

# RYTŲ IR VAKARŲ KULTŪRŲ SANKIRTOS



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# Chan Aesthetics from the Perspective of Comparative Analysis

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The article's research focus is the peculiarities of Chan aesthetics within a wider perspective of comparative analysis. The paper begins with a brief discussion of the origins of Chan aesthetics, its relationship with other Indian and Chinese aesthetic trends. Then follows an analysis of this school's historical metamorphoses, its main aesthetic principles, a detailed account of the leitmotiv of disassociation from external world, and the artist's relationship with nature. There is a discussion of various internal and external factors of creativity: psychological preparation for creative process, methods of creative concentration, spontaneity while searching for unity with nature. Particular attention is given to meditational aspects of Chan aesthetics and art.

**Keywords:** Chan aesthetics, Chan art, Chinese traditional aesthetics, artist, creativity, process of artistic creativity, spontaneity, meditation, relationship with nature.

## The Peculiarity of Chan Tradition of Thought

Chan Buddhism (Chan) is the only foreign ideology that succeeded in naturalizing in China. The title of Chan School derived from Sanskrit term *dhyana*, which in Chinese is translated as *chan-na*. It means focus, concentration of consciousness, meditation. The totality of this school's ideas formed during a period of crisis in Chinese culture and philosophical thought. From there flows Chan's inner discrepancy, ignorance towards traditional cultural forms, rituals, canons, attraction towards epatage and paradox, barely handled individualism, constant search for distinctive forms of creative expression.

This direction develops not as a logically induced teaching or a theoretical doctrine, based on rational principles, but rather as a method of thought, reality and life apprehension, creative activity, inspired by close human-nature relationship. Chan thinkers, inspired by Daoist ideas, purposely avoid main civilizational centres and seek shelter in scenic nature spots. Their spiritual escapism actualizes in self-reflection, dwelling in the world within. Synthesis of Buddhist and Daoist ideas in Chan world-view are buttressed with Confucian aesthetic principles. At this point, Chan Buddhism in China attain its integrity as a teaching.

Mahayana Buddhist ideas, native to India, assumed Chinese features during Jin

and especially Tang epochs. Their encounter with highly sophisticated and developed local philosophical traditions had Buddhism either assimilating with already formed Chinese philosophy style or becoming a religious outlook. From here nascent are the sophisticated adaptation strategies and mimicry of typologically similar Daoist ideas. An important distinctiveness of Chan tradition's process of becoming is worth mentioning: in China, alongside Chan, many other smaller, less significant Buddhist philosophy schools and religious streams existed and were less affected by 'becoming-Chinese' than Chan Buddhism, thus they can be considered manifestations of 'Buddhism in China'. In this view, there is an essential difference between concepts of Buddhism in China and Chinese Buddhism. The most definitive phenomenon of the latter – Chan Buddhism – exhibited extremely strong influence for subsequent Chinese philosophy, literature and art.

The formation of Chan postulates was crucially influenced by the Sixth Chan and the First Chan Southern school patriarch Huineng. In his exploration of human spiritual development problems, he enthrones 'the cognizance of oneself' as the ultimate Chan adept principle; values and pinnacles meditation, stillness and the inner experience of beauty. 'Meditation is the substance of wisdom; wisdom is the function of meditation. At the very moment when there is wisdom, then meditation exists in wisdom; at the very moment when there is meditation, then wisdom exists in meditation'. Here we see his invitation for

Chan adepts to exhibit freedom, comprehend their authenticity and act according to Dharma laws. Huineng's attention to sophisticated meditation methods, contemplations on one's inner world, non-verbal truth experience, contemplative way of life, the importance of dialogical communication – all these catch on among intellectuals and artistic intelligentsia.

