

Study on Animal Images in Ancient Chinese Paintings

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Abstract

The paper aims to summarize and classify animal images in ancient Chinese paintings, and to study the reasons and characteristics of three different ways of expressing animal images by ancient Chinese painters according to the images' analysis in different paintings. Finally, it finds out:

1. In ancient painting, there are more than mature methods of observation and painting for the ability to depict objective images of animals.

2. As products of the collective wisdom of numerous artists, the animal images in ancient Chinese myths and legends are the result of illusory imagination with symbolism and uncertainty.

3. The recognition and understanding of rare animals with superpowers in ancient China have a tint of idealization and humanization, with the rare animals' images in the paintings having a certain gap with objective facts. This gap is precisely the artistic behavior with excellent characteristics caused by cultural ideals and artistic imagination

Keywords: Animal Images, Ancient, Chinese Paintings

Introduction

The first paragraph describes the basic starting point of the research problem and three basic categories of the painting content of the animal subject matter under study. The second paragraph elaborates on the development and evolution of animal genre painting, including human cognition of the world and how the image of animal totems in myths and legends is designed by imagination. The third paragraph describes the influence of people's cognition of different animals in reality and imagination on the characteristics of painting schemata and the cultural implications of some special animal image symbols for human beings under different circumstances. The fourth,

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fifth, and sixth paragraphs introduce different expressions and cultural connotations of the three types of animals in the paintings, and explain the studied issues through image symbols by painting cases in different periods. And, the last part states the research results of this paper.

Research Objectives

1. Through the study, the types of animals in Chinese paintings are classified and their different symbolic meanings are sorted out.
2. Furthermore, this paper respectively studies the specific image reference basis of the formation reason of different image characteristics of animals with different types in Chinese paintings;
3. The cultural connotation and role of deity animals and auspicious animals with super power in Chinese paintings.

Literature Review

1. The Study on Animal Modeling Language in Chinese Flower and Bird Paintings is a reflection on the scale between reality and ideal of the modeling aesthetics of animal images (mainly bird images) in Chinese flower-and-bird paintings. In particular, it studies the subjective artistic expression methods of natural objects in Chinese paintings, and then systematically analyzes and studies the relationship between the methods and the social and cultural environment, literati thoughts, and the characteristics of materials of Chinese painting. This study didn't conduct a specific classification and background study on the development and evolution of various expression techniques exhibited by the animals in Chinese paintings.

2. Traditional Chinese Creative Consciousness - Taking Auspicious Animal Vision as an Example is the visual study of some virtual or real animals with spiritual symbolism-auspicious animals in Chinese culture. Through the formation of Chinese traditional auspicious animal images and their visual symbol significance and influence on Chinese folk art, it clarified the application value of auspicious animal image symbols in clothing, illustration, and art design, as well as the problems existing in the application of traditional animal images in the contemporary cultural context.

3. Having studied from the prehistoric pottery pattern and Chinese portrait brick to the mature period of flower-and-bird paintings, Research on the Morphological Evolution of Flowers and Birds and the Characteristics of Early Flowers-and-Birds Paintings has particularly made a relatively in-depth analysis and research on the evolution and development of early flower-and-bird image symbols. This is different

from the focus of most research on the image characteristics of Chinese flower-and-bird paintings, thus providing some help for my research.

4. Transcending from the Physical Image and Obtaining Its Essence-the Artistic Value of the “Similarity and Non-Similarity” Stylistic Features in Chinese Flower-and-Bird Paintings aim to explore the process of Chinese flower-and-bird painting from realism to freehand brushwork, as well as the reasons and conditions that influence the development of freehand brushwork in flower-and-bird paintings. The influence of philosophical and cultural ideas on the modeling concept enables the Chinese flower-and-bird painting to find an aesthetic starting point and destination between objective objects and subjective thoughts. This kind of broad exposition still needs further in-depth and specific research. In addition, the theoretical research of Chinese painting habitually takes Confucianism and Taoism as the premise to affect the artistic style, but this study has not further carried out more specific and in-depth research and systematic classification.

