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Wordless Mantras: Transcultural Engagements in Pan Jianfeng's *Roses from the Dark*¹

Abstract

The paper discusses artist Pan Jianfeng's transcultural series *Roses from the Dark* as a reconsideration of hierarchical binaries associated with language, culture, and artistic value. By relinquishing a focus on any "meaning" or "outcome" of *Roses*, the paper instead considers the communication between Pan's influences, geography, and artistic process in creating such multilayered works of art. Using interviews with Pan himself, as well as sources across time and space, the paper draws various connections to emphasize the lack of validity in perceived cultural boundaries. Finally, a look at language – and specifically the imagery of Chinese script – considers the ways in which traditional models of reading or understanding must be suspended in order to accept the beauty of Pan's *Roses*.

Keywords: ink art, Pan Jianfeng, China, peripheries, communications, rose.

¹ This work was supported by Xi'an Jiaotong Liverpool University, Research Development Fund-22-02-102.



Pan Jianfeng, *Midsummer—Awakening series*, 2023, 34 cm × 45.5 cm

Blossoms of Hope

Notions of the center – the definable cultural core – and the periphery – remote sites condemned as culturally inferior, if not barbarian – have remained of major importance to China throughout history. In a similar vein, a strong opposition between “East” *Dongfang* 东方 and “West” *Xifang* 西方 – terms coined by Chinese intellectuals during the Republican Era (1912–1949) in efforts to modernize and reimagine China – prevailed in different forms throughout the rest of the 20th century (Mitter, 2004; Schwarcz, 1986; Shih, 2001). Such an opposition survives today in various, at times contradictory ways in dominant narratives about China and its relationship to the world. Throughout the Reform and Opening Era specifically, when China began to ascend on the global scene after a period of isolation, questions of compatibility or difference between the so-called “East” and “West” resurfaced with new complexity on both sides of the conceptual divide (Tu, 2005). More recently, confrontational

narratives were enhanced over the pandemic years, often exaggerating perceived oppositions and cultural differences – in anything from values to lifestyle or artistic sensitivity – which upon closer examination prove highly problematic in terms of actual historical or cultural accuracy. Regardless of such inaccuracy, these dichotomies tend to serve as convenient and powerful tools in global economic competition and power struggles.

It is in this context of a growing obsession with strength, supremacy and division that the transcultural art of Pan Jianfeng 潘剑锋 – significantly shaped by Chinese ink art and calligraphy traditions as well as Buddhist and Daoist metaphysics – is of particular significance and interest. Based in Finland, Pan draws inspiration from various artistic and philosophical traditions, but does not follow any with absolute docility. Thereby his experimental practice contributes to the broader efforts of daring and imaginative artists who, through their art, began questioning the simplistic East/West divide as early as its establishment in the Republican Era (1912–1949) (Andrews & Shen, 1998, 2012; Birnie Danzker et al., 2004; Pan, 2008). The fact that Pan’s creations participate in multiple cultural realities and continue to be actively shaped by them, as well as the fact that as an artist he strives to enhance cultural layeredness through his own creative endeavor, make the theoretical framework developed within transcultural studies suitable for my inquiry.

Transculturality emphasizes intertwining between cultures and implies transgression beyond any assumed homogeneous communities or cultures (the presence of which would correspond to strictly defined territorial boundaries) and, consequently, suspects the existence of culturally autonomous artistic phenomena that can be thoroughly analyzed within narrow cultural categories. The most literal meaning of the term “transculturality” is as a product and contact zone for cultural flows, depicting the process of intertwining itself as “*passing through* classical cultural boundaries” (Brosius & Wenzlhuemer, 2011, p. 9). It is a term that captures cultural dynamism and interrelations. Following the interpretive turn in anthropology and expanding on Clifford Geertz’s view of culture, Afef Benessaieh noted that transculturality “offers a conceptual landscape for considering cultures as relational webs and flows of significance in active interaction with one another” (Benessaieh, 2010, p. 11). She argued that transculturality emphasizes the rapidly changing situations of cultural mixedness, where power relations are harder to identify, and where, due to increased mobility, it is difficult to establish a sense of exclusive dominance of one culture, because it is not necessarily

considered the only reference point, but rather appears as one among many others (Benessaieh, 2010, p. 11).

