



High Road into the Cloud

--- Ni Yun-lin's Art of Painting and Its Cultural Value

Qiuli Yu

The Arts System of Dezhou University

No.566 of Daxue Road in Decheng District, Dezhou 253023, Shandong, China

Tel: 86-534-898-5612 E-mail: dzxyyuqiuli@163.com

Abstract

Ni Yun-lin, Painter in the Yuan Dynasty, had great influences in the history of Chinese painting, especially the history of painting of man-of-letters. He stepped over the spatio-temporal limitation and guided trend of painting of man-of-letters several hundred years later. Although he was familiar with Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, and was endowed with a kind, sentimental and sincere heart, the abnormality of political ruling of Meng and Yuan Dynasty together with his obstinate and unruly character determined since his birth his destiny --- living in seclusion. He re-organized the value system of human being and established a virtual spiritual homeland. His art of painting was a monument which stood like a giant at the top of the world ethnic arts, with an intangible, cold, secluded and lonely style of painting. It was Ni Yun-lin who pushed the quality of painting to perfection which was most impressive.

Keywords: Ni Yun-lin, Painting, Perfection, Intangible, Spiritual homeland

Scholars in China were affected by Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, so most of them were against “rigidness”, but for “softness and leisureliness”, focusing on “literary” quality. As for art of painting, most of them held a calm and casual attitude, slow and leisurely, which was the effect of “literary”. In other words, if the art of painting gave up the ultimate purpose of ideological cultivation, then it could not become the approach for a scholar to “base on benevolence and edify his body and mind with the Six Arts”. All was established in “Tao” and looked back upon “utensil”. Painting was not sublimation from a concrete science to Metaphysics, but to standardize a concrete science starting from Metaphysics, which was a consistent guiding thought for men of letters to be involved in the art of painting, because it had a clear historical development skeleton.

Development and evolution of history has its necessity, and key characters made particular contribution in the process. Especially in the process of a significant transition, they made indispensable contributions. In Yuan Dynasty, it was Ni Yun-lin who seized the opportunity when it came and, without doubt, he was one with comprehensive expression.

1. Art value of painting by Ni Yun-lin

Influenced by Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism in his lifetime, Ni Yun-lin had his particular artistic feeling. In “Commend on Portrait of Mr. Zhang Dechang”, he said, “After reading the Book of Poetry, I greatly admire the motto of the master. He mounts the mountain for making a sightseeing tour, and enjoys an outstanding happiness, but not secluding. Although the cloud does not rain, it often moistens; although the jade is processed, it is perfect. Is he based on Confucianism, depends on Taoism and escapes from Buddhism?” Then, in “Commend on Portrait of Li An”, he said, “Does he who is dressed in shoddy clothes and hangs around escape from Buddhism, depend on Taoism and base on Confucianism?” On the surface, that was high praise by Ni Yun-lin on others, but as a matter of fact, it reflected his own aesthetic values and was real portrayal of himself. He held on to Confucianism at the bottom of his heart, but sought for comfort of his soul through Taoism and Buddhism. “The shadow of the cicada becomes small in the night light with turquoise, and autumn water in the stone pond pulls out his inner thought”. Intertwining ideas would decide that he would certainly become a complex whole of contradiction.

Aesthetics of Confucianism is the most fundamental school in Chinese classical aesthetics, and since it was born early, it had profound influences upon scholar-bureaucrats. Confucianism regarded “benevolence” as the footstone of beauty, which constructed the theoretical framework. In “Lun Yu Xu Er”, Confucius said, “One should have a lofty ambition, depending on morality, basing on benevolence and edifying his body and mind with the Six Arts”. At the same time, he

