligraphy put forward the important concept of potential, from which the four potentials in Brushwork Notes inherited. The most important concept in the calligraphy of the Wei, Jin and Northern and Southern Dynasties is “brushwork”. The matter of brushwork itself and its abstract combinations generate the “handwriting”, such as “proficient handwriting”, “fluent handwriting”, “outstanding handwriting”, “the handwriting is too poor to measure”, and “being famous only for his handwriting” and so on. There are also combinations of brushwork and power, such as “the power of the brushwork is amazing”, “its power outdoing Wang Zijing’s”, “extremely powerful brushwork”. There is a summary of brushwork: “lightly brushing and slowly wiping, relaxedly pressing and sharply poking, drawing horizontally and leading longitudinally, pulling leftward and winding rightward” (Cheng Gongsui, who lived in the Western Jin Dynasty). In In Praise of the Mood of Brushwork written by Wang Shengqi of the Southern Dynasty, specific requirements of brushwork were described as follows: “Bone and flesh should be plentiful and tender, getting into the spirit. Vertical strokes should be like a lance, and horizontal ones a nail. Stretching out should be like the phoenix spreading the wings, and standing out should be like Lingzhi standing upright. Thick strokes are not pressed heavily, and thin ones are not wiped gently. Strokes run back and forth, even if the slightest ones are related to the quality of characters”. Calligraphy theories in the Northern and Southern Dynasties include many important concepts: stroke, rule, bone, potential, nature, and work. Sinew is the highest, followed by bone, and the last one is flesh, the object of criticism. “Scripts superior in sinew are reserved, which need difficult skills, higher in quality. Scripts superior in bone, represented in their shapes, are inferior; and scripts full of flesh are the worst ones”. “Scripts that have much strength and abundant sinews are lofty, and those that have no strength and no sinew are flawed”. (Liu Tao, Chinese Calligraphy History of the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties) Painting theory works are also stabilized: Zong Bing’s Of Painting Shanshui, Wang Wei’s On Painting, Xie He’s Ancient Paintings, and many others, laid down the theoretical system of Chinese painting. The requirements for the brushwork are “to imitate the body of emptiness in one brushstroke”, “the bone method of using the brush”, and “the novelty of the brushwork” ... By the Tang Dynasty, Zhang Yanyuan’s On the Brushwork Deployed by Gu, Lu, Zhang and Wu (Records of Famous Paintings of All Ages) made clear the origin of “one brushstroke”: “in the past, Zhang Zhi learnt from Cui Yuan and Du Du’s methods of cursive script, and thus changed it to become the present cursive script. The posture of the script is formed by one stroke, and Qi flows through the connection, without breaking in neighboring lines. It was only Wang Zijing who grasps its deep purpose, so the character at the beginning of the line often follows its predecessor – that is called the script in one stroke. Later, Lu Tanwei also practiced painting in one stroke. Therefore, it is known that calligraphy and painting use the same method. Zhang Sengyou’s pointing, dragging, chopping, and wiping, following the instructions of Mrs. Wei’s On the Potentials of Stroke, are differently ingenious. It is also known that calligraphy and painting use the same brushwork. Wu Daoxuan was unique both in ancient and present times, without seeing Gu and Lu or anyone coming from behind. He taught Zhang Xu in penmanship, which also revealed that calligraphy and painting use the same brushwork. Since Zhang was known as “the wizard of calligraphy”, while Wu “the saint of painting”, miracles in their works came from nature, and the spirit was endless.”.

By tracing back, we can see that the requirements of brushwork as mentioned in Brushwork Notes: “without matter or form, like flying and moving” is the pursuit of independent aesthetics of the brushwork. That “Using the brush in bone method” refers to power, and that “one stroke” refers to sinew. In saying that “the brushwork, although following rules, operates flexibly”, rules are ones that the brushwork follows, and “flexibility” is that in what Huang Binhong called “smooth, controllable, elastic, powerful, and flexible”. This is also the characteristics of Lin Haizhong’s brushwork: “all points and strokes are out of surprise”, and the postures of brushwork and combinations are billowing, beautiful and powerful. After more than thirty years of refinement, he has formed his own unique and perfect brush-ink structure.

The brushwork is not so much a technical system as it is a way to control the physical and mental experience of time, a way of self-exercise and self-formation. In the process of time in the present moment, concentration, attention, and focusing on the coherent and intricately changing relationship between strokes allows the frequency of the spirit to flow through the soft fibers of the painting brush, while the heights of spiritual freedom achieved by the ancients are retained in the handwriting. This is why the Zen Buddhist monk’s last words embody a lifetime of enlightenment. The Chinese tradition reaches the threshold of spiritual experience through the crafting of a single thread. It is not by chance that calligraphy became a form of life and emerged in Chinese history in conjunction with Chinese painting. It is another outlet for spiritual power built and developed on the basis of Western shapes, images and blocks of colour, an independent aesthetic system and self-training path for the mind and body, relying on the vitality and spiritual subtleties of the structure built up by the brushwork. The brushwork is also a difficult practical skill, whether in terms of self-technique, aesthetic norms, or spiritual awareness, and has become a child in the dirty water thrown out by the modernist revolution, requiring us to re-examine and treat it when we look back at tradition. The

exploration of Lin Haizhong and other artists who continue to practice the brushwork opens the way for our contemporaries to access the ancients in exploring their own selves, training their minds and bodies through self-technique, and thus achieving a state of freedom.