Through the search and reading of the research literature on the images of animals in Chinese paintings, it is found that most of the research is based on the discipline of flower-and-bird painting itself as the starting point. In terms of the profound origin of the relationship between realism and freehand brushwork in Chinese painting and Chinese cultural concepts or philosophical speculation, most of the research comes down to the freehand brushwork of Chinese painting modeling and its value thinking field. The independent study of animal images in various subjects of Chinese painting (landscape paintings, figure paintings, flower-and-bird paintings) has not been valued by more researchers, which leaves enough room for my research. This paper may only be a short start and a general comb. Therefore, continuing this research in depth still needs more research workload and data collection.

Conceptual Framework

The study explores the formation reasons, characteristics analysis, and classification of image symbols. According to the content classification and symbol characteristics of images, combined with the corresponding historical literature research, the researcher divided the sources of animal images in Chinese paintings into three categories. The specific research on the characteristics of the three types of animal images is as follows:

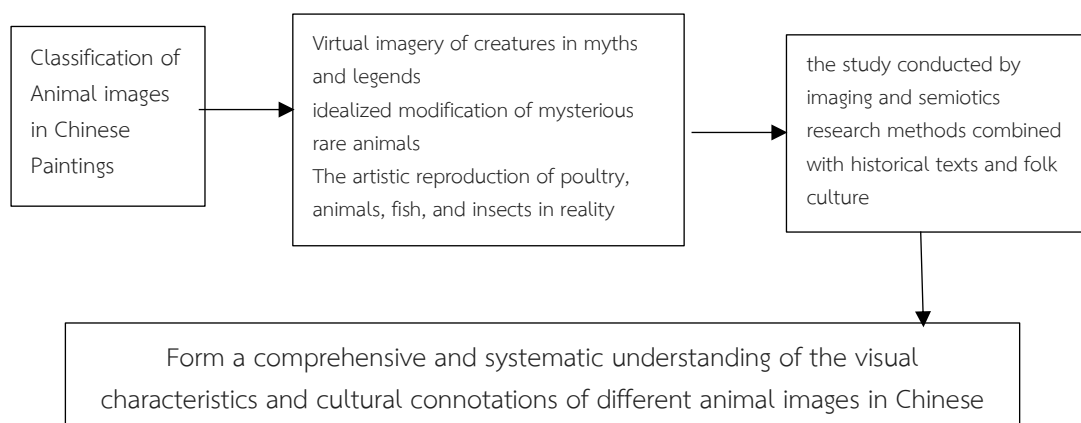


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Research Methods

This research mainly applies the observational method, literature research method, qualitative analysis method, and comparative analysis method to comprehensively analyze, induce, compare, and study animal images in ancient Chinese paintings. Taking image symbols as the main research object, it is found that the influence of social culture behind these images on the formation of image characteristics, as well as the absorption and integration of images themselves into the culture, religion, philosophy, folk customs, and other human factors, so that these images are accepted and understood by all relevant visual audiences through literature research.

In the history of human beings painting, animal images have appeared in rock paintings and artifact decorative patterns with characters early. Animals in Chinese paintings are classified into the special branch of flower-and-bird paintings, though animals have always been an important setting element in figure paintings. Because animals always accompany humans in the process of recognizing nature and transforming nature, the domestication of animals by people is also an important achievement of civilization in the process of humans conquering nature for a long time. Various animal images have appeared in both animal paintings and figure paintings in ancient Chinese paintings. Through the classification and summary, the animal images can be roughly divided into three categories: the first is animals that are close to or common to human life, such as cows, sheep, chickens, and sparrows; The second is deity animals or monsters with superpowers in myths and legends, such as dragons, phoenixes, and unicorns; The third is the rare beasts, rare animals or animals with the embodiment of mysterious power in the daily life of Chinese people, such as lions, tigers, elephants, cranes, and bats. These three types of animals have naturally formed three different image design concepts and painting expression methods during painting.

