



Interpreting the Dragon Vein and Qi Theory: on the *Zhouyi* imagery thinking in Chinese landscape painting

Ling Yu

Institute of Chinese Traditional Calligraphy and Painting Culture, Neijiang Normal University,
Neijiang, China

Email: yoselin2020@qq.com

Abstract. The relationship between the *Zhouyi* and Chinese landscape painting has received increasing attention from scholars at home and abroad in recent years. This paper combines the characteristics of dragon veins and Qi theory in Chinese landscape painting to explain the geomancy idea in painting theory, and demonstrates the influence of Qi theory in the *Zhouyi* on landscape painting creation. The source of water veins and the rise of clouds steam are regarded as important manifestations of the theory of dragon veins and Qi. The landscape painting with thinking of *Zhouyi* imagery has the connotation of fitting in with Yin-Yang, moving in the rhythm of Qi and even arousing the external environment, and promoting the harmony between heaven and man. Yin-Yang is the unity of manifestation and concealment, which conforms to the aesthetic principle of the interplay between reality and virtuality in landscape painting. In terms of the function of harmonizing the external environment, the landscape painting with thinking of *Zhouyi* imagery is also rich in ecological aesthetic significance.

Keywords: Qi theory; Dragon vein; *Zhouyi*; Landscape; Chinese Traditional painting

1 Introduction

The relationship between the *Zhouyi* and Chinese landscape painting has received increasing attention from scholars at home and abroad in recent years. The dragon veins in Chinese landscape painting are mainly characterized by Storing wind and gathering the Qi, vivid Qi rhyme, and the combination of beginning and ending, which are influenced by the subtle influence of the Qi theory and Yin-Yang concept in the *Zhouyi*. As a Chinese characteristic of landscape painting, Qi has been extensively discussed in various theoretical documents of painting throughout history. The landscape painting with thinking of *Zhouyi* imagery has the connotation of fitting in with Yin-Yang, moving in the rhythm of Qi and even arousing the external environment, and promoting the harmony between heaven and man. Harmonizing is its practical function.

© The Author(s) 2024

S. Kaki et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the 2024 6th International Conference on Literature, Art and Human Development (ICLAHD 2024)*, Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research 885,
https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-319-1_30

2 The Origin and Interpretation of Dragon Vein Theory in Chinese Landscape Painting

Classic Chinese literature such as the *Zhouyi*, *Book of Songs*, and *Zuo Zhuan* all contain textual descriptions of dragons. The hexagram Qian in *Zhouyi* states that "the flying dragon is in the sky", the hexagram Kun states that "the dragon fights in the wild", and the hexagram Zhen mentions that "Zhen is the dragon". The dragon is the most mysterious and unfathomable creature, regarded as a cultural symbol of the totem of Chinese civilization. The "veins" crisscross like water currents on the earth, forming magical gathering points. "Dragon Vein" is to describe the undulating and continuous mountain terrain, and more of an express of the cultural landscape.

In the painting theory of Wang Yuan-qi, which was popular in the court in the early 18th century, using dragon veins to depict the undulating and opening and closing mountains may give a painting a supernatural energy. In his discourse of the *Informal Essay Under Rain Window*, the theory of dragon veins has shifted from a technical issue to an aesthetic proposition. The 'dragon vein' he referred to is a manifestation of the opening and closing of mountains and rivers, as well as their undulations. Painters need to carefully conceive in order to transform the "dragon" into a "vein" through the ups and downs of mountains and rivers, and the rising and steam of clouds and seas. That is to say, the rhythm of Qi and generation of landscape painting are "the key to the life and death of painting, very important"^[1]. The core function of dragon veins is to use vivid dragon vein patterns to construct the momentum and aura of the scene. Wang Yuan-qi summarized as follows: "The dragon vein is the source of momentum in the painting, there is slanting and upright, turbid and fragmented, broken and continuous, hidden and visible."^[2] His theory of 'dragon veins' freed traditional landscape painting from dependence which the visual depiction did on natural landscapes. At the same time, due to it chimed in with the requirements for legitimacy of the Qing dynasty's pursuit of rule, his landscape paintings also became the orthodoxy of the early Qing dynasty's landscape culture, lasting for more than 300 years.

