

# Reflections on the Traditional Chinese Art of “Leaving Blank”

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## Abstract

The art of "leaving blank" has been deeply influenced by traditional Chinese culture, and at the same time, the art of "white space" has also influenced the creation of many works of art to a greater or lesser extent. This paper briefly describes and introduces the application of traditional Chinese "leaving blank" in calligraphy, Chinese painting, opera and music, and further considers the relationship between the art of "leaving blank" in various literary works and traditional Chinese culture, as well as how the traditional Chinese philosophical ideas contained in various literary works will bring us enlightenment.

## Keywords

“Leaving Blank”; “Meaningful Blank”.

## 1. What is “Leaving Blank”

The word "leaving blank" literally means to leave a blank space. From an artistic point of view, leaving blank is a common technique used in the creation of Chinese artworks. Leaving blank refers to the creation of artworks such as painting and calligraphy in order to make the whole work more harmonious and exquisite, and intentionally leave the corresponding blank space for imagination. During the Qing Dynasty, Jiang He said in his "Miscellaneous Notes on Learning Painting" that the beauty of the real place is created by the empty place. The art of "white space" is widely used in all kinds of art, including Chinese calligraphy, painting, music, and opera, all of which emphasize the aesthetic principle of "white space". The blank space brought by the art of "white space" gives people an ethereal sense of beauty and endless imagination, giving the viewer a unique sense of pleasure, allowing the viewer to obtain a variety of aesthetic pleasure, and leaving the reader in a free aesthetic space. There is a very interesting allusion to the phrase "stay white". In the Eastern Jin Dynasty, Yu Liang, a lieutenant, escaped from the capital because of a rebellion in the court and intended to join Tao Kan to conquer the rebels. After meeting with him, Tao Kan saw that Yu Liang was elegant and graceful, so Tao Kan invited him to dinner. During the meal, the atmosphere gradually became cordial, and suddenly a plate of Allium chinense came up, and when Yu Liang ate it, he left the white of the root of the Allium chinense. Tao Kan asked him, "Why did you leave the white part?" Yu Liang replied, "It can still be planted." Tao Kan therefore praised Yu Liang. this allusion is said: there is room for everything, do not exhaust. The allusion to "leaving blank" is to leave a free space for everything and not to be exhausted. The art of "leaving blank" is not only the inventions of the artist in the process of artistic creation, but also the result of the subtle influence of Chinese traditional culture.

## 2. Application of “Leaving Blank” Art

### 2.1. “Leaving Blank” in Calligraphy

In the art of calligraphy, "leaving blank" is known to calligraphers as "Bu Bai". It is a calligraphic term that refers to the way in which the scribe leaves the ink and the blank space sparse and well-defined. In calligraphy, the white blank must be correctly handled in terms of black lines and blank spaces, line movement and blank stillness, local and overall, as well as changes in ink

color throughout the word and block, and spatial division and contrast. In calligraphy, the art of "leaving blank" is used in a variety of ways, including white space in words, closed space, hollowed out space, enclosed space, and peripheral space, while the layout of the scroll in Chinese calligraphy follows the aesthetic principle of "leaving blank". Even the framing of calligraphic works also follows this aesthetic principle, whether it is a vertical axis, screen, or hand scroll, all have the head of the sky, the head of the ground, etc.

Most Chinese calligraphy uses line as the main means of expression, and the existence of line is predicated on "white". Without white, the line cannot be highlighted. From the very beginning, white has been an important means of expression in Chinese calligraphy, the life of the art. The highest level of the art of "leaving blank" in Chinese calligraphy is "Ji Bai Dang Hei". It is one of the rules for the creation of beauty in the art of calligraphy by Deng Shiru, a calligrapher of the Qing Dynasty. This means that the structure of the characters and the layout of the whole piece need to be sparse and dense in order to break through the monotony of the work and make it fluctuate and harmony in the midst of contradictions. The realm of "leaving blank" requires the writer to be reckless in the real and find interesting in the imaginary. The aura of the black line in calligraphy is born from the white space, and it will be vivid and dynamic.

