Between Brush-and-Ink and Line: A Comparative Study of Aesthetic Philosophy in Chinese Ink Painting and Western Drawing

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Abstract

Brush-and-ink (bimo) and line, as the respective central mediating substances of Chinese ink painting and Western drawing, are not merely physical instruments of mark-making: they are embodied expressions of two civilizations' fundamental understandings of space, time, being, and beauty. This paper undertakes a comparative aesthetic analysis — with philosophical examination as its primary axis and art history and iconography as auxiliary frameworks — to systematically explore the deep similarities and differences between the Chinese ink painting aesthetic tradition (with "spirit resonance," "ink-and-brush must follow the age," and the theory of the "single brushstroke" as key theoretical nodes) and the Western drawing aesthetic tradition (with linear perspective, disegno theory, and formalist criticism as key theoretical nodes) across six core dimensions: (i) ontological foundations — the divergence between a cosmological-organic worldview and a geometric-rationalist one; (ii) the philosophical status of line — differing roles as "trace of life" versus "armature of form"; (iii) spatial treatment — the epistemological difference between mobile perspective and fixed-point perspective; (iv) temporality — the opposition of process aesthetics and completion aesthetics; (v) bodily engagement — the perceptual difference between the writing body and the observing body; (vi) void and fullness — the cultural contrast between an aesthetics of emptiness and horror vacui. Through comparative analysis, the paper proposes the concept of the "intertextual brushstroke" to describe the mutual interpenetration generated by contact between the two traditions since the twentieth century, illustrated by the cross-cultural practices of Zao Wou-Ki and Chu Teh-Chun. The study demonstrates that the philosophical differences between ink painting and drawing are neither reducible to technical questions nor constitutive of incommensurable cultural barriers, but are rather two beautiful forms grown from the same human impulse — to capture time and being through the trace — in the soil of different civilizations.

Keywords: *ink painting aesthetics, Western drawing, comparative aesthetics, bimo philosophy, line, intertextual brushstroke*

1 Introduction: A Dual Invitation of Traces and Philosophy

Su Shi once stated that poetry and painting "converge in nature." Though brief, his words touch on a core aesthetic question that has persisted for a millennium: what does it truly mean to leave traces through a medium? In the Chinese painting tradition, the marks left by a brush on xuan paper or silk are called bimo (brush-and-ink)[1]; in the Western drawing tradition, the contours left by a silverpoint, charcoal, or graphite on paper are called line. Superficially, both are attempts to capture the visual or spiritual world using finite material means. Yet behind this appearance, the two traditions presuppose profoundly different cosmologies, conceptions of the body, notions of time, and ontologies.

These differences do not arise from mere technical choices, but from fundamentally different understandings of "reality." When Leonardo da Vinci declared that disegno (drawing) is the father and mother of all visual arts, he was describing an epistemological ambition: to grasp the forms of the world rationally and to conquer perceptual chaos through geometry. When Shi Tao proposed the "one-stroke" (yi hua) theory in his Hua Yulu, claiming that "one stroke is the root of all multiplicity, the origin of myriad phenomena," he touched on an ontological commitment: engaging the vitality of the universe through bodily perception and participating in natural generation through brushwork[2].

Comparative aesthetics research has accumulated substantial results since the mid-20th century. However, a systematic philosophical comparison specifically between Chinese ink painting and Western drawing, which simultaneously attends to technical detail and philosophical depth, remains lacking. This paper attempts an in-depth study structured along six dimensions, integrating philosophical analysis, iconographic investigation, and cross-cultural case studies, and introduces the concept of "intertextual brushwork" to describe the new aesthetic possibilities arising from mutual permeation of these traditions since the 20th century[3].

The structure of this paper is as follows: Section II outlines the philosophical foundations of the two traditions; Sections III through VIII present comparative analysis along the six dimensions; Section IX examines the phenomenon of "intertextual brushwork" in cross-cultural encounters; Section X concludes.

