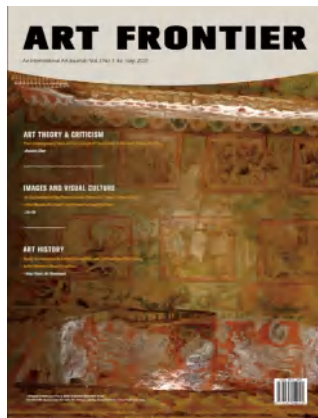




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Xuan Jin

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Harmony between Self and Object: A Study of Wen Zhengming's *Huxi Thatched Cottage* under the Aesthetic Concept of "Enjoying the Spirit"

Xuan Jin

Abstract

The core of Zong Bing's theory of "enjoying the spirit" in the Southern Dynasties lies in achieving the aesthetic realm of harmony between self and object through nature as a medium, thereby fulfilling the spiritual pursuit of nourishing the mind and self-cultivation. This article takes as its subject Wen Zhengming's *Huxi Thatched Cottage*, a painting that has so far drawn little scholarly attention. It looks at how the aesthetic idea of harmony between self and object is given visual form in the work, and at the way Wen Zhengming lets his inner spirit enter the natural scenery of the picture. It aims to reveal that this painting is not only a record of literati gatherings and a reclusive way of life, but also, within the context of Ming Dynasty literati painting, a profound artistic interpretation of Wen Zhengming's act of projecting his inner spirit onto natural landscapes and his aesthetic ideal of harmony between self and object as articulated in the theory of "enjoying the spirit."

Key Words

Theory of enjoying the spirit, *Huxi Thatched Cottage*, harmony between self and object, inner spirit

Zong Bing's advocacy of enjoying the spirit in the Southern Dynasties constituted an important shift in the history of Chinese painting aesthetics: it liberated the core function of landscape painting from its role as a tool of political and educational instruction, instead emphasizing that the creator, through clearing the mind to contemplate the Dao (chenghuai guandao) and mental travel (woyou) through landscapes, achieved a spiritual transcendence through the mutual permeation of self and nature. This shift provided a crucial theoretical foundation for painters to "express their emotions through painting". Nevertheless, scholarship on landscape painting has by and large concentrated on interpreting works from the Wei, Jin, Song, and Yuan dynasties, with insufficient attention paid to the literati painting practices of the Ming Dynasty. Li Ding, for example, in the article *Rational Sensibility: A Preliminary Exploration of the Aesthetics of Landscape Painting in the Wei and Jin Dynasties*, published in *Art Observation* (Li Ding, 2025), argues that the Wei and Jin literati contemplated the relation between mind and object through landscape in a direct and intuitive way, and that this is where their spiritual enjoyment came from. Shen Dawei, in his dissertation *On Landscape Paintings in Tang & Song Dynasties—With the*

Theories of "Tu Zhen" and "Chang Shen" (Shen Dawei, 2012), approaches Tang and Song landscape painting from the angle of "unity of heaven and man," and shows how such painting breaks out of the limits of actual time and space and enters a boundless spiritual one. In her doctoral dissertation *Research on the Artistic Conception of Garden-themed Paintings by the Wu School in the Ming Dynasty* (Guo Qiuyue, 2020), Guo Qiuyue explains the Wu School's artistic conception through three levels: the material realm, the emotional realm, and artistic conception, and shows how much weight these painters gave to the last. Zhu Huailan's *Study on the Art of Garden Landscape Painting and its Application in Wen Zhengming's "Hu Xi Cao Tang Tu"* (Zhu Huailan, 2024) divides Wen Zhengming's landscape works into "literati-style landscape painting" and "realistic garden landscape painting," and gives a general account of the features of his garden landscape paintings. Si Dongli and Fan Xinyuan's *An Exploration of the Spiritual Implied Meaning of Wen Zhengming's "Huxi Thatched Cottage" Scroll* (Si Dongli and Fan Xinyuan, 2023) stresses that the scroll is above all a record of his wish to keep away from office and live in seclusion. Wang Xueying and Xiao Xin's *Take Illusion as Reality: The Thatched Cottage Image and Authenticity in Wen Zhengming's "Huxi Thatched Cottage"* (Wang Xueying and Xiao Xin, 2022) looks into what the cottage image stands for in literati painting and the sense of the real that lies behind it. Most of these studies take the painters of one period as a group, or come at them through the themes of reclusion and symbolism, or in broad surveys. Hardly any of them offers a closer reading of a less canonical work such as *Huxi Thatched Cottage* in terms of the classic Chinese landscape painting concepts of "enjoying the spirit" and "harmony between self and object." This article addresses this research gap by taking the aesthetic concept of "fusion of self and object" as its starting point. Through analyzing the brushwork and artistic conception of the painting, it explores how Wen Zhengming transformed the concept of "spiritual enjoyment" into a concrete visual expression, thereby revealing his profound interpretation and aesthetic practice of the relationship between self and object in the context of Ming Dynasty literati painting.

