

## THE TECHNIQUE OF EMPTINESS IN HAIKU POETRY AND THE WHITE SPACE IN JAPANESE INK WASH PAINTINGS

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<b>Received:</b> 09/3/2022	Regarding the relationship between poetry and painting in Oriental culture, there that a poem could be a painting, and a painting could evoke poetic ideas. However, there has been modest research devoted to exploring this relationship. Based on interdisciplinary comparative theory in comparative literature and close investigation into the corpus of 102 haiku poems and 98 ink wash paintings in Japan from the 17th to 19th century, the paper aims at investigating the intersection between haiku poetry and ink wash paintings. The findings show that the similarity between the two art forms refers to the emptiness in haiku poems and the white space in ink wash paintings. It is expected that the research would shed a light on the approach to study haiku poetry and offer initial ideas to interpret ink wash paintings which are a well-established art form but have not received substantial research in Vietnam. Besides, the researcher hopes that the practical results would contribute to a deeper insight into the theory of comparative typology in modern comparative literature, paving the way for further relevant studies.
<b>Revised:</b> 25/3/2022	
<b>Published:</b> 25/3/2022	
<b>KEYWORDS</b>	
Emptiness	
Haiku poetry	
Ink wash paintings	
Comparative literature	
Interdisciplinary comparative theory	

## THI PHÁP HƯ KHÔNG TRONG THƠ HAIKU VÀ KHOẢNG TRỐNG KHÔNG BẠCH TRONG TRANH MẶC HỘI NHẬT BẢN

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THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO	TÓM TẮT
<b>Ngày nhận bài:</b> 09/3/2022	Tương quan giữa thơ ca và hội họa trong nghệ thuật phương Đông từ lâu đã được nói đến một cách khái quát như: “thi trung hữu họa; họa trung hữu thi” (trong thơ có họa; trong họa có thơ). Nhưng những công trình nghiên cứu khoa học làm sáng tỏ mối tương quan đó thì nhìn chung vẫn chưa nhiều. Bài viết dựa trên cơ sở lý thuyết so sánh liên ngành trong văn học so sánh, đồng thời, thông qua việc khảo sát số liệu 102 tác phẩm thơ haiku và 98 tác phẩm tranh mặc hội nổi bật nhất ở Nhật Bản trong khoảng thời gian từ thế kỉ XVII đến thế kỉ XIX, để tìm ra điểm giao thoa giữa thơ haiku và tranh mặc hội. Kết quả nghiên cứu chỉ ra một trong những điểm giao thoa đó là thi pháp hư không trong thơ haiku và khoảng trống không bạch trong tranh mặc hội. Từ kết quả nghiên cứu này, bài viết mở ra hướng tiếp cận mới đối với thơ haiku Nhật Bản, đồng thời bước đầu tìm hiểu về phương thức tiếp nhận tranh mặc hội, vốn là một thành tựu văn hóa nghệ thuật đặc sắc, nhưng vấn đề tiếp nhận vẫn chưa được đào sâu nghiên cứu một cách sâu rộng ở Việt Nam. Mặc khác, công trình nghiên cứu cũng đóng góp những kết quả thực tế để phát triển mở rộng lý thuyết về so sánh loại hình trong lý thuyết so sánh văn học đương đại, tạo tiền đề cho những nghiên cứu mới trên phương diện lý luận.
<b>Ngày hoàn thiện:</b> 25/3/2022	
<b>Ngày đăng:</b> 25/3/2022	
<b>TỪ KHÓA</b>	
Thi pháp hư không	
Thơ haiku	
Tranh mặc hội	
Văn học so sánh	
So sánh liên ngành	

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34238/tnu-jst.5650>

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## 1. Introduction

Haiku (俳句) is a unique form of Japanese traditional poetry. Haiku poetry flourished in the seventeenth century and has become well-known in the world's poetry with such famous poets as M. Baso, then Y. Buson, K.Itsa, and M. Shiki. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, haiku was given its current name by M. Shiki. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this typical Japanese poetic form has widely spread in the trend of globalization with haijin (haiku poets) presented in more than 40 countries around the world. These facts indicate the value of haiku poetry on people's spiritual life in general, as well as mankind's literature in particular.