Mistrust of discursive logical thought, doubts about the Confucian-glorified power of word and written texts, celebration of spontaneous intuitive reality apprehension, giving prominence to psychological exercises, aestheticizing the majority of human creative spheres – these all became main features of Chan worldview. From Mahayana teachings Chan adepts assimilate the almost cosmic importance and specific evaluation of conscious processes, as well as karma theory that connects not only physical actions, but also particular person's words and feelings, tying one's life in various reason and consequence connections. All experienced reactions, relationships with the external world are comprehended as manifestations of universal consciousness.

One of the most significant Chan aesthetic leitmotifs, nascent from Hindu Buddhism and Daoism philosophy, is the dissociation from the external world and any kind of public life. In fact, this can even be considered a concurrent part of worldview for a Chan intellectual and artist. Wallowing in solitude, wandering in nature and developing close relations

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York and London Columbia university press, p. 135.  
Access through internet: <http://terebeess.hu/zen/PlatformYampolsky.pdf>

1 Yampolsky, Philip B. *The platform sutra of the sixth patriarch the text of the tun-huang manuscript*. New

with it are understood as a turn towards the depths of one's soul and a path towards knowledge of beauty, truth and fullness of being. According to Chan adepts, the real life of a thinker or creator is distinguished by enigmatic silence, while ranks, authority, wealth and glory are all skulduggery, tricks, disappointments, decay and putrefaction, alien to the real existence. Intimate communication with the silent and subtle beauty of nature for Chan adepts becomes the main instrument for connecting with the outside world.

Art and nature for Chan followers are the spheres of authentic existence expression, in which they seek stillness, enlightened consciousness and creative inspiration. According to Chan theorists, the cardinal artistic creation impulses lie in close communication with nature and its beauty. Thus, even the most prosaic life phenomena can become objects of artistic creation. Poetization of the mundane and dismissal of previously formed canons are concurrent parts of Chan aesthetics. Different to the objectified and alienated beauty, characteristic to classical Western aesthetics, in Chan aesthetics the comprehension of beauty (which is simply another dialectic part of ugliness, often gaining the functions of beauty) is something profoundly individual and subjective.

Chan adepts who had chosen 'the way of art' were often grand masters of landscape painting, calligraphy, poetry, garden art, etc. They witness the meaning of human existence in creativity and living in nature. Dissociation from the external world and devotion to 'the way of art' was not an exceptional phenomenon in Chi-

nese cultural tradition, but rather a usual path towards confirmation of existence for Daoist, or later, Chan adept thinkers and artists. This path was apprehended as a reliable spiritual 'cleansing' and a method of personal development.

The majority of most prominent Chan aesthetic exponents, like Wang Wei (699–756) live indrawn lives as monks and express themselves as philosophers, poets, painters. Most well-known Chan monasteries with rich libraries, art collections, and distinguished teachers in medieval China become important intellectual centres, act as peculiar kinds of universities, capable of providing Chan adepts with diverse education. From here flows Chan art's intellectuality, sophisticated artistry and integrated world comprehension.

### **Chan aesthetic principles**

Intrinsic to Chan worldview are ideas of panaesthetism. Even human life, as in Kierkegaard's and F. Nietzsche's conceptions, is equated with art. In Chan worldview, art becomes the perfect form of apprehending the abyssal world substance. Followers of Chan aesthetic and painting traditions do not give much prominence to the technical aspects of artwork, instead they stress the artist's spiritual development, opening of new spiritual spaces through various Chan practices, beginning with apprehending natural beauty, quest for perfection in particular art spheres, concluding with the most complex methods of self-education and meditation.

A particular set of underlying principles distinguishes Chan from other aesthetic

and art traditions. In some ways, these principles are close to those of Daoism, thus explaining why Chan aesthetic and artistic ideals were long apprehended in Chinese cultural tradition as a separate, more radical branch of Daoism and had often formed under the cover of Daoism. But compared to Daoism, leitmotifs of dissociation from external world, meditational attitudes and celebration of poetizing the mundane were much more prominent in Chan aesthetic and art tradition.