1. Brush and Ink Creation: The Visual Presentation of Harmony Between Self and Object in *Huxi Thatched Cottage*

"The *Huxi Thatched Cottage*" by Wen Zhengming (figure 1), a representative work of

the mature Wu School of painting. With its exquisite and vibrant brushwork, it successfully constructs an aesthetic realm of "fusion between self and object". This work transcends the mechanical imitation of natural scenery; it is the result of the painter's active refinement and artistic arrangement of the images in his mind under the spiritual state of "purifying the mind and observing the Tao." This is not only an echo of the traditional concept of "livable and enjoyable", but also a visual presentation of its personalized interpretation. Specifically, whether it is the thatched cottage (figure 2), trees or rocks (figure 3), the brushwork is subtle yet strong, the lines are lifted and pressed freely at the turning points, and the ink tones are rich and soft. Every blade of grass, tree, stone, and stream in the picture is thereby saturated with the mild temperament of Jiangnan and the painter's inner feelings, and the boundary between self and object quietly melts away in the hazy blending of brush and ink. This treatment clearly reveals Wen Zhengming's aesthetic orientation of striving to permeate and integrate his subjective spirit into the natural scenery.



Figure 1. Wen Zhengming, *Huxi Thatched Cottage*, Ming Dynasty, hand scroll, ink and color on paper, 26.7 × 142.5 cm. Currently in the collection of Liaoning Provincial Museum.

The core of the artistic conception of the fusion of subject and object lies in the dual interpretation of "the form of the object" and "my inner mind" through brush and ink. "I perceive the stirring vitality of brush and ink, so intense that I cannot restrain myself... When I pick up the brush, I also feel the interest come naturally."¹ Wen Zhengming took delicate and subtle brush and ink as a medium to fuse the physical attributes of objects with the spiritual aspirations of literati into a unified visual language. This characteristic is particularly evident in the coordinated use of lines, texturing (*cun*) techniques, and ink. Lines, as a visual medium for the fusion of subject and object, are especially prominent in the depiction of foreground rock formations (figure 2). The painter uses the central brushstroke to create iron-wire lines, and through rhythmic control of lifting, pressing, turning, and twisting, he not only depicts the physical hardness of the rocks, but also metaphorically represents the

spiritual strength in the writings of literati. Such lines are even more prominent in the depiction of pine branches and trunks. The gnarled forms are drawn slowly with the centered tip of the brush. The spring and tension of the lines give the old pine its natural strength, a tree "still strong even when old," and at the same time they stand for the firm, unbending spirit of the literati. "The state of the thing" and "my will" are joined at last. Line holds a weight of its own in Chinese painting. To draw a line is, first of all, how the painter gives shape to things on paper, and at the same time how his feelings and spirit are handed on to the viewer. In Wen Zhengming's case, every stroke was placed with great exactness, so that each line is charged with meaning. Some strokes are hard and forceful, some gentle and winding, some swift and some unhurried. Out of these differing rhythms and speeds a lively world is built up on the paper. Painter and nature are no longer two separate beings. Through silent contemplation, the two come together in emotion, spirit, and manner of living.