2 Philosophical Foundations of the Two Traditions

2.1 The Cosmology–Organic Basis of Chinese Ink Painting

The philosophical soil of Chinese ink painting is an organic cosmology formed at the intersection of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. In this cosmology, the world is not a collection of discrete, static entities, but a life community permeated by the continuous flow of qi. Mountains, rivers, bamboo, rocks, and figures are temporary forms of the condensation and dispersal of qi at a given moment. Painting, therefore, is not the reproduction of fixed objects, but the participation in and resonance with the movement of qi—the artist connects bodily qi with the qi of the universe through brush-and-ink, leaving traces of vital flow.

This organic cosmology is most directly expressed in Xie He's "Six Principles," where the first, qi yun sheng dong ("spirit resonance and vitality"), emphasizes not merely the liveliness of the painting but the fundamental aesthetic quality required for a successful work: conveying the infinite vitality of the universe through finite brush-and-ink traces. This standard is both technical (quality of brushwork) and metaphysical (transmission of life force), and these two aspects are never strictly separated in Chinese painting theory.

Daoist aesthetics further deepens the philosophical dimension of ink painting. Laozi's assertion that "the Dao that can be spoken is not the eternal Dao" resonates aesthetically with the blurring and fluidity achieved by ink on xuan paper. Zhuangzi's epistemological principle of "attaining the meaning and forgetting words" finds visual embodiment in the ink-painting aesthetics of "less is more" and using emptiness as form. Xu Fuguan (1966) notes that at its deepest, the Chinese artistic spirit is a visual manifestation of Zhuangzi's philosophy.

2.2 The Geometry–Rational Basis of Western Drawing

The philosophical roots of Western drawing have a distinctly different lineage within European civilization. From the geometric tradition of ancient Greece, through the medieval theological order, to the humanism and scientific rationalism of the Renaissance, Western visual arts gradually established an aesthetic system grounded in mathematical proportion and geometric construction.

Leon Battista Alberti, in his On Painting (1435)[4], systematically described linear perspective in mathematical terms, defining painting as a geometric mapping of three-dimensional space onto a plane. In this tradition, disegno serves a dual purpose: technically, as the framework and foundation for composition and modeling; epistemologically, as the manifestation of the rational mind's capacity to analyze, abstract, and order the sensory world. Giorgio Vasari defined disegno as the spiritual father of visual art, emphasizing its role in intellectual mastery and spiritual elevation rather than mere manual skill[5].

Kant's aesthetic philosophy can be seen as the culmination of this tradition. In his Critique of Judgment, he distinguishes "free beauty" from "dependent beauty," establishing form as the core object of aesthetic judgment. Although Kant's own ranking of drawing versus color is not without ambiguity, his aesthetic framework prioritizing graspable formal structures deeply influenced modernist Western criticism and the evaluation of line in drawing. Clive Bell's theory of "significant form" extends this formalist tendency into 20th-century art criticism[6](see Tabel 1).

Table 1. Comparison of philosophical foundations of Chinese ink painting and Western drawing

Comparative Dimension	Chinese Ink Painting Tradition	Western Drawing Tradition
Cosmology	Organic theory — the universe as a life community of flowing qi	Mechanistic/rational — the universe as a geometrically structured material order
Epistemological Basis	Resonance theory — connecting bodily qi with cosmic qi	Representational theory — mapping the external world through the rational mind
Core Philosophical Resources	Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism; theory of qi; organic holism	Platonic geometry; Renaissance humanism; Enlightenment rationalism
Artistic Function	Convey qi and spirit, achieve mental state, participate in natural generation	Reproduce form, conquer chaos, express spiritual order
Representative	Xie He's Guhuapinlu; Shi Tao's Hua Yulu;	Alberti's On Painting; Vasari's Lives of the

Comparative Dimension	Chinese Ink Painting Tradition	Western Drawing Tradition
Theoretical Texts	Su Shi's inscriptions on painting	Artists; Kant's Critique of Judgment
Highest Aesthetic Standard	Qi yun sheng dong (Xie He); One-stroke theory (yi hua, Shi Tao)	Disegno (Vasari); Significant form (Clive Bell)

Note: The above comparisons summarize typical tendencies and philosophical orientations; significant diversity and debate exist within each tradition. The descriptions focus on dominant theoretical frameworks rather than exhaustive coverage of all practices.