Abroad, Wang Yuan-qi's *Informal Essay Under Rain Window* was first translated into English by Osvald Sirén, a Finnish Swedish art historian, in 1935. In Sirén's discourse in *the Chinese Painting*, "opening and closing" is often translated as the "spatial interval" in the layout of landscape paintings, and the understanding of "undulations" is the visual impressions of the "change has a rhythmic" in the picture. American art historian Susan Bush attempted to accurately determine the true meaning of the Western dragon vein in various translations by combining the words "opening and closing" and "undulating". She believed that Wang Yuan-qi's words "dragon vein, opening and closing, undulating" were three terms for composition, with literal meanings of dragon shaped veins, opening and closing gathering, and rising and falling or vertically and horizontally.

Scholars have different understandings of Dragon Veins. Rowley believes that dragon veins, as a commonly used term in China, refer to the coherence implied in the regular texturing technique. American scholar Victoria Contag has translated parts of Wang Yuan-qi's painting theory twice, but the definition of dragon vein is different on both occasions. Her first translation of Dragon Veins is "the vibrating ridges in the

painting". The so-called visually generated invisible ridges of the dragon veins already exist, forming the the movement rhythm of the basic structure of the mountains in the painting. In the second translation, the dragon vein is simply described as the "great artery of mountains" and is considered a common concept of Mountain in Chinese dictionaries. Scholar James Cahill uses the binary structure of traditional Eastern culture to interpret art history - a classification system that often traces back to the Yin-Yang theory favored by Chinese culture. He believes that Chinese geomancers' concept of grandeur, and the dragon veins containing majestic, provides painters with a set of useful vocabulary, to describe and analyze the various opening and closing, undulating structural relationships that may appear in paintings. [3]

Researchers have also noticed the geomancy concept in landscape paintings. John Hay, a Ph.D. from Princeton University, pointed out in his thesis that Huang Gong-wang's painting theory in the Yuan Dynasty did not ignore the relationship between geomancy and painting. Japanese scholar Kenji Hori systematically discussed his views on the concept of dragon veins, the protection of dragon veins, and the relationship between Dragon Veins and geomancy in his book *Geomancy Thought and Chinese Cities*. [4] British scholar Joseph Needham summarized the remarkable phenomenon caused by geomancy in Chinese traditional architectural culture, and believed that the principle of "man cannot leave nature" was a great idea that Chinese people enthusiastically embodied, so that "cosmic patterns" often appeared in urban and rural areas, "as the symbolism of direction, seasons, wind direction, and stars" [5]. Guo Jian-ping from Tsinghua University focused on the consciousness of selecting auspicious positions for the dragon vein and its influence on ancient Chinese painting, combined with the transformation and extension of terminology, and conducted interdisciplinary interpretation. [6] From a philosophical perspective, Jiang Zhi-qin of Peking University dissects the value of the theory of dragon veins based on the essence of Qi and rhyme. She believes that Wang Yuan-qi's theory of dragon veins is a product of the influence of traditional Confucian philosophy of mind and nature, and is the unity of moral landscape and natural landscape.

In short, the theory of dragon veins is an important theoretical achievement in landscape painting creation. Chinese landscape painting emphasizes the principle of "intention before the pen", and establish imagery is the creative intention of the painting, which is the establishment of the "dragon image posture" of the artistic life constructed in the artist's mind. Landscape painting is the Image symbol representation of this realm of life. The symbolic value of landscape painting is a visual metaphor that transcends physical images. The dragon vein is the Image confession of the potential and metaphorical spirit, which can be perceived by the body and mind, expressed through language, and visualized. The significance of the dragon vein image lies in the rich and varied spirit of ink and brush, which perfectly combines the Dragon Vein and Qi Rhythm.

