



The ideological origins and aesthetic construction of *yijing* (*artistic conception*)

Jing Hongmei¹

Received: 1 May 2023 / Revised: 11 September 2023 / Accepted: 12 September 2023 /
Published online: 2 December 2023
© The Author(s) 2023

Abstract The ideological origin of *yijing* (*artistic conception*), an important concept in China's classical aesthetic category, has an inseparable relationship with the influence of traditional philosophies of Buddhism and Taoism. This kind of influence can be seen from both the creation of the concept of *yijing* (意境) and the artistic characteristics and aesthetic modes *yijing* reveals. However, from the perspective and achievements of the structural research, the structure of *yijing* containing aesthetic levels of *wu* (物), *xiang* (象), *jing* (境), *guan* (观) is similar to that in the artistic practice and aesthetic experience of other ethnics. It indicates that *yijing* can be considered as an aesthetic category with the universal commensuration of the ancient times, the modern era, Chinese and foreign cultures, to obtain modern transformation and integration that the general tool possesses.

Keywords *Yijing* · Ideological origin · Artistic characteristics · Aesthetic structure

Introduction

Interpreting what is *yijing* is as hard as interpreting what is beauty. To some degree, they are all things that could only be unspeakable. And usually, there are dissensions on their understandings because the benevolent see benevolence and the wise see wisdom. It can be found from the research practice that “The theory of *yijing* in ancient China lacks theoretical awareness...Even the master of Chinese culture in the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic China as Wang Guowei didn't make any theoretical analysis of it, which refers to a systematic discussion on its definition,

✉ Jing Hongmei
jinhongmei@bsu.edu.cn

¹ School of Humanities, Beijing Sport University, Beijing, China

nature, and characteristics, as well as the reason it is created and its changing law, neither did they give any explanations and demonstrations to the theoretical achievements of predecessors. In consequence, the difficulty of understanding *yijing* is left to people nowadays” (Jianjiang 2006). Modern scholars try to analyze and interpret *yijing* by referencing to western theoretical framework and terminologies, which leads to the problem that the research method and thinking mode do not fit the research object. Specifically, “generally, the creation and appreciation of *yijing* are based on the thinking mode of ‘harmony between men and nature’, while modern researches on *yijing* mainly conform to that of ‘subject-object dichotomy’. Then, the doubt comes that whether the thinking mode of ‘subject-object dichotomy’ is applicable to the research on *yijing*” (Wencheng 2003). Researchers including Wang Jinzhong, He Huibin and Cheng Yuanjing have made their assertions: “*yijing* cannot be fully interpreted with modern people’s thinking mode of ‘subject-object dichotomy’.” (Wang Jinzhong); “The experience and comprehension of *yijing* seem to be the privilege of our nation, and a majority of western people cannot enter this art palace.” (He Huibin); “...At first, the thinking mode of ‘subject-object dichotomy’ divides *yijing* into mutually contradictory elements as appearance and essence, subject and object, and art and reality, or follows the opposite patterns of individuality and commonness, reality and reflection, etc. Then, it seeks unity from oppositions to achieve the method of dialectical interpretation. Under the restraint of this thinking mode, breakthroughs on researches on *yijing* are hard to made.” (Cheng Yuanjing) “Until Chinese people’s thinking mode developing into a new stage that ‘surpassing the subject-object dichotomy and reaching the higher level of harmony between men and nature in the future (Wang Jinzhong), can the problem be truly solved” (Wencheng 2003). However, in this way, the research on *yijing* seems to be caught in a dilemma. It is hard to establish specifications and rules because the interpretation of *yijing* conforming to traditional Chinese thinking mode tends to lead to an empirical and impressionistic comprehension. Meanwhile, analyzing and interpreting *yijing* based on a reason-and-logic-dominated western structural framework is probably tailoring a square into a circle resulting in the inconformity of words and meaning and inaccurate interpretation.

Facing the current theoretical methods and research results, taking complementation and integration as its principle and purpose, this paper, considering both traditional Chinese and western research views, carries out its discussion by taking the best of all previous theories and achievements and the strategy of lexical discrimination from aspects of *yijing*’s ideological origins, aesthetic characteristics and inner structural levels. It needs to be stated that the earliest record of *yijing* may be seen from the poetry commentary made by people in the Tang Dynasty. However, the aesthetic form and spiritual essence it signifies have long historical origins. As the highest aspiration of ancient Chinese art, *yijing* has already permeated the creative practice and criticism and appreciation of all kinds of traditional arts, including poetry, painting, calligraph, and music. Therefore, the demarcation and comb of *yijing* cannot be merely stuck to its name and image. As well, identification and distinguishment should be done for it and those similar concepts and terminologies that are always taken as synonyms and easy to be confused.

The ideological origins of *yijing*

The ideological origins of *yijing* mainly comes from Taoism and Buddhism. The Taoism and views in *The Book of Changes* (《周易》) on *you* (有) and *wu* (无), space and time, holistic view, as well as the thoughts of discrimination of word (image) and meaning and harmony between men and nature have a profound influence on the creation of *yijing*. If we make an intuitive analysis to the literal meaning of *yijing*, it can be simply understood as the unification of *yi* (meaning) and *jing* (atmosphere), which obviously shows the dialectical unification between the image and the meaning, the virtuality and reality, and the *you* (有) and *wu* (无) it contains. In the history of Chinese ideologies, it is exactly the Taoism that provides philosophical basis for *that* dialectical unification relation.

The discrimination of word (言) and meaning (意) of Zhuangzi in the Pre-Qin Dynasty and that of image (象) and meaning (意) in *The Book of Changes* provide basis and interpretation for the relationship among the word (言), image (象), and meaning (意) of *yijing* and the inclination of emphasizing on meaning and making light of reality on its creation. “*The Book of Changes: Notes and Appendix* (《周易·系辞传》) presented the proposition that ‘the meaning cannot be fully expressed by words’ and ‘to fully express it, the image needs to be established’. It is believed that the meaning that cannot be clearly presented and fully conveyed by abstract concepts can be showed visually through images. Why the establishment of image can achieve the fullness of meaning? *The Book of Changes: Notes and Appendix* said: ‘things recorded here are subtle, but their implications are great, meanings profound, language elegant, descriptions euphemistic but targeted, narrations straightforward but the truth deep-hidden’, which demonstrates the opinion that the visual image has functions of reflecting the great through the small, summarizing the majority through the minority, and obtaining the general through the specific” (Yanling 2006). Further, Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu proposed the ideas of “the meaning being already known, one’s words are therefore no more necessary” and “the great image is invisible”. Thus, the discussions on the relationship of word-image-meaning of Taoism and *The Book of Changes* can be reorganized as: since the word cannot fully express the meaning, one’s words are therefore no longer necessary once the meaning is already known. To fully express it, the image needs to be established. However, the great image is invisible. In this way, in the end of the logical chain of the discrimination of the word and the meaning, the thought of *wu* (无) is introduced, that is to say, there is a transition from *you* (image) to *wu* (the great image or the meaning). The famous view on *you* and *wu* in *Tao Te Ching* (《道德经》) by Lao Tzu disclosed a critical truth:

Thirty spokes join together at one hub; the usefulness of the cart resides in its nothingness (*wu*).