Figure 2. Wen Zhengming, *Huxi Thatched Cottage*, detail of the brushwork.

The use of the "cunfa" technique further strengthens the artistic connection between the subject and the object. The mountains and rocks in the picture are rendered with hemp-fiber texturing strokes (pima cun) and unraveling-rope texturing strokes (jiesuo cun) (figure 3), with long lines outlining the structure and interlaced strokes enriching the texture layers. This type of texturing method is not a mechanical imitation of natural mountains and stones, but an artistic refinement of Wen Zhengming's long-term observation of the hilly terrain in Jiangnan. It exemplifies the principle of "learning from nature externally and gaining inspiration from the heart (waishi zaohua, zhongde xinyuan)."² The practical example of this technique is that every stroke contains an understanding of nature and a projection of subjective emotions. Among them, the long and intricate brushstrokes of the hemp-like texture seem to resonate with the moist land of Jiangnan, and also echo the gentle and

introverted temperament of the painter. It is the perfect unity of “the principle inherent in the object” and “my inner mind” achieved in the brush through the fusion of object and self. Through the use of texturing techniques to create variations in density and intensity, rocks not only possess a sense of volume and space but also serve as a visual representation of the artist’s perception of natural vitality. The moss dots reflected in the painting overlap with the density of the rocks, forming a coherent structural configuration of force (*shi*). This also constitutes a crucial unity between *qi* (vital energy) and *shi* (dynamic force).³ In addition, Wen Zhengming also showed great ingenuity in the variations of line density and weight. He created the volume and texture of the rocks through the dense arrangement of lines, and expressed the depth and spiritual emptiness of space through the sparse arrangement of lines. When wielding brush and wash, he watches the cadence of every stroke closely—how the point rises, bears down, and pivots—whereby formal grace and fullness of feeling come together. Handled in such a fashion, the strokes lift the Huxi scroll beyond a plain transcript of the scene; it reads instead like verse composed by hand, where ink serves in place of words. Taken as a whole, the picture discloses the scholarly refinement of its maker and the inward temper of a true man of letters.



Figure 3. Wen Zhengming, partial view of *Huxi Thatched Cottage* with hemp fiber texture strokes and unraveling-rope texturing strokes.

A sure command over ink gradations builds a deep, many-layered tonal setting that prepares the ground for a union joining the self with the things around it. Wen Zhengming’s exquisite arrangement of ink tones is a visual interpretation of the fusion of self and object: he uses dark ink to stabilize the thatched cottage and pine trees in the foreground, metaphorically representing the spiritual foundation of the literati; he uses light ink to enliven the fluidity of the stream in the middle ground, suggesting the free wandering of thoughts; and in the distance, he employs the technique of light ink breaking the color (*danmo po se*) to create an ethereal realm, guiding the viewer’s

gaze and thoughts to a transcendent spiritual space. The ink moves from the solid toward the empty, and this movement answers to the inner path of the literati who "purify their minds and contemplate the Dao." Near at hand the ink is laid on thickly, while toward the distance it gradually thins and grows pale. This movement obeys the rule of perspective and, at the same time, traces the literati's path "from reality to abstraction". Far away, the "light ink broken color" dissolves into drifting mist. As one's eyes travel along the central axis of the picture, one seems to step into the painter's inward world. Wen Zhengming brought together the material side of things and the longings of his own spirit, and in doing so laid the visual ground for the "integration of self and things". His fresh use of the "light ink breaking color" technique is likewise worthy of close study. The method asks the painter to lay thin washes of color over ink that is not yet dry, so that ink and color melt into each other and give rise to changes that are subtle and rich. In *Huxi Thatched Cottage*, Wen Zhengming successfully used this technique to express the unique moist atmosphere and ethereal artistic conception of the southern landscape. The variations in ink density and the subtle rendering of colors complement each other, maintaining the elegant style of ink painting while adding a lively and vibrant touch to the picture. The application of this technique not only demonstrates Wen Zhengming's superb artistic skills, but also reflects his profound understanding and unique perception of the essence of nature. It is a perfect interpretation of the concept of "fusion of self and object" at the technical level.