Ink wash painting (Sumi-e -水墨画) is a type of brush painting which was popular in East Asia, especially in China and Japan. It is characterized by the use of black ink, as being used in Chinese calligraphy in different concentrations. Ink wash paintings can be presented in two formats: the classic format is the vertical hanging scroll and another one is the long horizontal handscroll. In terms of color, ink paintings are usually monochrome, using only black and white of various shadings. Painters often place ample emphasis on skillful drawing technique and attempt to communicate the "spirit" or "essence" of a subject through direct imitation. Therefore, ink wash painting is an art form featuring the soul of East Asia in general and Japan in particular; and studying ink wash paintings would provide us a comprehensive insight into the soul of East Asia and Japan.

In the context of international exchange and integration, understanding the culture and literature of countries around the world has gained its increasing importance. Haiku poetry and ink wash paintings are considered unique artistic achievements of Japanese culture. However, in Vietnam, it is a challenge to receive and interpret these art works as the result of language barriers and cultural differences. Regarding haiku poetry, in the studies cited in [1] and [2], the author analyzes approaches to receive haiku poetry in terms of aesthetic sense and empiric art. Also, the research [3] aims at illustrating how to apply the similarities in art representation between haiku poetry and Japanese ink wash paintings into teaching haiku poetry to Literature students at Dong Thap University. Besides, the author conducted the study of [4] with regard to the relationship between haiku poetry and Chinese painting, which is the origin of ink wash painting in general and Japanese ink painting in particular. In the current paper, the author would explore the intersection of poetics in haiku and techniques in the painting, which is the emptiness in the two art forms. Besides the above studies, the research work of [5] has analyzed the value of traditional Japanese aesthetics from a cultural perspective. Particularly, the relationship between poetry and painting in terms of the composition of the authors, namely Vuong Duy and Buson, has been developed in her research [6]. The relationship between poetry and oriental painting, from an aesthetic point of view, has also been analyzed quite meticulously by the French scholar [7].

With the research findings as well as on the basis of comparative theory (interdisciplinary comparison), it is expected that a new approach to receive haiku poetry can be established, that is to interpret classical haiku through the perspective of ink wash paintings.

## 2. Methodology

The following research methods were employed to address matters stated in the study:

**Comparative method:** The first comparison was made between haiku and Tang poems to clarify the characteristics of two specific genres of two different literatures. Furthermore, the artistic characteristics of the haiku poetry and ink wash paintings were identified and compared, thereby indicating the intersection between these two art forms in Japanese traditional arts.

**Typology:** The study is based on a strong theoretical foundation on the relationship between the two art forms - literature and painting - from the perspective of Eastern and Western theorists. Thanks to this basis, specific analytical and categorical thinking manipulations were implemented to display the distinctive features between classical haiku poetry and Japanese ink wash paintings.

Interdisciplinary method: The study proposes and proves the feasibility and effectiveness of the approach to interpret haiku poetry from the views of another art form – painting. Thus, it is possible to discover delicate and profound aesthetic beauties of specific haiku poems, in order to improve teaching and research practices for this form of poetry.

Analytical-synthetic method: In some necessary cases, we investigated details of specific haiku works, from which the generalization over characteristics of haiku and ink wash paintings could be made.

Adopting the above methods, we have conducted the research over the following points:

(1) Clarifying the specific manifestations of the emptiness in haiku poems and the white space in ink wash paintings.

(2) Identifying the similarities between the two art forms of two art genres: haiku poetry and ink wash painting.

(3) Justifying the reasons for poetic similarities and pointing out the influences of Zen culture on haiku poetry and ink wash painting.

From these three points, the research offers intensive discussions and analysis on the similarities between haiku poetry and ink wash painting through specific works.