3 The Influence of the Qi theory in the *Zhouyi* on the theory of Dragon Vein Painting

Praising the beauty of calligraphy and painting works with the word 'dragon' has a long history in traditional calligraphy and painting theory, but most of them are inseparable from the philosophy of Qi theory. When praising Wang Hui's writing, Wang Shan said, "Keep calm and take a moment to reflect on the scenery of Yin-Yang. seek the ups and downs of its veins, observe the thickness and thin, or intensity and light of its Qi, and use ink and brush to convey its spirit."^[7] Guo Pu explained in *The Book of Burial* that when the Yin Yang energy rises, it becomes wind, clouds, condenses and falls, and becomes rain. When it moves on the ground, it becomes spiritual and get energized. This is another method of explaining the natural cycle mechanism based on Qi. The concept of Yin-Yang in Chinese landscape painting originates from the *Zhouyi*. In fact, the Five Elements and Eight Trigrams in the *Zhouyi* provide experience on how to choose a place to live and how to face nature. The traditional Chinese philosophy of Qi theory holds that Qi is the most fundamental unit of all things in heaven and earth, and became the fundamental source for the generation of all things. The *Zhouyi* based on the transformation of Yin Qi, Yang Qi, and Yin-Yang, fundamentally defined the inherent existence of Qi. Therefore, Qi in the *Zhouyi* belongs to the category of meta cognition, this also defines and implies the initial formation of aesthetic consciousness and thinking patterns of Qi.

Qi is one of the core vocabularies of Eastern culture. Under the influence of Qi philosophy, traditional Chinese geomancy believes that there exists undulating and fluctuating Qi vein, just like a divine dragon that does not see the beginning and end, pulse in the earth. The mountain terrain is usually regarded as a dragon, and the undulating mountains and rivers are seen as the circulation of Qi veins, the gathering places of Qi veins are regarded as auspicious acupoints. The theory of geomancy in the Qin and Han dynasties included the concepts of Royal Qi and Earth Qi. The magical Royal Qi specifically refers to the imperial Qi, which may be the divine temperament possessed by a certain person, or the Royal Qi that gathers heaven and earth in famous mountains and rivers. When a specific person combines with a mysterious natural force somewhere, a king will appear. The region with sacred Royal Qi characteristics is called the Dragon Vein.

The concept of Qi theory in traditional Chinese philosophy is often the core evaluation vocabulary of painting theory. Most of the calligraphy and painting theories of the Wei and Jin dynasties were based on the concept of Qi. In his book *Notes on Brushwork*, the painter Jing Hao of the Five Dynasties linked the concept of Qi with the style of landscape painting.^[8] The meteorology of mountains and waters is multifaceted, such as the enchanting fairyland where clouds and water rise. Qi is regarded as the essential element of mountain and river winding and meandering, which governs the rhythmic and dynamic internal changes and vitality of mountain terrain. The creativity and creative state of calligraphers and painters can be understood as a unique and artistic state presented in terms of artistic style and brush and ink techniques, characterized by a strong sense of energy, charm, and vividness.

In traditional landscape paintings, wind is the breathability of the blank space that allows the space in the painting to spread outward. Water refers to brush and ink, which means using a brush, drawing, rendering, moistening, and creating a long-lasting picture. The "wind" follows closely behind the "water" in the picture, and the so-called "wind makes water rise" means "vivid and lively rhythm of Qi". In Chinese painting theory, "the rhythm of Qi" and "realistic expression of demeanor" are the result of the painters establish imagery and select momentum, and the meteorology is the expression of the Qi of heaven and earth. Guo Xi believed in the *Lin Quan Gao Zhi* that the dragon veins and weather of mountains and rivers can only be glimpsed by observing them from a distance. The dragon vein atmosphere of landscape painting refers to the vitality and energy of mountains and rivers, which is the rising state of water flow and clouds. The original meaning of "Linquan" refers to mountains, forests, springs, and stones, which are natural landscapes. It can be extended as a place of seclusion, as well as a place of cultivation, Taoist temples, and extraordinary artistic conception. *Lin Quan Gao Zhi* not only emphasizes the painter's spiritual and personal cultivation, but also uses "spirit"^[9] to explain the genre of painting, evaluating the behavior and meaning of painting from an emotional perspective, reflecting Guo Xi's view that mountains and waters are also an extension of human morality. In terms of works, Guo Xi himself gained reputation for painting Buddha statues, which also shows that the Song Dynasty's cosmology experienced a fusion from the *Zhouyi* to Buddhism.