Looking into the works of great Chan painting masters, we see symmetrical compositional principles of exceptional expression and harmony between seemingly incompatible matters. These compositional principles open majestic spaces for the spectator's eye to wander, accord the artwork's visual system with exceptional emotional suggestibility. Chan tradition paintings astonished with inner stillness, aristocratism of simplistic aesthetics, and the ability to reveal exalted poetry in the most mundane life and natural events and motives. This simplistic and naturalistic cult takes shape in works of Chan artists as exceptionally ascetic, minimalist tools of creative expression that forbid artist to hide behind external effects and require one to invoke maximum concentration and denude one's creative powers. This apprehension of naturalism's importance is alien to primitive instinctiveness, it requires to deeply understand the importance of preceding styles' possibilities, as well as significance of laconic and concise style, power of synthesis, exhibiting exceptional mastery upon artistic expression tools and employ them to speak of great things

through simple form, as Chan painting is first and foremost, 'painting of ideas', celebrating the importance not only of form, but of the idea as well.

One of the most enchanting features of Chan and its close kin, Zen art tradition, for me personally is their ascetic magnificence, or stark pride, not letting a self-respecting artist demean oneself before this world's powerful and inspiring their creations with exceptional nobleness, authenticity, apprehension of value of independent personality. In their creations, Chan tradition masters are able to completely dissociate themselves from external things and submerge themselves into deep levels of phenomena and objects they deem important. Dissociation, according to Chan adepts, helps the creator feel the joyfulness of freedom and dive into the condition of stillness, spiritual concentration, which accumulates creative potencies of the Universe and brings one closer to the world of gods.

Here we witness the exceptional importance that freedom and distancing oneself from creatively limiting attitudes and canons have in Chan tradition. According to Chan theorists, even a slight external push, a novel unexpected standpoint on mundane things and events can unleash the artist's creative powers in a matter of seconds. Various methods of psycho-training, teacher's influence on Chan adepts are given prominence in this artistic creation conception. The goal of these methods is to encourage the enlightenment of the consciousness, which in turn stimulates unhindered development of natural, creative spiritual flights, emerging from deep within the sub consciousness. The

supreme beauty and harmony are not visible in regular canonical artistic creation forms, but are seen in the demonstrative ignorance towards external completeness and preciseness, conscious violation of harmony, deformation, nervous discontinuous line, spontaneously effused ink spots, dots, Chinese character structures, written in cursive, situated in painting's blank space.

Chan aesthetic artistic canon exhibits antitraditionalism, improvisation, emotionality, intuitiveness, naturalism and paradoxes. Even though Chan aesthetic system is extremely different from traditional European conceptions, it is not the totality of paradoxical ideas, but rather a worldview and a certain way of comprehending life and art world, that is directly associated with the conscious ascription and complete dedication to 'The way of art'. Base creative attitudes and life itself here are shaped by complex method of meditation practice. Differently to classical Buddhism which seeks the inner stillness, Chan psychological exercise is oriented towards the power of mental shock when an individual ceases to be affected by external events. One's consciousness, now situated in a certain critical condition, is deserted by the usual evaluation criteria and is submerged within the depths of beauty, apprehension of Being, reaches exceptional clarity and volatility. In this plane of Chan thought, it is during the powerful emotional trance that the real life of a Chan-Buddhist begins, not during rational evaluation of beauty and truth. The main instrument of communicating with the external world is the liberated intuition.

The great Chinese painting masters, deeply influenced by Chan aesthetic ideals – Ma Yuan, Liang Kai and Mu Qi have been able (as well as many others) to connect the Daoist simplicity with meditational starkness, characteristic to Hindu Buddhist aesthetic tradition and create art that promoted spiritual chastity, detachment from material objects and surpassed both of these inspirations. Thus, highlighting the importance of simplicity and chastity in artistic creations is distinctive to Chan aesthetic and art traditions. The Daoist charge in Chan aesthetic tradition is so powerful, that its inherent emphasis on simplicity and naturalism, aided the upstaging the Hindu features as these two different cultural aesthetic traditions converged.