Another way to understand “transculturality” and apply it to my analysis is to refer to it as “multi-situatedness” and use it to qualify cultural productions and works of art which result from cultural diversity. Benessaieh explains that in this understanding, the concept of transculturality allows us to deal with cases where elements of different cultures come together to create new shapes, genres and discourses that are intended not only to be meaningful in relation to the cultures from which they derive, but also to generate new meanings that can no longer be considered authentic or otherwise with regard to their original components (Benessaieh, 2010, pp. 27–28). Indeed, in his art practice Pan intentionally strives to transcend initial contexts and any fixed meanings. For instance, many ideas or artistic motifs of Chinese origin, after they become filtered through his sensitivity and life experience, can no longer be clearly classified as entirely “Chinese,” and at times even reveal overlooked inherent validity of those concepts or symbols across cultures. One of the biggest advantages of the concept of transculturality is precisely that it situates the analysis beyond the simple binary of “global” and “local” and empowers covering, almost simultaneously, universalistic and particularistic aspects of multi-situated works in their various nuances (Welsch, 1999, pp. 220–221).

The aim of this analysis is to understand the mechanisms of cultural negotiation that shape Pan Jianfeng’s art and lend his artwork unique cross-cultural communication potential, as he succeeds in evading isolationist discourses and totalizing approaches underpinned by different forms of cultural narcissism or aiming at essentializing cultures. This essay seeks to reveal how Pan Jianfeng engages in blurring the line between “exclusively own” and “absolutely foreign,” establishing new connections and bringing to light what is common or alike amid what at first seems to be fundamentally different. I examine in detail one of Pan’s recent series, entitled *Anhei Meigui* 暗黑玫瑰, translated as *Roses from the Dark*, or sometimes *Ink Roses*.² It is perhaps important to emphasize that the transposed term *hei’an* 黑暗 implies something quite negative (like a dark era), while Pan’s choice of *anhei* 暗黑 is much more open. Indeed, *anhei* 暗黑 suggests a positive

² So far, Pan’s *Roses from the Dark* have been exhibited in *The Landscape of the Soul* exhibition held at Glasshouse Helsinki (2021) and *Exhibition #88 Year of the Hare*, a joint show by Aimo Katajamäki & Pan Jianfeng at the Lokal Gallery in Helsinki (2023). Some have also been included in the permanent art collection of Akola Manor.

movement from deep darkness towards blackness, a motion of potentially positive energy. Moreover, the adjective *anhei* 暗黑 implies a freeing eclecticism, having been used broadly across contexts so distant from ink art as heavy metal aesthetics. Pan, whose first-hand exposure to heavy metal culture dates back to the late 1990s when he studied in Great Britain, admits that while “heavy metal is not part of Chinese tradition,” it is nevertheless “nice to illustrate this culture and sensitivity by ink. Why not if it works?” (online interview, March 2023).

There are two key ways in which *Roses* sheds light on the problematic dynamic between “East” and “West,” center and periphery. Firstly, both in Pan’s own transcultural creative process and in the artistic response and spiritual engagement the work invites, *Roses* works to remove the illusionary divides between cultures, countries, and people that allow for those very oppositions and tensions. Secondly, by attending to each work’s origins and evolution, *Roses* as a whole constitutes a fascinating case study on the power for each place – big or small – to produce its own energy and creative potential from within, and therefore maintain ultimate integrity and validity regardless of any hierarchy imposed from without. *Roses* thus bloom in Porvoo, blossoming beyond oppositions between mainstream art, high art, and underground art; between cosmopolitan art centers and peripheral sites; between and across the East/West divide. Gently, Pan’s roses break into our world and induce thoughtful, healing reconsiderations.

