

# Travel with Things-A Brief Discussion on Li Wei's Flower and Bird Painting of Northeast China

Ning Xu

Changchun Art Museum (Changchun Painting and Calligraphy Academy), Changchun 130000, Jilin, China

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**Abstract:** As an extremely important painting system in China's traditional art, flower-and-bird painting has become a core artistic medium for constructing and showcasing the ideal realm of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature through brush and ink, with its unique aesthetic perspective and profound cultural accumulation. Entering the 21st century, the existing themes of traditional flower-and-bird painting can no longer fully respond to the contemporary aesthetic trends of continuous evolution and diverse coexistence. Through deep exploration of regional expressions and other paths for diversified integration, it has become an inevitable trend to meet the demands of today's visual culture. Mr. Li Wei, a master of flower-and-bird painting with profound traditional scholarship and a broad contemporary vision, exemplifies the creative transformation and innovative development of traditional freehand flower-and-bird painting in the present era, thanks to his authentic freehand techniques, rich regional characteristics, and innate aesthetic sensibility.

**Keywords:** Chinese painting; Regional; Esthetics

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## 1. Introduction

In December 2025, the exhibition "Floral and Avian Paintings: Li Wei's Artistic Journey" was successfully held at Changchun Art Museum, showcasing a collection of works deeply rooted in Northeast China's regional culture. The artist cherishes the seemingly ordinary yet extraordinary flora and fauna of daily life, believing these natural elements possess irreplaceable intrinsic value. By incorporating them into his paintings, he breathes new vitality into traditional flower-and-bird art. The exhibition reveals how the dynamic imagery from Northeast China's fertile landscapes, lively squirrels, endearing bears, and playful tigers, finds vivid expression through his brush. Even common crops like sorghum and corn, imbued with rustic charm, transform into emotionally resonant subjects. Flower-and-bird painting has long served as a cultural medium for natural beautification and social harmony. Li Wei's works, through their relatable themes and humanistic touch, achieve both broad appeal and contemporary relevance while carrying profound cultural significance. From the perspective of cultural inheritance and innovation, the important value of Mr. Li Wei's flower and bird painting creation is that it provides a very vivid artistic practice for the inheritance and innovation development of the excellent traditional Chinese culture in the contemporary.

## 2. Deepening and expanding of regional themes

Li Wei's flower-and-bird paintings profoundly embody distinctive regional characteristics, deliberate innovation, and profound humanistic qualities. Due to historical and geographical constraints, the artistic system of Northeast China's flower-and-bird painting emerged relatively late, remaining somewhat distant from the extensive cultural heritage of the Central Plains mainstream artistic tradition. Consequently, the region's unique natural motifs and aesthetic expressions were largely excluded from traditional literati paintings' creative and critical discourse for an extended period. This historical limitation significantly hindered the development of Jilin Province's flower-and-bird painting in its early stages. Ironically, this very circumstance enabled Jilin's artists to pioneer the conscious pursuit of regional artistic identity, charting a distinctive creative path.

Mount Changbai, the most towering mountain range in Northeast China, stands within the temperate zone of the northern latitudes. As one of the most ecologically intact and biodiverse natural regions, it has inspired artist Li Wei's decades-long creative focus on depicting its unique wildlife: the majestic yet spirited Siberian tigers, sturdy black bears, graceful sika deer, clever squirrels, noisy flocks of sparrows, and ethereal red-crowned cranes, alongside iconic local crops like corn, chestnuts, and sorghum. This artistic approach stems from Li's profound observation of nature's floral and avian world, embodying the core aesthetic concept of life sketching proposed by Ming-Qing dynasty aestheticians. The renowned Qing calligrapher Fang Xun elucidated this concept in his treatise *Shan Jing Ju Hua Lun*: The world divides painting into two styles: freehand brushstrokes of fruits and flowers and meticulous line drawings. The former captures spontaneous inspiration, while the latter preserves literal likeness. Ancient artists Xie Sheng's practice was essentially capturing the vitality of nature; it's not a double standard<sup>[1]</sup>. Fang emphasized the importance of expressing the intrinsic vital energy of flora and fauna, highlighting their vibrant vitality and living dynamism.