Laozi's statement on the external unattractiveness of truth is contiguous with Chan artists' practice of highlighting simplicity and ascetics. Thus as they talk about creation of true art, they invite to avoid the deceptive beauty and to concentrate attention even to the gloomiest aspects of life, despite their rudeness, unattractiveness and repulsiveness. On the other hand, developing Laozi's and Zhuangzi's ideas they enthrone the meaning of aesthetic hints and tacitness. According to them, words are only valuable as much as they help get closer to the deep meaning of things, truth and knowledge of supreme beauty. Thus even with a few carefully selected words the artist can express the deep meaning of things represented. It is essential to authentically convey the inner flights of spirit, register the artist's creative will by particular art form's tools for aesthetic expression.

In Chan aesthetic tradition exceptional attention was given to calligraphy. The embedded features of Chinese characters in calligraphy meant it possessed various abilities and extraordinary power of emotional effect. Chan artists' calligraphies are distinguished by powerful energetics and visual conciseness. Calligraphy in Chan tradition extremely actively penetrates painting – weaves in together with painterly images. In minimalistic works of many great Chan painting tradition artists, calligraphic structures often assume an equally important role as does the painterly image.

### **Meditational Character of Art**

Reality comprehension and artistic creation principles, emphasised in Chan aesthetics, gradually infiltrate and eventually become a concurrent part of art practice. In their works, Chan painting masters seek to convey the primordial idea and visual forms of the incomplete human mind, or Nothingness. Differently to followers of academic landscape painting, they paint not on silk scrolls, but on carefully prepared paper of subtle neutral shades, upon the surface of which ink ran smoothly and as many as possible contrasting and tonal ink shades, important to monochrome painting, could be elicited. Their exceptional attention towards these material and technical monochrome painting aspects can be explained by prominent emotionality, which in meditational forms of creativity strengthens the activity of various conscious and subconscious processes during the act of artwork comprehension. Chan adepts are convinced that in the supreme phase of

meditational creation, both artist and spectator cease to exist, only the ex-phenomenal consciousness, erupted from the influence of phenomenal world comprehension plane, prevails. This consciousness has apprehended its primordial emptiness, akin to the deepest nature of Buddha and it also has understood the openness of the empty consciousness in the world for the unfolding forms of truth, beauty and harmony.

On the other hand, Chan painters, referring to the substantial Chan philosophical idea of Emptiness as the base of world events, act upon conveying their aesthetic vision of world by altering a plentitude of precedent landscape painting principles. Bringing Emptiness into the centre of their world and nature vision, a good number of old landscape compositional, perspective and technical principles, as well as their use to the new 'open' Chan landscape conception are reimagined. In Chan landscape conception, the starting point of landscape image system construction is the dominating blank space and surrounding natural forms, prone to dematerialization.

And finally, in Chan aesthetics, same as in Daoism, delving into the substance of rendered object and observing the nature is not as important as introspection. Meditation here becomes the inner expression of creative process. Because of exceptional attention given to meditation and consciousness concentration, Chan tradition art is condensed, expressive, and extremely intensive in its emotional effect. In Chan aesthetic tradition, the process of creating artworks itself is often colated with meditation, while the process of artwork comprehension is equated to the

enlightenment of consciousness. The latter thought is often repeated by many Chan influenced artists – Chan enlightenment is considered not only as the essential part of artist's creative process, but also as the analogue for artistic inspiration.

In Chan teachings, Buddhist methods of passive meditation are altered. In order to reach enlightened consciousness, various sophisticated meditation and psychic-training methods are employed, physical effect tools used in order to calm the passions and experience beauty and truth within. 'False thoughts are born from passions, when true thoughts come – passions disappear'<sup>2</sup>. According to Chan thinkers, enlightened consciousness liberates the individual from contradictions of profane existence and opens up another condition of appreciating the harmony of primordial Being, in which the world unfolds in specific forms and shapes, similar to those of artistic expression. Thus, creation of Chan landscape, as well as its visual system contemplation process here emerges as an instrument for possible consciousness transformation. Wandering through the roads, secluded mountain and valley paths within the landscape, helps Chan tradition painter and the apprehender of one's work to move through complex path of knowledge from imperfect obscure reality towards the perfect comprehension of 'Great Nothingness', or the fullness of Being. Thus, the deepest communication, comprehension of the substantial processes of Being, in Chan aesthetic tradition un-

folds not merely through mundane words that are considered the external shell of true language, but through pause, silence, subtle language of aesthetic symbols, hints, suppression etc.

