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# UNIT 4

# Decoding art



## Learning objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- analyze the role of art, implications of icons, and the cultural connotations of Chinese landscape paintings;
- summarize the main points of lectures narrated in chronological order;
- identify connections between objects by comparison and contrast;
- present proposals to win approval or support.



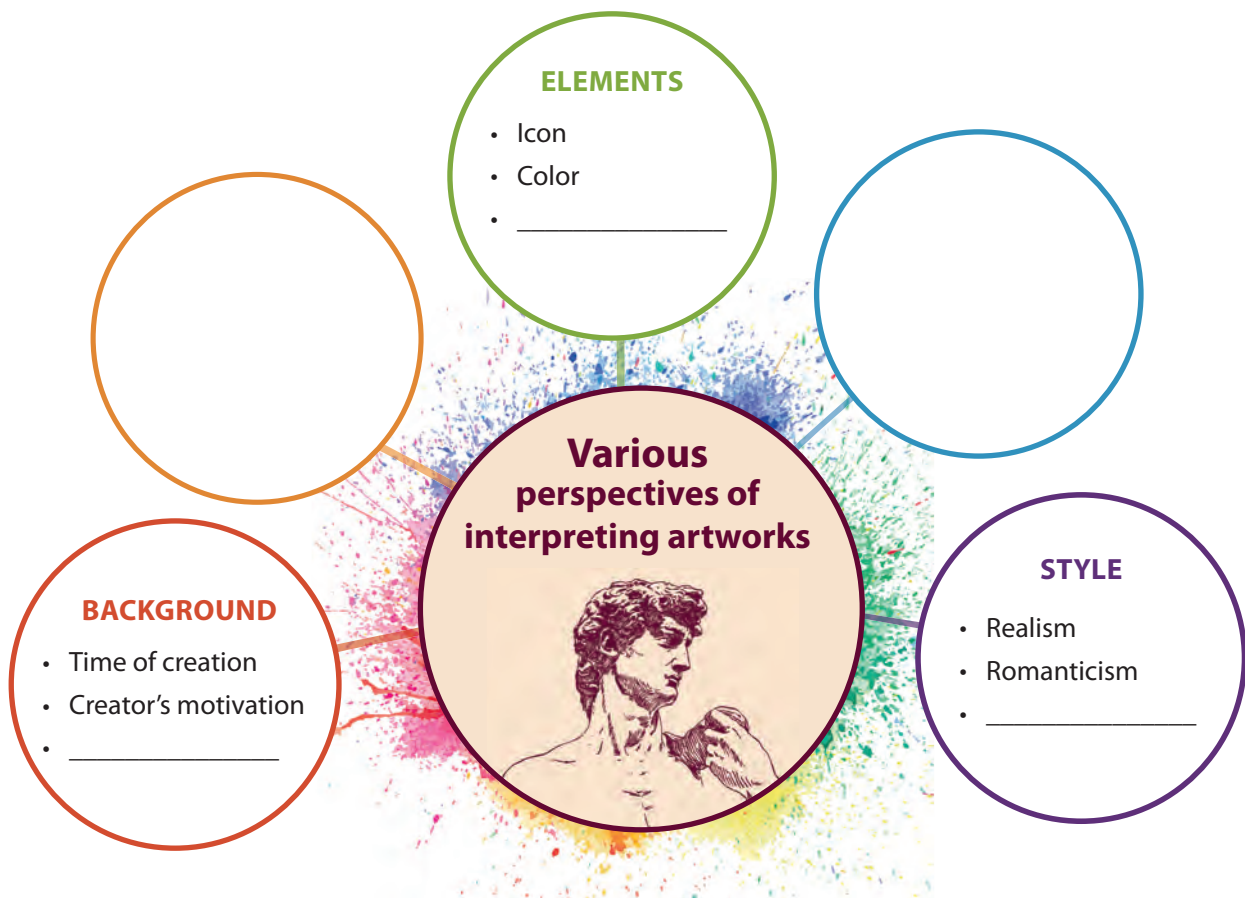
# Setting

Art, a unique human creation, appeals to human senses in different ways (e.g. painting to our sight, music to our hearing) and elicits strong feelings in similar manners. Artworks, which often embody profound ideas and rich cultures, are frequently rooted in ancient traditions that reveal the shared experiences of humanity. Hence, we can (re)discover our cherished cultural traditions and gems of other cultures embedded in different artworks, and work together toward a shared future of humanity through exchange of artistic activities. **In this unit, we will explore what aspects we should take into consideration when interpreting artworks in cultural exchange.**



## Leading in

There are diverse perspectives of interpreting a work of art. Brainstorm and complete the diagram.



