

GE1106 Chinese Art Appreciation

A Study of Literati Paintings in the Yuan Dynasty: Taking the Paintings of Ni Zan as an Example

Student Name: HUANG Zechao

Student ID: 56642581

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Introduction

In 1271 A.D., Kublai Khan established the Yuan Dynasty, and in 1279, the Southern Song Dynasty perished. The establishment of the Yuan Dynasty is not only politically a recurrent regime replacement in ancient China, but also it is a critical factor in the transformation of Chinese painting in the Yuan Dynasty¹. Literati painting (文人畫), as a major form of the traditional Chinese painting, started in Tang Dynasty, developed rapidly in the Song Dynasty, also experienced a reformation in the Yuan Dynasty, where it formed its distinct features, and really stepped into its heyday. Ni Zan (倪瓚) is a representative literati painter in the Yuan Dynasty. He has his own eccentric character and unique aesthetic thought². Because of this, he creatively formed his unique painting style and put forward several new brush and ink techniques, which has a profound influence on the literati paintings of later generations.

Several studies had been done in this area. For example, in a study of the rise of literati painting in the Yuan Dynasty, the researcher uses Zhao Mengfu (趙孟頫) as an example to indicate it is the painters' advocacy and promotion that led to its prosperity³. Also, there are researches targeted to study Ni Zan's aesthetic thought⁴. Although these studies directly present some details of the Yuan Dynasty literati painting and Ni Zan's thought, the analysis of Ni Zan's techniques, his status as a painter in the Yuan dynasty, and his influence on later generations is still not comprehensive enough. This paper takes Ni Zan's paintings as an example and aims to study the characteristics, spiritual meanings, and influences of literati paintings in the Yuan Dynasty.

Literati Paintings in the Yuan Dynasty

Due to the fact that the Yuan Dynasty was established by Mongols, who were regarded as an ethnic minority in China, the ruler of the Yuan Dynasty still remained suspicious of the traditional Han Chinese, especially southerners, and tried to limit their power⁵. On the other hand, many literati were still deeply nostalgic about the Song Dynasty that Han Chinese founded, so they refused to follow the new government but placed their emotion in natural landscapes, and used painting to express their feelings⁶. For this reason, a vast majority of the literati paintings in the Yuan Dynasty are landscape paintings, particularly with mountains and waters.

¹ Chen, Zida 陳子達. "Reasons for the Rise of Literati Paintings in the Yuan Dynasty 元朝文人畫興起之原因再探." *Art in China 中國美術*, no. 3 (2013): 96-99.

² Li, Shan 李珊. "Ni Zan's Aesthetic thought of Painting 倪瓚繪畫美學思想." *Universitas: Monthly Review of Philosophy and Culture 哲學與文化* 38, no. 9 (2011): 151-173.

³ Chen, Zida 陳子達. "Reasons for the Rise of Literati Paintings in the Yuan Dynasty 元朝文人畫興起之原因再探." 96-99.

⁴ Li, Shan 李珊. "Ni Zan's Aesthetic thought of Painting 倪瓚繪畫美學思想." 151-173.

⁵ Bush, Susan. *The Chinese Literati on Painting*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, HKU, 2012.

⁶ Chen, Zida 陳子達. "Reasons for the Rise of Literati Paintings in the Yuan Dynasty 元朝文人畫興起之原因再探." 96-99.

Landscape painting is a very suitable emotional carrier for literati painters in the Yuan Dynasty. Since the popularity of the idea of unwillingness to be an official among the literati in the Yuan Dynasty, an increasing number of literati began to pursue the ideology of Daoism that seclusion in the mountains and away from the secular⁷. For example, as the painting *Six Gentlemen* (六君子圖) showed in Figure 1, which is the scenery of six upright and lofty trees that painted by Ni Zan, the painting, through the depiction of simple lines and the ingenious composition of mountains, waters, and six upright trees, aims to show his own cultivation and express the painter's subjective yearning for the leisure and supramundane seclusion life⁸. Therefore, through the landscape painting, literati can present their inner cultivation, convey their affection for nature, and the pursuit for a leisurely seclusion life that mentioned in Tao Yuanming's poem that "While picking asters 'neath the Eastern fence, my gaze upon the Southern mountain rests (采菊東籬下，悠然見南山).", which is the life most desired by ancient hermits.



Figure 1. Ni Zan (倪瓚 1301-1374), *Six Gentlemen* (六君子圖), 1345. Hanging scroll, ink on paper, 61.9 x 33.3 cm. Shanghai Museum, Shanghai.