Mr. Li Wei consistently channels his observations, emotions, and insights from daily life into his artworks. His profound love for nature and everyday existence has forged an artistic style that is both accessible and whimsically natural, allowing his creations to radiate vibrant vitality. The rhythm of nature in his brushwork mirrors the poetic splendor of Li Bai's verses or the majestic melodies of Beethoven's compositions – a unique artistic vision and emotional expression exclusive to exceptional artists. During my visit to Mr. Li Wei's studio, I discovered an extensive collection of sketches and drafts, each meticulously crafted with profound dedication. When he elaborated on the intricate details and creative philosophies behind these sketches, the audience seemed to journey through the tranquil mountain villages and pastoral landscapes he described. This obsessive devotion to art deeply moved me, revealing Li Wei's extraordinary diligence in his creative journey. Such dedication has enabled him to evolve from the foundational stage of "observing nature's creation" to the liberated realm of "embracing all things within his heart", ultimately harnessing his masterful brushwork to artistically arrange, combine, and elevate life's raw materials. In his works, we not only witness the interplay of heaven and earth... The vitality and vigor of all things can reveal their colorful, rich and profound artistic life.

## 3. The warm expression from the perspective of humanities

Through decades of artistic exploration, Mr. Li Wei has consistently sought themes that express the beauty of life and human emotions within regional cultural contexts, skillfully highlighting the unique characteristics of diverse subjects. His years of sketching practice allowed him to meticulously study his subjects, ultimately choosing to capture the inherent simplicity and spiritual charm inherent in natural forms through a universal human perspective. For instance, the Siberian tiger, often called the "king of the forest" and typically seen as fierce, takes on a transformed appearance in Li Wei's works: adult tigers appear gentle and compassionate, while cubs are portrayed as playful and endearing, radiating humanized qualities. The sturdy black bear emerges as lovable and clumsy, while the agile squirrel appears lively and full of vitality. By intentionally infusing these natural subjects with human-like traits and emotions, Li Wei's anthropomorphic artistic approach imbues his works with a profoundly moving humanistic warmth that lingers throughout.

In Li Wei's paintings, whether depicting traditional fierce beasts like bears, wolves, tigers, and leopards, or everyday

creatures such as cats, dogs, fish, and shrimp, these animals gradually shed their wild instincts to reveal tender human qualities. This artistic approach allows viewers to naturally resonate with universal human emotions like friendship, family bonds, and the joy of kinship. In one of his works, two cubs on a rock face appear to be whispering like close friends, the left cub seems to be feeling wronged, while the right cub tenderly places its front paw on its head, offering silent comfort. While such physical expressions might be rare in the real animal world, this anthropomorphic portrayal mirrors the encouragement and support between human friends, creating a warm and harmonious atmosphere with genuine emotion and natural expression. Moreover, the inscribed poems in these works often directly convey the artists profound appreciation for natures beauty and the richness of life.

The formation of this unique aesthetic orientation is inextricably linked to Mr. Li Wei's rich life experiences during his youth. Born with an optimistic and open-minded disposition, he cultivated a serene life philosophy of equanimity and composure through over two decades of relatively challenging living conditions in Gansu. As Mencius observed: "A great person never loses their childlike heart", highlighting that true greatness lies in preserving an innocent, authentic, and natural disposition. Laozi similarly proclaimed: "The constant virtue never departs, returning to the state of an infant", advocating a life of simplicity and tranquility. Though their philosophies differ, both share a profound resonance in celebrating authenticity and preserving original aspirations. Ultimately, those with truly great character transcend the complexities and anxieties common to ordinary people, maintaining a precious childlike innocence that naturally manifests in their words, actions, and creative works. Mr. Li Wei exemplifies this artist who embodies the "childlike heart".