## VIEWING

### Word bank

**hieroglyphics** /ˌhaɪrəˈɡlɪfɪks/ *n.* 象形文字

**ideology** /ˌaɪdɪˈɒlədʒi/ *n.* 意识形态

**calligraphy** /kəˈlɪɡrəfi/ *n.* 书法

**stylized** /ˈstɑɪlaɪzd/ *a.* (绘画、写作等手法)  
非写实的

**embroidery** /ɪmˈbrɔɪdəri/ *n.* 刺绣

**manifest** /ˈmænɪfest/ *vt.* 显现

**exponential** /ˌɛkspəˈnenʃəl/ *a.* 越来越快的

**grandiose** /ˈɡrændiəs/ *a.* 宏伟的

**spectacle** /ˈspektəkəl/ *n.* 壮观的场面

**Paleolithic** /ˌpæliəʊˈlɪθɪk/ **Age** 旧石器时代

**Neolithic** /ˌniːəʊˈlɪθɪk/ **Era** 新石器时代

## Pre-viewing

Art is often described as a gift to mankind, pleasing the heart, stimulating the mind, and enriching our lives. Has art ever brought something special to you?

## Analytical viewing



Scan the code. Watch the video and complete the exercises. You can do more comprehension exercises on Ucampus.

## NOTES

**The Bronze Age** (c. 3000-1000 B.C.E., 青铜时代) is the period when bronze tools and weapons etc. began to be made to replace those made of stone. Writing was also invented during this time.

**The Middle Ages** (c. 5th-15th centuries, 中世纪) is the period in European history typically interpreted as a thousand-year period of darkness and ignorance, when Europe experienced a period of political and religious upheaval, and made few advancements in science and art.

**The Renaissance** (c. 14th-16th centuries, 文艺复兴) is the period in European civilization that immediately followed the Middle Ages. Characterized by a revival of Classical learning, the Renaissance witnessed the advancement of art, culture, science, technological innovations, geographic discoveries, as well as the decline of feudal system and the growth of commerce.



Louvre in Paris, France

Match the historical periods in the left column with the corresponding characteristics of art in the right column. You can refer to the **Academic listening skill** below.

### Historical periods

- 1 The Paleolithic Age and Neolithic Era
- 2 The Bronze Age
- 3 The Middle Ages
- 4 The Renaissance
- 5 The Baroque Era
- 6 The Neoclassical Period
- 7 The Romantic Age
- 8 The 19th-20th centuries
- 9 Today

### Characteristics of art

- a Artworks began to show human weakness.
- b Art was used as a primal survival mechanism and testament to the advancements of civilizations.
- c Artists discovered and expressed their own style.
- d Artworks were created to honor ancestors.
- e Art assisted in scientific and societal development.
- f Artworks were created to inspire and control the public.
- g Art became a more subjective term open to interpretation.
- h Artworks emphasized individuality, nature, and imagination.
- i Art served as a powerful religious tool.
- j Art was created in a more technical way.
- k Art showed grandiose scenes and events.

## Academic listening skill



### Listening for chronology

In academic lectures, information is organized in a way that best presents the subject to its target audience. Chronological order is one way often adopted when the subject in question evolves over time. It records the linear order of actions and events according to the sequence they occur. Structuring information in this order makes it easier for listeners to follow.

Transitional words and phrases such as *at first*, *next*, *afterward*, *last*, etc. are often used to elicit

the sequence in which events or actions unfold. When it comes to longer periods of time, such as the whole evolutionary history of art, other time signals may be utilized to indicate the sequence, like *throughout the Middle Ages* and *during the 19th and early 20th centuries*.



Scan the code and learn more about the skill on Ucampus.

## Language focus



Scan the code and complete the language exercises on Ucampus.