The Characteristics in Ni Zan's Paintings

Ni Zan is a highly creative artist whose art has influenced Chinese painting for hundreds of years and even changed the course of traditional Chinese art. A majority of his paintings focus on the scenery of Tai Lake (太湖). By observing the natural beauty of Tai Lake, Ni Zan formed two distinct characteristics in his paintings. For one is his most iconic "three-segment composition (三段式構圖)", which is an individual spatial form that he created⁹. For the other one is his distinctive ink and brush technique, including his unique brushstroke, simple and light ink usage, and the others¹⁰. These two distinct characteristics jointly shape the distinctive style of Ni Zan's painting, which is an

⁷ Bush, Susan. *The Chinese Literati on Painting*. HKU, 2012.

⁸ Li, Zehou 李澤厚. "Three artistic conception of landscape painting in Song and Yuan Dynasties 宋元山水畫的三種意境." *Academic Monthly 學術月刊*, no. 2 (1980): 58-65+74.

⁹ Zhu, Liangzhi 朱良志. "On 'Absolute Space' in Ni Zan's Paintings 論倪瓚繪畫的'絕對空間'." *Journal of Peking University (Philosophy and Social Sciences) 北京大學學報(哲學社會科學版)*, no. 3 (2017): 61-75.

¹⁰ Zhang, Lei 張磊. "The Style of the Yuan-Dynasty Painter Ni Zan '逸品'之極——論元代文人畫家倪瓚作品風格特徵." *Art Panorama 美術大觀*, no. 9 (2008): 16-17.

independent style not only in the literati painting of the Yuan Dynasty, but even in the Chinese painting history on later generations.



Figure 2. Ni Zan (倪瓚 1301-1374), Fishing Village in Autumn (漁莊秋霽圖), 1355. Hanging scroll, ink on paper, 96.1 x 46.9 cm. Shanghai Museum, Shanghai.

From the perspective of Ni Zan's individual spatial form, he created the "three-segment composition", which formed a subjective idea of "absolute space" that derived from Chinese philosophy. Ni Zan's paintings do not follow the physical spatial perspective, which is widely used in western painting; on the contrary, he created the scene based on his mind through three-segment composition. Thus, his paintings break the visual logic but concentrate on the subjective sense of life¹¹. For example, Figure 2 presents the painting Fishing Village in Autumn (漁莊秋霽圖), which Dong Qichang (董其昌) considered as the first-rank work in Ni Zan's later years¹². In the foreground of the picture, by using scorched ink to paint, Ni Zan depicted five withered trees standing tall on the rocks; as for the middle part, he used a broad white space to show the boundless water; and in the distant view, he utilized a sketched brushwork to depict the distant lake bank and a few mountains. This unique "three-segment composition", aiming to express the stillness and emptiness of the environment, uses minimal ink to emphasize images of withered trees, boundless water, distant mountains, but ignores other images like people, birds, boats that should be in the scenery¹³. Therefore, from the view of spatial form, the individual "three-segment

composition" in Ni Zan's painting is more like a spiritual expression, which tally with Ni Zan's thoughts and traditional Chinese philosophy.

From the perspective of Ni Zan's distinctive ink and brush technique, he created several new and distinctive brushstrokes, such as Zhe Dai Stroke (折帶皴), and utilized an extremely simple and light ink skill. In his paintings, for the brush techniques, he always uses vigorous and bold brushstrokes to present the simple and empty scenery. As Dong Qichang indicated, "The painting of Ni Zan requires the usage of side brush technique,

¹¹ Zhu, Liangzhi 朱良志. "On "Absolute Space" in Ni Zan's Paintings 論倪瓚繪畫的 "絕對空間" ." 61-75.

¹² Zhu, Liangzhi 朱良志. "On "Absolute Space" in Ni Zan's Paintings 論倪瓚繪畫的 "絕對空間" ." 61-75.

