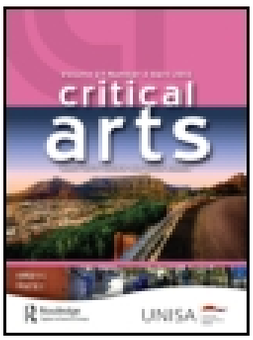

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Critical Arts

South-North Cultural and Media Studies

ISSN: 0256-0046 (Print) 1992-6049 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcrc20

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Siying Duan

To cite this article: Siying Duan (2019): *Yixiang* (意象) in Contemporary Chinese Ink Installation Art, Critical Arts

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/02560046.2019.1679207

Published online: 26 Nov 2019.

CRITICAL ARTS
https://doi.org/10.1080/02560046.2019.1679207

Yixiang (意象) in Contemporary Chinese Ink Installation Art

Siying Duan [a,b]

[a]The Critical Theory Research Center, Shanghai University, Shanghai, People's Republic of China; [b]School for the Contemporary Art of Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Canada

ABSTRACT

Since the early twentieth century, the art tradition in China has been challenged by art practices from the West, which has led to a bifurcation in Chinese art practices: one branch has stayed true to the traditional Chinese style with ink and the other has turned to the Western style. Although always accompanied by heated debates on whether Chinese painting should retain its ink tradition, efforts have been made to find a third way in-between the two styles, to make traditional Chinese art contemporary by incorporating traditional ideas and artistic techniques in new media art practices. These art practices are much less accessible internationally because of the difficulty in categorising and understanding them. This essay recontextualises these artworks in the context of traditional Chinese aesthetics by introducing the concept *Yixiang* (意象), with a discussion of the artwork "Melt" by Pan, Gongkai (潘公凯). The non-dualistic, dynamic, and relational features of *Yixiang* (意象) resonate with the characteristics of contemporary new media art practices, which usually include dynamic moving images or installation spaces that invite audience participation. Through a careful introduction of the cultural significance of *Xiang* (象) thinking, as well as its embodiment in artworks, this article proposes a new way of looking at contemporary media artworks which may go beyond the cultural confines of Chinese or Western art.

KEYWORDS

Chinese aesthetics; ink art; contemporary Chinese art; new media art; art installation; *Yixiang*; *image-thinking*; non-dualistic thinking

Snow, falling down quietly on the withering lotuses, and gradually covering on their thin branches. This is a world of simple black and white, projected onto the wall of a corridor. It is an art installation named "Snow Melting into the Lotus" (or "Melt"), created by Pan, Gongkai (潘公凯) and exhibited at the Chinese Pavilion of the 54th Venice Biennale. If we were to stay for a while in the corridor and take a close look at the projected image, we would find that the lotuses are painted with ink strokes and the snow is actually letters of the alphabet melting down from a paragraph hung at the top of the projection. The text description of the exhibition tells us that the paragraph is derived from the artist's article "On the Boundary of Western Modern Art" (Pan 1995).

In order to grasp the meaning of this artwork, we might interpret the withering lotuses in ink as "traditional Chinese literati culture", as put forth by the curatorial introduction to the solo exhibition of this work at the University of Michigan (Stamps 2014). Likewise, the snow falling from the text of the article as well as its covering the lotuses can be seen as "a

CONTACT Siying Duan duansiying@gmail.com

forced dialogue with the West", which is "threatening to blot out China's artistic traditions" (Stamps 2014). This artwork can therefore be seen as a critique of the intrusion of Western culture into Chinese culture.

However, there is a potential second reading of this work which is in contrast to the previous one, also expressed in the curatorial statements. Although the snow might be viewed as threatening to destroy China's artistic traditions, it is also an element of its regeneration: When it melts, the snow nourishes the future lotus blossoms, which may become a new kind, absorbing a different type of cultural nutrition in the coming years.