## Pre-reading

Due to their appearance, movements, and seemingly miraculous transfiguration from caterpillars, butterflies have been popular subjects for artworks throughout art history. What do you usually associate them with? Do you know any art or literary work where butterflies feature as a symbol?

# Butterflies:



- <sup>1</sup> Great movements for change need powerful symbols. Picasso's dove, for example, will forever be **synonymous** with the World Peace Council. This icon plays a key role in **unifying** the actions of people from **disparate** backgrounds and nationalities. Symbols **bestow** a visual identity upon a set of ideals. If the climate crisis is searching for a symbol, one option is the butterfly, an insect that is not only **hypersensitive** to the ecosystem, but is also steeped with meaning in the history of art.
- <sup>2</sup> Butterflies are one of many **exquisite** creatures to be threatened by man-made climate change. According to Michigan State University, populations of **monarch butterflies** are in decline in North America because of **alterations** in temperatures. Meanwhile, many butterfly species across the world are migrating northward to cooler **climes**. Butterflies and their adjusted migration patterns have become one of the warning signs of the climate crisis.
- <sup>3</sup> However, butterflies aren't just living symbols of the **precariousness** of nature and beauty. They can also be understood as icons of hope, and the ability to adapt in a fast-changing world. Since the 4th century B.C.E., visual artists have been fascinated by butterflies – their brief



# The ultimate icon of our fragility



appearances, their **dainty** structures and **skittish** flight paths, and their capability to **metamorphose** from **caterpillars**. The latter has long been seen as a symbol of beauty breaking free from baseness. In the 21st century, this event might just serve as a reminder that we still have the potential to change and survive.

- <sup>4</sup> But butterflies have also been used as symbols of ourselves: more precisely, our inner spiritual selves. Written around 300 B.C.E. in China, the story of the philosopher Zhuangzi dreaming he became a butterfly remains one of the most celebrated tales associated with Daoist philosophy. It became a key inspiration for later Chinese and Japanese artists who represented butterflies.
- <sup>5</sup> Once Zhuang Zhou (i.e. Zhuangzi) dreamed he was a butterfly, **flitting** and **fluttering** about, happy with himself and doing as he pleased. He didn't know that he was Zhuang Zhou. Suddenly he woke up and there he was: Zhuang Zhou. But he didn't know whether he was Zhuang Zhou who had dreamed he became a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming that he became Zhuang Zhou.
- <sup>6</sup> The story emphasizes the **instability** of our perception of reality. Nature is of great importance to Daoism. It focuses on following the "path" or "way" of nature, respecting and adapting to it in order to lead a life of harmony. Such principles feel remote in the present age. The tale of Zhuang Zhou's butterfly dream clearly dissolves the artificial barrier between humanity and nature. It reminds us of our **subservient** place within nature and **flips** our established sense of being by placing the greater truth of nature in contrast to our **insubstantial**, **flittering** consciousness.



- <sup>7</sup> At around the same time, but 5,000 miles to the west, a **strikingly** similar notion had occurred in ancient Greek thinking. Aristotle, an ancient Greek philosopher, made the first recorded instance of the word “psyche,” meaning the human spirit or soul, in reference to a butterfly, in his **treatise** *The History of Animals*. It stemmed from the belief that caterpillars’ **cocoons** were like tombs, and the butterfly emerging was like the soul fluttering free from the prison of the **corpse** after death. In Greek myths, Psyche, the goddess of the soul, is often depicted with a butterfly.
- <sup>8</sup> For this reason, the butterfly seems like a reasonable symbol for climate change: It is an international symbol of the purer part of the human character, connected with nature and at the opposite pole from our **materialistic** self-interest.
- <sup>9</sup> But in art history, butterflies have also been warning symbols. In European visual culture, they continued to represent the human soul for centuries – and the significance became deeper and more complex in the Renaissance and Baroque periods.
- <sup>10</sup> One of the Dutch Republic’s greatest painters of still life was Maria van Oosterwijck. Her technical abilities are exemplified in *Vanitas Still Life*. The **red admiral** on the book at the center of the painting is again a symbol of the human soul. Maria van Oosterwijck was painting at the inception of capitalism and her work reflects guilt about **accruing spectacular** wealth. Gainsborough’s painting, *The Painter’s Daughters Chasing a Butterfly*, made on the cusp of the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain, reflects an ongoing delight in the soon-to-be-threatened natural world. But the butterfly remains a symbol that reminds us of the **transience** of life and of the worldly luxuries we mistakenly value.