In the *Twelve Taboos of Painting*, Rao Zi-ran regards whether has the presence of Qi vein as an important criterion for evaluating landscape paintings. The Qi vein of the mountain is a visual metaphor that the painter creates by manipulating the primary and secondary positions of the mountain before painting. The main mountain should be grand and majestic, while the surrounding area of the secondary mountain should gather like sand. There should be a balance between the mountains, and there should be harmony between the guests and hosts. In ancient Chinese landscape paintings, religious buildings often appeared prominently on the ridges of dragon veins deep in the mountains. Some paintings only poked out the upper ends of some buildings, while others were hidden by rocks and trees, making them even more mysterious and mysterious.

4 The Yin-Yang Concept in Yi-ology Imagery Landscape Painting

Undoubtedly, Qi and Yin-Yang are important categories in traditional philosophy that influence the construction of Feng Shui and calligraphy and painting theories. The core of the thought of neutralization in the *Zhouyi* is the coordination and dynamic balance of Yin-Yang. The entire objective world is composed of Yin-Yang, and is a dynamic system in which everything is universally connected. According to the *Zhouyi*, "The unpredictable Yin-Yang are called gods", and the attributes of gods include ever-changes, flowing clouds and water, and unpredictable realms, thus constituting the beauty of the divinity of all things in nature. Calligraphers and painters

believe that "since Yin-Yang are born, the situation emerges." The fundamental principle of aesthetic creation in calligraphy and painting is to express unpredictable movement and stillness, the natural vitality with vagary.

The Taoist priest Da Chong-guang discussed many key issues in his book *The Tricks of Painting*. He believes that the layout of landscape painting is centered around the management of Yin-Yang, virtual and real. This layout is reflected in a combination of Yin-Yang, and the management layout is a landscape arrangement of "vertical and horizontal gathering and dispersion". The so-called "one yin and one yang" is reflected in the painting technique as the relationship between movement, stillness, reality, and virtuality. The transformation of Yin-Yang in things is the foundation of Eastern philosophy. The concept of Yin-Yang is reflected in painting as the unity of manifestation and concealment, which can be understood as the aesthetic principle of the interplay between reality and virtuality. Only when the landscape of the picture is created by the interplay of reality and virtuality, can the scene generate a vivid rhythm of Qi and imposing atmosphere. Therefore, Feng Shui is also known as Yin-Yang. The concept of Yin-Yang is the reverse change of relative changes, for example, the changes in landscape and geographical topography can be discussed in terms of Yin-Yang.

Harmonizing the external environment is an important function of Yi-ology imagery landscape painting, which originates from traditional Feng Shui concepts (i.e. geomancy). The practical function of Feng Shui theory is to settle and reproduce in a home, and the best choice is actually a location close to water and sunny. The ideal residence needs to complement the surrounding environment, viewing it as a part of nature. As a building and landscape, it has a relationship between points and surfaces, parts and the whole, thus forming a coordinated and unified whole. This is the so-called "obtaining the spiritual energy of mountains and rivers, receiving the radiance of the sun and moon" residential structure. In the Song Dynasty, the system of judging the auspiciousness and inauspiciousness of geomancy formed a powerful cultural force by utilizing the psychological needs, that the general public to seek good fortune, avoid misfortune, and seek protection and benefits from geomancy. After spreading to Korea and then to Japan, it eventually became a cultural symbol of the unique Eastern cultural landscape, and even had a unique impact on the site selection and construction of tombs in East Asia.

