

## Taoist Philosophical Implications and Artistic Expressions of Human-Animal Relationships in Chinese Paintings

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### ABSTRACT

Since ancient times, the evolution of human culture and ideas has revolved around the link between humans and animals. However, how human-animal imagery in traditional art incorporates Daoist philosophy and informs modern ecological aesthetics remains a study subject deserving of thorough investigation against the dual backdrop of present ecological crises and cultural modernization. The purpose of this study is to investigate, from a Daoist philosophical perspective, the philosophical implications and artistic manifestations of human-animal connections in Chinese painting. This study uses a thorough methodology that combines interdisciplinary research, picture analysis, and literature review. It examines the influence of Daoist concepts such as “following the way of nature(道法自然),” “non-action(无为),” and “The unity of Heaven and humanity(天人合一)” on artistic creation; traces the evolutionary trajectory of human-animal relationships from primitive totems and religious symbols to modern ecological art; and reveals how Daoist thought shapes artistic expressions of ecological consciousness, equality of life, and spiritual symbiosis within Chinese painting. Findings reveal that the cosmology and philosophy of life inherent in Daoist thought enable Chinese painting to transcend anthropocentrism, forming an artistic ethic centered on respect, coexistence, and balance. This paper offers profound cultural insights for contemporary ecological civilization development.

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**Contribution/Originality:** This study offers a new theoretical direction for Chinese art studies by developing a new framework for Chinese painting research based on Daoist ecological aesthetics. It opens up new avenues for ecological aesthetics research by demonstrating the persistence and reinterpretation of Daoist ideas in works of art that pertain to human-animal relationships.

## 1. Introduction

The animal-human connection continues to be a crucial link between the ancient and modern eras. The nature of human-animal relationships has changed significantly from the early hunter-gatherer era, when humans depended on animals for survival, to modern society, where animals have grown into companions, spiritual symbols, and vital parts of ecosystems. Anthropologist Shipman asserts that "Humans are the only species on Earth capable of forming one-to-one relationships with members of other species." This highlights the emotional similarities between humans and animals as well as the differences in human culture, emotions, and thought processes .

Within ancient Chinese thought, Daoist philosophy provides a distinct perspective on human-animal relationships. Daoism, founded on key beliefs such as "following the way of nature," "the unity of Heaven and humanity," and "non-action," promotes peaceful cohabitation between humans and nature, obedience to the cosmic order, and respect for all beings' essential nature. Daoists see humans as intrinsic aspects of the natural world, rather than rulers who stand above it. Heavens and earth, mountains and rivers, plants and trees, birds and beasts—all are representations of the Dao, interconnected and mutually beneficial. This non-anthropocentric worldview created a solid ideological framework for ancient Chinese artistic output, particularly painting (Barnhart et al. 1997).

Since ancient times, Chinese painting has stressed the aesthetic realm of "*the unity of Heaven and humanity*," with artistic creation serving as a way of spiritual communication between humans and nature. Paintings have seldom shown humans and animals as opposing or distinct species throughout history. Rather, they show a natural, harmonious communion of life as they integrate into the surrounding landscape of mountains, rivers, and vegetation. From ancient rock art to Song Dynasty flower and bird paintings, oxen and cranes depicted in literati brushwork, and the ecological themes of contemporary painters, animal imagery has consistently functioned as a vital spiritual emblem in Chinese painting. It stands for humanity's comprehension and reverence for life, the natural world, and the universe.

Reexamining Daoist views regarding human-animal relations has significant current importance in light of global ecological catastrophes, environmental degradation, and spiritual estrangement. It provides priceless intellectual resources for contemporary ecological ethics in addition to embodying old philosophical wisdom. Daoist ecological viewpoints can be experienced and communicated in more vivid and captivating ways through the visual medium of art. Particularly in contemporary Chinese painting, an increasing number of artists draw inspiration from Daoist philosophy, using brushwork, color, and composition to explore new equilibriums and symbiotic relationships between humans and animals and humans and nature.

This study adopts Daoist philosophy as its theoretical lens to examine how concepts such as "following the way of nature" and "*the unity of Heaven and humanity*" influence artistic expressions of human-animal relationships in Chinese painting. Through a combination of literature review, image analysis, and interdisciplinary methods, this study systematically examines the aesthetic manifestations and ecological significance of Daoist philosophy in Chinese painting. By analyzing classical texts such as the Tao Te Ching and Zhuangzi, alongside interpretations of works by painters across dynasties, this paper aims to reveal how Daoist thought shapes artists' aesthetic consciousness and

influences the visual representation of human-animal relationships across different historical periods.

This study aims to widen the use of Daoist ideas in art and ecological aesthetics studies by providing a new academic perspective on understanding the "*the unity of heaven and humanity*" concept in Chinese painting. It seeks to provide intellectual inspiration for modern artistic creativity, supporting the birth of more works that embody ecological consciousness and humanistic care, while promoting the transmission and innovation of traditional culture.