Maria van Oosterwijck's *Vanitas Still Life* (1668)



Thomas Gainsborough's *The Painter's Daughters Chasing a Butterfly* (c. 1756)

<sup>11</sup> In the 20th and 21st centuries, the **symbolism** of butterflies **mutated** in line with historical conditions. In the 1950s the French artist Jean Dubuffet made art by ripping butterflies' wings off and **dispersing** them **asymmetrically** on a **canvas**. They were **despised** by critics, who described them as “**massacres**” that unmasked the artist’s “cruel” attitude to nature. Today, however, they are seen as a key element in the artist’s **oeuvre**, inspiring future artists to treat butterflies symbolically as **harbingers** of disaster.

<sup>12</sup> **Contemporary** British artist Damien Hirst has also been using them since the beginning of his career in the early 1990s. His **culminating** works **deployed** butterflies on an epic scale. *I Am Become Death, Shatterer of Worlds* is a **kaleidoscopic** composition which used over 2,700 real sets of butterfly wings. They **radiate** across a canvas more than five meters in width, creating a **cinematic** and **sublime** spectacle. Death is **disconcertingly electrified** into a thing of great beauty.



Damien Hirst's *I Am Become Death, Shatterer of Worlds* (2006)

<sup>13</sup> Butterflies could be an icon of climate change for both scientific and cultural reasons. They are among the planet’s most rare and **ethereally** beautiful creatures, and they are uniquely **attuned** to global warming. There is also a shared human cultural understanding of butterflies: common themes of change, the soul, and death, linking Daoist writing in China in the Warring States period to a still-life painter in the 17th-century Netherlands, and connecting philosophers in ancient Greece to modern artists.

## NOTES

**World Peace Council** (WPC, 世界和平理事会) is the largest international peace structure standing for disarmament, justice, environmental protection, cultural heritage preservation, and anti-imperialism.

**Vanitas** (虚空派静物画) is a genre of still-life painting that flourished in the Netherlands in the early 17th century. This style of painting reminds viewers of the transience of life and the futility of pleasure.

# Analytical reading

## Reading and understanding

What symbols have been historically attributed to butterflies? Read the text and complete the outline.

### Butterflies could be an icon of 1) \_\_\_\_\_.

#### Scientific reason(s)

##### Warning signs of

2) \_\_\_\_\_, living symbols of precarious

3) \_\_\_\_\_

- The number of monarch butterflies in North America declines due to changes in temperatures.
- Many butterfly species migrate northward to seek cooler environments.

#### 4) \_\_\_\_\_ reason(s)

##### Icons of 5) \_\_\_\_\_

Butterflies metamorphose from caterpillars, symbolizing beauty breaking free from baseness and reminding us of our potential to 6) \_\_\_\_\_.

##### Symbols of ourselves

The tale of Zhuangzi's butterfly dream reflects the Daoist philosophy: Our perception of reality is unstable and we should follow the way of nature to lead a life of 7) \_\_\_\_\_.

##### Symbols of 8) \_\_\_\_\_

Ancient Greeks deemed butterflies emerging from caterpillars the soul fluttering free from the prison of the corpse after death. Psyche, the goddess of the soul, is often depicted with a butterfly in Greek myths.

##### Warning symbols

- Reminders of the transience of life and 9) \_\_\_\_\_ we mistakenly value.
- 10) \_\_\_\_\_.
- Beauty of death.



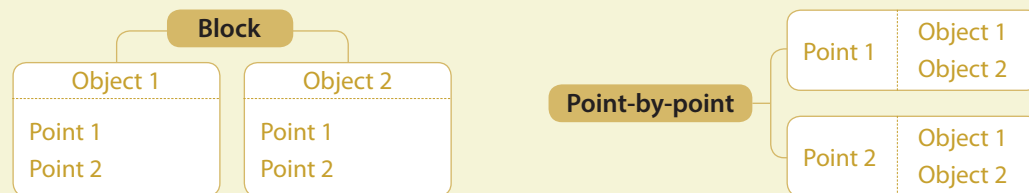
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## Comparing and contrasting

Comparing and contrasting involves taking two or more subjects and analyzing the differences and similarities between them. Through effective comparison, similarities can be identified. By means of stark contrast, differences can be recognized.