Clay is pulled to make vessels; the usefulness of the vessel resides in its nothingness.

One cuts doors and windows to make dwellings; the usefulness of the dwelling resides in its nothingness.

Something (*you*) is what makes them beneficial; nothing (*wu*) is what makes them useful.

Lao Tzu thought that *you* and *wu* are interrelated and *wu* is even the prerequisite of *you*. Why is that? Lao Tzu said: “all things in the world are produced by *you*, while *you* is produced by *wu*.” In other words, the idea that *you* is produced by *wu* is the reason for why *you* and *wu* can be integrated or *wu* can be embodied and inferred by *you*. On the basis of this principle, the characteristics of the thinking mode and the aesthetic mode of “obtaining the meaning through the image”, “feeling emotions through the scenery”, “extending to the infinity of the time and space based on the presence of their finitude”, and “transiting from the visible material world to the invisible noumenon world” are deducted. While, Lao Tzu’s promotion of *wu* determines that *wu* stands in a more critical and valued position than *you* in examples of their comparisons.

If there is truly a thing similar to the dialectical unity in *yijing* (in which the dialectical relationship has discussed as above), the emphasis on unity is possibly much more than that on the dialectical relationship for the reason that unity, integration and holistic view are more approximate to the traditional cognitive ways of Chinese. Since the publication of *The Book of Changes*, the ancient people have established a naïve cosmology of the unity of time and space. The term *yu zhou* (宇宙, means universe) naturally represent a unity of the time and space, as the ancient said that “the up and down, right and left, forward and backward is *yu* (宇), while the ancient, present and future is *zhou* (宙)”. When considering the time and the space, the ancient will absolutely not isolate the two from each other to have an abstract discussion, but usually represent the time with the change of the space and establish the space through the flow of the time, which enables people to have a preliminary holistic view in the sense of ontology. *The way* (道) proposed by Lao Tzu depicted a more vivid picture for this kind of holistic view: “there is a totally natural thing that born before the creation of the earth and the *tian* (天, means heaven). It is quiet, invisible, and isolated. It grows independently without any other external forces and runs circularly without exhaustion. It can be entitled as the root of the earth and the *tian*. I do not know its name so I shall call it *the way* (道)”, and “there is only one principle in *the way*, the principle has two opposite sides, the third appears when the two opposite sides clash, and then everything is created”. Therefore, the way to achieve *the way* (道) is to exclude the illusion and obstruction of visibility and finitude and then approach to the chaotic and faraway original scene, so as to embrace the holistic view. Under the guidance of this kind of ontology and epistemology, the thought of “harmony between men and nature” is naturally formed. The Taoism emphasizes the harmony and unity between men and nature. As Lao Tzu called it *the way*, he also gave it another name “the Great” (大): “Without knowing its name, I shall call it *the way*, and name it as *the Great*”. After that, he said: “therefore *the way* is great, *tian* (天) is great, the earth is great, so are men. Men follow the principle of the earth, the earth follows the principle of *tian*, *tian* follows the principle of *the way*, and *the way* follows the principle of nature.” It indicates that the relationship between *tian* and *the way* is the same as that between men and *the way*, and they share the same origin. Although *tian* is an exterior thing of men, they are united

and governed by nature, the highest principle. In other words, they are all integrated into the orbit of *the way* and nature. Chuang Tzu, another representative of Taoism in the early Qin Dynasty, specified his thought that “Heaven, Earth, and I were produced together, and all things and I are one” (*Chuang Tzu: The Adjustment of Controversies* 《庄子·齐物论》). He “never takes nature as a contrary thing to men, but feels honored and pleased for the unity of men and everything in the world” (Yanling 2006). He “communicates with the *tian*, earth, and spirits, and does not position himself over anything” (*Chuang Tzu: The Land under the Heaven* 《庄子·天下》). The holistic cosmology and the thought of “harmony between men and nature” have directly influenced the creation of *yijing*, the consciousnesses of “things and I share everything” and “the integrity of the subject and object”, and the wide-range view of attaching great importance to general grasp.

In conclusion, the theory of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu in Taoism and some content of *The Book of Changes* sharing the same idea with Taoism objectively provide critical philosophical basis and aesthetic psychological preparation for *yijing* that was created later and gradually developed into mature to form its unique aesthetic structural level and perception mode.

In the author’s opinion, the ideological relationship between Buddhism and *yijing* is mainly embodies in the doctrine of Buddhism and its terminologies’ extending and supplementing the conceptual meaning of *yijing*, as well as the enlightenment about the understanding and perception methods of *yijing* it brings. From the perspective of etymology, the character *jing* (境) has an inseparable connection with Buddhism. Here, the author tries to discriminate three inter-related words: *jing* (境), *jingjie* (境界), and *yijing* (意境). Originally, *jing* (境) refers to the completion of a musical composition, whose original form is *jing* (竟). Xu Shen said in his *shuowenjiezi* (《说文解字》) that “the completion of a musical composition is called *jing* (竟)”. Duan Yucai noted that “*jing* (竟) means the completion of a music composition. By extension, it also denotes the completion of everything and the boundary of a territory”. In *Xiaguan · Anecdotes of Rites of the Zhou Dynasty* (《周礼·夏官·掌故》), it was written that “in each *jing* (竟) of the nation”. Zheng Xuan noted that “*jing* (竟): the boundary”. Therefore, when it refers to the space boundary, *jing* (境) can be written as *jing* (境). The word *jingjie* appeared later as a compound word. *Eastern Expedition Fu* (《东征赋》), written by Ban Zhao in the Eastern Han Dynasty, said that “Arrive at the *jingjie* of Changyuan county, observe its people busy with farming”. Here, *jingjie* shares the same meaning with the character *jing* (境) referring to the boundary of time or space. After Buddhism’s introduction into China, *jingjie*, a word with the implication of territory, was borrowed for its translation and endowed with new meanings. In *The Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms*, *jingjie* is explained as “the territory’s boundary under one’s sovereignty” and *jing* “a place where one’s heart arrives after sublimation”, which all refers to the territory one’s consciousness and ability of feeling can reach. The Buddhist believed that six kinds of things can be sensed by men’s sense organs: color, sound, smell, flavor, tangible objects, and mind objects and named them as “the six *jings* (六境)”. For a man, to perceive those six kinds of things he has eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind, which are called “the six roots” (六根). The behavior of sensing “the six *jings*” by “the six roots” is “the six senses” (六识) that are “the sense of color by eyes, sound by ears, smell by nose, flavor by tongue, tangible objects by body, and mind objects by mind”. The six *jings*, the six roots and the