said, "If one is not benevolent, how can he be polite? If one is not benevolent, how can he be happy?" That is enough to come to recognize the important status of "benevolence" in Confucianism. Confucianism affirmed that the implementation of moral principle could not go without internal sentimental requirement of an individual, and enjoyment of aesthetics should conform to the requirement of social ethical morality with the core of "benevolence". Confucianism pursued the arts of the life, and perfection was the highest and ultimate state of Confucianism to assess the arts. Since he learned Confucianism in his early years, Ni Yun-lin accepted the idea of consistence between connotation of benevolence and beauty out of his own free will under edification of Confucianism, and believed that harmony of beauty could be achieved only under standardization of benevolence. In "To Lu Youheng", the following idea was intensively reflected: "Virtue is the purpose of learning, and being filial to our parents is the basis of conducting ourselves. We should learning something in the morning and review it in the evening. Then, if we feel cool in summer, we will feel warm in winter. We should be dedicated to farm work and housework. We should not pursue fashion, but should have a moral standard and treat others with honesty." Beauty was escalation of benevolence, and in the eye of Ni, it was improvement of an individual moral quality for better state that he diligently strived after. In "Poetry of Autumn Water Pavillion" for Chen Weiyun, Ni said, "some people think that poetry has no effect at all on education of human being, which is not the fact. Elegant voice will never go silent, but the sentiment of hatred, admiration, metaphor, sustenance, praise and sarcasm always exists. Zhu Xi said that poetry of Tao yuanming is reveal of his own temperament, which embodies his moral quality and can totally attain the purpose of upgrading people's stature." The reason why Ni attached so much importance to teaching by poetry was that he was greatly influenced by aesthetics of Confucianism, and regarded poetry as an effective tool to educate and influence human beings. Aesthetics of Confucianism never separated individual sentiment and psychological demand from the social ethical standard. An individual should seek for development by coordinating his relation with the surroundings, and considered it his lofty bounden duty and the greatest happiness to perform his social responsibility and to realize a society with mutual love and integration. Just as Xu Fuguan said, "Any person or matter influenced a bit by Confucianism thought would maintain a glean hope of survival for the nation and hold together the ideal and hope of the nation to a certain extent." There was no exception with Ni Yun-lin. Even in the darkest period of Yuan Dynasty, he still paid attention to the people's livelihood, and worried about the country. Under influences of Confucianism thought, he inherited the good tradition of realism, and regarded it as a standard for himself to make artistic creation, especially prominent in his poetry. Confucianism advocated the spirit of "Doctrine of Mean". Confucius said, "being joyous but not indecent, and mournful but not distressing", which proposed to abstemiously release one's feeling, and that the feeling should not be expressed in an extremely strong way. Thus, under his direction, as a whole, the ancient Chinese art exhibits a kind of neutralized beauty. Ni Yun-lin inherited this spirit and made extremely appropriate definition in his "Poetry of Autumn Water of Pavillion" that, "The artistic conception is leisurely and profound, with moderate and comfortable atmosphere. Although he expresses it with reason, he is self-controlled, without any excessively excited words, which is just like the ripple produced by the wind blowing water surface, with streakiness. After the strong wind passes, the water surface comes back to calmness, just as the beautiful sound of the universe, which is a state worthy of praising." It was his consistent artistic position to pursue a suitable and harmonious aesthetic state self-consciously.

"Depending on Taoism" was reflection of Ni Yun-lin's thought of Taoism. Advocated by rulers in Yuan Dynasty, Taoism enjoyed a particular social status, so those lowborn men of letters struggled to join in Taoism to seek for protection. For a while, the theory of Taoism spread all over each corner of the society, and devotion to Taoism became a social climate. Influenced by that, Ni Yun-lin also "dressed himself in shoddy clothes and hanged around lakes and mountains" in his late years.

In the main structure of traditional Chinese culture, evolvement of supplement of Confucianism and Taoism outlined the basic framework of traditional Chinese culture. Considering the significant influences of Confucianism and Taoism on Chinese arts, it is Taoism that has more significant influences. Philosophy of Lao-Tse and Chuang-Tzu had the highest concept of "Tao". From the current perspective, the so-called "Tao" by Lao-Tse and Chuang-Tzu, if further viewed, exactly adapts to modern artistic spirit, which was not obvious at the times of Lao-Tse, but was extremely significant by the times of Chuang-Tzu. Effort spent to learn Tao, according to Chuang-Tzu, was similar to effort spent on creation of an artist, which could prove that the content of learning Tao was exactly the same to the spiritual state attained by an artist. Thoughts of Lao-Tse and Chuang-Tzu contain the purest artistic spirit in China, in which accomplishment of artistic life is the core, but liberation of individual spirit is of the essence to realize that. Only in such a way, can life free itself from the common customs, and be endowed with more thorough meaning. Taoism obeyed the nature to gain highly free thinking, able to break through the framework of observing all rules and regulations in aesthetics of Confucianism. Although thoughts of Confucianism was a sort of positive philosophy, there seemed to exist an internal and necessary link between access to the society of Confucianism and reclusion of Taoism, that is, to emphasize self satisfaction of personality will of an individual. Recognition of reclusion means recognition of self satisfaction of personality will of an individual. In "Lun Yu", "One should neither enter a dangerous nation, nor reside in an unpeaceful nation. One in the world should show himself where there is Tao and seclude himself from where there was no Tao".