There are two main ways to organize a comparison-and-contrast essay or argument, namely using a **block** or **point-by-point** structure. For the block structure, all the information about one object is given first, and all the information about the other object is listed afterward. For the point-by-point structure, each similarity (or difference) for one object is followed immediately by that for the other.



In Reading A, the author uses the block structure in contrasting the positive image and negative image of butterflies, whereas the point-by-point structure is employed in comparing the symbolic messages of butterflies in artworks of different artists.



Scan the code and learn more about the skill on Ucampus.

### Thinking beyond

**Think of all the elements you know in artworks and discuss their role.**

Indispensable features or aspects of an artwork are often known as elements, like rhythms of poems and images of paintings. Artists use different elements to communicate with the audience. When analyzing these intentionally utilized elements, the audience is guided toward a deeper understanding of the work. As in Reading A, butterflies, a frequently used element in many works of art, have rich connotations and can be interpreted from various perspectives. Are there any other elements in artworks that carry abundant meanings and arouse strong emotions? Share and explain based on your understanding.

## Language focus



Scan the code and complete the language exercises on Ucampus.

## READING B



Log on to Ucampus for interactive learning.

### Pre-reading

Artists have been painting natural landscape since ancient times all around the world. How do Chinese landscape paintings differ from and approximate to Western landscape oil paintings? What do you think lies behind their differences and similarities?

# The Dao of painting

- 1 China's engagement with the art of landscape began around 400 C.E. At this point in history, China's nature-focused Daoist philosophy was **melding** with imported Buddhism. The interest in landscape first took artistic form in poetry, most **notably** in the works of such **seminal** figures as Tao Yuanming and Xie Lingyun. "Drinking Wine" by Tao Yuanming is a poem which exemplifies this.

### Drinking Wine

I live here in a village house without  
all that **racket** horses and carts stir up,  
and you wonder how that could ever be.  
Wherever the mind dwells apart is itself  
a distant place. Picking **chrysanthemums**  
at my east fence, I see South Mountain  
far off: air lovely at dusk, birds in flight  
heading home. All this means something,  
something absolute: whenever I start  
to explain it, I forget words altogether.



- <sup>2</sup> Chinese landscape painting itself arose in the period of Wei, Jin and Southern and Northern Dynasties (220-589), and reached more sophisticated development by the Tang Dynasty. Wang Wei is celebrated as one of the pioneers of landscape painting. He is also one of China's most famous poets, known especially for a poetry collection *The Wang Stream Collection*. Each poem in the series is about a specific place in the mountain landscape around his home. Wang also painted a companion **scroll** depicting the same 20 sites.
- <sup>3</sup> A  **cursory** glance at Wang Wei's scrolls confirms that Chinese landscape paintings are fundamentally different from their Western equivalents – especially in the former's abundance of empty space and lack of realistic representation. Understanding these images requires some knowledge of the **conceptual** framework within which they operate. Otherwise, it would be like looking at Renaissance painting with no knowledge of Christianity. In fact, mountain landscape is only the apparent content of Chinese paintings. More accurately, the paintings render a Daoist **cosmology** that feels surprisingly familiar in the modern West.
- <sup>4</sup> That Daoist cosmology finds its root in Laozi's *Dao De Jing*, the seminal work of Chinese spiritual philosophy. Dao, the central concept in Daoism, means most literally the Way, as a road or pathway. But Laozi uses it to describe the empirical cosmos as a single living thing that is **inexplicably generative** – and so feminine in its very nature.





As such, Dao is an ongoing cosmological process by which things come into existence, evolve through their lives, and then go out of existence, only to be transformed and then reemerge in a new form.