3 The Philosophical Status of Line: Traces of Life and the Skeleton of Form

3.1 Line in Chinese Painting Theory: The Flow of Qi

In the Chinese painting tradition, line is not a purely formal element independent of content; it carries traces of vital qi and life significance. In the "Eighteen Stroke" (shiba miao) system, each style of line—from the firm and upright iron-wire stroke (tie xian miao) to the light and flowing willow-leaf stroke (liu ye miao)—is not merely a modeling technique, but a visual expression of temperament, character, and even cosmic force[7].

Notably, in Chinese painting theory, "brush technique" (bi fa) and "ink technique" (mo fa) are never entirely separated. The brush represents movement in time; ink represents marks in space. On paper, the two merge, becoming a record of life at the intersection of time and space. Shi Tao's notion of the "one stroke" (yi hua) refers to this fundamental unity of brush movement: the relationship between the artist and the universe is established at the moment the first stroke touches the paper; all subsequent brush-and-ink work is merely an unfolding and variation of this primal relation[8].

Wen C. Fong, in his pioneering research, emphasizes that understanding the structure of brush-and-ink in Chinese painting requires recognizing the "action structure" inherent in each stroke: every stroke is a complete temporal event, comprising variations in pressure and force during the start, execution, and ending of the stroke, leaving readable traces in line thickness, ink density, and edge texture. In other words, lines in Chinese painting are maps of time, not merely contours in space[9].

3.2 Line in Western Drawing Tradition: The Skeleton of Form

In Western drawing, line performs a fundamentally different philosophical function[10]. Within the Renaissance theoretical framework, line primarily serves to define contour: it separates objects from the background, giving form a recognizable boundary, thereby accomplishing the rational-aesthetic task of "conquering chaos with form." Leonardo da Vinci's drawing manuscripts are both records of scientific observation and experiments in formal analysis: lines here not only trace appearances but, through precise anatomical representation, reveal the structural principles underlying forms.

In the Western modernist tradition, the role of line underwent a significant shift from representational to expressive. Paul Klee, in his Bauhaus teaching, distinguished "active lines," "passive lines," and "medial lines," viewing them as records of force relationships on the plane. Henri Matisse's pursuit of line purity liberated line from mere contour depiction, making it an independent rhythmical expression. Nevertheless, even amid these modernist transformations, the formative function of line in the Western tradition—defining, distinguishing, and organizing—remains its primary syntactic role in visual construction[11].

4 Spatial Treatment: Epistemological Differences Between Scattered and Focal Perspective

4.1 Scattered Perspective: The Moving Eye and Flowing Time

Chinese traditional painting employs a spatial approach modern scholars often call "scattered perspective" or "mobile viewpoint perspective." This concept does not depict a geometric projection from a fixed point of view, but rather a synthetic organization of visual experiences encountered by the painter while moving or imagining movement. In a typical Chinese landscape handscroll, the viewer's sequential engagement along the horizontal unrolling of the scroll re-experiences the painter's temporal journey: space unfolds over time rather than being presented as a fixed geometric cross-section[12].

Northern Song artist Guo Xi's "Three Distances" (san yuan fa) in Linquan Gaozhi—high distance, deep distance, and level distance—provides the most systematic theoretical articulation of this scattered spatial consciousness[13]. These distances are not fixed viewpoints but different modes of qi perception, corresponding to different cosmic sentiments experienced when looking upward (high), downward (deep), or straight ahead (level). Notably, all three can coexist within a single composition, which is impossible under the geometric logic of linear perspective that assumes a single fixed

viewpoint.