We might be satisfied with this more nuanced and richer interpretation of this artwork. But this view, on the other hand, is criticised for its conformity with the official art discourse of the Chinese government, which is expressed as "traditional Chinese culture decorated in a modern way" (Yung-Wen 2017, 16). In the contemporary art world, where art objects have been dematerialised and have transcended the pursuit of aesthetics, it is not unusual to read an artwork based on its intention. But to understand artworks such as "Melt" only from a conceptual perspective can be problematic: The easy reversal of one conclusion in favour of another in this case poses an uneasy challenge to this way of reading, by showing that an artwork can hardly be reduced to one final meaning. It also seems too easy to categorise the work as part of political propaganda simply because it incorporates both traditional elements and contemporary technology.

Since the early twentieth century, the art tradition in China has been challenged by art practices from the West, which has led to a bifurcation in Chinese art practices: one branch has stayed true to the traditional Chinese style with ink and the other has turned to the Western style. The coexistence of the two art practices systematically shapes the art world in China, including the structure of art education, artists' professional identity, and art exhibition and criticism (Wu 2013). Although always accompanied by heated debates on whether Chinese painting should retain its ink tradition, efforts have been made to work out a third way in-between the two styles, to make traditional Chinese art contemporary by all sorts of experiments integrating both ideas and expressive techniques from the two styles. A field of "experimental ink painting", first so named by Huang, Zhuan (黄专) and Wang, Huangsheng (王璜生) in 1993, "emerged as a vibrant field" (Wu 2013) in mainland China, with independent exhibitions and critical writings in the following years.

Although Pan did not create "Melt" as part of this new ink art movement, he shares its concern with the legacy of Chinese traditional art and the issue of its modernisation. Born in 1947, Pan first trained as a painter in the traditional Chinese style before serving as a teacher and later the president of the China Academy of Art. In 2001, he became president of the China Central Academy of Fine Arts. In addition, he has also been awarded an honorary PhD by the San Francisco Fine Art Institute and Glasgow University. Having such a strong background in both Chinese and Western artistic traditions and practices, he has always engaged actively with the development of Chinese traditional art as well as its relationship with Western art. The creation of "Melt" emerged exactly from his view of Chinese art as being open to Western influence while retaining its key traditional aesthetics.

However, while contemporary Chinese artworks received international attention from the early 1990s onwards, art practices combining traditional values and new art forms were left behind. This is probably due to their identity "arising from either the ancient

or the recent past", which is "less accessible to Western critics and collectors" (Hearn 2013, 16), as stated by Maxwell Hearn, the curator of the first large exhibition in the West focusing on Chinese artworks that are both new and old, "Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China", in 2013. The more recent association of political propaganda with this type of artwork set up yet another obstacle to understanding the works in themselves.

In order to encourage Westerners to go to the exhibition, Hearn encouraged a reading of these artworks with the appreciation tools from conceptual art and abstract expressionism (Phaidon 2013). Although there indeed exists an interesting crossover, it is still necessary to dig deeper into the aesthetic tradition in Chinese history and culture, since ink art has received increasing attention internationally in the past five years. Hearn has tried to find an "ink aesthetic" in the collection of his exhibition. Indeed, in contemporary artworks there can be found a unique spirit, inherited from the Chinese cultural past, regardless of their media choices—photography, video, or installation—or whether they are using ink as a major expression tool. But what exactly this "ink aesthetic" is or how it relates to traditional Chinese aesthetics has not been explained clearly. The rest of this article will recontextualise contemporary Chinese installation artworks, with a discussion of the artwork "Melt", against the aesthetic background developed in the Chinese tradition.

Yixiang: A unique idea of "image" in Chinese aesthetics

In an interview with the Chinese media outlet Artron, Pan himself explained "Melt" as "an image represent[ing] the devastation of Chinese lotuses under the Western snow at the first sight"; however, after the "audience's further experience or feeling" of the image, the lotuses will demonstrate their toughness by standing still while the snow melts away (Artron 2017). What is interesting here is not just the artist's own idea of the work, but the way the artwork has an effect, as he describes. How does an artwork function as an image that can be grasped as meaning one thing at first glance and then be understood differently after having been experienced for a while? This question provides us with an opportunity to unfold the traditional Chinese understanding of aesthetics and art experience, shaped by the Chinese way of thinking and living, as a background to the contemporary art context.

The key concept Pan used to describe his artwork is the "image" (*Yixiang*, 意象), sometimes translated as "imagery". It is arguably the most fundamental concept in Chinese aesthetics and is deeply rooted in the Chinese way of thinking.