Li Wei's regional flower-and-bird painting creations fundamentally stem from his profound love for life and meticulous observation. Throughout his artistic career, he began with Western painting as his initial inspiration, later received guidance from the renowned master Han Buyan, and subsequently absorbed the wisdom of predecessors from traditional Chinese culture and painting theories such as the "Book of Changes" and Shi Tao, ultimately integrating them to form his own unique style. His distinctive modeling foundation, brushwork language, and artistic philosophy all derive from his long-term immersion and accumulation in nature and life. It is precisely because Li Wei harbors boundless love for life that he can deeply observe the habits of birds and insects, the withering and flourishing of flowers and trees, thereby making his works diverse and vibrant, always imbuing people with vigorous vitality and positive spiritual strength. Li Wei's artistic practice places great emphasis on "learning from nature", continuously refining his painting techniques through extensive sketching and plein-air painting. In his view, nature is an inexhaustible treasure trove for his artistic life, which also cultivates his profound realistic skills and extraordinary ability to capture life's details. The images created by Li Wei's brush are exquisitely vivid, each stroke and ink particularly expressive, and every scene in his works radiates the authors life interests and natural beauty. Whether depicting flowers, birds, fish, insects, landscapes, or pastoral scenes, they all reveal Mr. Li Wei's unique and the artistic style and aesthetic pursuit are distinct.

#### 4. The leisure and naturalness in aesthetic observation

In the development of the Chinese painting aesthetic system, the concept of "Qu" as an important aesthetic notion was proposed and discussed by scholars as early as the Wei and Jin periods. Contemporary scholar Fan Bo, in his work "Outline of the History of Chinese Painting Aesthetics", has organized this: Zong Bing of the Southern Dynasties proposed the proposition of "the fusion of myriad charms with divine thought" in his "Preface to Landscape Painting"; during the same period, Xie He also expounded the view of "elegant and ingenious charm" in his "Records of the Classification of Ancient Paintings" <sup>[2]</sup>. Fan Bo believes that the concept of "Qu" was truly strengthened and widely applied during the Ming and Qing dynasties, with its connotation roughly divided into four levels: the first level refers to the expression of the painters subjective emotions and tastes; the second level refers to the charm presented by the brush and ink form itself; the third level refers to the charm derived from the overall artistic conception of the painting; the fourth level refers to the painter observing and representing nature with a "Qu" mind and "Qu" perspective. Zong Bing also proposed: All that is subtle beyond the surface of words and images can be grasped within the text <sup>[2]</sup>. The so-called "beyond the image" refers to the

meaning beyond the superficial appearance of objects, and what Zong Bing advocated was precisely this profound realm of being simple beyond the image rather than beyond the meaning. Sun Liankui of the Qing dynasty once compared in Imagined Commentary on the Classification of Poetry: “When a person paints a pavilion and house, they do not paint the pavilion and house, but they know there must be a master in the pavilion and house”<sup>[3]</sup>. This theory also applies to flowers. The appreciation and creation of bird paintings reveal that works lacking the pursuit of “artistic effects transcending mere representation” struggle to achieve profound and enduring artistic conceptions. Observing Mr. Li Wei’s works, one notices their natural and understated atmosphere, with brushwork rarely showing deliberate craftsmanship. This artistic realm stems not only from the artist’s own serene and clear mental state but also from his lineage as a successor to Qi Baishi’s artistic tradition. The most moving aspect of Qi Baishi’s paintings lies in the poetic essence and vibrant life interests emanating from his soul. It is through this poetic sensibility that he transforms ordinary natural beauty into profound and exquisite artistic conceptions. In Mr. Li Wei’s works, for instance, the focused gaze of a tiger gazing at a swimming bluefish in the stream, and the dynamic, unrestrained movements of its paws, demonstrate the deep influence of the elderly Qi Baishi. Qi Baishi once expressed his admiration for predecessors in verse: “Qing Teng and Xue Ge transcend mortal bounds, Old Master Qi’s later years reveal unique talent. I’d gladly be a servant dog in the netherworld, revolving under the guidance of three masters”. Mr. Li Wei also deeply understands the principle of “learning from multiple mentors”. In his discussions on freehand flower-and-bird painting techniques, he emphasized the importance of studying traditional classics and proposed: “On the basis of correct understanding and in-depth study of tradition, one should learn from predecessors’ strengths while avoiding their weaknesses, and borrowing from the past to innovate for the present. “In terms of subject selection and artistic expression, Li Wei has demonstrated varying degrees of... This work reveals a personalized pursuit and contemporary reinterpretation of the transcendent spirit in traditional Chinese painting. Li Wei has studied and admired the boldness of Xu Wei, the aloof elegance of Bada Shanren, and the robustness of Wu Changshuo. Yet his approach transcends mere imitation. Grounded in the legacy of these masters, he achieves spontaneous brushwork and natural spontaneity, ultimately reaching a new aesthetic height. Through flowers and insects, he celebrates the beauty of everyday life and expresses the joy and vitality of human experience.