Recovered Unity

Leaving Shanghai in 2015, Pan Jianfeng settled in Porvoo, a town which, having lived through moments of major urban glory, is today a rather quiet though picturesque city not far from Helsinki. Here, in a place largely secluded from political turmoil and hectic cosmopolitanism, Pan gradually developed a unique transcultural art practice gravitating around Xuan paper (宣纸) and ink. In some ways, he appears to replicate the old gesture of disenchanting Chinese literati officials posted or banished to remote places, seeking comfort and escape from mundane worldly affairs through art and spiritual practice. Such solitary retreats from wealthy political centers often facilitated genuine expression, free experimentation, and humble self-cultivation. Indeed, it seems that embracing the life of an outcast often resulted in overcoming strict formal principles revered by the elite, and thereby developing new styles or visual qualities (Sturman & Tai, 2012). Furthermore, reconnection with nature allowed for broader

unity with the nature of being and reconnection with one's true self, while also developing skills in seeing and feeling the world in new ways.

That being said, Pan Jianfeng's retreat, which he likes to describe as a "self-exile," is different to such traditional experiences in many ways. While his ink studio, framed inside an 18th-century wooden house, may certainly facilitate the suspension of thoughts about worldly affairs, Pan does not endeavor to forget about human pursuits of peace, welfare, or mutual understanding. In fact, the broader purpose behind Pan's art is not to escape, reject, or disengage, but rather to understand how art can facilitate, on a micro level, the mission of bringing people together, if and when politicians and cultural institutions fail. Rather than "bridging" the divide, Pan seeks instead to dilute, soak, and erode the divide, to question the validity of any solid, centralized, national state by inviting the audience to enter a more fluid state of mind. Therefore, his process treats water as equally important as the paper and ink of traditional practice, addressing how water enables strokes and images to overlay, blend, and heal. Free of ambitions to establish any kind of overseas Chinese art or heritage center, he focuses on the creation of works which are not simply a record of his own cross-cultural engagement, but intend to initiate an open, lasting conversation to be held within a museum, a gallery, even a private home.

On curiosity, assimilation, cultural conflict, and historical bruises, renowned Japanese designer and intellectual Kenya Hara wrote that "where we stand is not the center of the world, and furthermore ... there is no such thing as the center of the world." He goes on to inquire:

Isn't it O.K. to think of oneself as seated in a modest position, without considering oneself the center of the universe? In fact, the global perspective only becomes possible when one orients oneself on the Edge... With an attitude that observes the world based on a full knowledge of all the facts, not just some of them, we will think globally based on a lucid awareness of both our bad and good points. In the coming world, that kind of attitude will surely be necessary. (Hara, 2007, p. 305)

Pan seems poised to achieve such lucid awareness. Over years of extended formal and informal studies across different visual traditions and methods, in China and abroad, he has developed a critical and appreciative understanding of ancient and contemporary art alike. Furthermore, in constantly repositioning himself between different systems of values and aesthetics, reconsidering creative choices from a number of different perspectives, layering multiple art sensitivities, and filtering them through

one another, he rediscovers and reimagines things both completely overlooked and taken for granted, such as the use of paper in Chinese art.

In one of our interviews, he explained how much of his current artwork would seem, even to himself, too rough, were it to be judged only according to the principles of traditional Chinese aesthetics. Certain visual effects would appear, in those terms, as mistakes. Yet by expanding his aesthetic awareness via interactions with European art and crafts, especially those of Nordic countries, allows him to reflect on such “misconduct” as entirely legitimate, bringing attention to the overlooked materiality of the scroll and encouraging the viewer to appreciate the layeredness and details of an ink artwork (online interview, March 2023). Moreover, in his constant movement between different traditions and methodologies, Pan gains a unique ability to remove himself from the Chinese traditions of calligraphy and ink art without rejecting or attacking them. Instead, he finds his own way to move beyond existing genres and conventions, to overcome many major constraints, without giving up on the ink, brush, or paper, or indeed the essential training of hand and mind. Pan differs from many other contemporary ink artists in this sense, while retaining much in common with Shitao 石涛 (1642–1707), who argued that,