It may be difficult today to draw a clear line between Western and Eastern thought. Asian countries have undergone modernisation since the twentieth century. Interest in Chinese traditional thought, such as Taoism, can be traced through reflections on modernity and logo-centrism by many twentieth-century European philosophers. Nevertheless, a distinctive mode of thinking based on *Xiang* (象) developed and remained to some extent in Chinese culture. This concept can be loosely translated as "image", and this way of thinking is interpreted by some contemporary scholars as "image-thinking" (Wang and Yu 1997; Yasuo 2008).

This way of thinking came into being through the divination activities of the Shang dynasty (商, 1600–1046 BC). People would cut holes in a tortoiseshell or animal bone and then burn it to produce cracked patterns. Those patterns were understood as the order of the universe, and people would adjust their daily behaviour according to their

reading of the patterns. Likewise, during the Zhou dynasty (周, 1046–256 BC) people would read numbers from bamboo sticks. The numbers and patterns generated from these practices became the divinatory images or hexagrams engraved on early books, such as the old Chinese classic *The Zhou Book of Change*. These kinds of divination were not rare in the early history of the human species in different regions, but, as summarised by the contemporary scholar Wang, Yuxiong (汪裕雄) (1996), the Chinese people developed a culture based on the basic belief that there is a correlative relationship between humans and the universe or nature. In this belief system, *Xiang* works as a communication device between human beings and the universe.

Xiang thinking pervades various aspects of Chinese culture. The unification of China (221–206 BC) under the First Emperor of Qin (秦始皇) facilitated the comprehensive integration of *Xiang* into daily life. *The Spring and Autumn of Lv Buwei* (《吕氏春秋》), completed at the time, synthesises all of the major schools of thought, covering Confucianism and Taoism to Mohism, Legalism, and the School of Names. The book refines a universe–human system, organising all aspects of a human being's daily life, from medicine to cultivation, according to the operational *Xiang* of the universe. Many of those ideas and practices, such as the Twenty-Four Solar Terms and Chinese medicine, are still implemented nowadays.

The Chinese character system is also based on the embodied *Xiang*. The history of the current Chinese writing system can be traced back to the Oracle bone script, engraved on tortoiseshells or animal bones to record divinations during the Shang Dynasty. These scripts were mostly invented through people's observation of *Xiang* in the universe and nature. Many of the scripts found on those relics are still in use today. This writing system based on *Xiang* may be less precise than writing systems based on abstract alphabets, due to the constant presence of the image of the character. It is less precise not in the sense that it is less functional. Rather, by their presence in front of the eye, the images of the characters affect each other and extend into the concrete world. They thus arouse associations in the reader, without the control of the writer. For example, the English word "moon" signifies the real moon and may lead us to imagine the moon, but the Chinese character "月" is not just a combination of some random alphabetic letters—it is an image of the moon itself. The presence of the image-word causes an affective effect outside the realm of the communication of precise information, while arousing poetic associations during the reading process.

The presence of the *Xiang* is embodied not only in characters, but also in articles and passages. This is due to the traditional scepticism towards language. *"The survey"* of the *Zhou Book of Change* proposes as one of its central arguments that "writing cannot record a language in full and a language cannot convey man's thought in full (书不尽言，言不尽意《易传•系辞》)"; thus, in order to fully express thoughts, "the sages invented images (立象以尽意《易传•系辞》)" (King Wen of Zhou [750 |BC] 2008, 403). The connotation of "thought" (*Yi*, 意) in this quotation has a much broader range than "reason", covering "sense", "cognition", and "comprehension" of things. Another keyword, "language" (*Yan*, 言), is translated as "speech" in some other translations, for example in James Legge's 1963 translation of *The I Ching*. But the translation as "speech" seems to infer the argument of logo-centrism that has been challenged by twentieth-century philosophers such as Jacques Derrida. The idea of "thought" in the original text instead expresses a profound scepticism towards the system of language as an

effective tool through which to approach reality. As Laozi (老子, likely sixth or fourth century BC), one of the ancient central thinkers in China, stated in the opening sentence of his *Laozi* (《老子》, also known as *Tao Te Ching*), "the '*Dao* (道)' that can be told of is not an unvarying *Dao* (道) (道可道，非常道)" (Lao [4 BC] 1999, 3). No matter if it is being said or written, once the *Dao* has been expressed in the form of language, it is not the *Dao* any more.