Ancient paintings began by recording human life, so we will see a large number of figures and animal patterns in rock paintings or murals carved on stones by early human beings. These are the marks left by ancient humans to record their hunting life and labor. A large number of cows, sheep, and horse symbols can be seen in Yinshan rock paintings in Inner Mongolia now that may be painted separately or appear in hunting and nomadic scenes. We can tell whether they are cows, sheep, or horses through simple graphic characteristics. In the Chinese ceramic and enamel paintings dating back about 3,000 years ago, we can see more mature painting techniques and expressions. In the Human, Dragon, and Phoenix Painting unearthed in Mawangdui, Changsha, we can already see the images of characters, phoenixes, and dragons, which were also drawn during the period of totem worship or deity worship in human civilization. At that time, humans conceived symbolic symbols of superpowers such as angels, demons, and deity animals by imagining natural phenomena that could not be explained in nature. They gradually evolved into tribal totems of spiritual worship by human groups through dissemination. Dragon is a national totem with a large regional identity that the Chinese people imagined and continuously enriched three thousand years ago. It can go up into the sky and the sea, call the wind and rain, and even punish human errors. People revere it out of fear, praying for fair weather and peace in their families' life by worshiping the dragon. Therefore, according to their own life experience, people have endowed the dragon with the advantages of many animal bodies. For instance, it has a serpentine and changeable body (snake is one of the earliest animals that people worship due to fear), sharp and powerful claws like eagles, solid and powerful brains like cows, noble and beautiful horns like deer, fierce and rigid teeth like tigers...This nearly perfect image design further makes it a perfect embodiment of ability and image. This kind of imagery can be realized and displayed to the public only through painting. Therefore, the social role of painting is mainly reflected in two aspects: one is to record various figures and events in human social activities; The second is to spread knowledge and religious teachings through the content of paintings to help rulers form an orderly social ethical order. Different types of animal images in Chinese paintings also play a certain role in social education.

The development of Chinese painting matured around the fifth century AD. After that, Chinese painting gradually divided into three categories: figure paintings, landscape paintings, and flower-and-bird paintings. Beasts and birds are classified as the category of flower-and-bird painting, but animals are still an important setting in figure paintings and landscape paintings. As images that echo the characters or as ornaments in the landscape, they often have metaphorical cultural references and make the spirit and emotion of the picture extend imaginatively. For example, tigers

are the most ferocious beasts in the world. In Buddhism, there are stories like Buddhists giving up their lives to feed tigers, and Luohan or practitioners taming tigers with Buddha. Tigers also symbolize the power to protect Buddhist dignity in Buddhism, so the pictures of tigers and practitioners together are often seen in Buddhist paintings. This combination of practitioners and tigers gradually weakened their storytelling in the course of long-term cultural evolution, but used tigers to metaphor the supreme power and broad tolerance of Buddha Dharma (Figure.1). We look at Luohan Tu painted by the Chinese painter Dai Jin in the 14th to 15th centuries that a tiger in the picture is sitting in front of an old monk and receiving his touch. Its expression is gentle and cute, and its volume, image, and temperament are very different from the real tigers'. Two main reasons are causing this kind of pattern language: On the one hand, the image of the tiger is not common in life, so the artist mainly creates through the pictures of others or the description of language; On the other hand, the superpower of this kind of animal makes people produce fear and worship for it, thinking that its superpower is endowed by God; Accordingly, people could add many subjective emotional imaginations in depicting it, with the tiger breaking away from ordinary animal attributes. Such examples can be seen in many Chinese paintings with extremely obvious symbolic characteristics. The painters often rely on a certain aspect of an animal's excellent quality or bad defects to conceal the theme of the picture or the thoughts that they hope to express. For example, the white crane symbolizes the secluded life away from the city and standing aloof from worldly affairs, the monkey symbolizes the fickle and uncontrollable emotions and desires, and the snake symbolizes some mysterious and vicious things in human nature. There are also symbolic animals with more probabilities in the picture: unicorns, lions, elephants, monkeys, cranes, phoenixes, turtles, toads, etc. These animals have also been recognized by the Chinese as deity animals or auspicious animals with specific cultural symbols in the long cultural evolution.