### 1.1. Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to explore the artistic expression of human-animal relationships in Chinese painting and their underlying philosophical roots from a Daoist perspective. By systematically examining core Daoist concepts such as “following the Way of Nature,” “The unity of Heaven and humanity,” and “non-action” the research aims to reveal how these philosophical ideas influence artists' creative concepts and aesthetic orientations, thereby constructing an ecological aesthetic framework centered on harmony, balance, and symbiosis.

This study will reveal how Daoist philosophy shapes the visual representation of human-animal relationships in Chinese painting. It analyzes the historical evolution of human-animal dynamics within Chinese painting. In order to show how traditional philosophy continues to impact the spiritual heart of Chinese art, this longitudinal analysis attempts to show how Daoist thought has been passed down, changed, and reproduced over many historical eras. This study enhances the theoretical framework of ecological aesthetics and human-animal connection studies by fusing Daoist philosophy with art studies. It not only offers fresh perspectives on old culture, but it also gives contemporary art critique a philosophical foundation.

## 2. Literature Review

Over the past thirty years, human-animal interactions research has undergone significant transformation, evolving from a minor issue in early anthropology to a prominent area of study in the humanities and social sciences. This tendency manifests in art historical inquiry as the "ecological turn," which highlights the interconnectedness of all living things and the moral implications of visual representations. Animals have always had a dual function in human society, according to scholar Cary Wolfe: they are both familiar and alien. By decentralizing the human subject, post-humanist theories challenge conventional anthropocentric thinking and encourage a reconsideration of agency and interspecies communication. In a similar vein, Haraway's notion of "companion species" redefines human-animal relations as a mutually enabling, co-evolutionary collaboration rather than as unidirectional dominance and submission.([Garlick et al., 2011](#); [Haraway, 2004](#)).

Within the Chinese context, academic discourse on the relationship between humans and animals in visual arts remains relatively limited. Unlike Western visual studies that integrate posthumanism with ecological theory, Chinese art research tends to focus more on iconography, stylistic evolution, and cultural symbolism, while offering fewer interpretations from an ecological perspective. This gap underscores the necessity of revisiting indigenous philosophical traditions, particularly Daoist thought. Daoist

thought predates Western ecological theory yet equally profoundly articulates concepts of interdependence among living beings, natural equilibrium, and non-hierarchical coexistence. As Le Guin noted in her English translation of the Tao Te Ching, the Daoist principle that “*Man follows the earth, the earth follows heaven, heaven follows the Tao, and the Tao follows nature*” actually presents a “pre-ecological” worldview. This perspective views all things as part of a spontaneous, balanced organic system, rather than as appendages to human will (Le Guin, 1998).

In art historical research, traditional studies of Chinese painting have predominantly focused on literati painting aesthetics, brush-and-ink language, and compositional structure. By highlighting the Confucian and Daoist spiritual underpinnings of Chinese art, scholars like Bush and Cahill have exposed the ethical and philosophical aspects of Chinese art (Cahill, 1976). Animal imagery, however, is frequently considered a decorative theme or a secondary symbolic element (Bush, 2012). Scholars have just lately started reexamining animal images from the perspectives of ecological consciousness and cosmology. L. Zehou investigated how moral and philosophical ideas are projected onto the natural world, including animals. Their study sheds light on the viewpoints on life and the universe that are ingrained in visual culture, but the ethical implications of Daoist animal philosophy in modern artistic production are still not fully explored (Zehou, 2023). While Daoist ecological perspectives have received some discussion in philosophy and environmental ethics, their visual manifestations—such as composition, subject matter, brushwork, and spatial rhythm—remain underanalyzed. Therefore, this study aims to fill this academic gap by combining philosophical interpretation with iconographic analysis. It places contemporary Chinese painting within the continuum of Daoist ecological aesthetics, revealing the ecological consciousness and aesthetic transformation manifested in contemporary artistic creation through Daoist thought.

## **2.1. The Historical Traceability of the Relationship between Humans and Animals in Chinese Paintings**

### *2.1.1. Animal Worship and Primitive Artistic Expression*

In ancient times, the productivity level of human beings was extremely low, and their knowledge of natural phenomena was limited. Animals became objects of worship because of their great power, special skills, and mysterious behaviors. Primitive tribes often regarded animals as totems, believing that they had supernatural power and could bless the tribes. Such as the jade dragon of the Hongshan culture and the Liangzhu culture, the animal decoration on the jade cong clearly reflects the people at that time and the animal worship of the psychology.