This scepticism towards the language system was shared by another ancient thinker, Zhuangzi (庄子, 370–287 BC). In one of the fables in *Zhuangzi* (《庄子》), the experienced wheelwright Bian (轮扁) is asked why he does not convey his experience to his son. He answers that his experience cannot be put into words and easily transferred, even to his own son (Zhuang [3 BC] 1999, 219–221). Zhuangzi uses the fable to say that the sage cannot convey the *Dao* of the universe through language, just like the wheelwright cannot convey his experience.

Because of this deep suspicion of abstract language, the *Zhuangzi* is full of fables, while the *Laozi* prefers a seemingly illogical strategy in which arguments are at odds with each other. These efforts aim to make language alive and work more like *Xiang*, which could either create an effect of vividness, as in *Zhuangzi*'s case, or break through rigid presumptions, as exemplified in *Laozi*. The thinking mode of the *Xiang* is deeply immersed in Chinese culture throughout history.

The *Yixiang* that Pan uses to describe his artwork is an embodiment of *Xiang* thinking in aesthetics and poetic theory. It was first introduced into literary theory by the theorist Liu, Xie (刘勰, 465–521) from the Nan Dynasty (420–589). In his "Spiritual Thought or Imagination" (《神思》), he quotes Zhuangzi's wheelwright fable to say that literary creation is as subtle and difficult to put into words as wheel cutting. Thus, according to him, part of "the main principle employed in the planning of a literary piece" is to "wield the ax [sic] in harmony with his intuitive insight" (Liu 1959, 155), like the master wheelwright. Here the *Yixiang* is translated as "intuitive insight" to stress its function in the creation process. It works like the images the sage invented to express the thought previously discussed in *The Zhou Book of Change*. However, in the field of aesthetics, the *Yixiang* does not merely express thought, but becomes an artistic image "tinged with the colouring of his [the writer's] own feelings" (Liu 1959, 155) and thus capable of conveying these feelings in a vivid and affective way.

After Liu, the concept of *Yixiang* has been widely discussed and further developed by many later theorists, such as the Former and Latter Seven Masters (前后七子) during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). We will not explore the details of the differences between the understandings of *Yixiang* throughout history; instead, we will only point out several fundamental and shared aspects which can still be found in contemporary ink installations such as "Melt".

Yixiang is a compound word composed of *Yi* (意) and *Xiang* (象). In the field of aesthetics, the study of this concept has continually focused on the relationship between *Yi*, "thought", and *Xiang*, "image", as initiated in *The Zhou Book of Change*. It is worth repeating that the idea of *Yi* is a concept of "thought" that cannot readily be put into "words", like the wheelwright's experience, while *Xiang* is a concept of "image" that is neither a perfect representation of objects nor a symbol pointing to abstract thought or meaning. It is, instead, a third realm that is always in-between the subject and object, the signifier and signified. Therefore, the combination of *Yi* and *Xiang* does not refer to

an "image with a meaning", as might be understood from a direct translation into English, but to both "an image that is meaningful" and "a thought that is imaginative". It is simultaneously an artistic image that carries or takes shape with the artist's feeling and one that presents itself in the artwork.

The *Yixiang* of "Snow Melting into the Lotus" and its characteristics

Against this background of the Chinese aesthetic tradition, we can now understand the *Yixiang* that Pan used to describe the artistic effect of his work "Melt". The images used in this work can be read from two perspectives. From the perspective of symbols, they represent meanings such as "Western culture" or "Chinese culture". We can quickly access those meanings if we are familiar with the convention. However, to take a further look means we are seeing or, more accurately, experiencing the images while they present themselves in full—in other words, as *Yixiang*.