¹³ Zhang, Lei 張磊. "The Style of the Yuan-Dynasty Painter Ni Zan "逸品" 之極——論元代文人畫家倪瓚作品風格特徵."

with light and heavy brushwork, but it should not use rounded strokes. The best part of it is its delicate and sharp brushstroke (作倪瓚畫須用側筆，有輕有重，不得用圓筆，其佳處在筆法秀峭耳)¹⁴.” Thus, it can be seen that Ni Zan’s brushwork is filled with vigor and strength, and for this reason, he can easily present his spiritual world in the painting. Taking the painting *Maple Leaves Fall on Wu River* (楓落吳江圖) in Figure 3 as an example, the painting uses a large number of his most characteristic brushwork, *Zhe Dai Stroke*, literally means folding-belt brushstroke. When taking a close view in Figure 4, it can be found that this type of brushstroke painting requires the delineation with an almost dry brush and sketch-like depiction method to wield the brush. By using *Zhe Dai Stroke*, Ni Zan can depict the fault line of rocks and mountains layer by layer, and finally, together with the distinctive composition, he can create a sense of desolation and emptiness in his paintings¹⁵.

In addition, as for the ink techniques in his paintings, he tried to use the minimum ink to express the infinite artistic conception inside the painting. As it is showed in Figure 4, his ink usage is almost dry ink, but there still is not a scene of weak and thinness; on the country, it presents the freshness and detachment of the sight¹⁶. Thus, from the view of Ni Zan’s unique ink and brush technique, there are brushwork like *Zhe Dai Stroke* and the ink usage that in a minimum way, and Ni Zan used them skillfully, trying to bring us into the scene in his paintings and his spiritual world.



Figure 3. Ni Zan (倪瓚 1301-1374), *Maple Leaves Fall on Wu River* (楓落吳江圖), 1366. Hanging scroll, ink on paper, 94.3 x 48.8 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei.



Figure 4. Ni Zan (倪瓚 1301-1374), *Maple Leaves Fall on Wu River* (楓落吳江圖), 1366. Hanging scroll, ink on paper, 94.3 x 48.8 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei. (Detail)

¹⁴ Zhang, Lei 張磊. “The Style of the Yuan-Dynasty Painter Ni Zan “逸品”之極——論元代文人畫家倪瓚作品風格特徵.” 16-17.

¹⁵ Zhu, Liangzhi 朱良志. “On “Absolute Space” in Ni Zan’s Paintings 論倪瓚繪畫的“絕對空間”.” 61-75.

¹⁶ Zhang, Lei 張磊. “The Style of the Yuan-Dynasty Painter Ni Zan “逸品”之極——論元代文人畫家倪瓚作品風格特徵.” 16-17.

The Aesthetic in Ni Zan's Paintings

As Ni Zan gradually improved his unique painting style to perfection and formed his unique painting technique, he also gradually shaped his own aesthetic ideas. Through the inscriptions, poems in paintings, he made several in-depth discussions regarding the creation, the function, and the essence of painting¹⁷. These discussions clearly reveal the fundamental aesthetic ideas of the literati paintings in the Yuan Dynasty and directly influence the views of literati paintings on later generations.

For Ni Zan's aesthetic thoughts about the creation and the function of painting, he regarded painting as a way for self-entertainment, and he did not pursue the resemblance of the image. As he wrote in response to a friend's letter, "The reason why I became a painter is just to freely draw a few scribbles, which is not required to be very similar, but only for my own entertainment (僕之所謂畫者，不過逸筆草草，不求形似，聊以自娛耳)¹⁸." This manifests that he believes that painting is not only a physical and sensory entertainment, such as visual entertainment, but also a spiritual entertainment, for he can express his inner feelings by painting freely¹⁹. In addition, take the painting Rongxi Studio (容膝齋圖) in Figure 5 as an example. The painting, painted in his later years, depicts serenity and stillness of the image with exclusively a few simple strokes, which completely demonstrates his creation thought that to freely draw a few scribbles and do not seek for resemblance. Also, this painting shows Ni Zan's peaceful state in his later years that he was unfettered in nature and painted for self-entertainment.



Figure 5. Ni Zan (倪瓚 1301-1374), Rongxi Studio (容膝齋圖), 1372. Hanging scroll, ink on paper, 74.7 x 35.5 cm. National Palace

When it comes to Ni Zan's aesthetic about the essence of painting, Ni Zan has his own distinctive explanation of it. As the inscription in one of his bamboo paintings, he wrote, "I painted bamboo merely to sketch the exceptional exhilaration from my breast (余之竹，聊以寫胸中逸氣耳)²⁰." Thus, it can be seen that he regarded painting as a way to sketch the feelings in his mind, for he emphasized subjective emotion and tried to pursue the detached life, which is the most

¹⁷ Li, Shan 李珊. "Ni Zan's Aesthetic thought of Painting 倪瓚繪畫美學思想." 151-173.