2. The Generation of Artistic Conception: The "Seclusion" of the Thatched Cottage and the "Freedom" of the Mind

The artistic conception of "*Huxi Thatched Cottage* Picture" is rooted in the Ming Dynasty literati's value concept of "cultivating oneself when poor and benefiting the world when successful".⁴ The painting centers on the image of a thatched cottage, which embodies both the wisdom of "seclusion" and the spiritual pursuit of "freedom", together forming the inherent aesthetic tension of the work. The "seclusion" of the thatched cottage breaks through the negative framework of the traditional recluse theme of "escaping from the world and becoming detached from worldly affairs," and is reflected in the unique "urban seclusion" paradigm of Wu School literati. The formation of this paradigm is both a response to the social context

of the Ming Dynasty and a creative reconstruction of the concept of "seclusion" by literati. Although the thatched cottage in the painting is nestled amidst mountains and waters, it does not feel desolate. With the nearby Huxi River navigable by boat and the distant mountains connected to the city yet still inhabited by people, it is a visual representation of the ideal life of "living in the city but with one's heart in the forest". The thatched cottage in Wen Zhengming's writings forms a spatial relationship with the outside world that is both accessible and secluded through the waterfront and small boats. It satisfies the ideal of seclusion while preserving the possibility of social interaction. It is a spiritual buffer zone built by literati between reality and ideals. The location of the cottage must be far away from the hustle and bustle of officialdom, while also maintaining the social circle of literati. "Therefore, depicting gatherings of literati to express their feelings and aspirations became a common theme in the works of Wu School painters."⁵ From a socio-cultural perspective, the political environment and economic development of the mid-to-late Ming Dynasty profoundly influenced the literati's concept of reclusion. "The Jin Dynasty valued charm, the Tang Dynasty valued rules, the Song Dynasty valued principle, the Yuan Dynasty valued intention, and the Ming Dynasty valued taste."⁶ On the one hand, the darkness of officialdom and the difficulty of the imperial examinations led many literati to choose to distance themselves from the political center, seeking spiritual liberation; on the other hand, the prosperity of the urban economy provided literati with new living spaces and possibilities for social interaction. This contradictory situation prompted literati to develop the unique survival wisdom of urban reclusion, that is, living in the city while yearning for the mountains and forests, and maintaining spiritual independence and freedom in secular life.

The spiritual dimension of enjoying the spirit is not presented through intense visual conflict, but rather conveyed through the interaction between the figures' activities and the atmosphere of the scenery. In the interaction between figures and scenes, enjoying the spirit is manifested as implicit spiritual resonance, which is consistent with the aesthetic pursuit of Wen Zhengming's late-period paintings. "The difficulty in painting figures lies not in meticulous detail but in achieving an antique elegance. For when painting figures, one strives for perfect likeness, leaving no time to consider brush and ink."⁷ In the foreground of the thatched cottage, the figures'

activities convey the core of enjoying the spirit through subtle spiritual resonance: the scene of two scholars sitting and discussing the Dao is not arbitrary; one holds a scroll in deep thought, while the other raises his hand to discuss philosophy, demonstrating profound reflection on the classics and conveying a peaceful exchange of viewpoints; a servant prepares tea nearby, the dynamics natural and the atmosphere rich in everyday life, breaking the seriousness of discussing philosophy and creating an atmosphere of harmony between host and guest, and forgetting self and object. This "joy of discussing the Dao" is not outward passion, but a subtle and restrained spiritual exchange, consistent with Wen Zhengming's gentle and peaceful personality. The shimmering stream in the middle ground is rendered with light yet not sloppy lines, capturing both the dynamic movement of the water and avoiding any sense of turbulent turmoil, suggesting a peaceful flow of spirit. A small boat drifts upon the stream. Though the hull is not large, every part of it is rendered distinctly, and no one sits in it. The vessel seems to declare "You may sit down or lie down", as though waiting for some scholar to step aboard and keep an appointment; the empty boat also hints that people are free to come and go. This arrangement sets movement inside stillness. Through it the mood of "relaxation" is lifted into a visible scene, a picture of inward freedom. The far-off mountains are painted in pale ink laid on layer after layer, so that within the overlapping washes their outlines gain depth. The distant hills keep a light and remote quality, and yet they bear a soft, full-bodied weight. This answers the spiritual craving for "inner peace", and it lets the misty atmosphere of the distance linger as well. The "movement" of the scenery and the "stillness" of the figures stand in mutual contrast. In this manner, "enjoying Shen Yun" rises beyond a mere "argument" scene and attains the mental state of "seeing life in tranquility and gaining freedom in stability". What the painting preserves is the "inner freedom" of the Ming literati. When "seclusion" and "freedom" meet, Huxi Maolu ceases to be a straightforward record of scenery. It becomes a mirror in which the literati may behold their own souls. The hut sits by the stream, bordered by the riverbank and the little boat, shaping a space that is by turns open and enclosed. It stands at a remove from the world, yet is not shut off from the world—such is the survival wisdom of the Ming literati: to "hide in the city, and keep the heart in the forest". The place answers two longings at once, the wish to withdraw and the wish to remain among others. Two