In order to unfold the *Yixiang* of "Melt", we will need to take a closer look at some details of the artwork and relative aspects of the concept. The integration of words into the work is closely related to the Chinese understanding of "thought" and "image" and their interrelation in the concept of *Yixiang*. The snow-words are not merely the carriers of meaning; they also have an existence that has its own unique artistic effect. It is an indispensable part of the *Yixiang* of the "snow melting into lotuses". We may consider the integration of words as snow in the projected scene as a play between words and image, the purpose of which is to convey the idea of alphabetic words as Western culture. However, there are aspects of this word–image play that call for further examination.

The inscription of words on a painting is not a strategy that many contemporary conceptual artworks use, but it has a long history in traditional Chinese painting. Many well-known painters are also very good poets. We might understand this phenomenon based on the *Xiang* thinking tradition and the *Yi–Xiang* relationship discussed previously. In "Famous Paintings through History", art historian Zhang, Yanyuan (张彦远,) ([847–859] 2005, 815–907) traces the origin of painting back to the time when the writing system was invented through the observation of the *Xiang* of the universe and nature. He argues that this practice is the origin of both writing and painting (Zhang [847–859] 2005). This same origin led to the use of a similar brushstroke technique in writing and painting. Moreover, despite being different forms, they are both art activities that express the feelings and ideas of the artist in resonance with the natural world. This belief has been largely accepted among Chinese artists throughout history and inherited, or even reinforced, from one generation to another through their practices.

This is why (painted) images and words can be harmoniously integrated in the same artwork. Their harmony is partly created by similar brushstroke techniques. But even more importantly, they are harmonious in the way they both have an effect during the viewing experience. Words in paintings are usually poems written by the artists themselves or by their poet friends. Like other functional words, regardless of whether they are used in an article or report, the words of poems in paintings also carry meaning and have a mental effect on the viewers who recognise them. However, as we previously discussed, the meaning that the poem carries is a kind of *Yi*, or "thought", that is imaginative and vivid and coloured by the artist's own feeling. In this sense, the function of these poems is not the guidance of or even the fixing of the meaning of the images or their

artistic intention. The words and images in the painting enhance each other's artistic effect through an echoing effect. A commentary on the art practice of the Tang dynasty artist Wang, Wei, by the later poet Su, Shi, is of interest here: "There is painting in his poetry, and poetry in his painting (诗中有画,画中有诗)" (Su 1986, 2209). This idea of "painting in poetry, poetry in painting" soon became popular and has had a far-reaching influence on both literature and painting since the Song dynasty. It perfectly illustrates the relationship between words and images in Chinese painting as echoing back and forth. It thus stimulates the spectator's imagination to create a more lively *Yixiang* of the painting.

However, "Melt" uses words in a different way than its predecessors. First, the words hidden in the snow are alphabetic letters rather than Chinese characters. Second, the words are drawn from an article by the artist rather than from a poem. It appears that the artist is trying to make an argument through these choices and attempting to break from the previous painting tradition. Nevertheless, the argument is actually quite an open and dynamic one. The name of the article, "On the Boundary of Western Modern Art", seems to indicate that the artist is critical of Western art, but the way the paragraph is hung at the top of the projection does not invite a close reading of the actual text. If we did strive to read it or if we found the original text, we would discover that it is actually a study of the dissolving boundary between art and life in Western modern art (Pan 1995). Furthermore, the artist's intention in writing this article is to understand the nature of art as contributing toward "solving the dilemma of Chinese painting" (Artron 2017). As was mentioned previously, Pan has long pondered the unique way in which Chinese traditional art is being modernised, and his study of Western modern art is part of this long-term project. It is thus no wonder that he incorporated this piece when he created "Melt", as at the time he was also finishing his monograph *The Road of Chinese Modern Art* (2012). His open attitude toward the development of Chinese art is embodied in the visual expression of the artwork. In "Melt", the alphabetic letters are integrated into the scene of the painting in such a way that they almost "melt" into the snow. And the snow, after falling upon the lotuses, gradually melts away. In this way, the work creates a beautiful scene of continuous encounter between words and images, snow and lotus, which solicits the audience's imagination and facilitates multiple ways of reading rather than imposing the artist's intention.