six senses are collectively known as “the eighteen *jies* (十八界)”, therefore, *jing* (境) can also be called *jingjie* (境界). It can be seen that “from the *jingjie* in the Han Chinese mind to that in the Chinese translation of Buddhist scriptures there is a semantic generation-conversion process of Chinese language, which is the generation process from the object to the subject, from the boundary to the degree, from the secularity to the religiosity then to the human life and finally to the art” (Jianjiang 2006). Since then, the word *jingjie* with spiritual meaning has been widely used in the appreciation and comment of China’s literary and artistic works by generations. For example, in Chinese painting history, the earliest usage of *yijing* with spiritual meaning can be seen in *Linquangaozhi* (《林泉高致》) written by Guo Xi in the Northern Song Dynasty: “only when one’s *jingjie* is mature and hands move as his mind wonders, can he paint appropriately and successfully”. Besides, the earliest record of *jingjie* in Chinese literary theory history also implies this kind of meaning. Li Tu in the Southern Song Dynasty said in his *The Essence of the Essay* (《文章精义》) that “To write essays beyond the worldly life, one must change his *jingjie*. Essays such as the allegory *Chuang Tzu* hold the *jingjie* of ‘emptiness’, *The Odes* written by Qu Yuan *jingjie* of ‘cunning’, *Notes of Da Bei Pavilion* written by Su Zizhan *jingjie* of Buddhism, and *Shang Qing Temple Ci jingjie* of supernature”. Although *jingjie* in those two examples does not contain the meaning of “the degree of enlightenment” in Buddhism, it jumps out of its original meaning and refers to the spiritual activities and creations. It is Wang Guowei, a great scholar in the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republic of China, taking *jingjie* as an important aesthetic criterion and critical term, that officially made a deep discussion on it and had it integrated and inter-communicated with *yijing*. He has used *jing*, *jingjie*, and *yijing* of highly frequency¹ to generalize and summarize the creative achievements on poetry, *ci*, song and *fu* of the successive dynasties in his works including *The preface of Ren Jian Ci II* (《人间词乙稿序》, 1907), *Poetic Remarks in the human world* (《人间词话》, 1908), and *A Study of Traditional Opera in Song and Yuan Dynasties* (《宋元戏曲考》, 1912), which greatly improves the status and influence of *yijing* and *jingjie* in the artistic practice and theory of Chinese literature.

Later researchers have sedulously done textual researches and discriminations on *jingjie* and *yijing* in Wang Guowei’s works and draw the conclusion or believed that the two words are interchangeable or different. However, as consistent criteria of Wang Guowei for artistic works’ appreciation and comment, it is undoubtful that *jingjie* and *yijing* overlap in admitting that there are differences in the artistic works’ perception levels towards the space and grades of aesthetic effects, emphasizing the transcendence of the art, and attaching great importance to the spiritual quality of works. If it is necessary to figure out some distinctions, we can say that *yijing* is usually restricted to discussions on works and rarely used to comment on people, while *jingjie* can be used for the appreciation and comment on artistic works and making discriminations and judgements of things out of works. What the author cannot agree with is the condition that the determination of religious connotation in

¹ According to statistics, the word *yijing* appears 16 times in the *The preface of Ren Jian Ci II*, which is less than 1000 words. *Jingjie* appears 22 times and *jing* 23 times in the Sect. 126 of *Poetic Remarks in the human world*. More information can be seen in Cheng Xiangzhan’s *Wang Guowei’s Theory of yijing and Jingjie*, published in *Literature, History and Philosophy* on No. 3, 2013.

jingjie is ignored while emphasizing the extensiveness of its extension one-sidedly when comparing it with *yijing*. In fact, *jingjie* (in a broad sense, generally) can be the extension of *yijing* and *jingjie* (in a narrow sense, in Buddhism) can be seen as a type of *jing* (境), the state of Nirvana, *yi* reaches. That is to say, *jingjie* in a narrow sense can be a part of the *yijing*'s ideal level in its structural levels. It can be seen that the Buddhist interpretation of *yijing* plays a crucial and necessary guiding role in understanding and using of *yijing* from the real *jing* (which refers to the boundary of space and time) to *yijing*. In other words, Buddhism has substantially inspired and influenced the conceptual formation of *yijing* and its extension.

In addition, the influence of Buddhism on *yijing* is also reflected in the fact that the Buddhist philosophies of “setsuna intuition” and “sudden enlightenment” have given rise to the scholars’ discovery of perception ways of *yijing* and the revelation of the nature of aesthetic behavior conducted by the appreciator on *yijing*, thus completing the structural content of *yijing* from the perspective of aesthetic genesis and epistemology. According to Zhang Jiemo’s argument and introduction in his article “*Meaning-Atmosphere: Its Ancient Generating and Modern Theoretical Extension*”, “setsuna” embodies the Buddhist sense of time and “intuition” is its corresponding method of perception, while “sudden enlightenment” is a kind of thinking mode based on the Buddhist concept of “emptiness”. Zhang Jiemo believed that the penetration of Buddhist doctrine and the spirit of Buddhism in people’s cultural life since the Wei and Jin Dynasties has led to a historical transformation of Chinese people’s “time consciousness from chaos to setsuna”, aesthetic experience from association to intuition, and “perception-dominated from expression-dominated”. After summarizing the changes in time consciousness and aesthetic experience of the Buddhist-influenced Chinese, Zhang Jiemo studied the poetic practices of ancient China (especially the Wei, Jin and Tang Dynasties) and found that “ancient Chinese poetic thinking of great depth was not based on similes, nor did it follow the path of symbolism. The most striking thing about the poetic experience of the ancient Chinese is the moment of enlightenment. It is an almost transparent state of mind. However, as a pure phenomenon, it is based on a momentary intuition of natural objects, sounds, colors and movements. That is what we called *yijing*” (Jiemo 2005). Regardless of whether Zhang Jiemo’s “findings” and conclusions here stand up to factual and logical scrutiny, his attention to the relationship between the Buddhist thought and the change of Chinese conceptions in literature and art and his credible reasoning and textual researches are indeed worthy of recognition, because “a phenomenon that cannot be ignored is that most of the remarks about *yijing* were made by Buddhist poets and monks and found in the texts of the literati’s interaction with monks. (Jingtai 2005).^(P113) Therefore, Zhang Jiemo’s definition that “*yijing* can be considered as the setsuna intuition in which the dynamic things can be observed by the quiet and the subject and the object are identical under the influence of the ‘emptiness’ of Zen” (Jiemo 2005) does have some practical basis and theoretical value. If that is a Zen-style explanation or definition of the nature of aesthetic activities contained in *yijing* from the perspective of embryology, on the issue of cognitive methodology of such aesthetic activity, another important concept in Buddhism called “sudden enlightenment” is often involved.