In primitive art, animal images appear frequently. Rock paintings, colored pottery, and other forms of art in the animal image are vivid and simple. For example, Figure 1 depicts a hunting scene from the Yin Mountain rock carvings in Inner Mongolia. The Yinshan Rock Carvings feature an exceptionally rich variety of subjects, including hunting scenes, animal figures, ritual activities, depictions of chariots and horses, and symbolic patterns. Among these, animal figures stand out most prominently, such as deer, sheep, horses, cattle, and wolves. Animals are often carved with highly dynamic lines—simple, powerful strokes rich in symbolic meaning. Deer figures are particularly common, believed to be associated with fertility, abundance, and spirituality, reflecting primitive humans' reverence for the vitality of nature. The Yin Mountain rock carvings

reflect the totemic beliefs and nature worship of early northern ethnic groups. In these images, humans and animals are not depicted as adversaries but coexist within a dynamic cosmic order. This worldview of human-nature symbiosis aligns remarkably with later Daoist philosophy. These animal images are a unique way of communication between humans and nature and are also the prototype of early Chinese paintings ([Gantulga & Turbat, 2021](#)).

Figure 1: Yin Mountain rock carvings in Inner Mongolia



Source: [Sina News Center \(2025\)](#)

### 2.1.2. Sacrifices in the pre-Qin period

From the pre-Qin to the Qin and Han Dynasties, animals had a significant practical value in social life. In agricultural production, cattle, horses, and other livestock were used for labor and transportation; in war, warhorses and hunting dogs played an important role; and animals were used as sacrifices in sacrificial activities. The Zhou Rites recorded a variety of sacrificial provisions, which fully reflects the importance of animals in the socio-political and religious life at that time ([Jaffe & Campbell, 2021](#)).

During this period, animal images in paintings gradually changed from purely recording practical functions to aesthetic expressions. [Figure 2](#) is the pre-Qin silk painting “Character Dragon and Phoenix Figure.” In the “Character Dragon and Phoenix Figure,” the animal image not only has symbolic meaning but also reflects a certain aesthetic pursuit in its line outlining and modeling performance. Qin and Han portrait stones and portrait bricks in the animal image are rich and diverse, and the carving techniques are mature, showing the craftsmen's skill and reflecting the people of that time on the animal aesthetic awareness of the enhancement of the solid foundation for the development of the later generations of Chinese paintings of animal subjects. During the Warring States period, the “*dragon and phoenix motif*” and “*imperial dragon motif*” on silk indicate that people began to interact with animals in a face-to-face manner, and this interaction reflected the independence between humans and animals.

Figure 2: Character Dragon and Phoenix Figure



Source: [Chinese Treasures Museum \(2025a\)](#)

### 2.1.3. Religious Symbols (Wei, Jin, North and South Dynasties)

During the period from the Wei, Jin, North and South Dynasties to the Sui and Tang dynasties, Buddhism was introduced to China and spread widely, which had a profound impact on Chinese people's concept of animals. Buddhism advocates the equality of all living beings, opposes the killing of living beings, and advocates compassion, which is intertwined with Taoism's concept of the equality of all living things and further strengthens people's respect for animal life. The appearance of a large number of animal images in Buddhist stories and sutra paintings, such as the Nine-Colored Deer and elephants in the murals of the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang, greatly enriched the connotation of animal subjects in traditional Chinese paintings while conveying Buddhist teachings. [Figure 3](#) depicts the story of the Nine-Colored Deer in Dunhuang murals from the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties period. In The Nine-Colored Deer, the deer not only symbolizes the image of animals but also represents the spirit of compassion and serenity in Buddhism, as well as the spiritual connection between humans and animals ([Agnew et al., 2016](#)).

Figure 3: Dunhuang Mural "The Nine-Colored Deer Jataka"



Source: [Chinese Treasures Museum \(2025b\)](#)

#### 2.1.4. *The Everyday Depiction of Human-Animal Relationships in Song Dynasty Painting*

The relationship between humans and animals in Song Dynasty paintings demonstrates a spiritual connection that transcends practical value. With delicate brushstrokes, painters sublimated the images of animals in daily life into aesthetic symbols carrying the humanistic spirit. Whether domesticated animals or wild species, they were given unique dignity of life under the brush of Song painters, and this artistic expression reflected the Song people's deep understanding of and reverence for all things natural. Compared with the Tang Dynasty paintings, in which animal subjects demonstrated the nobility's majesty, Song Dynasty works paid more attention to the warm interaction between human beings and animals as equal and symbiotic. This shift not only reflects the evolution of artistic aesthetics but also the ideal pursuit of a harmonious relationship between man and nature in Song society (Fan et al., 2025).

Figure 4 is a detail from Zhang Zeduan's *Along the River During Qingming Festival*, depicting figures and animals in the bustling marketplace. In *Qingming Shanghe Tu*, Zhang Zeduan builds a vibrant ecological picture of the city: mules and horses carrying goods, oxen plowing in the fields, and dogs wandering in the streets. All of these animal figures are intertwined with the daily life of the people in the city. The artist's precise stylistic language not only records the prosperity of the Northern Song Dynasty city but also reveals the essential relationship between human civilization and the animal world—animals are not only tools of labor but also an indispensable part of human society. This artistic expression transcends the mere reproduction of scenes and rises to a humanistic reflection on the community of life.