## 2.2. "Leaving Blank" in Traditional Chinese Painting

Chinese paintings, in many cases, appear at the same time with calligraphy. In Chinese paintings, the fly-headed characters of the author's title and inscription are of a different kind of interest. The biggest difference between Chinese paintings and oil paintings is that while most oil paintings are rich in content and colorful, Chinese paintings leave a lot of space, a technique known as "Yu Yu" in traditional Chinese painting. During the Song Dynasty, a large number of painters used "Yu Yu" to give their works their unique mood and charm. In landscape painting, black represents tangible things such as mountains, rocks and trees, while white space represents the sky, streams, waterfalls, roads, clouds and fog, etc. The large blank space allows the viewer to feel the imagery that the author wants to express. Black and white form a Chinese painting that reflects both reality and form, giving people enlightenment and enjoyment of beauty. The "black and white" is one of the components of the artistic image of Chinese painting, which makes the picture more aesthetic through the contrast between the tangible and the intangible. The "leaving blank" is not randomly made by the painter, and not because of the author's lack of expression. It is a product of the author's elaborate design according to the intention of the picture and according to certain aesthetic laws, in order to express the author's aspiration. It has the connotation of the interplay between reality and emptiness, and inadvertently permeates the Taoist philosophy of natural inaction, and renders the mood of emptiness and tranquility, creating a special beauty of Chinese painting.

There is a classic use of the art of "leaving blank" in Chinese painting, the painting "Fishing Alone in the Cold River". This painting is a landscape painting created by Ma Yuan in the Song Dynasty. In this painting, there is only a flat boat with an old man on it, and the old man is leaning over and fishing. There are only a few strokes on the side of the boat. However, this painting still makes people feel the immensity of the river. Some people commented: "The real and the imaginary are all created together, and the unpainted places are all wonderful. You can say that the painter depicts the loneliness and solitude of an old man fishing in a cold river, or that the painter depicts the indifference of fishing alone in the vast world. In fact, both of these two, or all kinds of things beyond these two, are born from the viewer's heart, just like a thousand Hamlets for a thousand people. The various thoughts that come from the heart have their own meaning. The large blank space left in "Fishing Alone in the Cold River" gives the viewer more freedom to reflect and think. This refreshing and intriguing realm is a wonderful reverberation of reality and emptiness that will not go away in the viewer's mind for a long time.



**Fig 1.** Landscape painting “Lonely fishing in cold river” by Ma Yuan

### 2.3. "Leaving Blank" in Opera

The art of "leaving blank" has also long been deeply rooted in folklore. Whether it is Huangmei Opera, Beijing Opera, Qin cavity or Kunqu, as the classic traditional entertainment activities, the "leaving blank" in opera also has its own unique flavor. If you have seen the traditional Chinese theater, you will find that there will be opera actors holding a horse whip to ride a horse scene. In fact, there is no real horse on the stage, but the audience can deeply feel the actor riding a horse in a predetermined situation. In the theater, there are often characters stomping around the stage for thousands of miles, bringing the audience into another story scene through the actors. In the Kunqu Opera "Peony Pavilion", there is no real pavilion on stage at all. However, the actors' graceful posture and meticulous steps lead the audience into the courtyard and then into the pavilion. Yu Shang Yuan, in his "National Drama Movement", has a summary of the theatrical performance program: "wielding a whip is like riding a horse, pushing a knock is like having a door, stacking chairs is a mountain, square cloth is a cart, four soldiers can refer to a team of people, and a maneuver is calculated to travel thousands of miles". In writer's opinion, this is the using of the "leaving blank". In many types of Chinese operas, the art of "leaving blank" is prevalent. Whether it is the omission of physical objects, the abbreviation of the plot or the simplicity of the performance, the application of the art of "leaving blank" brings a visual and auditory feast to the opera viewer and brings an infinite and vivid world of opera.

In addition to simplicity instead of tedium, the art of "leaving blank" has another unique use in opera. In fact, most of the operas we see are basically an excerpt from an opera work, which is called a "Zhe Zi Xi". It is a selection of a section or even a scene from the opera to be performed. The plot and story are ignored and there are only a few people on stage. As a small part of the whole play, the fracture is usually not performed at the beginning and the end. And it is the extra charm of the fragmented parts that makes the viewer enter the play and create boundless thoughts and lingering.