Ana of Zen Master Dazhu (《大珠禅师语录》) said that “people who acquire the essential of ‘sudden’ will suddenly remove improper thoughts; people who gain ‘enlightenment’ will be enlightened in nothing”. In his *Notes on Poetry and Poets of the Recluse Canglang* (《沧浪诗话》), Yan Yu said that “probably the way of Zen is subtle enlightenment, so is the way of poetry”. With the prevailing trend of using Zen as a metaphor for poetry at that time, people since the Tang and Song dynasties have often directly related the Buddhist and Zen enlightenment to the poetic *yijing*, thus forming the Chinese tradition of the subtle enlightenment of *yijing*. The most typical one can be seen in Yan Yu’s remarks: “poets in the glorious age of Tang Dynasty attached importance only to the poetry’s aspiration and interest that is similar to hanging the antelope’s horn on the tree so that nobody could trace its footprint. Therefore, the most wonderful part of the poetry is its incisiveness and fineness, like the sound in the air, the complexion on one’s face, the moon under the water, and the image in the mirror. Although the words are limited, the meaning is profound”. Therefore, the subtle enlightenment theory in poetry and painting is actually the result of the penetration of the Buddhist spirit in the field of literature and art with a strong Buddhist meaning. Enlightenment is a kind of mystery leap of one’s perceptual experience. Then, what’s subtle of the subtle enlightenment? As Han Jingtai said that “the subtle point lies in that it takes the enlightenment with nothing obtained as its enlightenment of the first sense, the thorough enlightenment”. He explained: “Yan Yu’s discussion on poetry from the perspective of Zen follows the principle of ‘not falling into the trap of wording’ and ‘not getting involved in reasoning’, because once it falls into the trap of wording and gets involved in reasoning, interpretation and deduction are required. However, interpretation and deduction certainly result in an established attainment, which is the enlightenment with something obtained. Although it is also an enlightenment, it loses the subtleness. To reach the ideal *jingjie* of ‘hanging the antelope’s horn on the tree so that nobody could trace its footprint’, firstly the poet obtains something through enlightenment but does not interpret and deduct, then the reader obtains the same thing but does not need the poet’s interpretation and deduction. The medium that naturally matches the creator and the acceptor is the poetic imagery world with the characteristic of ‘partyaksa’² in Zen, which can also be seen as the poetic sense of reality.” Therefore, the poet creates for expressing their short-lived feelings. While the ideal work is a fully personalized artistic intuitive world constructed by “the initial scenery without being setting up” and “the initial emotion without being prepared” (Jingtai 2005).^(P114) A seemingly self-contradiction is found when analyzing this passage of Han Jingtai: if the subtle enlightenment takes “the enlightenment with nothing obtained” as its first essence, how can “the ideal *jingjie*...require that the poet obtains something through enlightenment but does not interpret and deduct... and the reader obtains the same thing but does not need the poet’s interpretation and deduction”? Actually, in my opinion, “enlightenment”, as a spiritual activity, connects with its specific objects. The “enlightenment with nothing obtained” is the enlightenment of “emptiness”. In

² Han Jingtai said in his article that “The key of Zen is to hold partyaksa only. What is partyaksa? It is the real feeling of the present.”.

the Buddhist view, “emptiness is not the essence of nature, nor is it another entity that has nothing to do with nature. It is simply equal to the essence of the natural phenomena under the pure intuition” (Jiemo 2005). That is why Buddhists say: “form itself is emptiness; emptiness itself is form.” When a meditator, or a masterful artist, or appreciator, with the mind of meditation and enlightenment, happens to gain some kind of enlightenment in the ordinary world, and suddenly enters a momentary state of clarity, he may feel that he has obtained something, but in fact, what he has obtained is only “emptiness”. “Something obtained” can be “nothing obtained”. Perhaps in this sense, we can better understand Han Jingtai’s remarks and see the connection and difference between the Buddhist “form” and “emptiness” and the Taoist “*you* (有)” and “*wu* (无)”. In brief, “form” and “emptiness” in Buddhism are identical (“emptiness is form, and form is emptiness”), while between the Taoist “*you*” and “*wu*” is the difference of order and level (“*you* comes from *wu*”). Therefore, I think that, if there is any difference, it is not that there is any essential difference between “emptiness” and “*wu*”, but that the “form” and “*you*” that correspond to each of them occupy different positions and possess different natures in the whole structure of the Buddhist and Taoist systems (in the Buddhist view, “form” is illusory and “empty”, not the real “*you*”). If this is the explanation for the highest *jingjie* of *yijing*, at least for scholars who support the theory of subtle enlightenment, the highest *jingjie* of the poetry and painting’s *yijing* should be the Buddhist “emptiness” (or, the Taoist “*wu*”).

It should be noted that in the practice of art appreciation and the perceptual experience of acquiring *yijing*, “subtle enlightenment” and “intuition” are not in the usual sense of “observation” followed by “enlightenment”, but happen simultaneously. According to the Buddhist “six roots” and “six senses”, if “intuition” is seen as emphasizing the action of sense from the perspective of “eyes sense colors”, then “enlightenment” emphasizes the objectivity (i.e. emptiness) of the “sense” from the similar perspective of “methods of sense”. They are like the two sides of a coin, only different in the perspective but not in time. Together, they identify the essence and destination of the spiritual changes that occur in the aesthetic activity of the aesthetic subject. In other words, “subtle enlightenment” and “intuition” are both the spiritual channel for the aesthetic subject to reach *yijing*, and the substance of *yijing*’s presentation.

In summary, in the thoughts of Buddhism and Taoism, we have traced the ideological origins of the formation and presentation of *yijing* as the ideal and aesthetic norms of classical Chinese art. It can be briefly concluded that the Taoist concept of considering the universe as one and philosophical proposition of the complement of *you* and *wu* fostered the aesthetic consciousness of the ancient to pursue a sense of wholeness and the meaning beyond words and images in art, which laid the prerequisite national aesthetic interest and conceptual foundation for *yijing*’s developing and possessing the corresponding aesthetic moral characteristics. The Buddhist ideas of *jingjie* and “emptiness”, as well as “intuition” and “sudden enlightenment” of the way of Zen Buddhism, have influenced the cognitive and thinking modes of a significant portion of Chinese people since the Middle Ages. As a result, a critical type of meaning source and interpretative basis is provided for the generation and creation of *yijing*’s concept connotation and evaluation mechanism that are rich in

spiritual transcendence and mystical colors. It is worth noting that the roles of Buddhism and Taoism on *yijing*'s creation are different but not always separate, especially in the cultural context of interpreting Buddhism with Taoism in the Wei and Jin dynasties. At that time, Buddhism and Taoism show a tendency to merge with each other in some aspect, which is then reflected in the understanding of *yijing*, such as the pursuit of "eternal tranquility and the unhindered ethereal *jingjie*, the desire to "transcend the reality of the senses to grasp the eternal *jingjie* of nirvana" and "the *jingjie* of *wuwei* (无为)", and the ideal of presenting a natural and ethereal poetic world in a clear and profound style by the coincidence of the empty *jingjie* of heart that gets rid of emotions and concerns and the aimless natural existence such as "clouds drift out aimlessly from behind the mountains". From those the similarities between Buddhism and Taoism are shown. More knowledge can be referred to Han Jingtai's paper *The Spirit of Buddhism and Taoism and the Ideal of Classical Poetry*, and the author will not give unnecessary details here.