Figure 4: *Along the River During the Qingming Festival*



Source: [Chinese Treasures Museum \(2025c\)](#)

#### 2.1.5. *Representation and Metaphor of Imagery in Ming and Qing Literati Paintings*

Animal paintings of the Ming and Qing dynasties show a richer artistic outlook, inheriting the Song and Yuan ink and brush traditions, while at the same time responding to the contemporary context of the fusion of Chinese and Western art, and displaying a diversified creative orientation. In expressing the relationship between humans and animals, Qing painters not only retained the traditional concept of harmony

in the view of nature but also gave it a deeper cultural metaphor, making the picture have both aesthetic interest and spiritual symbolism (Murck & Fong, 1991).

The creations of this period often used idyllic pastoral scenes as the carrier, through the classic patterns of shepherd boy and ox, fisherman and gull, etc., vividly interpreting the ecological wisdom of the agrarian civilization in which man and nature are mutually dependent. Figure 5 depicts Dai Jin's "Cattle Herding" from the Ming Dynasty, portraying a serene scene of a man and an ox enjoying rural life. The composition is simple yet the theme is vividly expressed. With the development of the realistic painting style, artists gradually broke through the bounds of resemblance and turned to the condensed language of ink and brushwork and imaginative modeling techniques to sublimate the image of animals as artistic symbols for the literati to express their feelings and aspirations. Elephants, cranes, deer, and other auspicious animals were given the spiritual qualities of personification and became cultural carriers to convey friendship, purity, longevity, and other beautiful symbols (Wu, 2008).

Figure 5: Ink Painting of Herding Cattle by Dai Jin



Source: Chinese Treasures Museum (2025d)

It is worth noting that the Ming and Qing painters of the animals have gone beyond the simple reproduction of objects but, through the anthropomorphism of the art of processing, have built up a subject-object mingling, the heart of the aesthetic realm of the sense of things. Pictures of people and animals are no longer a simple relationship of dependence but the formation of emotional resonance of the community of life—the pastor's flute and the cattle head down, the fisherman's leisure and the gull's proximity to the philosophical implications of the unity of man and heaven. This artistic expression not only continues the ecological ethics of traditional painting but also expands the spiritual dimension of animal subject paintings through the use of symbolism.

### 2.1.6. *Symbol of national spirit (modern times)*

After experiencing the social changes of the late Qing Dynasty and the baptism of Western artistic trends, modern Chinese painting gradually broke through the traditional paradigm and presented a brand-new artistic style. With the introduction of Western artistic concepts such as Realism and Impressionism, painters underwent profound changes in their creative methods, choice of subject matter, and expression of ideas (Hu, 2023). In the expression of the relationship between man and animals in this theme, artists no longer adhere to the traditional symbol of auspiciousness, but with the realism of the modelling language and personalized emotional expression, they make an in-depth exploration of the emotional resonance between man and animals and the social metaphors they carry so as to interpret the national spirit and humanistic concern.

Xu Beihong's works on the subject of horses are exemplary of this period of transition. Figure 6 depicts Xu Beihong's "Gallopers," a modern Chinese ink painting executed on traditional rice paper. With anatomically precise brushstrokes, he vividly portrays the muscle lines and bone structure of the steed, creating a strong dynamic tension in the concise composition. The horses in the picture are ready to go, full of primitive vitality and uninhibited spirit, and this kind of artistic treatment not only shows the deep emotional connection between humans and animals but also becomes a visual symbol of national spirit (Ma, 2022). Xu Beihong is especially good at depicting unrestrained horses, their vigorous posture and free form, a metaphor for the national independence, national self-improvement, and fervent hope. In these works, the image of the horse has transcended the animal itself, sublimated into the carrier of the spirit of the times, and not only highlights the artist's concern for the people's social commitment but also reflects their resolute and heroic personal artistic character (Wang, 2009). This creative concept of linking the animal image with the destiny of the nation has created a new realm of modern Chinese animal painting.

Figure 6: Xu Beihong's Ink Painting of Galloping Horses



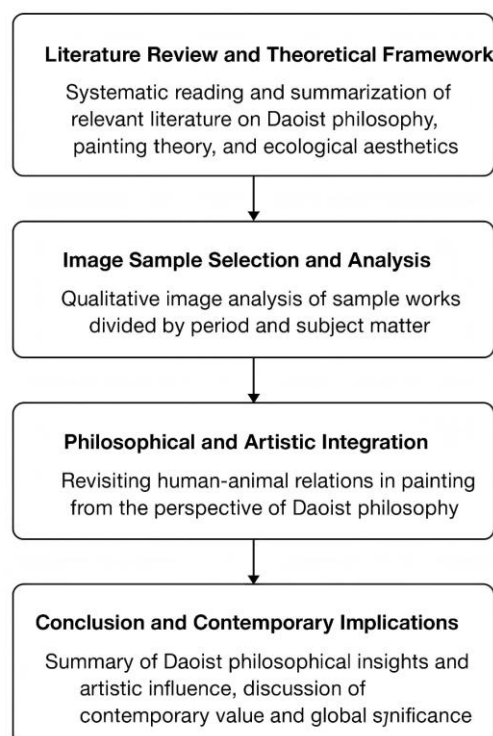
Source: Chinese Treasures Museum (2025e)