“Reclusion” of Confucianism just represented self satisfaction of individual personality and will of freedom, which was a sort of reclusion full of Tao. In order to attain absolute freedom of life, art itself is the best means. Most of men of letters and scholar-bureaucrats turned to poetry and painting, in which they paid attention to expression and edification of the spiritual subject. Creation of painting and calligraphy was aimed at being appropriate, and “grace and spirit” of Ni Yun-lin exactly reflected this aesthetic thought. “The bamboo I draw is to express my inner sentiment, so I care neither whether it is like a bamboo or not nor the number of bamboo leaves and angle of bamboo branches. Maybe some people think that what I draw is a hemp or a cucurbit. I don’t justify that this is a bamboo, and I don’t care that there is nobody to appreciate it.” He regarded painting as a means to edify and remould the spiritual character, for which he relied on painting to pursue perfection of spirit of the subject.

In late Han Dynasty and in Wei & Jin Dynasty, metaphysics prevailed, and leisure became a social fashion. Under such a circumstance, leisure was penetrated into the field of painting naturally. Especially, Huang Xiufu in Northern Song not only gave precise explanation to works of leisure, but also put leisure above divinity, wonderfulness and capacity. In “Records of Famous Paintings in Yizhou”, “It is difficult to attain an antique and refined state in drawing. It is absolutely impossible to attain such a state if one keeps on the rails or haggles over every subtleness. Simple drawing of the spirit of an object, simple, unadorned and natural. This is an actual expression of internal feeling, which can not be imitated by others. Only such works can be termed as “leisure”. Hence, the style of leisure was regarded as a standard of painting in the history of painting aesthetics. Leisure of Ni Yun-lin lied in “leisure” of his own state of mind, and the “leisure spirit” that was freed from secularity, expression of personal character. Only if one focuses on conveying his own spiritual quality, expressed his disposition on the paper, together with necessary technical support, can the “leisure and spirit” be accomplished. Pursuit of leisure raised painting to a new height, that is, extremely free release of the spirit and transparence and openness of the state of mind. Later generations, when imitating the style of painting of Ni Yun-lin, could not apprehend his “three secrets”, so they just paid attention to the superficial aspect of their painting and the external form, racking their brains in vain. Li Rihua in Ming Dynasty hit the mark with a single statement: “Ni Yun-lin paid no attention to external forms, and he said, drawing was to express the temperament of human being, and was natural disclosure to free oneself from the worldly atmosphere. One can not apprehend his true essence if one just imitates the external forms of his drawing.”

Lao-Tse said, “If every one knows beauty and pursues beauty, then appears ugliness”. From his point of view, worldly beauty was just frivolous beauty to stimulate the sense organ. Chuang-Tze also said, “The nature has great beauty, but not to mention it”. What Taoism pursued was a sort of absolutely harmonious and unified beauty which got rid of common customs. Lao-Tse pursued a state of life of returning to the original nature, that is, “to attain the extremity without anything. Nothing to see outside and nothing to reflect on inside”. However, Chuang-Tzu pursued “simplicity and nothing more beautiful to contend.” Meanwhile, Chuang-Tzu emphasized “being extremely indifferent and anything beautiful is inferior”. Austerity and simplicity is the beauty hunted for. Deeply aware of that, Ni Yun-lin regarded simplicity and austerity as the superior standard of arts, and his preserving his moral integrity and his pride was an attempt to break away from the worldly uproariousness. He won victory with simplicity and innocence, and a large majority of his paintings were not painted with any figure or seal. He regarded his ink as if it were gold.