The artistic characteristics of *yijing*

By having a general observation of *yijing*'s construction process and research condition, it is easy to find that although Wang Changling proposed and used the term *yijing* in the Tang Dynasty first, this term did not attract much attention from critics at that time and for a long time afterwards, nor did it gain a special status in the history of literature, and even its complete meaning was rarely used. In fact, few of the so-called *yijing*-related literature have been directly labeled with its name and focused on its interpretation, and most of them have been devoted to exploring the relationship between words/*xiang* (象) and *yi* (意), emotions and the scenery, form and spirit, etc. when stating peoples' artistic ideals. Even if *yi* (意) and *jing* (境) appear in a text, they are often used and mentioned as synonyms separately. It was not until the modern era when Wang Guowei specifically introduced the term *jingjie* for aesthetic interpretation and enhancement, and scholars later found the interchangeable relationship between *yijing* and *jingjie* in his writings, that *yijing* was used as a term of art. Only then was *yijing* established as the highest criterion for the evaluation of classical poetry and painting, and only then did the targeted works of conceptual definition and material organization of *yijing* begin. Despite this, the poetry and painting commentaries of the past generations have become precious materials of experience and resources of thought for the present generation to understand *yijing* for they contain the deeper and stronger understanding and feelings of the ancients. In other words, the ancient writings, in a rich vocabulary, have touched on the basic artistic features of *yijing* either macroscopically or microscopically from many angles and aspects.

Wang Changling, the first person in the Tang Dynasty who proposed the concept of *yijing* and gave it an interpretation, said in his *Poem Format and Style* (《诗格》) that "A poem has three *jing* (境). One is *wujing* (物境). If one wants to compose a poem, his mind is occupied with the magnificently beautiful scenery of the spring, the rock, the cloud and the mountain, his body is personally on the scene, his heart sees the scenery, and his hand holds the general view. And then, by understanding

and feeling the comprehensive *jingxiang* (境象) with his thoughts, a similar form is obtained in his brain. The second is *qingjing* (情境). Entertainment, happiness, worry and resentment are all things that can be expressed in meaning and experienced by the body. And then, by realization, emotions are obtained. The third is *yijing* (意境). As well, by expressing its meaning and considering it in mind, its truth can be obtained". It can be concluded that the pursue of *wujing* (物境) stops at obtaining the similar form, *qingjing* (情境) strives for fully expressing emotions, and *yijing* (意境) aims to realize the true meaning. Since the first two are closely connected with the scenery before the eyes and normal emotions, they are "ordinary *jing*" and only *yijing* itself possesses detached things. Yin Pan in the Tang Dynasty mentioned *yi* and *jing* several times in the *Anthology of Great Poets of Tang Dynasty* (《河岳英灵集》). For example, in his commentary on Wang Wei's poetry, he said "Wang's poetry was written in beautiful words and refined tune, with novel ideas and powerful argument. They can be pearls once put into the spring and paintings on the wall. Each sentence and word is obtained from the ordinary *jing*." and then pointed out the attachment and generation relationships between the ordinary *jing* and *yi*. The Buddhist poet Jiao Ran put forward the idea of "obtaining *jing*" in *Poem Style* (《诗式》), which requires that the obtaining of *jing* must be done "aimlessly without thinking". He also re-emphasized that *yi* comes out of *jing* or *yijing* comes from the ordinary *jing*. Then, the poet Quan Deyu made a commentary on Xu's poetry in *Preface to Mr. Xu's Collected Works, the Left Guard Officer In Charge of Weapons* (《左武卫胄曹许君集序》): "All of his poetry integrates *yi* and *jing*. Written in passionate words, he expressed his natural aspiration and interest. Since the work was completed in quietness, the implication was profound", which specified idea of integrating *yi* and *jing*. There are also quite some discussions that demonstrably take "beyond *xiang* (象外)" as *yijing*'s manifested or expanded aesthetic space to stress *yijing*'s characteristics of igniting people's imagination and lasting appeal, such as Jiao Ran's "the purpose beyond words" and "see the aspirations and interest with words being ignored" (*Poem Style · Examples of Poetry with Multi-level Implications* 《诗式·重意诗例》), Liu Yuxi's "*jing* is the thing created beyond *xiang*" (*Preface to the Collection of Dong Ting of Wuling* 《董氏武陵集纪》), Situ Kong's "the refinement out of rhyme" and "the spirit out of taste" (*Discussion on Poetry with Friend Li* 《与李生论诗书》), "*xiang* beyond images, *jing* beyond the scenery" (*A Letter to Wang Jipu* 《与极浦书》), "the spirit is fully expressed without explicitly writing one word" (*On Twenty-four Styles of Poetry · Implicity* 《二十四诗品·含蓄》), and "the center is reached beyond *xiang*" (*On Twenty-four Styles of Poetry · Majesty* 《二十四诗品·雄浑》), etc.

By the Song Dynasty, in *Notes on Poetry and poets of Lay Buddhist Liuyi* (《六一诗话》), Ouyang Xiu quoted a famous line of Mei Yaochen's commentary on the poetry's creation: "It can bring the most indescribable things in sight, and convey the implication of the poetry without explicitly written in words", which pretty generally summarized *yijing*'s characteristic of being simple in language but profound in meaning. In his *Notes on Poetry and Poets of the Recluse Canglang* (《沧浪诗话》), Yan Yu said that "Poets in the glorious age of the Tang Dynasty attached importance only to the poetry's aspiration and interest, which is similar to hanging the antelope's horn on the tree so that nobody could trace its footprint. Therefore,

the most wonderful part of the poetry is its incisiveness and fineness, like the sound in the air, the look on one's face, the moon under the water, and the image in the mirror. Although the words are limited, the meaning is profound". This discourse echoes Ouyang Xiu's thought and points out *yijing's* ethereality. Fan Panwen in the Song Dynasty said in *Night Talk* (《对床夜语》) that "without emotions, the scenery will not be noticed; without the scenery, emotions will not be generated" and "the scenery and emotions are integrated and inseparable", meanwhile, Ci writer Jiang Kui wrote that "yi contains emotions while the scenery conveys yi" in *On Poetry of the Taoist Baishi* (《白石道人诗说》). They are all statements on the relationship between emotions and the scenery.