Chan artist does not describe the object or phenomena in order to convey them, but tries to relax one's stream of consciousness, natural thought and image flow, trusting completely the spontaneity of one's artistic intention. Chan painting is distinguished by subtle tone gradation, infinite spaces, rendering the most sensitive soul vibrations. With the help of laconic and reserved tools of artistic expression, mostly basic ink, artists convey spiritual afflatus, staggering in their depth and inner dramatism. As Chan expert F. Cheng correctly notices, this is the aesthetics of conveying the 'spiritual condition' (*état d'âme*), which emerges through long contemplations, meditation<sup>3</sup>. Creative process is divided into two unequal parts: the first (and the most important) is associated with meditation and idea maturation; the second is associated with realizing the idea, is completely spontaneous, more technical, and short-lived. Highly regarded in Chan art is the consonance of artist's soul's inner rhythm with the rhythm of surrounding world and natural phenomena that are being conveyed in the artwork. This consonance is conveyed by graphic line rhythm, subtexts of emotionally active blank spaces, pauses, unexpected asymmetrical collations. Musical rhythmic painting structures, space poetics help the apprehender infer com-

2 Завадская Е. В. *Эстетические проблемы живописи старого Китая*. Москва: Искусство, 1975, p. 324.

3 Cheng, François. *L'Espace du rêve : mille ans de peinture chinoise*. Paris: Phébus, 1980, p. 18.

municational methods, opening the secrets of complex Chan landscape painting and poetry symbols. Extremely important in artist's contact with the integrity of Being and constantly shifting seasons are pause, silence, hint, which all help to convey the deepest meanings from consciousness to sub consciousness.

Airing the ideas on infinite world and principal incomprehensibility of human personality, Chan aesthetic theoretically affirms the *non finito* principle. Art, influenced by Chan aesthetic tradition possesses deep philosophical subtexts. According to Chan theorists, by using rational logical speech or forthright realistic painting, it is only possible to convey external descriptive aspects of Being, while real artist, seeking to convey the true meaning, needs to explore different spheres of creation, which are extremely difficult to find and reside outside the boundaries of logical thinking and can best be expressed only in a form of a subtle hint, tacitness, which does not simplify the reality, but leaves it alive, open to comprehension and interpretation.

Aesthetic hints were widely used by Chan adepts not only in painting but also in poetry. Famous Tang epoch calligrapher, painter and poet Wang Wei considered pause, tacitness in logical theme development, or disruption of thought as exceptionally impressive tools of emotional effect. Truly, in tacitness, aesthetic hint, blank space and in the emptiness itself, Chan followers see the origins of all worldly events. Considering completeness incompatible with the constant movement of Being, they deny everything static, complete, seeing the danger of limiting spirit and thought.

Hus, Chan aesthetic exhibits avoidance of symmetry, balance, forthright repetition. Asymmetric composition, active highlighting of aesthetic hint in Chan aesthetic are considered to be signs of good taste. Chan tradition artists remind the spectator that outside the visual boundaries lies the inexpressible deep substance, comprehension of which can only be approached, never fulfilled. They seek to draw the spectator into the creative process itself, help one reinstate what is being contemplated, felt, but not shown.