4.2 Focal Perspective: Fixed Eye and Eternal Moment

The invention of linear (focal) perspective was one of the most revolutionary contributions of Renaissance visual culture. Its core epistemological assumption is the existence of a fixed, rational observation point, where all objects in space are precisely located relative to it, parallel lines converge at a vanishing point, and objects shrink proportionally with distance. This system transforms visual space into a measurable, predictable, and controllable geometric space.

Epistemologically, linear perspective embodies a "knowing, stationary observer" model: the observer stands in a fixed position, grasping the world objectively with a single-eye, instantaneous viewpoint. This model is structurally isomorphic to Cartesian subject-object dualism: the cognitive subject is clearly separated from the cognitive object, and the subject organizes the external world through purely rational vision. Merleau-Ponty, in his phenomenology of perception, critiques this model, emphasizing that genuine perception is always embodied, flowing, and context-dependent. In this sense, Chinese scattered perspective can be defended phenomenologically.

5 Temporality: Process Aesthetics vs. Completion Aesthetics

5.1 Process Aesthetics in Ink Painting

Ink painting is fundamentally process-oriented. The high absorbency of xuan paper means each brushstroke is irreversible: speed, pressure, and ink quantity leave temporal traces that cannot be modified. This irreversibility is not a technical limitation but a philosophical choice, reflecting a temporal philosophy of the present moment that emphasizes each stroke as a complete, singular event.

In Chinese painting tradition, the ideal mode of viewing involves imaginatively retracing the creative process: viewers read the brushwork to infer the artist's speed, pressure, and rhythm, approaching the mental state of the artist in reverse time. Su Shi emphasized "observing spirit and vitality," and Xie He's first of the Six Principles, qi yun sheng dong, similarly points to this tradition of understanding artworks as temporal traces. This contrasts sharply with the Western aesthetic focus on completed spatial form as the core of artistic value[14].

5.2 Completion Aesthetics in Western Drawing

Since the Renaissance, Western drawing has been guided by the principle of "completion" (finito): every part of the image should achieve the visual completeness required for accurate representation. Michelangelo and Raphael's drawings, with precise rendering of human anatomy and drapery, reflect the aesthetic ideal of transforming intellectual understanding ("knowing how forms should be") into visual completion (accurate reproduction on paper).

However, this completion-oriented tradition underwent profound disruption in modernism. Cézanne's drawings preserve traces of process and exploratory gestures, while Abstract Expressionist action painting elevates the temporality of artistic activity itself to the work's core content. Philosophically, these modernist innovations exhibit convergence with the process aesthetics of Chinese ink painting, despite very different historical and cultural origins.

6 Bodily Engagement: The Writing Body vs. the Observing Body

Differences in bodily engagement between Chinese ink painting and Western drawing are among the most tangible and frequently overlooked distinctions between the traditions. They reflect fundamentally different notions of artistic subjectivity[15].

In Chinese ink painting, the creative body is first and foremost a writing body. Calligraphy and painting are traditionally seen as sharing a common origin—"calligraphy and painting share the same source." Both use the brush as medium, rely on coordinated full-body movement (arm, wrist, fingers), and follow the rhythm of breath as a temporal framework. Training involves full-body engagement: standing to paint, suspending the wrist, making the body a conduit connecting spirit and medium. This aligns closely with Merleau-Ponty's notion that skill acquisition reorganizes the body schema.

In contrast, Western drawing presupposes more of an observing body: a technical subject coordinating vision and hand movement precisely to transcribe what is seen onto paper. Renaissance training emphasized observational accuracy: translating three-dimensional visual information into two-dimensional lines and shading. Here, the body functions primarily as a precision optical-mechanical apparatus—eye as sensor, hand as actuator—rather than as an integrated, living perceptual system(see Table 2).