Aesthetics of Zen was a trend of thought born in middle Tang Dynasty. It originated from Buddhism in Ancient India, and was introduced to China in the early Eastern Han Dynasty. With a combination of Confucianism and Taoism and going through almost six hundred years, Zen gradually evolved into a kind of Buddhism with particular Chinese cultural spirit and way of thinking --- Zen, which had a direct effect on the development course of Chinese arts later. Self-recognition is the highest purpose of religious exploration, and is also self-conscious pursuit of arts, which has been satisfactorily unified in aesthetics of Zen. The famous Japanese Zen master Daisetz Suzuki gave a description, “It should be a highlight of the soul by pushing at one go to old rationality and establishing a new basis, and should be consciousness of a new unprecedented feeling to view everything in the world from a new perspective. According to Zen, people should pursue self consciousness from their soul, which came down in one continuous line with the spirit of the subject of artistic creation. At the same time, Zen advocated seeking for Buddhahood from the internal world of human being and put forward the theory of self consciousness. According to Zen, everything in the world comes from the internal heart of human being, determined by his disposition, and attaches great importance to the significance and value of subjectivity to a great extent. However, creation of literature and arts is exactly manifestation of of self-soul of the subject of creation. Mr. Zong Baihua gave an incisive inference, that is, Zen was applied by Chinese people in the philosophical state and artistic state after engaging themselves in the Great Vehicle of Buddhism and realizing the most inner soul.

Jing Ming An Zhu” called by Ni Yun-lin himself came from the Buddhist Scriptures. “Jing Ming” refers to Vimalakirti, abbreviated for Vima or Vimakirti. Wang Wei in the Tang Dynasty, Moji, called himself “Jing Ming Ju Shi”, which also originated from it. “My mid-life has passed, and I am eager to find a tranquil place to dedicate myself to Buddhism. Then, I will be unconventional, do anything with skill and ease and express my internal feelings. For my after-life, I will commit myself to Buddhism and be rapt in painting.” I have in which Ni Yun-lin emphasized cultivation of disposition,

because cultivation of disposition could free one from the mortal world and get to a tranquil and peaceful state. "Not be pleased by external gains and not to be led aside by anything" was what he was in pursuit of, because it conformed to conscious pursuit of arts. It is as in such a state where "One observes the boundless universe, with peace at the bottom of his heart; he feels objective things with divinity and apprehends the nature of the things attentively". Then, one could attain the ideal state of artistic expression. Mi Youren in Song Dynasty inscribed in "Yun Shan De Yi Tu Juan" that, "One should pursue an ordinary state in painting, and should show no concern with mortal matters. When he sits in meditation, his inner heart is limpid and becomes an organic whole with the universe."

Both Buddhism and Taoism advocated a transcendental attitude towards right & wrong and gain & loss in the world. However, Taoism experiences transcendentalism at a height of unification between human being and the nature, and reflects the state of forgetting all, for which "Chuang Chou Dreaming a Butterfly" is the best explanation. However, Buddhism advocates escaping oneself from the internal spirit of an individual, which is a thorough expression of the inner heart, and is freedom without fetter. Transcendentalism in Taoism is a broad spirit to attempt to integrate into one whole with the infinite nature, whereas Buddhism is to retreat back to the inner heart to seek for comfort of the soul. Thus, compared with Taoism, Buddhism tends to endocathexis and narrowness, which discloses the side of being indifferent to the world and leaves a negative impression. Aesthetics of Zen was born in Middle Tang Dynasty, and was made perfect by Song Dynasty, with deeper influences until Yuan Dynasty, Ming Dynasty and Qing Dynasty. Since aesthetics of Zen opened a plain and cold style which conformed to the downhearted state of frustrated men of letters and catered to a certain support for their aesthetic implication, quite a large number of men of letters sought for comfort of the soul by turning to Zen. Ni Yun-lin got rid of his pain with the word "escape", and he unburdened his responsibility fundamentally because he didn't mind gain or loss. Detachment was to show no interest in worldly affairs. "I spend the summer by living in peace, and I lie in bed as a result of illness by late autumn. Shroud is sorrowful that the time is momentary, duckweed in the water sighs that it is swung by the water, and cultivated farmland is to be frequently ploughed. Comfort is helpful for one to recuperate. One should not go with the stream and the mood of inaction is just like an untrammelled fishing boat." In his dramatic transition from a rich kid to one leading a wandering life, the do-nothing and unconventional Taoism and Buddhism thoughts were the potential motive for Ni Yun-lin to abandon his family and for recluse. Wang Wei put forward the artistic proposition of "Aesthetics out of circumscription" in his "Xiu Ru Yi Lun Xiang Zan · Xu". "Circumscription" not only corresponds with the thought of Buddhism, but also absorbs the thought of "eliminating clever opinions" by Lao-Tse and the thought of "quiet" by Chuang-Tzu. "Quiet" is the foundation of "purity". It was in the process of awareness of daily cultivation that artists refined their internal spiritual world, eliminate external interference of worldly utility, and stepped into a pure and natural artistic world that was not tarnished by anyone. It was enough to make clear the motivation of the three thoughts of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism to birth of Ni Yun-lin's artistic thoughts. After surrender of Song Dynasty, there appeared a trend of integration of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism in Chinese religion, but existed with different proportional shares on the part of a certain person, changing with different individuals and at different times. With changes of the times, ups and downs of the life, and alteration of different dynasties, the artistic life of a matter-of-letter and scholar-bureaucrat was formed.