I am myself because my Self naturally exists. The whiskers and eyebrows of the Ancients cannot grow on my face, nor can their entrails exist in my stomach. I have my own entrails, and my own whiskers and eyebrows. Even when there may be some point of contact with another master, it is he who approaches me, and not I who seek to become like him. I have been taught directly by Heaven; how could I learn from antiquity without transforming it? (Hay, 2001, p. 229)

While actively blending aesthetics across cultures, Pan also avoids identifying himself as “a Chinese artist in Europe.”

I am physically here, as a piece of flesh. I may come originally from Wenzhou, but I do not live there and I have a limited understanding of what happens in China as I now live here. When I moved to “the North” I realized how artificial this divide between East and West actually is. Depending on the perspective and the map, for some countries, China could be the West! I don’t need to remember where I come from by sticking to any simplistic identifications, unable to reflect my factual life experience and art practice. I have my own ways of belonging. As human beings, we all have certain understandings of art, no matter where we come from. (online interview, March 2023)

There is a striking but somewhat unsurprising resemblance between Pan’s observation and thoughts expressed by renowned painter Fabienne Verdier.

Though it would seem that Verdier's transcultural experience as a woman born in France, and belonging to a different generation, is inevitably very different from that of Pan, in a certain sense she chose to walk the same path of reinvention, rediscovery and cultural disengagement in a decade spent studying calligraphy and ink painting in China in the 1980s. Moreover, Verdier laid the foundation for her lifelong art practice at the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute in Chongqing, sensing that she would maintain more freedom and achieve much more as an artist away from the capital city of Beijing (Verdier, 2006). When asked by Caroline Ward in a 2016 interview if it is "important to identify an artist by where they come from, or where they studied," Verdier replied,

I think it's pointless to argue about territory or where you are. I really want to suspend boundaries around being human, because we construct such strong boundaries around all our elements of culture, but in fact the human soul has an inner meditative state and a universal perception and I think we should see it as universal and use it to exchange ideas ... We have the universe, and each person is part of the universe, and nature, and we should be able to meditate and look beyond a specific place. (Ward & Verdier, 2016)

Paper on Ink

Across years of practice, Pan Jianfeng has developed a broad array of techniques applied to paper and ink. He has experimented with large and small-scale collages, as in the *Jade Sea* series, as well as with three-dimensional works created as part of the collaborative project *Drawing Theatre*. He has even explored the possibilities of engaging rubbing and woodblock printing techniques.³ *Roses* is an ongoing series created using a technique that Pan calls "paper on ink," and which captures playful twists in the creative process while also acknowledging the major presence of paper not as a passive surface for painting or writing, but as an organic material that actively merges with ink and breath. Through his "self-exile," Pan began to nurture a deeper, more complex relationship with paper, partly because it turned out he could not as easily get his artworks professionally mounted in Finland, and had to learn to do it himself. "My relationship with paper evolves and gets more and more complex," Pan explains. "It deepens

³ Many reproductions of Pan Jianfeng's works may be accessed via his personal website www.panjianfeng.com or his Instagram account <https://www.instagram.com/inklink/>.

with time as I try to understand the spiritual connection between paper and breathing” (online interview, March 2023). As a result, paper matters both as partial inspiration and as a lasting foundation for creative and emotional growth, ensuring consistency despite his adventurous and multidirectional explorations.