Then, critics in Ming and Qing Dynasties further interpreted and deepened their relationship. For example, Xie Zhen in the Ming Dynasty stated in *Notes on Poetry and Poets of the Recluse Siming* (《四溟诗话》) that: "emotions and the scenery are the fundamental things of poetry's creation. They are integral and compatible." Among those views, the most classic is the theory of emotions and the scenery's integration proposed by Wang Fuzhi in *Notes on Poetry and Poets of Jiangzhai* (《姜斋诗话》) in the early Qing Dynasty. It said that "The scenery will be meaningful with emotions, and emotions can be generated through the scenery. They are inseparable, which can only be explained by yi. If they are separated, emotions cannot be fully expressed and the scenery will not be *jing* (景)". "Although emotions and the scenery are two different things that work on people's minds and objects respectively, the scenery triggers emotions and emotions achieve the scenery. Therefore, it is the inter-reaction of emotions including happiness and worry and the rise and fall of nature that pave the basic for the creation", "In name only, emotions and the scenery are two things. But they are inseparable actually. Excellent poetry among which some depicts the scenery by expressing emotions and others express emotions by depicting the scenery integrates them to the point.", etc. In spite of commentaries on the poetry, commentaries on painting at that time also involved *yijing's* characteristics of expressing the virtuality through depicting the reality, creating something out of nothing, and the complement of virtuality and reality. The ancient commentaries on painting advocated that "the best of a paint lies in where the brush has not touched". Fang Xun in the Qing Dynasty commented on the wonderful part of Shi Tao's works in *On Painting in Shanjing House* (《山静居画论》): "Shi's *The Long Voyage Home* was depicted in a cursory style. He painted a few strokes of willow branch along the bank fluttering in the wind, a touch of a distant village, and a lonely fisherman afloat midstream. Some may ask: 'where is the rain?' I would answer: 'you can see the rain from the real things depicted here and feel the rain from where the brush has not touched.'" Bu Yantu in the Qing Dynasty said in his *Questions and Answers on Painting* (《学画心法问答》) that "Generally, the brush and ink can only depict things with forms, not things without forms; the reality, not the virtuality. Amid the mountains and rivers are the fickle mist and cloud that can be visible or invisible, real or virtual, there or not there. Somewhere dim and gloomy appear the pneuma and the spirit that are boundless without certain forms, thus, the brush and ink cannot depict them on the paper. Therefore, the ancient racked their brain to replace the brush and ink with nothingness. Where the brush has not touched the pneuma is generated, where the ink has not splashed the

spirit is embodied. In this way, the pneuma and the spirit can be shown. That is why I admire it as the best". In *A Handbook of Flower and Bird's Painting* (《小山画谱》), Zou Yigui in the Qing Dynasty said that: "It is said that a painter who draws snow cannot reveal its clean, moon its brightness, flower its fragrance, and man his emotions. Those things are virtual ones that cannot be depicted in certain forms. However, if the reality is lifelike, the virtuality will be showed naturally. Therefore, people can feel chill when they see the north wind painted, feel torridity when they see the summer heat and steam painted, and hear the sound of water when they see the water painted on the wall. Those who think it impractical do not know painting". Liu Xizai in Qing Dynasty said in *The Summary of Arts* (《艺概》) that "the spirit of the mountain cannot be depicted, so the mist and clouds in the twilight are portrayed instead; the spirit of the spring cannot be depicted, so the grass and trees are portrayed instead. Therefore, if a poem has no images of pneuma, the spirit gets no supporting basic".³

On a holistic view, the basic artistic characteristics of *yijing* have been presented and addressed in ancient times, but due to traditional thinking habits and presentation characteristics, they either emphasize description but lack of theoretical abstraction, or they only involve one side but lose completeness and systematization. Therefore, on the basis of their researches, modern people have made appropriate generalizations, which concluded the basic artistic characteristics of *yijing* represented by that of Tong Qingbing in his edited *A Course in Literary Theory*: the integration of emotions and the scenery is its expressive characteristic, the complement of reality and virtuality its structural characteristic, and the lasting appeal its aesthetic characteristic.

The structural level of *yijing*

Generally, people's typical understanding of *yijing* can refer to its definition given by Yuan Xingpei: "*yijing* is an artistic *jingjie* formed by the blending of the author's subjective emotions and interest and *wujing* (the objective material world)." Simply, *yijing* means "the artistic state of bending emotions and the scenery". However, Jiang Yin believed that "until now, there is a fundamental flaw...in the academic world's interpretations for *yijing*, which is to interpret *yijing* as an aesthetic experience not a structural thing" (Yin 2002). Indeed, traditional Chinese thinking mode of emphasizing sensible intuition gave birth to pretty much empirical achievements on the literature theory, which contributes to exploring art's features and effect of reception but is inconvenient to make its essential attributes and components clarified. But the structural consciousness developed by the western thinking mode of emphasizing rational logic could make up for the flaw exactly. Probably, that is the reason why scholars in modern times continually refer to western theoretical achievements and methods to study Chinese literary and artistic practices.

³ For sources of the above ancient theories refer to Zhang Yanling's *Differentiating and Analyzing "Artistic Conception", "Condition", and "Image" in Chinese Classic Literary Theory*.

Regarding to the structural consciousness in researches on *yijing*, Zong Baihua has asserted in his article *The birth of China's Artistic yijing* that “*yijing* in art is not a plane natural reproduction with a single level but a creation and construction of *jingjie* with level depth⁴”. Cao Zhengwen also said in *Discrimination* that “*yijing* is the aesthetic reflection of the poet’s inner emotional structure” (Yin 2002). Even in ancient times, examples of understanding the creation of *yijing* through its level and structure are not rare. For instance, Wang Changling put forward the idea that “A poem contains three *jing* (*wujing*, *qingjing*, *yijing*)”, which actually has showed an obscurely structural consciousness in some degree. And the “three-far method” (三远法) and “six-far method” (六远法) in ancient painting theories more specifically attach attention to the construction of spatial levels, thus, Chinese people’s sensible structural consciousness was cultivated.⁵ However, those fragmental structural views and consciousness in the past cannot be equal to the textual structure associated with structuralist semiotics as Jiang Yin said. “According to modern scholars of literature theory, ‘the text is a kind of sequence or structure in an orderly, comprehensive and relatively enclosed semiotic form; then there is an orderly, comprehensive and relatively enclosed semantic structure corresponding to it’. Semiotic-semantic structure of the text releases evocative information during readers’ reading activity, stimulates readers’ imagination in a directional way, and forms a complete aesthetic experience, thus the work is produced. Before being read, the poetry of Tao Yuanming is merely the text. After they were spread to the circle of poets and read by their first readers including Xiao Tong, they became the work and their author was honored as ‘a great master among the hermit poets in ancient and modern times’. That is the essence disclosed by the reception aesthetics” (Yin 2002) Jiang Yin thought that “*yijing* is the poetic text created by its author”, “the essence of *yijing* is an evocative *yixiang* structure”. Therefore, he advocated to define *yijing* as “created by the author in his work, a semiotic system constructed by the *yixiang* structure integrating emotions and the scenery to express emotions of the lyric subject.” To this end, he made an in-depth discrimination purposely on those words relating to the structure of *yijing* in the article *Yuxiang · Wuxiang · Yixiang · Yijing*, and pointed out:

⁴ Li Jiexiang said in *A Comparison of the Depth of yijing between China and the West*: “Depth of *yijing* is a new category of literary theory and aesthetics. It is about the depth of *yijing*, referring to the multi-level *jingjie* shown by the artistic image and imagination of the space.” Published in *Journal of Taizhou University*, No.2, 2003.