2. Integration of moulding and education and gradual entrance into an optimal state of mind

Before the age of 30, Ni Yun-lin had always been leading an easy and comfortable life. The abundant collection in Qingbi Ge was enough to cultivate his temperament, and he was especially indulged in "Xiao Xiang Tu" by Dong Yuan, "Mao Lin Yuan Xiu Tu" by Li Cheng and "Qiu Shan Tu" by Jing Hao. During that period, on one hand, Ni Yun-lin paid attention to cultivating his character disposition, and on the other hand, made extensively friends with men-of-letters. He participated in elegant get-togethers of men-of-letters, met with frustrated men-of-letters in humble cottages of Mount Morrison, visited temples and Taoist temples, and got deeply acquainted with lots of monks and Taoist priests. A general view of all the friends he made, some of them were imperial officers, such as Zhao Mengfu, and some were just common Taoist priests, such as Zhang Yu. Although they were different in identities, there was a common characteristics among them, that was, all of them, without exception, had achieved definite accomplishments in the field of poetry and painting. In the frequent communication with them, they deliberated poetry, exchanged views on the style of painting, and had a full view of the original handwritings of older generations. Without doubt, this attitude of learning by benefiting from many masters and extensive learning enabled Ni Yun-lin to further make clear the skeleton of Chinese traditional culture. In other words, the aloof and proud literary sentiment of former masters was penetrated into his blood just as genic inheritance.

The career of painting in the earlier years of Ni Yun-lin could be found out in his "Inscription to Mountain Fangyuhua: "Landscape by Wang Wei expresses romantic charm of mountains but not their appearance; pines branches in the painting by Zhao Mengfu overlap and intersect, but flying birds are leisure. When I learned to paint, I wished to draw all I saw true to life; whether in suburbs or in town, I wished to record all I saw into the scroll holder." Thus, it was proved that, in his earlier years, Ni Yun-lin concentrated on painting from life and similar paintings in form, which was still at a stage with the standard of reproducing objective realities. Although at that time, he had already had good

literary foundation, it still required a further accumulated process to really bring the scintillating talents to a state of the pink of perfection. Together with the abundant collections of his most intimate friend Zhang Yu and Jingxi Wang Juexuan & his father, and mutual encouragement and stimulation of friends, his quality of poetry and painting was on the increase day by day.

There were few paintings by Ni Yun-lin in his earlier years and "Shui Zhu Ju Tu" collected today in the National Museum of China was painted at the age of 43, a works in his mid-life, which basically represented the painting style of Ni Yun-lin at that time. Although there included his own exploration, we could still recognize vaguely from his painting the painting style of his predecessors. This painting was made on paper, 53.5cm vertical and 28.2cm horizontal. On the painting, there were five trees on the slope and hatches were dotted behind the trees, with forests against the brook. His style of painting was prudent, with light ink strokes, and the writing was mellow and full. His laying paint on the dark green was totally different from his later style of painting. The biggest difference between the style of "Shui Zhu Ju Tu" and his later representative style of painting was his thickly laying paint on the dark green, the former approximating to frippery and stamped with a vermilion seal. Then, there was rarely dry painting, but mellow and full. Finally, the overall arrangement of the painting exhibited a crowded shape, obviously different from the calm of strolling idly in his later years. Stream in the mid-shot was still not wide enough, and the whole painting was faintly shrouded under the shadow of Dong Yuan's "horizontal" mode of composition. However, it was praiseworthy that the classical composition of "the three stops" had already edged up. Thus, the painting style of Ni Yun-lin in his later years was not out of randomness.