### 3. Methods

This study follows a strict research framework to guarantee methodical analysis and conceptual coherence, even if it mostly uses qualitative and interpretive research techniques. Overall, the study employs an interpretive and practice-based research paradigm that incorporates philosophical contemplation, contextual analysis of art history, and thorough interpretation of texts and images. This study uses a multi-layered methodological approach due to the research theme's emphasis on ancient Daoist philosophy and its creative embodiment in current Chinese painting. It thoroughly reveals the relationships between Daoist philosophy and creative production by combining a review of the literature, hermeneutic analysis, and comparative iconographic research.

Starting from the theoretical foundations of Daoist ecological aesthetics, the study explores core concepts such as “*following the way of nature*,” “*Non-action*,” and “*The unity of Heaven and humanity*” at textual and philosophical levels. Through analysis of classical texts like the Tao Te Ching and Zhuangzi alongside modern Daoist scholarship, it clarifies that the focus of Daoist philosophy's perspectives on nature and life lies in examining their ontological and ethical significance—particularly how they shape human cognition of non-human life and natural order, thereby providing intellectual foundations for ecological consciousness in art. This research traces the evolution of animal imagery from early Chinese civilization to the contemporary era, revealing the continuity and reinterpretation of Daoist cosmology in artistic creation across different periods. Through semiotic and iconographic analysis of pictorial representations, it examines the cultural symbolism and philosophical connotations embodied by specific animals throughout historical stages. Comparative visual analysis explores how contemporary Chinese painters integrate or reconstruct Daoist ecological sensibilities within their creative practices. The flowchart of this study is depicted in [Figure 7](#).

Figure 7: Research Flowchart



## 4. Findings

### 4.1. The Philosophical Implications of the Relationship between Humans and Animals in the Creation of Chinese Paintings from the Perspective of Taoism

This study systematically examines Daoist philosophy, human-animal relationships, and the traditions of Chinese painting through iconographic analysis. It reveals that core Daoist concepts—such as “*following the way of nature*,” “*The unity of Heaven and humanity*,” and “*non-action*”—have profoundly influenced the development of Chinese painting. This influence manifests not only as the philosophical foundation of artistic concepts but also transforms into visual language and creative spirit, shaping the unique aesthetic framework of harmonious coexistence between humans and animals in Chinese painting (Jianping, 2002). Palgrave Macmillan. Daoist philosophy posits that “*The Way gives birth to One, One gives birth to Two, Two gives birth to Three, and Three gives birth to all things.*” All life originates from the ‘Way’ and exists within an interdependent, cyclically flowing whole (Zheng, 2020).

Humans and animals are not dichotomous opposites but coexist within the same web of life, jointly participating in the generation and transformation of the cosmos (LaFargue, & Pas, 1998). This worldview of “*all things as one*” profoundly shaped Chinese artists’ understanding of nature and life. In painting, this philosophy manifests as an attitude of equal regard toward natural life. Traditional artists did not look down upon animals from a human perspective but engaged in dialogue with nature with a humble heart. For instance, in Song Dynasty paintings depicting herding cattle or horses, artists often placed herders and animals within the same visual field, emphasizing their harmonious coexistence. The figures’ poses are calm and gentle, while the animals’ expressions are vivid and natural, embodying a sense of mutual interaction between living beings. This aesthetic orientation contrasts sharply with Western painting’s emphasis on human conquest and control over nature. Influenced by Daoist philosophy, Chinese painting tends to depict scenes of “*The unity of Heaven and humanity*” rather than asserting human-centered subjectivity. Animals in these works cease to be decorative symbols or emblems of power, instead becoming co-equal living beings with spiritual significance and emotional depth.

### 4.2. The Connotation of “*following the way of nature*”

“Following the way of nature” comes from “Tao Te Ching,” the core meaning of which is to emphasize that Taoism takes nature as its law and operates in accordance with the laws of nature. Nature in this context is not nature in the narrow sense of the word but refers to the natural state of things and their internal laws. In the Taoist system of thought, Tao is the root and essence of all things in the universe, and in the process of the birth of all things in Tao, the laws of nature always run through it. As one of all things, human beings should follow the way of nature and should not act recklessly to disrupt the harmonious order of nature. The way of nature is the law of all things, and art creation should also follow this law to present the beauty of natural harmony. This is highly consistent with the philosophical proposition of Taoism that ‘*man follows the law of the earth, the earth follows the law of the sky, the sky follows the law of the Tao, and the Tao follows the law of nature.*’ (Le Guin, 1998).