Table 2. Six-dimensional comparative framework of aesthetic philosophy between Chinese ink painting and Western drawing

Dimension	Analytical Focus	Chinese Ink Painting	Western Drawing
D1	Philosophical Foundation	Organic theory — universe as a life community of flowing qi	Rationalist theory — geometric order conquering perceptual chaos
D2	Status of Line	Trace of qi — record of life force in temporal flow	Skeleton of form — rational tool defining boundaries of form
D3	Spatial Treatment	Scattered perspective — temporal unfolding of space through moving viewpoints	Focal perspective — geometric mapping from a single fixed viewpoint
D4	Temporality	Process aesthetics — irreversible brushstrokes as present-moment events	Completion aesthetics — the final completeness of form as primary value
D5	Bodily Engagement	Writing body — full-body, life-sensing conduit	Observing body — technical subject precisely transcribing visual information
D6	Use of Empty/Space	Aesthetics of void — using white as black, creating presence from absence	Fear of emptiness — filling the composition with form as a design goal

Note: D1–D6 correspond to the six comparative dimensions discussed in Sections II through VII of this article. The descriptions of each dimension are typological generalizations intended to highlight the dominant tendencies of the two traditions, without denying the internal diversity and exceptions within each.

7 Leftover White and Fulfillment: Void Aesthetics and Horror Vacui

If the comparisons in the previous five dimensions still allow for some convergent cases within each tradition, then the contrast between "leftover white" (*liubai*, void aesthetics) and "horror vacui" reveals one of the most fundamental divergences between the two traditions at the level of aesthetic intuition[16].

In Chinese ink painting, negative space (*liubai*) is not an unfinished area but an active aesthetic element. The principle of "counting white as black" (*ji bai dang hei*) is central to compositional strategy—the blank spaces and ink traces together create the rhythmic breathing of the image. In ink landscapes, large expanses of white can represent clouds and mist, lakes and rivers, or the sky; they can also represent nothing at all—simply the void itself, a visual manifestation of the formless *Dao*. Laozi's philosophical insight, "It is precisely where there is nothing that the utility of the room exists," finds its most direct visual counterpart in the aesthetics of leftover white in ink painting.

By contrast, the Western painting tradition exhibits a markedly different aesthetic attitude toward blank space. Although *horror vacui*—the fear of empty space—is not a universal feature across all periods and styles of Western art, it can be clearly identified as a deep cultural-aesthetic intuition running through a long tradition from Byzantine mosaics to the ornate decoration of the Baroque. In this tradition, blank space is typically understood as an area awaiting filling, a place where form has not yet arrived, rather than a positive manifestation of the void. This contrast profoundly reflects the two traditions' fundamentally different philosophical attitudes toward "Being" and "Nothingness."

8 Cross-Cultural Encounter and "Intertextual Brushstroke"

8.1 Cross-Cultural Encounters in the 20th Century

Since the 20th century, the cross-cultural encounter between the Chinese ink tradition and the Western drawing tradition has gone far beyond mere technical borrowing, generating a creative intertextual tension at the deeper level of aesthetic philosophy. This encounter has unfolded simultaneously in two directions: the Western modernist discovery and acceptance of Eastern art, and the re-positioning of traditional brush-and-ink by Chinese modern artists within a Western-learning context[17].

In the Western direction, the Impressionists' reception of Japanese ukiyo-e (the "Japonisme" movement) opened a channel for Western modern art to absorb East Asian visual thinking. Matisse's exploration of the independence of line and the value of negative space interestingly echoes certain core principles of Chinese painting, even though their philosophical sources differ radically. In the Abstract Expressionist movement, Franz Kline's canvases, characterized by bold black strokes against large areas of white space, have often been compared by critics to Chinese calligraphy. While such analogies involve historical simplification, they nevertheless reveal a deep underlying structure of aesthetic

resonance between the two traditions[18].

8.2 Intertextual Brushstroke: The Cross-Cultural Practices of Zao Wou-Ki and Chu Teh-Chun

This article employs the concept of "intertextual brushstroke" to describe artistic practices that emerge from a profound dialogue between the two traditions. These are not simple stylistic hybrids, but rather responses in which one tradition's core philosophical concerns engage with the other's formal language, undertaken with full awareness of their differences.