Figure 2: Luohan Tu by Dai Jin

Through the above research, we classify the animals in Chinese paintings in terms of three sources of image design: (1) the artistic reproduction of real animals, animals, fish, and insects; (2) the virtual imagination of spirit and monster creatures in myths and legends; (3) the ideal decoration of rare birds and foreign animals. The first kind of animals that are common in life are the most common painting materials. They are close to or have many intersections with human life, so they often appear in the artist's observation field. Therefore, the artist has enough time and opportunity to carefully observe their morphological characteristics and living habits and even can paint the animals by directly looking at the actual animals. For the ordinary visible animals, the viewers of paintings will also put forward opinions or opinions on the paintings according to their observation of the images, and the realism of the images in the paintings will become their first consideration. The first type of animals is common in life so people are generally familiar with their images. And, although the artist will also apply artistic treatment to the animal images in the painting, they are still very close to the original image characteristics in reality. Besides, some excellent painters can distinguish themselves from ordinary painters by capturing these animals' vivid instantaneous expressions or actions in an abnormal state. Han Gan, a great Chinese artist in the 8th century, is a master in this aspect. He is famous for his expertise

in drawing horses and the horses he painted are not only accurate and realistic, but also have body language and attitude. Another one is the emperor Zhao Ji, living in the 11th century. He is also a great master of painting. His work *Myna* (Figure 3) shows the moment when three mynas are dancing and playing in the branches. The figure of Mynas turning gently in the air and the sense of power released by the claws and bodies when they are playing and fighting with each other are very vivid. A few falling feathers are very wonderful to present this dynamic instantly. This work is a classic representation of Chinese realistic painting. It can also be seen from this work that painters rely on careful observation to achieve an accurate grasp of animal images and expressions when painting such animals so that the images are close to nature and vivid and wonderful.



Figure 3: Mynas by Zhao Ji

The second kind of animals often presented in Chinese paintings are strange creatures in myths and legends, also known as deity animals. These virtual images that do not exist in reality are magical animals with symbolic significance and powerful capabilities generated through imagination, so their images will vary greatly according to the personal understanding of different painters. When designing these animal images, the artist naturally has obvious subjective emotions of the artists on the premise of retaining the main characteristics according to the description in the text or

legend. The differences produced by these images in different pictures can also be understood and recognized by the viewers, which is generally common and established. Nine Dragons, created by Chen Rong, a Chinese painter in the 11th century AD, is a representative work of ancient dragon paintings. In the picture, he painted a total of nine dragons with different shapes. Some dragons roam in the waves and others hover in the clouds. The dragons depicted in the painting look powerful and agile (Figure 4). There is also the dragon image in the works of painter Wu Bin in the 16th century which is different from Nine Dragons'. Although the basic morphological characteristics of the dragons in the two paintings are relatively similar, it is not difficult to find obvious differences in facial features, horns, and bodies between the two through the specific details in the images. This is not the difference in painting styles but the difference in subjective ideas in the process of describing the shape of the dragon. Through the above two images, it can be judged that their depiction conforms to the image characteristics of the dragon totem generally recognized in the minds of the Chinese people. And, the difference between the two just inspires the viewer to have more possible imagination space for the image of strange creatures existing in the divine world, which is also the worship of the supreme surreal power of human beings and the charm of myths and legends for people to have rich imagination.