### 2.4. "Leaving Blank" in Music

Another explanation of "Bu Bai" in the Chinese dictionary is that it means to make the music sound suppressed, raised, sparse and slow in a proper way when playing music. When Bai Juyi was the secretary of Jiujiang County, he listened to a pipa woman play the pipa at the mouth of Penpu and left his famous poem "Pipa Xing". There is a sentence: at this time no sound is better than the sound." Here the "no sound" that is the blank. At the same time, in the aesthetics of music, Laozi proposed "the Great Sound". What is "Great Sound"? In Laozi's view, the origin of the world is inaudible, and although it is silent, it contains an incomparable richness of meaning. The white space in music is often used when there is a need to express the inner emotion, or when the emotion of the work reaches its climax. The pleasure generated by the special sensory experience of this brief blank space can surpass the aesthetic saturation of ordinary musical

works. The ethereal mood created by the contrast and unity of the piece can lead to greater aesthetic pleasure for the listener. At the same time, it is also easier for the listener to have emotional resonance.

### 3. Black and White Phase

In traditional Chinese Taoist aesthetics, Laozi attributed the "supreme beauty" and "great beauty" to "Tao". He practiced and pursued the original and absolute beauty and proposed that "there and nothing are born together". The creation of reality and emptiness reflects the Chinese view of the universe. Emptiness is the universe, and everything comes from emptiness. The aura of black lines in calligraphy is created by blank, and it is made vivid and dynamic by blank. The blank in Chinese painting is the cloud of smoke. In music, there is a sound beyond the strings. There is meaning beyond words in poetry. The minimalist style or no set-in opera, as well as the plot of a large jump and other artistic techniques. The deep meaning of them is from nothing, so that people can create reality from emptiness, stretching from the blank to infinite imagination, obtaining a variety of aesthetic pleasure, so that the viewer is in a free aesthetic space. At the same time, the viewer's mind is also impregnated with the philosophical idea of black and white.

When it comes to black and white, it is inevitable to mention the Taiji Diagram, which is explained in the Chinese Modern Chinese Dictionary as follows: The Taiji Diagram is a circular image to represent the unity of yin and yang opposites, and in Taoist symbols, the circle is usually surrounded by eight trigrams. In the Taiji Diagram, the two fish, yin and yang, are connected at the beginning and end, and they are opposed to each other and unified. As one of the ancient Chinese philosophical symbols, the Taiji Diagram is a special symbol used to explain the state of yin and yang in all things and is designed according to the concepts in the Zhou Yi. The articulation of black and white in it is like the natural alternation of night and day, inseparable from each other. It can also be said that it is an ideal image that suggests the harmonious development of all things.

### 4. "Knowing its White and Keeping its Black is the Style of the World."

And about the origin of the theory of white and black, Laozi said, "Knowing its white and keeping its black is the style of the world." White, referring to the place where light can shine, represents the appearance of things. Black, which refers to the place where light cannot shine, represents the inner law of things. In the face of everything, not only do we need to understand the phenomena, characteristics and external changes in the form of laws, but also need to explore the inner workings of those things that determine the external phenomena and laws from the surface to the inside. And can firmly grasp, flexible use. Respect the objective laws of things, and go with the flow. For the world style, is all in accordance with the laws of things. Laozi used black and white as a metaphor for the way of life, knowing white and keeping black, and leaving white everywhere to get interesting. The same is true for each of our lives, Zhuangzi said: "The empty room is white, auspicious stop". When the house in your heart is cleared of clutter and dust, your heart will be filled with sunlight, and the result will of course be a constant flow of good fortune. From the perspective of life, leaving white space refers more to a simple and leisurely life concept, a kind of life wisdom in the world. It is far more important to give yourself white space in life than to keep piling up. Giving up the meaningless busyness is to leave white space in life. Life needs to be white, everything should not be too much, as the saying goes, "Do not over-warm your clothes, do not over-fill your food".

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