- <sup>5</sup> At its deepest level, Dao is described by that cosmology in terms of two fundamental elements: Presence (有) and Absence (无). Presence is simply all things in the universe in constant **transformation**, and Absence is the **void** from which this realm of Presence emerges. And so, Dao is the process through which all things arise and pass away as Absence **burgeons** forth into the great transformation of Presence. This is simply an **ontological** description of natural process, perhaps most immediately manifest in the seasonal cycle: the emptiness of Absence in winter, Presence's burgeoning forth in spring, the fullness of its flourishing in summer, and its dying back into Absence in autumn.
- <sup>6</sup> In a Chinese landscape painting, empty space depicts Absence. The generative emptiness is where the landscape elements (Presence) seemingly just emerge into existence or have half vanished back into the void. In Wang Wei's scroll, that generative emptiness takes the form of sky and river. But at the same time, the landscape elements also seem **infused** with it. This makes philosophical sense because in the end, they are the same thing. Absence and Presence are simply different ways of seeing Dao: either as a single formless tissue that is magically generative (Absence), or as that tissue in its many distinct and always changing forms (Presence).
- <sup>7</sup> This Daoist philosophical framework is felt even more strongly in later landscape paintings, where emptiness expands to include larger **portions** of the composition. Again, things of empirical reality appear as rivers-and-mountains landscapes emerging from the emptiness of mist and cloud, water and sky. This basic framework takes many forms in Chinese landscape painting, where each work renders this cosmology in its own particular way.
- <sup>8</sup> For China's artist-intellectuals, the goal was to dwell as an **integral** part of Dao's eternal process: consciousness woven into the living cosmos. Artist-intellectuals found their spiritual home in mountains, thought of mountains as their teachers, and lived in cultivated reclusion among mountains as much as possible. They **meditated** among mountains, wandered the mountains near their homes, often made long journeys through China's rivers-and-mountains landscapes, and they dreamed of mountains. They built their artistic lives around them.

- <sup>9</sup> Landscape painting is perhaps the most dramatic and immediate form of the Daoist spiritual practice of **merging** one's consciousness with the landscape and the cosmos. The human element in these paintings is almost always small and well-integrated into the landscape, or there is no trace of the human at all. The lack of perspective makes the viewer feel somehow inside the work's cosmology and able to wander there, rather than being a center of identity looking at the landscape from a single viewpoint outside the painting.
- <sup>10</sup> In looking at a painting, one mirrors the painting, making its space the space of consciousness. So, ancient artist-intellectuals gazed into these pictures for long periods of time as a kind of spiritual practice – for the painting portrays the Daoist cosmos in **microcosm**, and to mirror the image is to fill one's mind with that cosmos in all its depths. It was a discipline that returned consciousness to dwell at that cosmological origin-moment as a matter of immediate experience, a moment that filled one's mind with a particular form of emptiness.
- <sup>11</sup> Viewing a landscape painting in ancient China was a **meditative** practice. One might stand in front of a single work for hours, absorbed in its depths. And gazing at it with a mirror-deep mind, ancient artist-intellectuals were returned to that place where consciousness and landscape were woven together in a single cosmological tissue. But all this wasn't just a mental experience. The word for "mind" in classical Chinese is also the word for "heart." There is no **ingrained** distinction between the two. This empty-mind **integration** into a cosmological whole was also an emotional experience, an experience of the heart. And so, finally, landscape painting meant cultivating the **inexhaustible** complexity of an empty mind and a full heart.

## NOTES

**Daoist philosophy** (道家思想) is an ancient Chinese philosophical tradition which emphasizes living in harmony with nature and achieving balance or the Way (also known as Dao). One of the key concepts in Daoist philosophy is non-action (*wuwei*).

**The Wang Stream Collection** (《辋川集》) is a poetry collection, consisting of poems by Wang Wei and his good friend Pei Di. The 20 poems by Wang Wei in the collection describe respectively 20 attractions near and around the Wang Stream.

**Dao De Jing** (《道德经》) is a classic text of Chinese philosophy attributed to Laozi. The text, which explores fundamental concepts such as the Way (Dao) and the Virtue (De), emphasizes the importance of following the Way.

## Analytical reading

How is Dao related to Chinese landscape painting? Read the text and complete the outline.

### Origin of landscape theme

- Landscape poetry: e.g. poems by Tao Yuanming and Xie Lingyun.
- Landscape painting: e.g. works of Wang Wei.



### Features of Chinese landscape painting

Chinese landscape paintings are distinguishable from Western ones by their 1) \_\_\_\_\_ and 2) \_\_\_\_\_.