Our discussion of the image–word relationship in traditional Chinese painting also sheds new light on the understanding of the (painted) image, on the way the lotuses are depicted in "Melt". The lotuses in the work have their own existence, not as real lotuses or as photos of them, but as an image of lotuses. How is this image different from transplanting real lotuses into the exhibition space? We might mention ink as a special art medium that can be seen as a symbol of Asian art. But what makes the ink unique is not its cultural association, but rather its existence as a trace of the battle between the brush and the paper and as the gesture of the artist. It is a unique embodiment of the *Yixiang* which the artist takes from the natural lotuses in combination with his own feeling, ideas, and particular way of looking. He expresses this through a painting technique involving a whole-body movement, coupled with the material painting conditions, including the resilience of the brush, the thickness of the ink, and the roughness of the paper. Even after being transformed into a video projection, the various expressions of this trace—energetic or exhausted, stretching or struggling—are still alive and affect the viewers who approach it.

There is a process of transformation at work here, in that the lotuses are transformed from natural ones to the *Yixiang* of lotuses. The natural lotuses firstly appear as the *Xiang* of lotuses in the artist's eye, attached to the artist's understanding and feeling. They then become the artistic image created by the artist's hand, which always carries or presents itself as the *Yixiang* of lotuses that is, finally, conveyed to the audience. This process demonstrates another key aspect of the *Yixiang* concept that we will discuss: its transcendence of the boundary between body and mind. This aspect is closely related to the first aspect of *Yixiang*, namely its transcendence of the boundary between *Yi* and *Xiang*, or word and image, in artworks due to the intrinsic *Xiang* thinking tradition. *Yi* and *Xiang* cannot be separated as "thought" and "image", but instead exist in a third realm that is always in-between the subject and object, the signifier and signified. In both the creation and the appreciation process, we can indeed see how the *Yixiang* emerged between the natural objects and the artist and then presented itself between the artwork and the audience in an unfixed and experiential way. We can also see from the process that it involves the engagement of both mind and body (perhaps better expressed as "a holistic activity of the person", because the expression "mind and body" leads to the trap of dualism), which cannot be separated or put into abstract words, like the wheelwright's experience. The experience of this dynamic, unfixed, and experiential *Yixiang*, which requires the audience's whole bodily and mental engagement, fits the characteristics of new media artworks that include dynamic moving images or installation spaces that invite the participation of the audience.

For instance, in the installation artwork "Melt", the holistic experience begins even before we step into the display room, when we approach the entrance door of the installation. The entrance to "Melt" is actually not a door, but a moon gate. How is a moon gate different from a common door? In Chinese traditional architecture, the moon gate is usually associated with a full moon because of its round shape. And the full moon is symbolic of happiness and completeness in Chinese culture. However, the importance of a moon gate does not lie merely in its symbolic meaning, but also in the way that it works as a frame in-between our visual experience and the scene of the installation semi-exposed behind it. The moon shape stands out as an unusual entrance, and it creates a new composition in relation to the scene "captured" inside by cutting out the corners with a smooth curve. As we walk towards the entrance, which is neither entirely open nor fully closed, a visual effect is created that is similar to that of a dynamic painting. It stimulates in our mind the creation of the *Yixiang* of the installation space we are entering. Rather than appearing suddenly, the *Yixiang* of the work emerges gradually during our appreciation process. In this way, we are stepping into an art world that is already a combination of our imagination and expectation rather than just an installation assembled from its material components.

Even without this moon-shaped entrance, the appreciation of this artwork would be a holistic experience. After we step into the corridor, the first thing that we see are not words or paragraphs. We probably do not even notice that the snow is actually alphabetic letters. Instead, we are caught up in an experience created by the environment of the installation. For example, the general light setting of the work is not very bright, which creates a soft welcoming atmosphere and also makes the whiteness of the snow stand out. The gentle smell of lotuses is diffused throughout the exhibition space and the temperature is set to