According to Chan adepts, spiritual art is distinguished by principle of incompleteness, which renders the artwork exceptionally individual and polyphonic. This *non finito*, incompleteness, aesthetic hint and inexpressibility principle is one of the main Chan art principles. Other main stylistic features are – stillness, naturality, conciseness of style, close relation to poetry, calligraphy, favouring asymmetry, drastic stroke fashion, faint colourful marks, dramatic, expressivity and virtuosity of often disrupted, broken lines, abnegation of sophisticated form.

In Chan landscape painting tradition, exceptional attention is given to rendering the enigmatic silence poetics and most sensitive mood nuances. Mood here is comprehensible as a more intensive and more universal experience, associated with the deep worldview layers, is a more powerful aesthetic effect tool than emotion and takes longer to unfold. Here unfolds the conviction of landscape aesthetic followers, that the spirit of the perfect landscape is inseparable from stable enduring moods, inner stillness, silence, meditation. Thus

the lone leaning figure of a fisherman on a small boat in a snowy lake in Ma Yuan's painting 'Lone Fisherman on a Wintry Lake' (end of 12<sup>th</sup> c. – beginning of 13<sup>th</sup> c.) is much more successful in conveying the moods of solitude and existential pathos than extensive literary descriptions. This is where the enigmatic power of a genial painterly metaphor resides; it highlights the universality of the mood and opens up completely different planes of existence and human surrounding nature for both creator and spectator.

Chan tradition artists strive to convey even the most complex ideas laconically, distancing their creations from external lustre, seek richness of form with the most simple and minimalist artistic expression tools possible. Natural beauty of extraordinary aesthetic value is found in even the most mundane objects, materials, their textures. The most profound artist's quest is seen in this highlighting of the mundane, as it is not possible for the artist to hide behind external matters, one must denude the true power of one's talent. Another Chan art characteristic is avoidance of symmetry, well-formed, complete, static forms and celebrating asymmetry, which for Chan artists is associated with symmetry-negating irregular forms of nature. According to them, symmetry limits space and spontaneous crooked lines of tree branches, meandering streams etc. reflect dynamism of natural forms and processes, open up new spaces for creativity and constant artist's being 'on the road', its change, renewal, moving forward and assimilating new previously unknown spheres of creativity and natural world (as in Chan tradition nature

is the supreme teacher). Finally, in Chan art tradition one strives to be liberated from any external canons, norms, enthroned is the personal artist's relation with the object of his creation and the spontaneity and freedom of the creative act itself.

Chan landscape painting tradition, having reached sublime artistic heights in China, differently to from Chan developed Zen tradition in Japan, does not attract enthusiastic patron support and the appreciation it deserves. Many members of Imperial Palace's Painting Academy, influenced by Confucian ethics, perceive Chan landscape painting as an excessively eccentric, scandalously unconventional and esoteric stream, which threatens the base of traditional aesthetics. But Chan landscape painting, with its powerful emotional impact suggestiveness and exceptional harmony, has successfully invaded the residential interiors. Invasion of calligraphic inscriptions, comprising over one hundred Chinese characters, and their diffused poetic thought into the painting's visual structure, strengthen the artwork's emotional atmosphere.

Thus, Chan aesthetic and art stream is nascent from Hindu culture and has been successfully naturalized in Chinese culture. In various different forms of Chan, reactions to Confucian traditionalism, respectability, intellectuality, literary wisdom, rituals and various principles of external reglamentation are crystalized. Influenced by Zhuangzi's Daoist ideas and Buddhist methods of beauty and truth cognizance, Chan aesthetics resume Daoism's polemic with Confucian methods of beauty and truth cognizance, which are

based on canonical attitudes and thesis about the educated sage's primeval knowledge. Chan adepts contrast this theory with the principal abnegation of authority and importance of canons, theory of active creative human consciousness nature, raise the importance of free creative improvisation and the unexpected enlightenment of

the consciousness. These 'anti-canonical' attitudes of Chan aesthetic were gradually canonized and became a totality of ideas in Chan aesthetic treatises and art practice. Thus by negating the attitudes of precedent canons, followers of Chan aesthetic preserve them in other, transformed anticanonical shape.

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