kinds of joy bring "seclusion" to life: one is the quiet, restrained pleasure of scholars in conversation, the other the pleasure of a light skiff sliding over the stream. Urban reclusion is thus no longer a passive flight from the world, but a path the individual chooses, filled with spiritual exchange and spiritual liberty. The two sustain each other, and the mood of the painting is raised from "scenery" to "spiritual realm". One plainly discerns the inward disposition among Ming-era scholars struggling to weigh the real world against their ambitions. Across the wider sweep of the art of bygone ages, such counterpoint of seclusion with freedom within the Huxi scroll marks a genuine advance in how mood was evoked by the art of Ming times. Measured against earlier conventions for depicting hills and waters, his pictures dwell far more on the scholar-gentry's inward existence; the scene around it serves as a backdrop that bears the imprint of a painter's heart. Nothing within the frame is a mere thing drawn from nature itself. No motif lacks a significance proper to itself, drawing alike on culture and on spirit. The hut offers a haven where the scholar's soul rests, while the waters mirror the direction his ideas take; the peaks embody the urge to rise above oneself. Taken together, such motifs coalesce into a full symbolic order, allowing whoever studies the picture to pass beneath appearances toward a more profound reading.

3. Inspiration and Echo: The Relevance of the Self-Object Harmony Ideal to Contemporary Art

The "retribution" theory of Zong Bing rests on a belief that "the self together with the myriad things constitutes a single whole". Within this Huxi scroll, that notion takes concrete form: a heart mirrored in brush and wash, the inward being voiced by the scene itself. What animates that model owes nothing to the copying of precedent; it is, rather, a creative reply to an abiding theme: the meeting of spirits in which self merges with things. In his Preface to Painting Landscapes, Zong Bing proposed that "Peaks and mountain ridges tower aloft, clouds and forests stretch in misty seclusion; sages and virtuous men shine through the ages, and all worldly delights merge into one's spiritual meditations."⁸ The concept of enjoying the spirit (*changshen*) is the theoretical source of this aesthetic view. It emphasizes the deep resonance between natural landscapes and the subjective spirit, laying the foundation for the symbiotic relationship between self and object in later literati painting. Faced with the dilemmas