The new contribution of the research is to propose a new approach to classical Japanese haiku, which is to perceive haiku poetry from the angle of ink wash painting, aiming to understand the common spirit of the two arts: Zen spirit in Japanese culture. That would allow readers and researcher to approach haiku poetry in a new direction, in order that the content and artistic value of this unique poetic form would be promoted.

### 3. Results and discussions

#### 3.1. *The concept of white space in ink wash paintings and emptiness in haiku poetry*

In terms of art method, the white space and emptiness are considered as the relationship between the unreal and the real. Suggested by Chinese philosophy long before the development of Zen Buddhism, this pair of concepts has been uniquely and creatively absorbed by Japanese arts. A number of famous Chinese painters have discussed the white space in paintings from a dialectical perspective between the unreal and the real. For example, while the art critic Da Zhongguang claims that "*The real and the unreal nourish each other. In fact, the place left unpainted makes a magical scene*" [6, p.148], Tang Yifen states "*There is a common belief that painting is comprised of painted details, yet painting also involves unpainted parts. The blank space is associated with the whole scene, that is, the mutual relationship between the real and the unreal*" [6, pp.148-149].

In Japanese ink wash paintings, the white space is defined as the space left unpainted and uncolored. The white space is not only a painting technique but also an ideological expression in Japanese ink wash paintings: "*The word margin here corresponds to yohaku in Japanese. This word is difficult to translate into English or French, but literally means "leftover blank". In Western oil painting, be it landscape or still life, the entire canvas is expected to be covered in paint, corner to corner: a bare patch with nothing painted on it would be viewed as an incomplete section. But in a Japanese work like Hasegawa Tohaku's Pine trees, between the stands of dark pines and the stands of pines so light they seem to be fading away, there is a space containing nothing at all. It is this space that gives the painting its mystical depth; the atmosphere of the painting seems to come from the empty space itself.*" [7, p.161].

Likewise, Chuang Tzu, one of the great writers of ancient Chinese literature, paid attention to the concepts of "presence" and "absence" in arts and literature through his work. "*Some say it is present, some say it is absent, and some others even say "presence" and "absence" have never been existed. Then it is unknown whether "presence" and "absence" really exist*" [6, p.151]. Subsequently, many people discussed the relationship between the "absence" and the vitality of

literature and painting, also known as "the spirit". Xie He's *Six Principles* outlines six basic elements that define a painting, in which, "Spirit Resonance" is the first principle. As a frequently mentioned attribute of Japanese haiku, the emptiness refers to blank space both outside and inside of a poem. The outside emptiness is created with the extreme brevity in language, forcing readers to apply their imagination, knowledge, experience and feelings to interpret what the poem has not yet stated. The inside emptiness is the space resulted from the "discretion" among words and poetic images; readers, thus, need to use their association (renso) ability to "connect" them: "*Due to its compact form, it is almost impossible to depict a detailed picture in a haiku poem. Clearly, only the main features or important parts are presented, and the rest must be supplemented with readers' imagination. Indeed, haiku poetry is identical to ink wash painting, which is closely associated with the Japanese sentiment*" [8, p.12]. Similar to the emptiness in haiku poems, the counterpart in ink wash paintings is termed the white space, or extra white. However, the white space is visible on the surface of paintings, making it different from the poetic emptiness in haiku poetry. "*The white space refers to a place where painters can draw something, but they do not as it is also not a place where random and redundant things should not be present*". [9, p. 142]. Therefore, the empty space in paintings has visual value, compared with the nonvisual emptiness in haiku poems.

Both the concepts of emptiness in haiku poetry and white space in paintings are influenced by the idea of emptiness in Mahayana Buddhism, especially Zen Buddhism. Two central concepts in the worldview of Theravada Buddhism - impermanence and non-self – demonstrate that in the constantly moving world, each person does not exist as an eternally immutable self in the endless flow of life. In the other words, the unchangeable characteristic of the phenomenal world is nothing is unchangeable. Therefore, the emptiness in the Mahayana Buddhism does not mean nothingness, but a dynamic substance, which generates a multitude of variations.