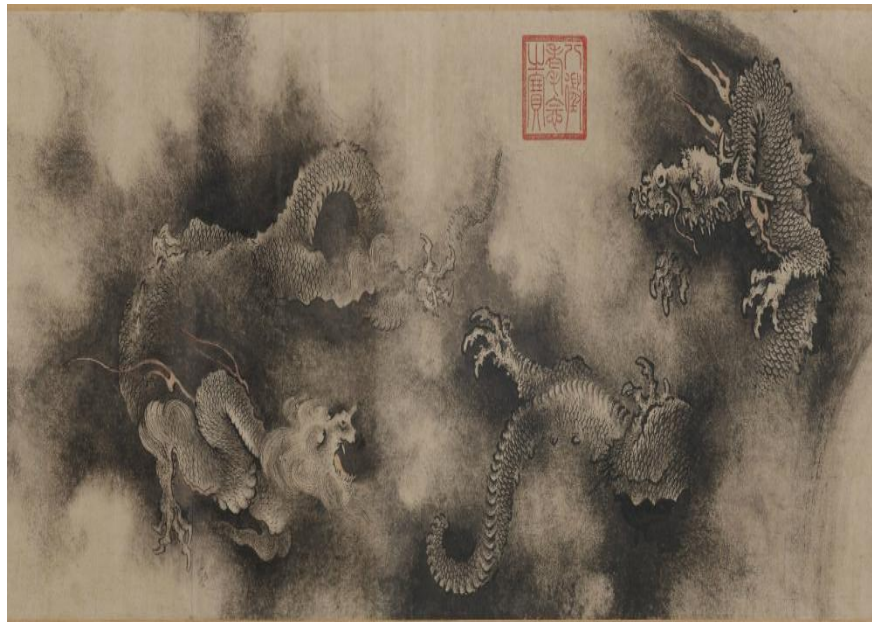


Figure 4: The partial picture of Chen Rong's Nine Dragons



Figure 5: The partial picture of Wu Bin's Luohan Tu-Dragon

The third type of animals shown in Chinese paintings are mainly rare birds and beasts, and animals that are relatively rare in China or have some spiritual legends. Except that they are rare, these animals also have the ability or characteristics that ordinary animals do not have, such as huge elephants, fierce and powerful lions, agile and smart monkeys, and bats that hide by day and come out at night. Therefore, the uniqueness of this kind of animal is subjectively endowed with some spiritual imagination in the course of cognition. And, they are listed between the first ordinary animals and the second deity animals, becoming the third spiritual animals with metaphorical symbolic meaning (auspicious animals). In the Han Dynasty of China 2000 years ago, Southeast Asia paid tribute to the Emperor of China, Emperor Wu of Han, a lion, which was hardly seen in Chang'an at that time. People only know that the tiger is the king of animals, but don't know whether the lion or the tiger is more powerful. Therefore, they put the lion and the tiger together, and the tiger saw the lion and threw itself on the ground with no ability to resist.¹ From then on, the big news spread rapidly in Chang'an and even across the country. The Chinese people knew that there is another animal called lions in the world that could defeat tigers. As a result, they invited painters to draw pictures of lions for them according to their descriptions to hang them at home to deter evil ghosts. Since then, the lion's heroic and courageous character has been increasingly promoted and worshiped by the Chinese. Coupled with the continuous status of the lion in Buddhism, as religion has spread in China, it has finally become an important totem for guarding justice and expelling evil. As for the image of the lion, it has formed image symbols far from the prototype in China. Over the past 2000 years, different types of lion figures have been formed in various parts of China with the characteristics of the north-south region (the northern lion is