### Conceptual framework behind Chinese landscape painting: 3) \_\_\_\_\_

- Dao means the Way, as a(n) 4) \_\_\_\_\_.
- Dao is a(n) 5) \_\_\_\_\_ by which all things emerge, evolve, end, and reemerge in a new form.



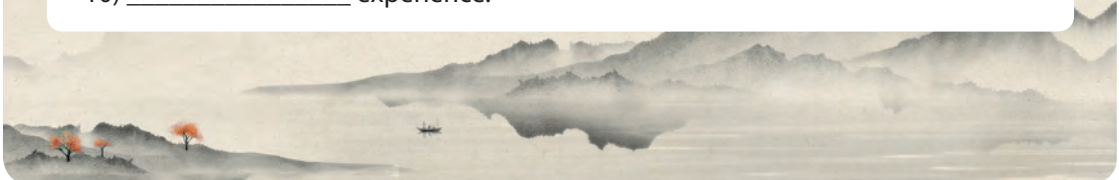
### Dao elements

- Presence is all things in the universe 6) \_\_\_\_\_.
- Absence is 7) \_\_\_\_\_ from which Presence perpetually emerges.
- Presence and Absence are the same thing: simply 8) \_\_\_\_\_.



### Appreciation of Chinese landscape paintings

Chinese artist-intellectuals aimed to dwell as an integral part of Dao's eternal process, gazed into the picture for a long period as a kind of 9) \_\_\_\_\_, with their consciousness woven into the living cosmos as both a mental and a(n) 10) \_\_\_\_\_ experience.



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## Language focus

### ① Translate the Chinese expressions into English.

- 1 采菊东篱下 \_\_\_\_\_
- 2 悠然见南山 \_\_\_\_\_
- 3 山水画 \_\_\_\_\_
- 4 留白 \_\_\_\_\_
- 5 无中生有，有中生无 \_\_\_\_\_
- 6 冥想 \_\_\_\_\_

### ② Translate the paragraph into English.

道家思想 ( Daoist philosophy ) 是中国古代哲学的一个主要流派，对中国传统山水画产生了深远的影响。中国传统山水画注重自然和谐，倡导人与自然相融相济、和谐共生 ( symbiosis ) ，这也是道家思想核心理念之一。中国山水画以自然景观为主题，如山峦、河流、云雾等，艺术家们在绘画中将自然景象表现得淋漓尽致，给人以美的享受，引发人心灵的共鸣 ( emotional resonance ) 。



Scan the code and complete more language exercises on Ucampus.



## Write a proposal: Art treasures of China

The International Art Youth Forum is preparing an art exhibition themed “Unity in Diversity.” Members of the forum are asked to submit a proposal introducing an artwork for the exhibition from their own countries. As a Chinese member of the forum, you are supposed to present your proposal with detailed interpretation of the chosen artwork.

### Academic writing skill

#### Organizing a proposal

Writing a proposal is the initial step toward creating a thesis, conducting a project, or providing recommendations. A proposal aims to convince the supervisor, academic or commercial committee that the proposed topic, approach, or suggestions are sound, robust, and appropriate to pursue further. A proposal that provides suggestions should present an initiative clearly and provide detailed information as well as assessment. Typically, this type of proposal includes the following components:

##### Working title

The working title should instantly tell readers what the proposal is about. It should be specific, concise, and distinctive. You can present the proposal title and your name, printed on a separate cover title page.

##### Problem statement

The problem statement deals with the reasons why the proposal is made. In this part you can succinctly explain why the work should be presented in the art exhibition.

##### Significance

This section could include a critical evaluation of what you have introduced, fully demonstrating the power and influence of the artistic work.

##### Restatement

Restate the arguments at the end of your proposal, using different wording.



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Scan the code and refer to the step-by-step guide on Ucampus.

# Evaluating

Rate your performance based on what you have learned in this unit.

	Fair	Good	Excellent
I can analyze the role of art, implications of icons, and the cultural connotations of Chinese landscape paintings.			
I can summarize the main points of lectures narrated in chronological order.			
I can identify connections between objects by comparison and contrast.			
I can present proposals to win approval or support.			

Answer the following questions.

- 1 What do you need to improve?
- 2 How do you plan to improve it?

## Vocabulary



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## Reading more



What does a psychological therapeutic way of reading art look like?  
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## Unit test



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