The principle of understanding the concept of Feng Shui (Yin-Yang) is to seek nature, respect nature, and harmonize nature, choose the best architectural environment, meet the needs of people's physical and mental health and behavior, and achieve the ultimate state of harmony between Yin-Yang, heaven and man, and body and mind. Meanwhile, an aesthetic atmosphere is also necessary. Mr. Lin Yu-tang once affirmed the aesthetic significance of Feng Shui culture, saying, "No matter from which perspective we look, we feel that nature is a true deity. Its Qi flows from east to west and converges to one point. She is also like the beauty we observe in mountains and rivers, not static and symmetrical beauty, but dynamic beauty."^[10] So, it is a broad ecology that establishes ecological aesthetic relationships between humans and nature, humans and society, and others and us in a broader sense. Ecological aesthetics embodies the inherent harmony and unity between humans and nature. The experience of

the value of life not only stems from human perception, but also from the discovery of the external beauty of nature, as well as the relationship between aesthetic subjects and objects and the integration of human life. Simultaneously, it also emphasizes the ethical principles of environmental rights and sustainable survival.

The influence of the concepts of Qi and Yin-Yang on Chinese painting theory is quite interesting. Su Shi of the Northern Song Dynasty believed that the hexagram and line symbols in the *Zhouyi* were abstract simulations of natural phenomena. He integrated Yin-Yang, five elements, hexagram Qi, and Neo Confucianism into painting theory, forming a painting theory rich in the principles of simplicity, and landscape paintings and calligraphies with *Zhouyi* imagery thinking, revealing the core function of this art, which fitting in with Yin-Yang, moving in the rhythm of Qi and even arousing the external environment, and promoting the harmony between heaven and man. Han Chun-quan 's *Collection of Mountains and Waters*^[11] connects the Yin-Yang state of mountains and rivers with the clever Qi of Yin-Yang in calligraphy and painting, thus forming the orderly and varied postures of mountains and rivers.

In the Qing Dynasty, painters commented on the yin-yang theory of landscape painting: "Void white represents yang, while solid dye represents yin."^[12] There is also a commentary on the principles of brushwork, such as "using the brush to capture Qi represents yang, and using ink to create color represents yin."^[13]

The concept of Feng Shui (Yin-Yang) also had a direct impact on literati painting and court art. Guo Xi's *Lin Quan Gao Zhi* (The lofty message of forests and streams) drew on many concepts from it, pioneering the combination of painting theory and geomancy (Feng shui) theory in textual narrative. The preference of ancient Chinese landscape painters for landscape architecture was actually primarily courtyard style architecture, which was used to express their desire and pursuit to stay away from the hustle and bustle of the world and get closer to the natural landscape environment. In the selection of palace buildings and royal gardens, there is a symbolic significance of the political fate of the humanistic Dragon Vein.

The mountain terrain in the painting *Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains* is a combination of strength and softness, presenting a mutual stirring of Yin-Yang. Hard rocks and gentle slopes are the concept of less softness in geomancy, while hard rocks are less rigidity. Dong Qi-chang was deeply influenced by him, and when it comes to painting, he said, "Every mountain must have a concave convex shape." Huang Gong-wang once made a living by selling divination. The prominent feature of his painting *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* is the transformation of Yin-Yang, reality and virtuality in the picture. The proportion of blank space in the picture is nearly the same as that of the main object, each occupying half of the painting space, corresponding to the reality and virtuality of the picture. In modern times, Huang Bin-hong attached great importance to the position of buildings in the picture, placing the Yin-Yang of virtual and real, light and dark, tight, hidden, open and closed in the vast visual field of the image space in the contradictory and unified relationship of the picture. His landscape paintings differ from traditional ancient landscape paintings in terms of shading behind the Yin-Yang structures of buildings, and he consciously highlights the individuality of artistic choices in cutting and composition.