⁵ Firstly, Guo Xi and Guo Si in the Northern Song Dynasty proposed the landscape painting method of “three kinds of farness” in *Linquangaozhi* (《林泉高致》). It said that “there are three kinds of farness to view the mountain: Looking up from the bottom to the top of it called ‘high farness’; looking at the back from the front of it is called ‘deep farness’; Looking over the distant mountain from the close one is called ‘level farness.’” Then, Han Zhuo put up with another “three kinds of farness” in his *Collection of Discussions on Landscape Paintings* (《山水纯全集》). “One stands on the river bank and clearly sees the mountain from the very front, which is called ‘wide farness’. One cannot clearly see the mountain with the mist, which is called ‘hazy farness’. One can see the majestic view of the mountain though the mist, which is called ‘remote farness.’” The later generations called the above “six kinds of farness”. Li Jiexiang said that “pursuing ‘farness’ is pursuing the spatial extension”, “extending the scene space is to extending the imagery space evocated by images and *yijing* by levels”.

“*Yuxiang* (语象) is the letter symbol that prompts and evokes the concrete mental image in the poetic text, which is the basic material of the text.

Wuxiang (物象) is a kind of *yuxiang*, especially ones referring to specific names of objects.

Yixiang (意象), as an integral part of the poetic text, is a structure of *yuxiang* processed by the author’s emotions and consciousness. It contains one or more *yuxiang* with self-sufficiency in meaning.

Yijing (意境) is a complete and self-sufficient evocative text.”⁶

In my opinion, the main value of this article is that it provides a new idea to re-define *yijing*. Following this idea, maybe we not only can ascertain the inner mechanism of *yijing* but see the common characteristics between *yijing* and other ethnics’ poetic experience. Just as Jiang Yin said: “...*yijing* is the poetic text its author created, representing different structural characteristics in the poetic writing of diverse ethnics. Possibly, in the poetics of other ethnics no concept equivalent to *yijing* is found temporarily, but the conclusion that there is no poetic view similar to *yijing* in other ethnics cannot be drawn. ... Currently, re-interpreting *yijing* based on the text makes it a poetic category that communicates with the universal poetic experience of human and endows it with the function of general tools” (Yin 2002). Hereunder, by adjusting and supplementing this idea, I try to propose my structural level of *yijing*, which is the semiotic system composed by *wu* (物), *xiang* (象), *jing* (境) and *guan* (观).

Here, *wu* (物) is *wuxiang* as Jiang Yin mentioned and the minimum unit of artistic works to construct *yijing*. In poetry, *wu* is presented as concrete nouns that refer to specific objects denoted by language, words, lines, and color in essence. For example, there is a famous line in the poem *On Li Ning’s Secluded Residence* (《题李凝幽居》): “Birds nestle in the trees by the pond, a monk knocks at the door awash in the moon”. In this line, “birds”, “pond”, “trees”, “monk”, “moon”, and “door” are six independent *wuxiang* with complete meaning. It needs to be pointed out that they themselves do not consequentially evoke certain emotions and imagination but only function as elements to hint and compose the scene. Wang Guowei said in *Poetic Remarks in the Human World* (《人间词话》): “there is a *self-jing* (有我之境) and a *selfless-jing* (无我之境) ... The *self-jing* views the object from the self’s perspective, so the object is endowed with colors of it. The *selfless-jing* views the object from the object’s perspective, so there is no knowing of which is the self and which is the object”. Then, how to understand the relationship between “objects” and “self” in poetic scenes? In fact, *yijing* cannot be created without “self”, emotions of the subject or the ideal world. Both *self-jing* and *selfless-jing* are results of people’s special preference to objects, and the only difference lies in whether the “self” in poetry is implicit or explicit. Therefore, once there is person being involved in a poem or a

⁶ As for *yuxiang*, *wuxiang* and *yixiang*, Jiang Yin also said in another part of this article, “*yuxiang* of poetry is the ‘basic image’ of the existed world. As the structural unit of this article, *yuxiang* can be regarded as the smallest element that cannot be further divided. *Wuxiang* is included in the concept of *yuxiang*, and *yixiang* is composed of declarative relations of several *yuxiang*. *Yuxiang* is a concept introduced to refer to the *xiang* other than *wuxiang* (such as abstract nouns, colors, sounds, verbs and other mental images).

painting, I think the person can only be considered as part of the nature and an element of the whole scene, no matter from the view of Taoism or Buddhism. Thus, the person should be simply regarded as one *wuxiang* as well.

Xiang (象) refers to *yixiang* that is the basic aesthetic unit for the creation of *yijing* in artistic works (a single *wuxiang* has no aesthetic meaning). For one thing, also emphasizing on the imagery of artistic works, *yixiang* is some combination of several *wuxiang*. For another, it is obviously blended with the creator's aesthetic emotions and attitudes and closely related to the viewer's aesthetic experience and perception. Therefore, the difference between it and *wuxiang* is that *wuxiang* is isolated, still, neutral and conceptual while *yixiang* is comprehensive, dynamic, lyric and impressionistic. Just as Yuan Xingpei pointed out that only after the objectively existed *wuxiang* being seen and thought by the poet and processed based on his aesthetic experience and personal emotions and interests, can *wuxiang* become *yixiang*. Jiang Yin gave a further explanation in his article that "different *yi* and *xiang* compose *yixiang* whose creation mainly depends on the consciousness. Pei Fei once stated his good point: 'there is only one objectively existed moon in the world, however, there are various moons in poetry. *Wuxiang* is finite while *yixiang* is infinite.' That is to say, the moon itself is only a *wuxiang*, but it can be turned into *yixiang* after being observed and depicted in all kinds of conditions." In addition, "no matter the natural *wuxiang*, nouns or allusions, their function as *yixiang* can only be achieved after they are put in a poetic context, simply an indicative situation" (Yin 2002). Therefore, still taking the poem as an example, its *yixiang* cannot be composed by *wuxiang* only without being put in specific states and conditions. In other words, in order to compose *yixiang* with rich empirical and creative aesthetic content, both the concrete nouns and their defining or modifying relationships with abstract nouns (such as the color, sound, four seasons), verbs, adjectives, prepositions, etc. should be considered. For instance, "birds nestle in the trees by the pond" is a complete imagery and *yixiang*, and "a monk knocks at the door awash in the moon" is another one.

As another Chinese classic aesthetic category, *yixiang* is always compared with *yijing*. *Yixiang* and *yijing* are easy to be confused because they all contain elements of *yi* and *xiang*, emotions and the scenery, however, they have the level difference in meaning actually. Although *yixiang* is blended with the subject's emotions and thoughts (*yi*), it focus on *xiang* and the imagery. While *yijing* simply emphasizes on *yi*, and from its composition both *yi* and *jing* contain spiritual signification and meaning. To differentiate *yi* in *yixiang* and *yijing* in detail, I think that *yi* in *yixiang* is related with a sensible and empirical emotion and feeling, while *yi* in *yijing* transcends the sensibility and ration with more transcendent spiritual essence and signification. If we study the two concepts by putting them into one work, their relationship will be clearer: "*Yixiang* is the method of the poet to create *yijing*" (Cao Zhengwen) (Yin 2002). The relationship between them is "the same as that of the part and the whole or the material and the structure. *yijing* is the evocative text composed by several *yuxiang* or *yixiang*" (Yin 2002). "*yijing* does not refer to one single '*xiang* in one's heart' or the superposition of multiple them, but an integral *yixiang* composed by several individual ones or 'the *xiang* beyond *xiang*' created by the

‘*yixiang* tree’, the broad aesthetic space established by the natural charm beyond the poise” (Yanling 2006).