### 4.3. Embodiment of the concept of the equality of all things

Taoism holds the view that all things are one and believes that all things in the world are equal before the Tao, regardless of differences in form and function. Animals, like human beings, are products of Tao and have intrinsic value and the right to exist. The expression *“Heaven and earth were born together with me, and all things are one with me”* in Zhuangzi's *“The Theory of the Unity of Things”* profoundly embodies this viewpoint (LaFargue, & Pas, 1998).

He reinterpreted the deep connection between the universe, life, aesthetics and cognition with a poetic vision, and constructed a unique philosophical system of “beauty” under the light of Taoist wisdom. The essence of his thought can be condensed into the cosmic view of life: *“Heaven and earth are born with me, and everything is one with me”*, which profoundly reveals the essential unity between the existent and the existence itself (Ely, 2009). Zhuangzi's aesthetic experience of the ultimate state of forgetfulness is perfectly interpreted in his famous fable of “Butterfly Dream” - when the philosopher is transformed into a fluttering butterfly, the individual life and the cosmos reach an instantaneous unity. This kind of spiritual wandering beyond the subject-object dichotomy ultimately points to the true state of life, which is *“free and unattended”*, manifesting the deep harmony between the laws of nature and the essence of human nature (Shouyun & Lan, 2023). It is this unique thinking paradigm that gives Chinese painting its ethereal and transcendent artistic character. As the sinologist David Hinton puts it, *“The ultimate pursuit of the ancient Chinese literati artists was to dissolve their self-consciousness into the unceasing flow of the universe and to become an integral part of the operation of the ‘Tao’”* (LaFargue, & Pas, 1998).

In the Taoist view, human beings should not be self-centered and regard animals as subordinates but should respect the existence of animal life and recognize their equal status with human beings in the natural ecosystem. This view of the equality of all things provides a fundamental philosophical basis for understanding the relationship between humans and animals and has had a profound impact on the expression of animal themes in traditional Chinese art creation.

### 4.4. Influence of “Non-action” Thought on Human-Animal Coexistence Patterns

*“non-action”* literally means “doing nothing”, but does not mean being passive and inactive but rather not intervening excessively or acting recklessly against the laws of nature. According to Taoism, nature has its own laws of operation, and too much human intervention will disrupt the harmony of nature and cause chaos. In the process of human-animal coexistence, the idea of *“non-action”* requires human beings to restrain their own desire for control and avoid excessive interference in the living environment and behavior of animals. Humans should follow the natural nature of animals and let them live and reproduce freely in their natural state. (Slingerland, 2007)

Under the guidance of the idea of *“non-action,”* human beings and animals should live together in a state of harmonious symbiosis. Human beings should provide animals with a suitable living space, avoid indiscriminate hunting and killing, and not destroy their habitats. Ancient Taoist followers often practiced this concept, such as some mountain hermits who lived in harmony with animals without interfering with each other. In the creation of Chinese paintings, painters are influenced by the idea of *“non-action,”* depicting scenes in which people and animals live in harmony, conveying the desire for

and advocacy of such a mode of coexistence, reminding people to respect the natural state of existence of animals, and rethinking the over-exploitation and utilization of animal behavior.

#### **4.5. The Philosophical Implications of the Relationship between Humans and Animals in the Creation of Chinese Paintings from the Perspective of Taoism**

##### *4.5.1. The quest for natural harmony*

Taoism's respect for nature is not only reflected in the creation of landscapes but also extends to a deep concern for the lives of animals. In the Taoist belief system, animals are given the same spiritual value as human beings, and they are regarded as spiritual beings in many doctrines and practices. The Taoist cosmology believes that animals contain the essence of heaven and earth, and monks often realize the true meaning of the Way by living with animals and observing their habits.

As the core category of Taoist philosophy, "*Tao*" is not only the natural law that governs all things but also the original power that generates the universe. In the Tao Te Ching, it is said, "*Man follows the law of the earth, the law of the earth follows the law of the sky, the law of the sky follows the law of the road, and the law of the road follows the law of nature*", which profoundly reveals Taoism's core idea of adhering to nature and respecting its laws (Le Guin, 1998). Traditional Chinese artistic creation has always been characterized by the recognition of "*Tao*," and Taoism has given animal images a unique aesthetic value in Chinese paintings by reinforcing the intrinsic connection between human beings and nature (Yeh, 2008). Under Taoism, animals are not objects to be dominated but integral parts of nature, and their artistic expression essentially reflects the philosophical thinking of symbiosis and co-prosperity between human beings and all things in nature. Taoism advocates that human beings should abandon the delusion of dominating nature and instead pursue harmonious coexistence with all things in heaven and earth, and this idea has profoundly influenced the way of expression and spiritual connotation of animal subjects in Chinese paintings.