Pan’s paper on ink technique implies working with raw and relatively thin Xuan paper in several phases, layering the image using different tools and procedures. A rough outline of a rose is initially painted on white paper using white paint and water, applied both by the brush and through intuitive splashing. Western brushes are used to splash small dots, as soft Chinese brushes – rabbit hair brushes, for instance – are too soft to achieve such effects. Once the paper has partially dried and can be turned over without damage, the image is covered with shades of black or gray, using what Pan calls “overnight ink”: the darkened liquid consolidating in the water container used for rinsing the brush.⁴ As Pan explains, this stage happens as a “one-breath action” where the hand, holding a flat brush, writes one thick stroke at a time, from left to right.

Once complete, other pigments – such as red, green or yellow – may be applied on either side of the paper with the brush, or directly with the fingers, to complicate the texture and dimensionality. Cinnabar pigment, *zhusha* 朱砂, features most prominently, as Pan likes to use it to create a large curve above his roses. This simple, spontaneous stroke allows him to transcend the ordinary image of any existing flower, which ceases to resemble anything “real.” The curve also becomes an indicator of general layout, as after the paper is turned over and the outline of the rose disappears from sight, the red cinnabar guides the next level of the image through the translucent paper. As the paper dries, the various stages of visual effect begin to settle, and minor additions or alterations may be made. Mostly this involves firmer brush lines to emphasize certain components, edges, or details, in order to reveal the image more fully.

Accidental effects and interactions are common throughout Pan’s process, as white paint, ink, water, and pigment transfer over one another, and unexpected – sometimes even incomprehensible – visual effects layer in a process of constant discovery and learning. White parts already marked on the paper will block the following dark, while thin lines of whiteness may

⁴ Though this water is generally discarded, Pan sees value in the unique visual effects achievable with this mixture of gradually evaporating water, washed away ink, and various particles of organic materials removed from Xuan paper in the process of writing on it with the brush.

emerge between thick black strokes where the ink does not evenly cover the paper. Though accident is part of the process, caution is also required, as spraying water on the paper before painting, for example, increases the work's fragility and precludes the application of any sharp, precise lines. Therefore, what may seem an entirely free and impulsive process is in fact, not unlike traditional calligraphy, a spontaneity shaped by a practiced understanding of the multiple constraints and implications of every decision and movement, down to the angle at which the brush moves over the paper.

Pan Jianfeng names this creative process “one-breath art” – inspired by Shitao's 石涛 *One-Stroke Theory* 一画论, which features one stroke as the origin of all beings and the root of myriad forms (Coleman, 1978). In Pan's process, once the paper dries entirely and all the lines, textures, shades of white, black and color, as well as various image components begin to belong organically to one another, no arbitrary alterations should be made; doing so would destroy the work's unity. While “one-breath art” may entail more than one pass in relation to the same piece of paper, the artwork may not be shaped by different feelings or energy flows belonging to disconnected moments in time, otherwise fractures will appear.

When explaining his creative process, Pan likes to use an analogy with photography: “a rose grows in the darkness like an analog photography image grows from the camera film in the dark room” (online interview, March 2023). While parallels with Shitao highlight certain metaphysical aspects of *Roses*, this allusion to a very different idea and technology of the image stresses the importance of the negative space of an image, while also establishing a poetry between the light-sensitive photographic paper and patient Xuan paper, sensitive in its own ways. Moreover, it draws attention to the gradual appearance of the image upon skillful treatment, as well as the potential for seamless creative intervention, if only the artist truly understands the materials, technique, and process. Though the materials and technologies involved are of course very different, in both cases the resultant images are projections to be developed, fixed, and dried.