Zao Wou-Ki (1921–2013) represents the most mature embodiment of this practice. Having received traditional Chinese painting training at the Hangzhou Academy of Art in his youth, he later moved to Paris to study Western painting in depth. His mature works employ the color fields and brushwork of Abstract Expressionism, yet the underlying spatial consciousness, temporality, and pursuit of *qiyun* (vital rhythm and resonance) are deeply rooted in the philosophical tradition of Chinese ink painting. In Zao's canvases, leftover white is not merely uncovered canvas but an active breathing space; his brushstrokes are not constructions of form but records of the flow of time. This is the paradigmatic form of the "intertextual brushstroke": realizing Chinese philosophical aspirations through the material language of the West[19].

Chu Teh-Chun (1920–2014), who shared a similar cultural background and trajectory with Zao Wou-Ki, developed a mature style characterized by luminous color and ink-like fluidity. Within the framework of Western abstraction, his work presents visual qualities that profoundly resonate with the artistic conception of Chinese landscape painting. The cross-cultural practices of these two artists collectively demonstrate that the philosophical differences between ink painting and Western drawing are not insurmountable cultural barriers, but rather a space of aesthetic dialogue rich in creative tension(see Figure 1).

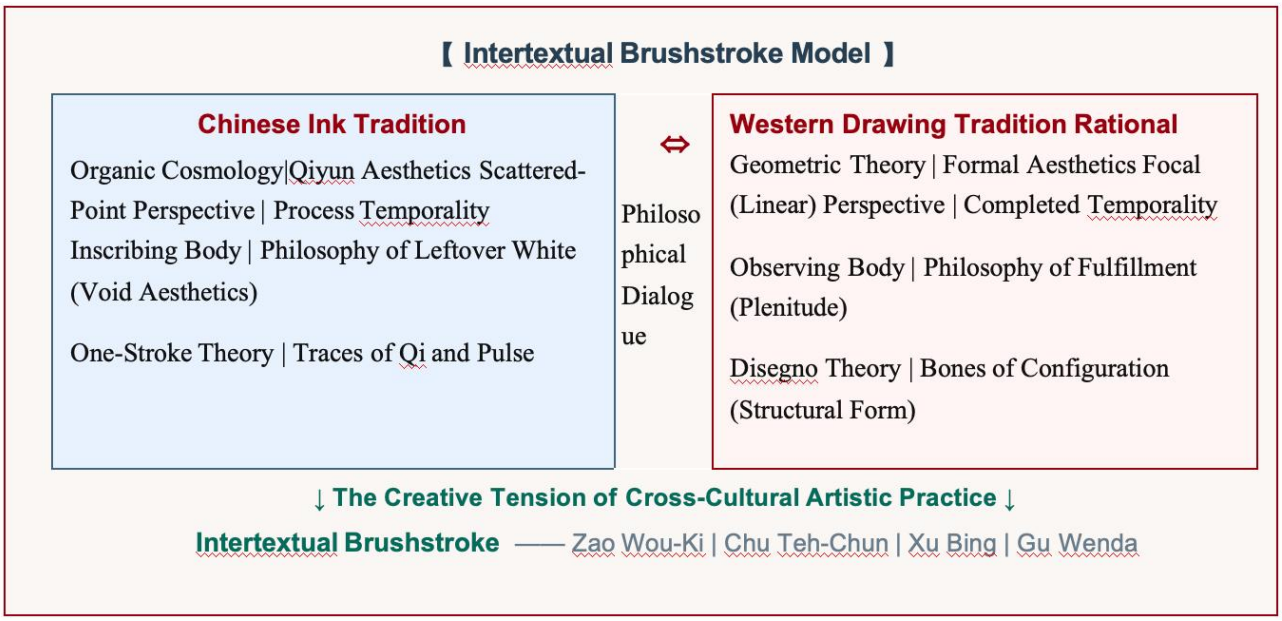

Figure 1. The generative mechanism of the "intertextual brushstroke": a model of philosophical dialogue between two traditions

Note: The arrows (⇔) indicate a bidirectional dialogue rather than a unidirectional influence. The concept of "intertextual brushstroke" refers to artistic practices that emerge from deep philosophical dialogue between the two traditions, rather than mere technical hybridization.