There was another landscape with the same laying of paint which was finished before the age of 50, called "Yu Hou Kong Lin Tu Zhou". In this painting, the scenery was complicated and full, with graceful and restrained style of writing, and occasionally with powerful leaning style of dry brush. Besides, mountains and rocks were dotted with ocher and cyanin, which directly inherited the shallow deep red color invented by Huang Gongwang. In these two paintings with similar way of paint laying, both artistic conception and pen and ink presented a refined and bright pattern, quite different from the cold style of leisure in his later years. In addition to inheritance factors of skill, the above painting also reflected his smooth-going frame of mind in the earlier years.

The scroll of "Yu Zhuang Qiu Ji Tu" stored up today in Shanghai Museum was made on paper with Chinese ink, 96cm vertical and 47cm horizontal, always highly commented by those familiar with it. Referring to the inscription of the painting, it can be seen that it was finished in Yuanzheng 15th Year of Yuan Dynasty, when Ni Yun-lin was already 55. There was painted a plain slope on the close shot of the painting, with five or six towering trees in different heights and postures. Two hills were painted on the other side of the bank in mild handwriting. He inscribed, "Rain and wind in Jiangcheng has stopped, and the pen and inkstone are still placed there on the writing desk in silence. Coins in the pocket is still there, and the song of life is that solemn and generous. Tree branches in autumn still droop and clear ripple shimmers lake water. Take care of yourself, Mr. Zhang Gaoshi, since we still have the ease to lie in bed. I drew conveniently this painting in Yiwei Nian in Wangyunpu fishing village. And so far, eighteen years have passed unconsciously, and I haven't expected this painting to be collected by my friend Ziyi. I am much indebted to him, so here I wrote this Five-character-regular-verse on July 20, Renzi Nian. Ni Yun-lin". The entire painting was separated into close shot, mid-shot and long shot. Mid-shot was a lake, but without any brushstroke; similar to the ink color of close shot, there was no distinction between distance & closeness, and lightness and darkness in the long shot, but with perfect visual effects of distance and closeness due to skillful pattern. Then, he used the brush to brush dry several strokes at lower right and where the ink was thick, and added slight details with light ink. The tree trunk was loosely painted with dry pen ink, together with a few brushes to strengthen the power. Use of ink for branches of the tree was similar to that of the tree trunk, but the stroke of writing was relatively slow, exhibiting thick ink. There were rare leaves, just dotted with light ink, and then more light ink was used to smooth the entire painting. In order to distinguish close mountains, dry pen ink was swiped and the stroke of writing was faster. There was not a little bit paint on the entire painting, just as a boundless expanse of lake water in a cold night under the autumn moon. Dong Qichang inscribed in the mount, "Ni Yun-lin was better at handwriting than drawing in his earlier years. In his late years, his handwriting was unrestrained, without any traditional taste, but profound attainments he achieved in his drawing, which changed the painting style of Dong Yuan & Ju Ran, and contained style of his own, so it was really a wonderful top grade. 'Yu Zhuang Qiu Ji Tu' was his masterpiece in his late years. It was collected by Chen Jiru, and corresponded to the style of Ni Yun-lin. Dong Qichang, on July 27, Yihai Nian, after berthing at Xumen." This painting was not made by Ni Yun-lin in his later years, which he had already made clear in the self inscription. However, it was certain that, a rudiment of his later classical style of "one river two banks" had already come into existence, except that his later spirit became more concise and the artistic conception became more ordinary.