As one of the foundations of Chinese culture, Taoism is a metaphysical philosophical system and a way of thinking that permeates the marrow of artistic creation. In the millennia-long development of Chinese painting, the interaction between humans and animals has always been a philosophical theme, and this artistic expression has formed a deep resonance with Taoist thought. By examining the relationship between humans and animals in traditional paintings from a Taoist perspective, we can see how the Taoist view of nature has subtly shaped the way Chinese artists observe the world and express life. The concept of "the unity of heaven and man" and the philosophy of "*the law of nature*" advocated by Taoism not only laid down a unique aesthetic paradigm for Chinese paintings but also vividly interpreted Taoism's cognition of the order of the universe and thoughts on the nature of life through the harmonious coexistence of humans and animals in the paintings. Whether it is the magnificent landscape paintings, the interesting figure paintings, or the delicate and elegant flower and bird paintings, the animal figures and the figures always maintain a kind of natural wholeness, and this kind of artistic treatment is exactly the best visual interpretation of Taoism's concept of equality, symbiosis, and the pursuit of harmony. The Tao Te Ching states: '*Man follows the law of the earth, the earth follows the law of the sky, the sky follows the law of the Tao, and the Tao follows the law of nature.*' (Le Guin, 1998).

Jia Youfu's landscape paintings present a unique perspective of ecological aesthetics, and his images of living creatures go beyond simple depictions of objects and are sublimated into philosophical carriers of dialogue between man and nature. Figure 8 is Jia Youfu's ink-wash landscape painting. In his art world, figures and animals do not exist in isolation but as organic parts of the natural whole, jointly interpreting the “*unity of heaven and man*” poetry of life. In painting, this philosophy manifests as an attitude of equal regard toward natural life. Traditional painters did not look down upon animals from a human perspective, but engaged in dialogue with nature with a humble heart. Artists often placed herdsmen and animals within the same visual field, emphasizing their harmonious coexistence; figures appeared calm and gentle, while animals displayed lively, natural expressions, embodying the mutual resonance of life where “*humans become one with creatures, and creatures become one with humans.*” This aesthetic orientation contrasts sharply with Western painting's emphasis on human conquest and control over nature. Influenced by Daoist philosophy, Chinese painting tends to depict scenes of “*The unity of Heaven and humanity*” rather than asserting human-centered subjectivity. Animals in these works cease to be decorative symbols or emblems of power, instead becoming co-equal living beings with spiritual significance and emotional depth.

Figure 8: Landscape in Ink and Wash



Source: [Meixun Network \(2025\)](#)

The artist builds a natural theater full of spirituality with delicate strokes: the cows working on the hillside are not only a symbol of farming civilization but also a vivid testimony of collaboration between man and nature; the free-flying birds convey the spiritual yearning for an unrestrained realm. The images of these living creatures are skillfully placed within the landscape, maintaining their biological characteristics and harmoniously echoing the activities of the characters. What is particularly noteworthy is that Jia Youfu does not deliberately emphasise the subject position of human beings but rather, through the handling of proportionality, allows the figures to naturally blend into the background of the landscape, thus highlighting the grandeur of nature and the equality of life.

In terms of artistic expression, the artist utilizes the technique of static and dynamic: the contrast between the rushing cows and soaring birds and the quiet mountains and forests not only strengthens the visual rhythm of the picture but also implies the cyclical law of unending life in the natural world. The daily activities of the figures, such as walking and resting in the mountains, are imbued with the philosophical meaning of

adhering to the time of the heavens, demonstrating the profound wisdom of “*the law of nature*” in traditional Chinese culture. Through this artistic expression, Jia Youfu has successfully transformed Taoist ecological philosophy into a visual aesthetic experience, enabling the viewer to feel the complex emotions of intimacy and reverence between man and nature when appreciating the paintings.

#### 4.5.2. *The Taoist Philosophy of Ease and Freedom*

In the Taoist system of thought, the realm of “*freedom and liberty*” constitutes an important dimension of its philosophical essence. This concept goes beyond the simple notion of freedom of action and implies a profound understanding of the nature of life, the laws of nature, and the truth of the universe (Hinton, 2020). It advocates the realization of an uninhibited mind through transcendence at the spiritual level and ultimately the attainment of a state of existence that is one with all things in heaven and earth.

In the Taoist vision, true freedom means awakening from the shackles of worldly merit and fame. Zhuangzi philosophy interprets this state as “*no waiting*”—a “state of absolute freedom that is not dependent on any external conditions. Just like the Kunpeng depicted in Chuang tzu, where “*the water strikes 3,000 miles, and the tuan shakes and rises 90,000 miles,*” this magnificent image is not mere literary imagination but a metaphor for the infinite extension of the spiritual dimension (LaFargue, & Pas, 1998). According to Taoism, when a person breaks through the limitations of the physical body and dissolves the subject-object dichotomy, he or she will be able to look at the world from the perspective of the “*Qi Matter,*” realizing that there is no difference between grass, trees, insects and fish, and human beings (Dal Lago, 2014).