In Brushwork Notes, it is said that “wash painting emerged in our Tang Dynasty”, and its using of ink is still viewed as coloring. Lin Haizhong, on this basis combining with the painting theories of the succeeding generations, puts forward the idea that “the brushwork is the ink and the ink is the brushwork”, that is to say, that the use of ink and color also requires the use of the brush. Only by using the brush in the ink can one “blossom in the world of ink”, as Shi Tao said, and his practice has advanced on the basis of Jing Hao’s theory.

III. “Thought and Scene” and “Four Qualities”

In Brushwork Notes, it is said that “thinking is to draw out the main points, and to visualize the form”. The idea is about the subjective choice of the arrangement of the whole piece of work, and about the creation of the conceptual perception. “What so-called scene is to extract the elements of beauty from the scenery in front of you, to study its truth, and to discover its subtleties.” That means to make a thorough inquiry into the pattern of the mountains and rivers, and through the subtleties of the images of things to reveal the truth. Four-quality is meant to clarify the further evaluation standard of “thought” and “scene”: the highest standard is “spirit”, which “has no action, and forms the image in nature”, presenting the concept of becoming of the heavenly way in nature which is in line with the spirit of Taoism. All the becoming of chaotic combination by chance is a kind of natural state of generative movement. It can be understood as the manifestation of the interplay of yin and yang, a kind of pre-established pattern. That “What so-called subtlety is the thought through heaven and earth, all kinds of dispositions, the appearance of texture and pattern, and the schema of things and the flow of the brush”, on the other hand, emphasizes the top-down rational perspective seeing the world in landscape painting. Jing Hao’s detailed discussion of the characteristics of the growth of pine and cypress in terms of the doctrine of Analogies to Virtues, his observations of the biodiversity of rowan, tung, oak, elm, willow, mulberry, and acacia with their different shapes and qualities, and the topography and geology of peaks, tops, ridges, caverns, cliffs, rocks, valleys, streams, and ravines, and the meteorological phenomena of fog and clouds, are all about the empirical content of all things in heaven and earth, showing a respect for objective experience and natural norms, and an observation of the pattern of becoming of all things based on the dichotomy of the body and the image of dispositions, which is characterized by the worldview of Confucianism in the light of heavenly pattern and its manifestation in the landscape. “What so-called strangeness means the unpredictable traces, the possible deviation from the real scene. Those who get strangeness from the biased pattern have a painting without thinking”. In consideration of Jing Hao’s comments on other painters, it can be seen that he attaches importance to “thought” and “pattern”, and the order of the real and theoretical worlds becomes very important, emphasizing the order of naturally becoming and actualization route of landscape painting, and also expressing a certain degree of criticism of the aesthetic of the deviation from the real scene. “What so-called ingeniousness means embellishing, pretending to fit in with the great law, deliberately crafting to depict the image in stacking. This can be said insufficient in content but surplus in prosperity”. His strong disdain for craftsmanship and falsification puts the work’s intrinsic compatibility with the Great Tao in an absolute position. The truth behind the phenomenon is “disposition”, “heavenly pattern”, and “Tao”, which transcend all appearances, and are beyond the reach of all superficial craftsmanship.

A later in the Song Dynasty, Guo Xi’s The Heart of Forest and Spring describes the realm of landscapes as follows: “What is the purpose of a gentleman’s love for landscapes? The hill garden is the place where one can cultivate one’s disposition; the spring-rock is the place where one feels free; the fisherman and the woodcutter are who one is always at ease with; the apes and the cranes are what one is always close to. The clamor and constraints of the world are what humankind are always tired of. The immortals and saints are what humankind often wish to see but cannot see. ... However, there are the aspiration to living in the forest-spring and the ideal of being accompanied with the smoke-haze even in dreams, though ears and eyes are cut off when dreaming. Today’s masters of painting are so interested in painting the beautiful scenery of springs and rocks that they do not have to go out of their halls, but can explore them while sitting in their seats, with the cries of the apes and birds in their ears, and the light of the mountains and the colors of the water brightly shining, so isn’t it pleasing to the human mind and appealing to my heart? This is the original intention of the world to cherish landscape paintings. If you do not cherish them, but treat them with an irreverent heart, are you not confused?”

Landscape paintings in the Five Dynasties and Song Dynasty are meant to express the ideal of completing one’s disposition or reason, and the feeling of living in seclusion in a place far removed from the world. This is also Lin Haizhong’s basic mindset, and, in the study over the years, he has broken through the norms of ancient sages, finding that the mountains-and-rivers is a proper place for making a thorough inquiry into truth and cultivating the aspiration to living in seclusion. With the reading and understanding of Brushwork Notes, the wonderful paintings of Lin Haizhong’s several journeys through the Taihang Mountains, the video recordings of his trips to the Taihang Mountains edited by Mr. Fan Li, and the photos of various editions of the book in history took by Gao Jin in libraries all over the world, invite us to enter into the place of experiencing the Tao and the realm of Becoming created by Lin Haizhong.

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