solemn and powerful, and the southern lion is dexterous and cute). The lion images frequently appear in paintings, sculptures, and patterns, especially outside the gates of important official institutions and Buddhist temples. Generally, a pair of stone lions are erected around the gate of the Buddhist temple to show the majesty and solemnity of the place. This kind of idealized lion shape depicted through imagination has formed a deeply recognized image symbol in the minds of the Chinese people. Although modern people have the conditions to often see real lions, the Chinese-style lion image with ideal colors in artworks is still more loved and generally recognized by the audience (Figure 5), which is also the cultural background and historical reason for the image variation of the third animal type in Chinese paintings. Tiger is also another symbolic animal. The above has analyzed the meaning of tiger in Buddhism when talking about Dai Jin's Luohan Tu. It also has the same exorcism function as the lion in the folk, so most of the tigers in Chinese paintings have the spiritual anthropomorphic feature. Among the birds, red-crowned cranes are particularly respected by the literati. In Taoist mythology, many deities use white cranes as mounts to traverse the universe between heaven and the earth. Lin Hejing, a litterateur in the Song Dynasty of China, was a hermit. He loved red-crowned cranes and plum blossoms very much. He even compared plum blossom to his wife and crane to his son. After his admiration for crane, it became the embodiment of an aloof and lofty character. And, his many paintings contain the image of a crane. Folks also believe that white cranes are a symbol of longevity so they often depict pine trees and white cranes in paintings with people's wishes for health and longevity. Cranes are not common in life and many painters may not have seen real cranes. Therefore, the image of cranes in the paintings will experience the artists' idealized imagination. The cranes in paintings have the exaggerated proportion of head and neck, feathers and body richer in line beauty, embodied human wisdom, becoming an image symbol in the status of birds which is second only to Phoenix in paintings. In addition, animals such as bats, deer, apes, and monkeys have similar image exaggeration, variations, and idealized painting methods. People usually add certain symbols to these animals, such as curled manes, beards, and eyebrows that symbolize longevity, facial features similar to humans, and healthy and beautiful limbs. All these convey human awe and worship for them.



Figure 6: Manjusri Bodhisattva by anonymity



Figure 7: Cast Copper Lions in Imperial Palace in Beijing



Figure 8: Stone Carved Lion in Yangzhou Slender West Lake

In the process of expressing nature, Chinese painting has always advocated Zhang Zao's aesthetic concept² of "good fortune outside the division, the source of a heart" in the Tang Dynasty. Therefore, blindly pursuing realistic paintings similar to objective natural objects in Chinese paintings has always been despised by cultural people and the aristocratic class. Painters will more or less add some artists' subjective thoughts in the process of expressing nature. This concept is called freehand brushwork in the field of Chinese painting. The integration of this subjective thought is particularly prominent in landscape painting. When painting animals, artists will carry out subjective artistic processing to varying degrees according to three categories. After long-term development and cultural integration, this artistic processing method has finally formed a modeling method and image symbols with the characteristics of Chinese culture and language. This phenomenon not only includes the way the Chinese artists observe the natural world, but also contains the artist's reflection on the philosophy of life and the sustenance of their ideal feelings. The artistic depiction of the three types of animals reflects the corresponding understanding and embodiment of the triple artistic realm (i.e. content conception, passion conception, and artistic conception)³ in Chinese art, and provides an important way and thought for us to interpret the spiritual connotation of animal modeling in ancient Chinese paintings, especially flower-and-bird paintings and figure paintings.

Notes:

1. There is a detailed record of this matter in the *Book of Natural History* in the Western Jin Dynasty.

“Good fortune outside the division, the source of a heart”, the theory of artistic creation put forward by the painter Zhang Kui Tang Dynasty, is the most representative statement in the history of Chinese art that advocates learning from nature and emphasizes that the artist's subjective thought is the decisive factor for painting.

In his work Poetic Style, Wang Changling, a poet of the Tang Dynasty, divided the artistic grade of classical poetry into three levels of realms, namely, content conception, passion conception, and artistic conception. This concept was later accepted by painting art and applied to the judgment of painting grades.

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Overview of the Traditional Patterns and Auspicious Animal Patterns

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