5 Conclusions

The simple philosophy of the Chinese nation always advocates harmony between humans and nature, emphasizing respect for nature, protection of nature, and ultimately adaptation to nature. The theory of Five Elements and Eight Trigrams in the *Zhouyi* provide experience on how to choose a place to live and how to face nature. Landscape painters derive the theoretical hypothesis of dragon veins from traditional geomancy concepts, forming a unique theory of dragon veins. Due to the influence of the theory of dragon veins, painters' consciousness of Qi theory gradually and consciously emerged in landscape paintings, creating a visual effect of the unity of peaks and momentum, forming an invisible atmosphere of floating and rising dragons.

The influence of Qi theory and Yin-Yang concept on Chinese painting theory is quite interesting. Under the influence of Qi philosophy, the ups and downs of mountains and rivers are regarded as the circulation of Qi veins. The essence of the composition and layout of landscape painting lies in the presence of Yin-Yang dragon veins in the mind, and the Qi patterns of clouds and smoke under the brush. The intersection of mountains and rivers is necessary to neutralize the Yin-Yang energies, and this geomantic omen theory is the inheritance and development of the yin-yang concept in the *Zhouyi*. Therefore, landscape paintings with the Yi-ology imagery often have connotations that are in harmony with Yin-Yang, move in harmony with Qi and rhyme, and even evoke the external environment and the harmony. The concept of Yin-Yang in painting is the unity of manifestation and concealment, which conforms to the aesthetic principle of the interplay between reality and virtuality in landscape painting. The concept of Yin-Yang also had a direct impact on literati painting and court art, demonstrating the symbolic significance of humanistic politics. In terms of the function of harmonizing the external environment, Yi-ology imagery landscape painting is also rich in ecological aesthetic significance.

Disclosure of Interest

The author declares that No conflict of interest exists.

Declaration of Funding

Philosophy and Social Science Foundation of Sichuan Province, China; No. SCJJ23ND113.

References

1. Zheng Wu-chang. The Complete History of Chinese Painting Studies. Yuelu Book Society, 2010:360.
2. Wang Yuan-qi. The Informal Essay Under Rain Window, *Qing Dynasty's Discussion on Painting*, edited by Pan Yun-xun. Hunan Fine Arts Publishing House, 2004:77.

3. Wrote by James Cahill, translated by Li Peihua et al. *Impressive Momentum: Nature and Style in 17th Century Chinese Painting*. Joint Bookstore of Life, Reading, New Knowledge, 2011:243.
4. Kenji Hori. *Geomancy Thought and Chinese Cities*. *Geomancy Theory Research*, edited by Qiheng Wang. Tianjin University Press, 2005:345-353.
5. Joseph Needham. *A History of Science and Technology in China*, Vol 3, Science Press, 1975:337-338.
6. Guo Jian-ping. Transformation and Extension: The Application of geomancy Terminology Dragon Vein in the Field of Ancient Chinese Painting. *Hundred Schools in Arts*, 2008(02):54.
7. Wang Hui. Wang Hui's Inscriptions on Painting and Poems Presented to Friends (Words of Gift from Qinghui), edited by Lu Fu-sheng. *The Complete Book of Chinese Painting and Calligraphy*, Vol.7. Shanghai Painting and Calligraphy Publishing House. 1993:816.
8. Jing Hao. *Notes on Brushwork*. People's Fine Arts Publishing House.2016.
9. Guo Xi-shu and Guo Si. Lin Quan Gao Zhi. Vol. 812 of *Wenyuan Ge Si Ku Quan Shu*. Taiwan Commercial Press. 1986:575.
10. Lin Yu-tang. Lin Yu-tang's Works Collection. Yunnan People's Publishing House. 1999: 465.
11. Wrote by Han Zhuo, edited by Tang Yin. *Complete Works of Han's Mountains and Waters*, Commercial Press, 1939.
12. Da Chong-guang. *The Tricks of Painting*. *Qing Dynasty's Discussion on Painting*, edited by Pan Yun-gao. Hunan Fine Arts Publishing House. 2004:277.
13. Tang Dai. *Elucidating the subtleties of painting*. Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House. 1987:45.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