This concept of freedom fundamentally deconstructs anthropocentrism and leads people to integrate into the rhythm of nature as participants. It is not a passive avoidance of the world, but a return to the true wisdom of life by transcending utilitarian calculations. In the realm of forgetfulness, the individual maintains a unique experience of life while being in harmony with the universal universalization and ultimately realizes inner tranquility and completeness. This philosophy has not only shaped the practice of Taoism but has also profoundly influenced traditional Chinese art and aesthetic pursuits. The primary notion of Zhuangzi is ‘*free transit*’, which emphasizes that one can only genuinely achieve freedom by transcending dependency on external objects ‘*no waiting*’ (Le Guin, 1998).

Figure 9 is an ink painting by contemporary artist Jiang Shiguo. The composition centers on a figure surrounded by various animals, creating a pleasant and relaxed atmosphere. The use of color is not overly vivid, but rather harmoniously paired with light ink to create an ethereal effect. Jiang Shiguo's artistic language presents a unique poetic freedom, and his ink and brush forms and image construction break through the traditional paradigm, constructing an aesthetic realm full of tension between retraction and relaxation. The relationship between man and beast in his paintings is neither a deliberate formal arrangement nor purely spontaneous, but a natural rhythm of life flowing out of the strict law.

Figure 9: Birdsong and Floral Fragrance



Source: [Artron Art. \(2025\)](#)

The artist creatively utilizes the unique brushwork of the side-facing brush, and through the seemingly loose but precise line outlining, he creates a hazy mood between the figurative and the abstract. This artistic treatment of “*between likeness and unlikeness*” aptly interprets the Taoist creative philosophy of “*having law but not being able to do anything.*” What is particularly exquisite is that Jiang Shiguo often juxtaposes figures, animals, and delicacies in the picture, and the introduction of wine imagery not only enriches the visual narrative but also makes the whole picture dense with a slightly drunken artistic atmosphere—it is a kind of aesthetic pleasure that goes beyond the similarity of form and refers to the true nature of life and is also a vivid interpretation of the life state of “*being free and at ease.*”

At the level of technique, he abandons the norms of the traditional center-front brush and instead builds up the image with seemingly random strokes; this “*scattered but not chaotic*” language of brush and ink is, in fact, an implicit reference to the “Butcher's Ox”-like artistic realm—the freedom of spirit that is achieved after skillfully grasping the laws. The interaction between humans and animals in the picture not only maintains the vividness of nature but also contains a poetic meaning that transcends reality, ultimately forming a unique aesthetic experience of “*freedom within the law.*” The spiritual expression of these imagery reveals that the painter sought not physical resemblance in depicting animals, but rather a shared essence of life.

## 5. Conclusion

This study adopts Daoist philosophy as its core perspective to explore the philosophical implications and artistic expressions of human-animal relationships in Chinese painting. Through literature review, image analysis, and interdisciplinary research, it reveals the profound influence of Daoist concepts such as “following the way of nature,” “non-action,” and “The unity of Heaven and humanity” across different periods of artistic practice. This exploration not only traces the historical evolution of human-animal relations in Chinese painting but also elucidates how Daoist thought gains renewed vitality and significance within contemporary ecological art contexts. The study's contribution lies in revealing, from a Daoist philosophical foundation, the underlying philosophical logic and aesthetic mechanisms behind images of human-animal symbiosis in Chinese painting. Through comparative analysis of ancient and modern artistic cases, it demonstrates the continuity and regeneration of the traditional “unity of heaven and humanity” concept in the contemporary context; it proposes an artistic ethical framework centered on the Daoist ecological perspective, offering cultural

insights for contemporary ecological civilization construction and providing profound spiritual resources for modern ecological aesthetics.

Corresponding conclusions have been drawn regarding the research objectives proposed. Daoist thought not only provides philosophical underpinnings for artistic creation at the metaphysical level but also drives a shift in aesthetics and ethics—from self-centered to community-oriented art. The symbiotic human-animal imagery in traditional painting reflects the Daoist principle of “equality of all things,” advocating for the equality of all life. Contemporary artists, using new media and vocabularies, extend this ancient spirit into a modern reflection on ecological crises. Concurrently, Daoist ecological philosophy offers significant insights for constructing a modern ecological aesthetics. The Daoist principles of “following the way of nature” and “governing through non-action” represent not passive laissez-faire but a wise attitude respecting life's autonomy and natural laws. They demand that humanity maintain humility in creation and practice, minimizing intervention and exploitation of nature. Extending such concepts to artistic creation and ecological civilization construction could facilitate a transformation of the human spirit.

### **Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate**

The researchers used the research ethics provided by the Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Teknologi MARA (RECUiTM). All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants according to the Declaration of Helsinki.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare no conflict of Interest.

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