¹⁸ Ni, Zan 倪瓚 (1301-1374). *Qing Bi Ge Ji 清閼閣集*. Hangzhou: Xiling Seal Engraver's Society Publishing House 西泠印社出版社, 2010.

¹⁹ Li, Shan 李珊. "Ni Zan's Aesthetic thought of Painting 倪瓚繪畫美學思想." 151-173.

²⁰ Ni, Zan 倪瓚 (1301-1374). *Qing Bi Ge Ji 清閼閣集*, 2010.

representative aesthetic thought in the Yuan Dynasty²¹. Additionally, as it is showed in the painting *Rongxi Studio* (Figure 5), the painting highlights the empty pavilion and the sparse trees, which aims to express the smallness of things, the vastness of heaven and earth, and intended to voice the longing for a seclusion life of spiritual sublimation like in Tao Yuanming's poetries. As a result, no matter whether it is about the creation and function of painting or the essence of painting, in Ni Zan's aesthetic ideas, painting should focus on the painter's spiritual world and not excessively pursue the physical resemblance. Through the expression of exceptional exhilaration (逸氣) in mind, painting can be regarded as a self-cultivation and conveying of spiritual feelings.

The Influence of Ni Zan's Works on Later Generations

Ni Zan's works have a profound influence on the development of literati paintings in later generations. In Ming and Qing Dynasties, the painting technique that Ni Zan created widely been used in literati painting. For example, as one of the four painting monks in the early Qing Dynasty, Hong Ren (弘仁) tried to emulate Ni Zan's brushwork technique. From his representative works like *Huangshan Mountain* and *Withered Branch and Short Silvergrass* (枯槎短荻圖) (Figure 6), it can be seen that he utilized a concise painting composition and his brush and ink usage modeled after Ni Zan's Zhe Dai Stroke and the dry ink usage²². In addition, Dong Qichang, a famous painter in the Ming Dynasty, inherited Ni Zan's aesthetic thought, and based on Ni Zan's idea that "painting for self-entertainment", he put forward the saying of "taking painting as a spiritual sustenance and taking painting as a pleasure (以畫為寄, 以畫為樂)."²³ Also, with Ni Zan's affection for landscape, the conception of "Harmony between man and nature (天人合一)" has been more displayed in later literati paintings, which facilitates the flourishing of literati painting in the Ming and Qing dynasties. As for modern times, Chen Shizeng (陳師曾) gave a new definition of literati painting in his article "The Value of literati Painting (文人畫之價值)". As he pointed out, literati painting emphasizes the spiritual sustenance of painters and aims to express their inner feelings through painting²⁴, which is consistent



Figure 6. Hong Ren (弘仁 1610-1664), *Withered Branch and Short Silvergrass* (枯槎短荻圖). Hanging scroll, ink on paper, 61.9 x 35.3 cm. The Palace Museum, Beijing.

²¹ Bush, Susan. *The Chinese Literati on Painting*. HKU, 2012.

²² Wang, Zhen 王珍. "A study on Ni Zan's painting style and its influence on later Generations 倪瓚的“簡逸”畫風及其對後世的影響研究." *Journal of Chifeng University (Social Science)* 赤峰學院學報: 漢文哲學社會科學版 37, no. 11 (2016): 178-179.

²³ Wang, Zhen 王珍. "A study on Ni Zan's painting style and its influence on later Generations 倪瓚的“簡逸”畫風及其對後世的影響研究." 178-179.

²⁴ Chen, Shizeng 陳師曾 (1876-1923). *The Value of literati Painting 文人畫之價值*. Beijing: People's Fine Arts Publishing House 人民美術出版社, 1989.

with Ni Zan's aesthetic thoughts. Thus, Ni Zan's artistic style is still an important theoretical source for modern painters and theorists to understand literati painting.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study, by taking Ni Zan's paintings as an example, systematically analyzes three main aspects, including the main type of literati paintings in the Yuan Dynasty, the characteristics and the aesthetic in Ni Zan's paintings, and influences of Ni Zan's works on later generations. By enumerating different theoretical and factual arguments for analysis, this study can provide several valuable information regarding reasons for the rise of literati painting in the Yuan Dynasty, Ni Zan's painting technique and aesthetic ideas, and the later influence of his works. However, this study has its own limitation. Since this study use Ni Zan's paintings as an example, his paintings cannot represent the whole literati painting style in the Yuan Dynasty, for Ni Zan's paintings might be too individual. Therefore, for further research, it can gain a more complete picture of the literati painting in the Yuan Dynasty if other painters' works can be analyzed.

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