of technology overriding the spirit, estrangement between man and nature, and lack of individual emotion in artistic creation, this aesthetic view provides a practical value path for painting creation, cross-media practice, and aesthetic education, thus achieving an effective dialogue between traditional aesthetics and the contemporary context. From the current state of contemporary art development, the proliferation of technologism and the lack of humanistic spirit now pose problems that demand urgent attention. Electronic media have widened the range of choices open to creators. Yet leaning on these tools too heavily often drains a piece of its spirit's depth together with its warmth of feeling. Meanwhile, under pressure from a world grown steadily more interconnected, disparate heritages mingle with one another, injecting fresh energy while leaving art anxious about where it belongs. Taking all of the above into account, the old idea that "a merging of the self into objects" calls for renewed scrutiny. Even today this notion stirs those who make art, pointing out that art's significance does not lie in flaunting virtuosity or in hunting down novel shapes. Art is important because, in its own language, it opens a spiritual dialogue between the person and the world, between subject and object. To be specific, the aesthetics of "self-integration" offers contemporary art guidance on three levels. First, artistic creation should come back to the spiritual initiative of the human being; technology is only a vehicle for emotion and thought, and this order must never be turned upside down. Second comes the balance between humans and nature, and between tradition and modernity: artists should break new ground even as they carry tradition forward, letting their works mature through dialogue. Third, art education should aim at the artist's overall quality — that is, technical training, cultural learning, and spiritual cultivation, none of which can be done without. These points are worth keeping in mind when one tries to correct what has gone off course in current art, or to explore a path of artistic development with Chinese characteristics.

There are two typical phenomena of "separation between subject and object" in contemporary painting: one is "technical realism," in which some creators use hyperrealistic techniques to replicate the texture and light and shadow of natural objects, but exclude their own emotions, making the works "mirrors of nature". For example, an overly detailed still life painting only pursues "visual realism" but lacks the creator's perception of the "charm of objects". Secondly, there is "empty and

vague freehand brushwork,” where some abstract or expressionist works deviate from the observation of nature and merely pile up forms based on subjective conjecture, resulting in works that are “self-evident but lack substance” and lack a perceptible spiritual focus. This separation essentially deviates from the core pursuit of traditional Chinese painting, establishing images to exhaust meaning, just as the tendency of emphasizing technique over Dao has appeared in contemporary meticulous brush and heavy color paintings, ultimately leading to a loss of spiritual depth. Confronted by such a predicament, Wen Zhengming showed firsthand how self may be wedded to surrounding objects. What it demands, at bottom, is the mastery of a pair of acts at once: receiving lessons from beyond (the outer world itself serving as guide, *waishi zaohua*) and drawing upon the inward wellspring (the wellspring lying in one's heart, *zhongde xinyuan*). Where art in our own day runs up against the difficulties just described, the idea of “self dissolving among things” offers a set of concrete remedies. In method, one pairs a close study of what meets the eye with one's inward responses—approach it in humility, afterwards distilling what was absorbed in one's own way. On the technical side, the governing rule holds that technique ought to minister to art's inner demands; drilling merely for drilling's sake is misguided. Where taste is concerned, what counts most in the finished piece is its sense on the plane of soul and its richness of culture; shape with substance, craft bearing a soul of its own, all need to be brought into accord. Such guidelines still hold for a working artist; each time he opens new ground, they assist him in keeping his candor and his inner profundity. One further point deserves stress. The bond of subject with objects goes beyond a mere idea about how art is made; equally, it offers a manner of living alongside a discipline of shaping oneself. When he took up the Huxi scroll, his devotion toward the living world, his affection toward life, plus the aims he pursued, all came through in the strokes he laid down. The picture thereby stands as a faithful account of a life he lived, his state of mind included. This attitude of integrating art with life, creation with spiritual practice has important implications for contemporary artists in overcoming a restless mindset and pursuing the true meaning of art. In today's world of material abundance yet spiritual anxiety, this mode of artistic creation is particularly significant and necessary.

Wen Zhengming did not paint the hills, waters, plants, and trees of Huxi from

one-time sketches. The imagery of Huxi Thatched Cottage came out of long wanderings, out of a kind of immersive observation. He recorded the winding curves of the water bank and the twisted postures of the pine trees, and injected his peaceful state of mind after renouncing official ambition and pursuit of the ideal of reclusion within the secular world (*shiyin*) into his brush and ink. The warm and gentle lines of the *pima* texturing strokes correspond to his warm personality, and the ethereal artistic conception of the light ink distant mountains echoes his spirit of transcending utilitarianism. This is exactly what Chen Hengke emphasized: "Literati painting is the first virtue, the second knowledge, the third talent, and the fourth thought."⁹ The creative principles and core values of literati painting lie in the cultural cultivation and spiritual realm outside the painting. This work, created by Wen Zhengming at the age of 66, blends the natural scenery with the emotions of literati through a synthesis of the *xiaoqinglü* (light blue-and-green) and *qianjiang* (light ink-and-crimson) styles. Its elegant color scheme and rigorous composition perfectly embody the visual externalization of the painter's character. The inspiration of this creative logic for contemporary painting is reflected in two levels: one is the observation dimension, from visual recording to spiritual perception. Contemporary painters need to go beyond focusing on the physical properties of objects (such as color and form) when facing nature, and deeply perceive the connection between the "aura of objects" and "my experience."