On the occasion of the *Year of the Rabbit* exhibition by Aimo Katajamäki and Pan Jianfeng at the Lokal Gallery in Helsinki, Pan confessed in a video, “I don't really paint anything. I use ink and paper. I only paint the background. So I'm the background painter” (Tanttu & Pan, 2023). Indeed, the task of drawing a clear and definite distinction between the foreground and background, between top, bottom, left, and right – which already appeared intentionally problematic in his earlier *Jade Sea* paper collage series – becomes even more challenging in the process of creating *Roses*. In certain instances, it is difficult



to decipher which side of the image, on which side of the paper, is actually “better.” “We are trained to put so much effort into the so-called ‘front’ part of the image,” Pan explains, “but sometimes I am truly humbled upon discovering that actually the ‘back side’ is closer to good art. Why are we not taught to flip the paper and see what is behind? In a way it feels natural that both sides of your artwork would be close and meaningful to you, but this human obsession with subdividing everything usually makes us focus just on one side” (online interview, March 2023).

Pan’s notion of the “background painter,” acting with kindness from a haven, has broader implications beyond the technique itself. Indeed, this idea connects to another important concept in ink aesthetics, one which became more clear when Pan spoke of his art practice as “creation of a kind of situation allowing for an image to grow from the paper, from the ink” (Tanttu & Pan, 2023). The idea of acting from the background – that is, acting through removal of the self – mirrors the ways of dealing with void and “blank space” in Chinese tradition. As modern Chinese philosopher, master of aesthetics, and poet Zong Baihua 宗白华 wrote in one of his essays, the “unpainted space does not connote vacuousness or a shortage of content. Instead, it relinquishes the mind to the vastness and unboundedness” (Zong, 2023, p. 31). In the same essay he remarks that “the cultivation of beauty lies in ethereal emptiness and void, keeping a distance from objective things and forming your realm” (p. 19). Such is the very situation Pan Jianfeng creates through his inventive use of paper, ink, and water: a space of undefined and undifferentiated void, full of energy and infinite possibilities for imagination and transformation.

Awakening of the Image and of the Self

Roses began with Pan’s appreciation of midsummer roses, which bloom “like love from the darkness” (online interview, March 2023). In accordance with spiritual traditions of creating images that do not aspire to merely register reality or depict beauty, but seek to reveal a deeper truth, Pan has little interest in roses looking like anything “real.”⁵ Instead, he offers “roses” that may resemble flower blossoms, but also appear like clouds, or opening human palms, as if in a meditation gesture or an invitation to join

⁵ Traditionally the artist should not depict everything, but rather suggest and ask the viewer to do their own creative work in terms of viewing, experiencing, comprehending, and appreciating.

hands for comfort. Upon extended examination, some of Pan's roses morph into landscapes that merge inner and outer places into a new spiritual home. In a fascinating conceptual twist, in the country where the lotus (in the Buddhist tradition symbolizing enlightenment) does not grow from the mud, the midsummer rose stands for awakening after long and dark winter sleep.

The midsummer rose is a popular flower in Finnish gardens. Many people in Finland consider it the epitome of summer. In one of our exchanges, Pan spoke about how often Finnish locals were surprised by his attention to the flowers they had taken for granted for so long. Simple and humble things may easily go unnoticed, but upon patient examination offer connective tissue across linguistic boundaries. Pan embraces such humility as an offering,

I am really happy to give something to the people who welcome me here with my distinct understanding of their world. Moreover, this little gift allows me to communicate about complex ideas for which I lack language outside of China. I let these ink roses grow beyond many complex concepts deeply rooted in calligraphy or Buddhist traditions, until no more explanations are required. Things develop bit by bit, almost on their own. Midsummer rose blooms quietly and effortlessly, suspending any strenuous attempts at a conversation rooted in research, translation, and inevitable confusion as both sides lack the shared imagery and vocabulary. Rose becomes my medium, my visual language – people see and feel, and as a result can develop their own understanding. (online interview, March 2023)