9 Cross-Cultural Artists and the Diverse Forms of Intertextual Brushstrokes

Beyond Zao Wou-Ki and Chu Teh-Chun, the second half of the 20th century witnessed the emergence of a cohort of artists practicing "intertextual brushstrokes" in various ways. These artists explored the creative dialogue space between the philosophy of Chinese ink painting and Western visual traditions from multiple perspectives, generating a diversity of forms and approaches within this cross-cultural engagement (see Table 3).

Table 3. Representative artists of the "intertextual brushstroke" and their practice modalities

Artist	Lifespan	Cultural Background	Features of Intertextual Practice	Dominant Philosophical Dialogue Dimensions
Zao Wou-Ki	1921–2013	China/France	Abstract Expressionist language + awareness of ink painting qi yun	Temporality, empty space, trace of qi

Artist	Lifespan	Cultural Background	Features of Intertextual Practice	Dominant Philosophical Dialogue Dimensions
Chu Teh-Chun	1920–2014	China/France	Luminous color + fluid structure of ink painting	Process aesthetics, writing body, organic rhythm
Xu Bing	1955–	China/USA	Conceptual writing systems + cross-linguistic textual philosophy	Status of line, writing body, meaning production
Gu Wenda	1955–	China/USA	Ink installations + bodily materials + writing rituals	Bodily engagement, processuality, Sino-Western symbolic systems
Liu Dan	1953–	China/USA	Minimalist language + meticulous observation of traditional ink	Aesthetic of empty space, temporality, materiality and spirituality

Note: The artists listed in this table are representative examples of the "intertextual brushstroke" concept and are not exhaustive. The descriptions of each artist's practice are based on the analytical framework of this paper and do not constitute a comprehensive qualitative assessment of their entire body of work.

10 Conclusion: Two Philosophies of Trace and Their Dialogue

Through systematic comparative analysis along six dimensions, this paper reveals the deep philosophical differences between Chinese ink painting aesthetics and Western drawing aesthetics, and employs the concept of "intertextual brushstroke" to describe the creative dialogue emerging from cross-cultural encounters since the 20th century. The core conclusions are as follows:

The differences between brush-and-ink and line are philosophical rather than merely technical. The distinct material characteristics of each medium—such as the organic absorbency of brush and xuan paper versus the precision of Western drawing tools—are not purely technical choices independent of cultural philosophy. They embody two civilizations' fundamental understandings of the universe, time, body, and existence in material form. Any comparative study must address both technical and philosophical levels to reach the core of the issue[20].

The differences between the two traditions are neither fully reducible nor insurmountable. The concept of "intertextual brushstroke" and the cross-cultural practices of artists such as Zao Wou-Ki and Chu Teh-Chun demonstrate that the philosophical gap between ink painting and drawing is not an impassable barrier but a dialogic space rich with creative tension. This dialogue does not dissolve one tradition in favor of another; rather, it recognizes differences and uses them as resources for creative meaning-making.

Comparative aesthetics research offers important methodological insights for art education. Understanding the philosophical differences between ink painting and drawing not only aids art history and criticism in more precisely interpreting cross-cultural artistic phenomena, but also provides contemporary art education with an aesthetic perspective that transcends the limitations of a single cultural tradition. In a globalized context, cultivating the capacity to navigate consciously between these two traditions is a key challenge for 21st-century art education.

Future research directions include: (1)Empirical studies based on cognitive science and neuroaesthetics—examining whether systematic perceptual differences exist between Chinese and Western viewers when engaging with ink painting and drawing. (2)More detailed period-specific comparative studies—focusing on particular historical moments, such as 17th-century Dutch drawing and contemporaneous Chinese literati painting. (3)Investigations into the continuation and transformation of brush-and-ink and line philosophies in the context of contemporary digital media.

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