be much lower than other spaces, to intensify the immersive experience, in terms of not just our vision but also our other senses. There is no background music, only the rustling of the machine, which contributes to displacing the audience to a strange world. The ink lotuses occupy the majority of the projection space. Through their harsh brushstrokes and contorted bodies, the lotuses convey a sense of toughness, while they silently call out their struggle. Even the density and the pace of the snowfall contribute to the overall effect of the work. The heavy and rapid snowfall in this work creates an unsettling sense of tension. The disposition of all the components of the installation affects the conveyance and presentation of the work's *Yixiang*. In this sense, the *Yixiang* cannot be grasped at a glance by an activity that is purely mental or vision-oriented and separate from other sensory experience. Through this holistic experience, the *Yixiang* of the work can be sustained in the audience's memory beyond any meaning or statement made through the work. It is felt by the audience without the need to have meaning attached to it. In fact, the *Yixiang* of an artwork only emerges without the interruption and distancing of judgements. This aesthetic thought focusing on multi-sensorial and bodily experience lies at the heart of contemporary artistic concern with embodied knowledge and efforts to question body–mind dualism, as we have previously discussed. Moreover, it involves not just a whole bodily and mental experience, but also a transcendence of the barrier between subject and object, human and nature. This means, for example, that in "Melt" we do not see the lotuses as objects, but instead we have an experience with them or even become a part of them. This relational feature is the third aspect of *Yixiang*.

We have seen how *Xiang* thinking originated in the hexagrams of ancestral Chinese divination practices and how it developed through the belief in Chinese culture that there is a correlative relationship between human beings and the universe or nature. We have also seen how, in aesthetics, *Xiang* is embodied as the *Yixiang* that the artist takes from natural objects through his or her own feelings and ideas. These objects are not picked up randomly and added to the artist's feeling; rather, the two have a deep resonance with each other.

Moreover, because of the background of this type of thinking, the feeling expressed in the artwork often goes beyond the artist's personal concerns and the objects often correspond to a natural world where *Dao* resides within them. In "Melt", when we are deeply immersed in the artistic world of lotuses, we forget the disturbing matters of our daily life that are hovering in our mind, as well as the actual lotuses or their medicinal value. We are instead guided into a natural world where there exists only the infinite circulation of life, with no judgement or border between right and wrong, death and birth.

Conclusion

Every element of "Melt", including its moon gate entrance, its melting snow words, its ink image of the lotuses, and many other elements which we have not discussed here, contributes to the *Yixiang* in the installation. Through its full range of material existence it provides the audience with an embodied experience and also an experiential space for imagining, feeling, and thinking. In this sense, the artwork becomes an artistic world that exists in-between, where the artist, nature, and audience can cross their personal boundaries and come together through the dynamic "image" (*Xiang*) of the work.

The motivation for this article originated from a dissatisfaction with the reading of certain meanings into an artwork. Through a discussion of the artwork "Melt", this article recontextualised contemporary Chinese installation artworks in the context of the Chinese aesthetic background and introduced a new way of appreciating art through the traditional Chinese aesthetic concept of *Yixiang*. Because the intrinsic *Xiang* thinking originated in the hexagrams of ancestral Chinese divination practices, *Yixiang* always emerges in a third realm which transcends the barrier between "thought" and "image", mind and body, subject and object.

Although this analysis focused on an example of Chinese installation art, from the perspective of Chinese aesthetics the art experience is not confined to a certain culture and Chinese aesthetic thinking is not exclusive to Chinese art practice; on the contrary, its embodied, dynamic, relational, and non-dualistic features resonate with the characteristics of contemporary media art practices. Moreover, although each culture tends to value some aspects of the experience and to shape certain cultural practices based on their inherited beliefs, the parts of the experience that are neglected and hidden by cultural constructions are in fact always there. That is why a cross-cultural aesthetic study can reveal and shed new light on artistic practices that are not limited to a singular cultural awareness.

Acknowledgements

This paper is sponsored by Major Program of the National Social Science Fund of China "Chinese Issues in twentieth Century Western Literary Theory" (No.16ZDA194) and received generous support from Laura U. Marks School for the Contemporary Art of Simon Fraser University. I have received comments and suggestions to improve this article from Kelly Donahey, Denise Oleksijczuk and the class of 2018 "Research Colloquium in Comparative Media Arts" at School for Comtemporary Arts, SFU.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This paper is sponsored by Major Program of the National Social Science Fund of China "Chinese Issues in 20th Century Western Literary Theory" (No.16ZDA194) and received generous support from Laura U. Marks School for the Contemporary Art of Simon Fraser University.

ORCID

Siying Duan http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9245-2976

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