Then, what is the “*xiang* beyond *xiang*” (象外之象)? I believe that is *jing* (境). If they are distinguished by borrowing the concepts of “real *jing*” (实境) and “virtual *jing*” (虚境), *xiang* is the “real *jing*” while *jing* is the “virtual *jing*”. “The real *jing* is the representation of objective things including the vividly depicted scenery, form, and environment. While the virtual *jing* is the aesthetic space evocated and constructed by the real *jing*. It is the extension and amplification of the original scenery by imagination, at the same time, it also means the realization and reflection generated through the imagination, which is the so called ‘the meaning that is not fully expressed’. The virtual *jing* is the sublime of the real *jing*, indicating the purpose and goal set up by the real *jing* and the art taste and aesthetic effect of *yijing*. Combining with the ideological origin we have studied, I thought that, according to the creators’ or the appreciators’ cultural concepts, aesthetic temperaments, and philosophical standpoints, there will be three kinds of *jing* that the artistic works can achieve: the Taoist *jingjie* of *wu* (无) in a state of chaos featuring with an implicit and blear beauty; the still and clear Buddhist *jingjie* in which everything is empty with the characteristic of a simple and ethereal beauty; the abstract philosophy in western style with heavy mysterious or speculative color and a clear and magnificent beauty. On the last topic, I prefer the view that *yijing* has the nature of generalization through ages and across countries. I deny that there are only theories on *yixiang* and no consciousness on *yijing* in the west,⁷ because, in my mind, the distinct cultural meanings and aesthetic *yijing* we see are simply due to the distinct structural forms and characteristics of a group of *yixiang* presented in different ethics’ artistic creations. Otherwise, it cannot be explained why there are creations in the western art history such as music by Johann Strauss, paintings by Katala Davit Friedrich, poetry by Shelley, as well as quantity of religious music and paintings, myth, allegory and some fairy tales. Of course, “*yijing* is not contained in every aesthetic *yixiang*, but created beyond it” (Yanling 2006).

Therefore, based on which culture and perspective to create and appreciate artistic works is a critical decision for discovering and exploring *yijing*. It involves the problem of *guan* (观, observation). Since *yijing* especially emphasizes on the reflection of the subject’s spirit, it is hard to fulfill Jiang Yin’s idea that employing *yijing* on the text may or can result in the confine of *yijing* to the semantic structure of the text and the isolation of it from the author’s and the reader’s imaginary experience (Yin 2002). In the aesthetic process of *yijing*, *guan* is a very critical and indispensable part. Creators or appreciators will get meanings and make aesthetic judgements at different levels towards one work due to the difference of their observation perspectives and visions. If we consider *wu* (物), *xiang* (象), *jing* (境) as a relatively enclosed structure of the text, *guan*, as an action element within it, will surely react to them from different aspects. For *wu* (物), *guan* performs its most simple function of observation that is seeing objects through one’s eyes and presenting it in the work. From the aspect of *xiang*, *guan* shows the function of association to show one’s emotions after he feels objects with his heart. As to *jing* (境), *guan* and perception integrate into one in which the observer transforms objects with *yi*, which expresses his yearning. Therefore, the difference of *guan*’s

⁷ For example, Wang Jianjiang holds such a view.

motivations or degrees lead creators or appreciators to be integrated into or reach different aesthetic levels in artistic works. In other words, the level depths of *yijing* thus obtained have the difference of profoundness and superficiality.

In conclusion, with western concepts and research methods on the structure, we can clearly know and grasp the elements of *yijing* and their inner relationships, and have a restricted view on the possibility of *yijing*'s modern conversion and aesthetic communication from perspectives of *wu* (物), *xiang* (象), *jing* (境), and *guan* (观).

Conclusions

Yijing is an important concept in China's classic aesthetic category. We cannot isolate the ideological origins of *yijing* from the influence exerted by the traditional Buddhist and Taoist thoughts, which can be seen from the concept formation, artistic characteristics, and aesthetic observation methods of *yijing*. However, according to the research perspective and achievements of the structure, a conclusion can be drawn that similar structures of the aesthetic levels of *wu*, *xiang*, *jing*, and *guan* contained in *yijing* can be found in other ethnics' artistic practices and aesthetic experience. It indicates that *yijing* can act as an aesthetic category with the nature of generalization through ages and across countries and achieve modern conversion and integration as a general tool. This paper is exactly a simple attempt to realize that goal.

Author Contributions The author confirms sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, data coding, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation.

Funding No funding was received for conducting this study.

Data availability Not applicable.

Code availability Not applicable.

Conflict of interest Not applicable.

Ethical statements I hereby declare that this manuscript is the result of my independent creation. Except for the quoted contents, this manuscript does not contain any research achievements that have been published or written by other individuals or groups. I am the only author of this manuscript. The legal responsibility of this statement shall be borne by me.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Han Jingtai. 2005. Taoist spirit and classic poetry ideal[A]. Editorial office of literature and history. *Taoism and Traditional Culture*[C]. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company. 韩经太. 释道精神与古典诗歌理想 [A]. 文史知识编辑部. 道家与传统文化[C]. 北京: 中华书局, 2005.
- Jiang Yin. 2002. Yuxiang, Wuxiang, Yixiang, Yijing. *Literary Review* 3. 蒋寅. 语象·物象·意象·意境 [J]. 文学评论, 2002, (3).
- Wang Wencheng. 2003. Comments on “yijing” study in the context of globalization. *Journal of Shandong University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)* 6. 王汶成. 全球化语境下的“意境”研究评述[J]. 山东大学学报(哲学社会科学版), 2003, (6).
- Wang Jianjiang. 2006. The modern integration of conception theory and going beyond the inner aesthetics. *Journal of Northwest Normal University (Social Sciences)* 1. 王建疆. 意境理论的现代整合与内审美的视域超越 [J]. 西北师大学报(社会科学版), 2006, 1.
- Zhang Jiemo. 2005. Meaning-atmosphere: Its ancient generating and modern theoretical extension. *Academic Monthly* 7. 张节末. 意境的古代发生与近现代理论展开 [J]. 学术月刊, 2005, 7.
- Zhang Yanling. 2006. Differentiating and analyzing “artistic conception”, “condition” and “image” in Chinese classic literary theory. *Journal of University of Science and Technology Beijing (Social Sciences Edition)* 1. 张燕玲. 中国古代文论中的“意境”、“境界”、“意象”辨析 [J]. 北京科技大学学报(社会科学版), 2006 1.