A masterpiece in the history of Chinese painting aesthetics, “Hua Quan” by early Qing painter Da Chongguang, provides a profound interpretation of the spatial representation techniques in Chinese painting. The whole picture is conceived in the mind, and unique forms emerge from the fingers. Only with majestic momentum can one be called a master”, and also: “Where the mountains are thick, there is depth; where the water is still, there is movement... The interplay of void and substance creates wonders even in unpainted spaces<sup>[4]</sup>. This core characteristic of traditional painting resonates with the construction of artistic conception in traditional Chinese poetry. For instance, Mr. Li Wei’s work “Autumn Water and the Vast Sky in One Color” directly borrows its title from the timeless verse in Wang Bo’s “Preface to Tengwang Pavilion” from the Tang Dynasty, aiming to depict a serene and expansive landscape. Similarly, Du Fu’s “Autumn water as spirit, jade as bone” and Bai Juyi’s “Autumn water with crimson grains, morning mist cooking white scales” both convey profound artistic conception, and Li Wei’s work visually transforms this literary imagery. The brilliance of this piece lies in its “seeing the big in the small” conception, where fragmented scene depictions conceal vast and profound cosmic grandeur. The painting only portrays two egrets in varied postures and a withered lotus, without directly depicting water ripples or sky clouds. Instead, it ingeniously leaves large blank spaces, yet makes viewers feel as if they are already standing by a tranquil autumn pond. The “negative space”. As a cornerstone of traditional Chinese painting composition and artistic conception, the “leaving blank spaces” technique embodies Da Chongguang’s philosophy: “The interplay of void and form creates wonders where brushstrokes seem absent”. Qing dynasty artist Dai Xi further elucidated: “The true artistry lies in the spaces beyond the brushstrokes”. These deliberate blank areas serve to harmonize the painting’s essence, generating both visual tension and imaginative depth. Li Wei’s use of this technique evokes the poetic “unity of water and sky” described in classical aesthetics, achieving a perfect fusion of literary imagery and visual artistry. The composition reveals two egrets: one gazing upward at the distant sky, the other intently observing fish darting through nearby waters. The lotus leaf’s outline conjures boundless lotus ponds in the viewer’s imagination, transforming finite space into infinite

extension. Structurally, the egrets, lotus leaves, and inscribed text form intersecting yet harmonious zones, simple yet refined, logically arranged, with the inscriptions placement meticulously aligned with the paintings flow.

Li Wei's interpretation of his works skillfully integrates the laws of nature, revealing a latent logic where artistic expression evolves with the movement of objects and shifting weather. His painting "Cold Sparrows" captures the moment when a flock of sparrows, following the direction of drifting clouds, forms a "V" shape and departs from the branches. The bare branches appear even more desolate after their departure. The unique aspect of this scene lies in its depiction of the dynamic transition between "motion" and "stillness" in nature: the lively figures of sparrows seem poised to vanish completely from the frame in mere seconds. After the departure of life, only a solitary tree and two thin clouds remain, with a sense of desolation and loneliness about to dominate the composition.

From the close to nature, to the observation of nature, to the natural expression of nature, Li Wei's unique perspective on the Northeast regions imagery perfectly blends the aesthetic foundation of traditional humanistic painting with contemporary emotional experiences. Entering his aesthetic realm, one can feel refreshed and inspired, with thoughts reaching far and wide.

## 5. Conclusion

The vibrant charm expressed in the imagery of Li Wei's works, the profound tenderness revealed from a humanistic perspective, and the pursuit of a natural realm in aesthetic contemplation are deeply rooted in the elegant and transcendent sentiments of Chinese traditional humanistic thought, while organically integrating the scientific composition and formal concepts of Western art. This undoubtedly represents a dynamic new path for the contemporary development of Chinese painting, as well as the remarkable height achieved in the current creation of flower-and-bird paintings in Northeast China. This study aims to provide beneficial academic supplements to the research on the creation of regional-themed flower-and-bird paintings in Northeast China through an in-depth exploration of Mr. Li Wei's artistic creations.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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