Pan's titular declaration that roses bloom "from the dark" – "quietly and effortlessly" – stems from his approach to image-making. Strongly influenced by the concepts of form and emptiness rooted in *Diamond Sutra* and *Heart Sutra* (Conze, 2001), Pan believes that just as one should not be attached to any superficial views, divisions or material manifestations, one should not trust images too much, either. If in our heads we are not attached to images, he suggests, if we let them flow, go, transform on their own, they will allow for liberation; if we do not aspire to control images, they will not be able to control our minds. "The more I work with images," Pan explains,

the more I feel it doesn't matter what you write or paint. The flower can be a flower or a potato. We are taught that a rose has a certain local feeling or symbolic meaning, but as an artist I can also present a potato in an emotional way. I can turn a rose into something else, like a rabbit hole for instance – even just for a while. Neither rose nor rabbit hole is "real" anyway, all of it is transient. All existing images and objects will disappear one day. There is no reason to stick to any solid

concept or fixed image in the world driven by change. Therefore the ultimate purpose of creative and spiritual exploration is not to understand what an image should be in accordance with any existing tradition or art movement in the “East” or “West,” but rather what it can be. (online interview, March 2023)

Through his experimental technique, Pan’s art practice turns into a continuous, endless spiritual process of self-cultivation in an effort to let go of outside hierarchies, oppositions, and divides. Art practice, spiritual practice, and the practice of daily life emerge as one, so that while the artwork is a process, the process itself is an artwork too. Furthermore, this spirit of constant renewal makes each day in the art studio a very different experience for Pan, each one full of surprises and abounding with possibilities. “When people think of ‘good art,’” Pan suggests, “they often anticipate certain use of line, color or imagery – all these things we can see, but none of which is truly real.” He goes on,

A truly meaningful story has to be delivered out of genuine emotion, for some real reason transcending the logic of art market or art history canons. Then it can touch people’s hearts and gift them with the opportunity of renewal as well. When as an artist you work with images, you have to constantly ask yourself “Why? Why is it being done?” But at the same time, you cannot stick to any single answer. Everything can be turned into something else – even completely abstract forms. A never finished image may even be better – how would we draw the line between finished and unfinished anyway? What does it mean to complete something in a world driven by change? Isn’t it arrogant to assume that it is up to us as individuals to complete any process? Isn’t each beginning and end beyond our control and comprehension? It’s like life. I may initiate and stop my individual art process, but all of it is just a minor part of a greater creation, so it cannot become an end. (online interview, March 2023)

Wordless Mantras

Recorded in an artist video created by the Lokal Gallery, Pan briefly addresses the intertwining of material forms (the world understood through physicality and attached meanings or messages), written Chinese characters (which may depict or express those forms, meanings, and/or messages), and images that have much in common with Chinese characters (every character can indeed be perceived as an image) but may also operate as communication beyond words or written language (Tanttu & Pan, 2023). Pan’s realization that one can juggle words, images, concepts, and material manifestations, without clinging to any for long, allows his

work to move beyond language without rejecting the enormous potential for communication embedded in Chinese characters. Indeed, Pan's work continues to harness the plenitude of visual forms and interpretations that Chinese script entails. Through Pan's work, we can interpret how certain conceptions of hermeticism, standardization – and at times even oppressive writing and reading practices – associated with Chinese written language, have more to do with power – or regulation of literacy, communication, and imagination – than with the intrinsic logic of the script itself.

Therefore, I would argue that the ultimate mechanism of Pan's inspiration and creation cannot be easily explained unless we suspend notions of translation, transcription, illustration, or any other direct mediation. Rather, we must adopt – as he does – a constant, considerate movement along complex trajectories between words and characters, characters and images, images and material forms, material manifestations and their representations, material manifestations and concepts, concepts and images, images and characters, characters and material forms, and so forth. Such movement enacts a continuous transfer – or perhaps transformation – of form and meaning, which leads to the emergence of a transcultural artwork but does not conclude in it. Indeed, there is no underpinning assumption that any definite form or meaning could, or should, be granted or achieved. In fact, any connections identified or established by Pan within his creative exploration are intentionally layered across, into, within a void where the viewer begins to engage with the artwork, so that the audience is free to make their own sense regardless of Pan's own perceptions.