Usually, Ni Yun-lin used the three steps of horizontal schema of "one river two banks", that is, several towering trees on the close slope, one brush on the Mt. could of the long shot and one lake in the middle. Irrespective of such intermediary supportive aspects as sand on the surface of the water and slopes, the extensive emptiness constituted capacious space. The two clear-cut segments of scenery up and down produced a feeling of loneliness in vision. However, the way that the trees grew corresponded to the winding of far-away mountains. The entire painting presented

a consistent structure and skeleton, forming a complete picturesque scene. Earlier emergence of this schema could date back to "Liu Jun Zi Tu", which was finished in 1345 and which is currently stored in Shanghai Museum. On April 8, 1345, on the boat of Gonghe in Wuxi, under the light, Ni Yun-lin completed the well-known "Liu Jun Zi Tu" for his friend Lu Shanfu. That painting, with great reputation, was passed down and recorded in order by master scholars of all later generations. He inscribed, "Each time Lu Shanfu meets me, he asks for a painting from me. On April 8, Zhizheng Five Years, he berthed on the shoreside of Gonghe in Wuxi, carried the lamp and lined the paper for my drawing. By that time, I had been tired beyond endurance, so I had to make do with that. If Mr. Huang Gongwang had witnessed this at that time, he would also burst into laughter. There is the preface and postscript by Huang Gongwang on the top right corner: 'From a distance, expanse of the autumn water shelters the cloud and mountains; closely, old trees are winding and zigzagging. There are six old trees in the painting, namely, pine, cypress, camphor tree, phoebe zhennan, locust tree and elm, upright and straight.'" Just because Huang Gongwang inscribed the "six gentlemen" in the painting, it was named after "Six gentlemen". The style and form of the painting was similar to that of "Yu Zhuang Qiu Ji Tu", except for slightly thick dotting technique of the moss. In the painting, the shapes of trees and rocks were a little bit hardened, inadequate in softness and looseness, but was representative of the earlier form of Ni Yun-lin's classic schema. This painting was relatively perfect practice of "broad and distant" composition theory, which broke through all former patterns, and exhibited an unprecedented appearance. It was not only refined and imagined from the landscape of Lake Tai, but also embodied the state of mind of painters' "remaining aloof from the world". Considering some other works in his middle and later years, it can be found out that, Ni Yun-lin combined the horizontal and broad composition methods to gradually evolve into his own composition. For example, "Song Lin Ting Zi Tu Zhou" painted by Ni Yun-lin in Zhizheng 14th Year (1354) had obviously association with "Shuang Song Ping Yuan Tu Juan" by Zhao Mengfu and "Xiu Huang Shu Shi Tu Zhou" by Li Kan. Considering his works passed down, before the age of 60, painting of Ni Yun-lin was a combination of all former generations and his paintings exhibited a diversity of visage.

3. Natural formation and dedication to perfection

Gorgeousness comes from loneliness, and Ni Yun-lin, in his later years, invented his characteristic formal language on the basis of learning advantages of all great masters with great concentration. He often used light ink, and he pursued thick writing at scattered places. In seemingly scattered calligraphy, he, as a matter of fact, used repeated light ink strokes, with loose and elegant calligraphic style like nature itself. Light ink strokes were applied to the drawing, highlighting fullness and massiness in dryness and simplicity. He applied upright and leaning writing style. That is, each time the first stroke began with upright edge, and then, after slight turning, became oblique edge, downward obliquely or turning over and forming the linetype of "belt stroke", which not only manifested the texture of mountains and rocks and light sensation of light and shade, but also contained vigorous and elegant lingering charm of the writing. Later generations assess his use of the pen ink as "being tender but grey, being withered but fertile, being conscious or unconscious, and being light but scattered", which is not exaggerated.

Although he suffered many mishaps in his life, his learned and refined quality could not be concealed. He walked into the genuine nature, lingering on everything in the world, appreciating objects but experiencing in the heart, experiencing and observing subtlety of the earth and apprehending the real atmosphere of "art". In a certain sense, art is the highest state of human life. Recluse of Ni Yun-lin was exactly a habitation after he experienced Taoism. In direct conversation with the nature and landscape, he was influenced from body to mind, gradually became unconstrained, and finally attained the detached state of integrating into a whole with the earth and the nature.