This is similar to Guo Xi's principle of "identifying oneself with mountains and rivers to apprehend them."¹⁰ Wen Zhengming's creative philosophy is consistent: only by immersing oneself in nature in a state of forgetting the distinction between self and object can one capture the spiritual essence that transcends appearances. His observation of the landscape of Huxi is a prime example of this mode of spiritual perception—he saw not only the forms of mountains, rocks, and trees, but also the point of convergence between nature and his own spirit. Secondly, in terms of expression, spiritual needs govern technical choices. Techniques such as brush and ink and color do not exist independently, but rather serve the expression of the spiritual interpenetration of self and object. Wen Zhengming used accumulated light-ink washes to paint distant mountains in order to create an ethereal artistic conception to fulfill the need for spiritual liberation. This creative logic of technique serving the

artistic conception breaks the predicament of technical servitude. In today's ink figure painting, true freehand brushwork is not a matter of laying down form at random. It states a "psychological truth" in the language of brush and ink, so that technique carries feeling rather than existing for its own sake. Once feeling and object live in each other like this, contemporary painting can slip free of both "technical enslavement" and "subjective conjecture" and come back to what art is for: "expressing life experience." This also goes to show that the ancient Chinese aesthetic value of "both form and god" has not vanished. The making of art consists not in a mechanical copying of the outward world, nor in an uncontrolled outpouring of feeling; it is, rather, a profound conversation carried on by the perceiving mind with the perceived world upon the plane of spirit. Here one may still catch a present-day resonance: Zong Bing's teaching on how the eye answers while the mind awakens, still sounding a millennium after his time.

4. Conclusion

With "*Huxi Thatched Cottage*", its maker gave working form to the notion of "the self together with the myriad things are one". Far from being an exhibit locked away during Ming times, the picture replies, with art's own voice, to a query that never quite goes away: how may perceiver and perceived dwell side by side? In the contemporary context, it not only addresses the imbalance between self and object in painting practice but also injects humanistic warmth into cross-media practices and rebuilds the emotional connection between humanity and nature through aesthetic education. The old teaching stays serviceable today not via the mere copying of what went before. Rather, it lies in the way its central ethos keeps being carried onward and brought to bear on the difficulties of our own time. So runs the moral of this ancient ideal of a "body-and-mind union". Whatever means art adopts, it keeps an essential nature that never alters: a conversation in which humans address all that lies around them. Art's final mission endures: the reforging of a bond of poetry joining humanity with all that surrounds it. This is why *Huxi Thatched Cottage* is still alive after five hundred years. For art education today, what succeeded in *Huxi Thatched Cottage* suggests that teaching should pass on technique, yes, but it should also build in students a reverence for nature, an understanding of tradition, and a feeling for life. Only by organically combining technical training, cultural cultivation, and spiritual

nurturing can we nurture truly creative artistic talents. At the same time this case also inspires us, that in the context of globalization Chinese art education should fully explore and utilize its own traditional cultural resources, and construct an art education system with national characteristics and contemporary value through dialogue and innovation.

Qiannan Normal University for Nationalities

XUAN JIN is a Master's student at the School of Fine Arts, Qiannan Normal University for Nationalities, with a research focus in Chinese Painting.

Corresponding author: LIU JUNPING (Peter J. Liu), is a Professor of Art History at the School of Art & Design at the University of Emergency Management, a Visiting Professor at Qiannan Normal University for Nationalities, and a Visiting Scholar, Department of Art and Art History at the University of California, Davis.

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