On a fundamental level, Pan's *Roses* are drawn simultaneously from a natural and symbolic realm. Abstract and non-abstract emerge at once, simultaneously denying and embracing the plant and the script that provided the initial, indirect, more or less intuitive inspiration. Pan inherits a historical Chinese practice of image-thinking⁶ inherent to ink and text

⁶ Such convergence and transition is possible because Chinese language – more specifically the common presence of pictorial elements in the ideophonographic characters and words – makes it quite natural for educated Chinese readers to develop a reading habit that involves much imagination already on the basic level of recognizing the character in the text. Pictorial components in the characters imply viewing and reading at the same time. This effect is further enhanced by such features of Chinese classical language as equivalence between the syllable, word, and single unit of the script, or the lack of grammatical variation. At the same time, due to the close connection between word and image in Chinese language and art, often even non-linguistic elements of the surroundings can be intuitively associated with certain characters or words.



Pan Jianfeng, *Rabbit Hole* series, 2023, 24 × 32.5 cm

work since ancient times, but does not seek to emulate Cangjie 仓颉 and his meticulous effort to transpose features and patterns of nature into a new form of written communication. Instead, he seeks to offer a wordless space of encounter and communication. *Roses* are “non-characters” – reminiscent of some kind of wordless mantra – bringing the mind clarity, deeper understanding, and greater compassion. Created through the process of self-removal, they act as reminders to take oneself out of the narcissism and egocentrism that often dominates contemporary societies, and as such offer a starting point to reconsider worldviews driven by the antagonistic logic of center and peripheries.

In this way, *Roses* evokes the mind tools of quiet meditation, appreciation and respect of otherness, all of which – according to Daoist or Buddhist terms – need not utilize mutually exclusive opposites. Here we find the possibility of freedom attainable through the pursuit of detachment from the place of origin and any singular form of cultural knowledge or practice we may believe to be granted, solid, and lasting. Without any fixed

or imposed meaning, the power of *Roses* is not in deciphering them. Rather, we must attend to and embrace the plenitude of perspectives, nuances, and feelings in each rose. From this vantage point, where left and right, back and front, top and bottom, turn out to be two aspects of the same sheet of paper, so “East” and “West,” “own” and “foreign,” “far” and “near,” “inner” and “outer,” “same” and “other,” also become parts of a limitless whole.

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Bezsłowne mantry: transkulturowe połączenia w *Różach z ciemności* Pana Jianfenga

Niniejszy artykuł stanowi refleksję na temat transkulturowego cyklu *Róże z ciemności* autorstwa Pan Jianfenga, kwestionującego zasadność zastanych hierarchii i opozycji w zakresie języka, kultury i wartości artystycznej. Nie próbując ustalać jednoznacznie “znaczenia” czy “efektu” *Róż*, artykuł ten skupia się raczej na analizie współzależności różnych wpływów, geografii i artystycznych procesów twórczych, umożliwiających powstawanie tak wielopoziomowych dzieł sztuki. Na podstawie wywiadów przeprowadzonych z Panem, jak również tekstów pochodzących z różnych epok i kręgów, niniejszy artykuł ujawnia szereg ukrytych połączeń, a tym samym ukazuje bezzasadność przekonania o istnieniu jakichkolwiek ściśle definiowalnych granic między kulturami. W końcowej części artykułu uwaga skierowana zostaje na język, a konkretnie na obrazowość chińskiego pisma, w celu rozważenia sposobów zawieszenia tradycyjnych modeli czytania lub rozumienia, aby piękno *Róż* Pana zostało zaakceptowane w całej ich złożoności.

Słowa kluczowe: sztuka tuszu, Pan Jianfeng, Chiny, peryferie, komunikacja, róża.



Note

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This work was supported by Xi'an Jiaotong Liverpool University, Research Development Fund-22-02-102.

No competing interests have been declared.

Publication History

Received: 2023-08-02, Accepted: 2023-15-10, Published: 2023-12-23