"Rong Xi Zhai Tu" by Ni Yun-lin stored in Taipei Palace Museum was painted in Hongwu 5th Year of Ming Dynasty (1372), and the poetry in the painting was inscribed in Hongwu 7th Year of Ming Dynasty (1374), the year when Ni Yun-lin passed away, so it was called his "last work before his death". "Shih-ch'u Pao-chi" in Qing Dynasty recorded the history of circulation of this painting, which added extremely rich historical value to the painting. From Renzi Year (1372) to March 4 of Jiayin Year (1374), "Rong Xi Zhai Tu" was collected by Bo Xuanweng, and was presented to Doctor Pan Renzhong from Wuxi after being inscribed again by Ni Yun-lin. Rong Xi Zhai was the residential name of Doctor Renzhong, so Ni Yun-lin inscribed this seven-character octave, "Prunus is blown by the spring wind to each corner in the room, and I spend the treasurable life in the study that is only enough to contain the knee. Fishes in the pond swim back and forth like a golden shuttle, and birds perch in the mountain stream and bamboo forests. Murmuring brook surges up with spondrift as beautiful as jade, just as I, with white hair, despise wealth and worldly glory. Like Han Kang in the Eastern Han Dynasty, I would like to be a recluse selling medicine with no bargaining. However, Fei Zhangfang in the Eastern Han Dynasty who practised medicine in order to help the people is also an example to follow." On March 4 of Jiayin Year, Bo Xuanweng again carried this painting to ask for an inscription, and presented it to Doctor Renzhong. Wuxi is my hometown, and Rongxizhai is the residential place of Doctor Pan Renzhong. Before long, he will return to Rongxizhai in his hometown, carrying delicious wine, upfold the painting I have presented. Then, wish Doctor Pan good health and a long life. By that time, my wish will be settled. "Rong Xi Zhai Tu" was a classical schema of Ni Yun-lin's landscape painting, with far-away composition of scenery. There were several tanglesome trees on the nearby slope, with an empty pavillion on one side, black in the middle for lake water, and several far-away mountains in the distance, which was an innocent and remote scenery, describing fully the author's unperturbed and

adaptive sentiment of forgetting the world in quiet. Turning a blind eye to similarity and dissimilarity, he just expressed ordinariness and innocence with light pen ink. The writing of the painting was intangible and flexible, with both dragging and brushing, and the calligraphic style was gloomy, expressing the extraordinary and refined artistic conception in the painting. Ni Yun-lin abandoned his family for travelling faraway, leading a wandering life and residing in country estates and Buddhist temples, and got together with fishermen, monks and Taoist priests. The autumn water of Lake Tai as smooth as a mirror and residence out of the dusty world was exactly what he had been yearning for day and night.

The scroll of “Gu Mu You Huang Tu” stored in the Palace Museum was completed with Chinese ink on paper, 88.5cm vertical and 30.2cm horizontal. Dry and wet ink was used in turns, and especially dry and light ink was used skillfully, which really achieved the state of having one’s words at hand consciously or unconsciously. He poetized, “Ancient trees nearby the brook grow in silence together with bamboo clumps, and verdant mosses bend over shoreside rocks, forecasting advent of the spring. I know for sure that my painting might not be accepted by the public, and this painting is presented to one of my friends in Jiaoxi in Zhenjiang who is reclusive.” The writing of this painting was extremely loose and soft, with free drawing, and all was quiet and desolate on the painting, without any noisy and worldly taste. This painting fully expressed Ni Yun-lin’s pureness, elegance, unselfishness, non-action and automorphic sentiment.

“You Jian Han Song Tu” is now stored in the Palace Museum, and although there isn’t any definite chronological record of events, it can be confirmed as the favourite works of Ni Yun-lin in his later years. This painting was completed with Chinese ink, 59.7cm vertical and 50.4cm horizontal. The pine was painted in secluded gorge, and it can be seen from the preface and postscript that this painting was presented to Zhou Xunxue for calling him to seclusion as early as possible. Outline of mountains and rocks in the painting was drawn with dry writing, and then was brushed by oblique brush. The pine was defined with two brushes, with no light ink strokes inside, but just several scars. Pine needles were painted with two or three brushes at least and five or six brushes at most, with countless changes, which could reveal the more naive and powerful style of painting in his later years. Landscape of Ni Yun-lin in his later years disclosed an artistic state of detaching from former generations with his particular formal language and clear-cut personality sentiment. Ni Yun-lin brought paintings of Chinese men of letters to an unprecedentedly perfect state.

By tasting landscape of Ni Yun-lin and following his internal track, it is not difficult to discover that objects in his landscape broken away from individual significance, and has been integrated with complicated sentiment. His painting is reservoir of sentimental memory, so when we pass through the temporal tunnel, it seems that we can hear his calling from the bottom of his heart. He was condensed in the depth of the history, but he has been engraved in the history of human culture permanently.

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