It is also true of the creative origins for haiku poetry and ink wash paintings. That creativeness comes from a tranquil mind without distractions, but not a purely empty one. That tranquil mind is regarded the source of vitality, creativity and true beauties, from which art is created.

### **3.2. The white space in Japanese ink wash paintings**

In ink wash paintings, the emptiness is the clearest expression of Zen thought: Everything originates from and then returns to emptiness. The white space in these paintings is the motive for viewers' creativity and also suggests the idea of infinity and change.

Sesshu Toyo (1420-1506) is considered the prominent painter of ink wash painting - sumi-e (水墨) of his time. As a monk, he was exposed to Zen at an early age. Researchers believe that his painting career commenced while studying at Shokokuji temple in Kyoto, so it can be claimed that his paintings were inspired from the source of Zen thought. Though his paintings involve a wide variety of subjects, like portraits, landscapes, birds and flowers, most of his masterpieces are about landscapes. His most famous work is the painting Haboku Sansui – Broken Ink Landscape (破墨山水), in which he "*created undefined forms in a misty space*" [10, p.115]. The painting depicts a distant misty mountain with a very light color in the background. The foreground includes triangular roofline by the trees and a boat as sketches. The minimalism of the figures in the painting is the Zen removal of the rational thinking, leading to the possibility to enlarge the horizons of intuition and speechlessness. Judged with reasoning, the painting can be seen as hazy and ambiguous. Nevertheless, if it is perceived intuitively and emotionally, everything becomes crystal clear. Haboku – Broken ink (破墨) is an important technique in Japanese ink landscape painting, which emphasizes the freedom to subtly change the tones of ink, creating different shades. It can be said that the key of this technique is to construct forms that enable the escape from their own limitations.

A student of Sesshu Toyo, Toshun, (1506-1542) was a true heir to the penchant for broken ink (splashed ink), haboku. A relatively popular pattern in Chinese and Japanese painting at that time was the set of eight scenes at Xiao Xiang - eight landscapes at Xiao Xiang River. One of the pioneers of this trend was Yujian (玉澗), a Chinese painter who lived around the 13<sup>th</sup> century during the Southern Song Dynasty. Toshun integrated the style of Southern Song painting into his acquisition of Sesshu school's impressionism and created a unique artwork. As indicated in the picture, the romantic poetic elements as often seen in Southern Song painting are overwhelmed by the intensely strong style from various contrasts and chaos: vertically, waterfall pours down from above, along the ravine and already covered with white snow; and horizontally, the strong winter winds blow through the dark sky seemingly beating against the rocky mountains. The free brushstrokes of bold ink blocks on the lower and upper right perfectly correspond with the white spaces to depict the snow on the left. In this case, the key technique in the painting is the combination of the visible and the invisible, which seems to be accidental but really appropriate.

In terms of layout and technique, there are three basic ways to produce the white space in the paintings. First, the space can be created in the middle of the picture, while the details are painted below and around, like Bunsei's West Lake. The second way is exemplified with the painting Small Lake Landscape by the 15<sup>th</sup> century painter Shokei Tenyu, where the layout is totally opposite: shapes are painted in the center and the white spaces alternated around the edges.

The third way, which is the mixture of the two above ways, could be found in Soami's eight scenes of Xiao Xiang. *“Soami's composition is mid-way the void center works of the Sesshu School to follow. In his mastery of the Southern idiom with soft, pliant wash and minimal use of texture strokes, his wet, inky one-line tree trunks, and consummate use of ink-wash in the evanescent mists, we see in this earliest example of Nanga or Southern-style landscape created in Japan, one of the master-pieces of Japanese ink painting of all time”* [11, p.133].

Besides, ink wash painters never attempt to fill their paintings with lines, colors, or details. The white space left unpainted serves two main purposes. First, it leaves room for inscriptions of names, dates, or sentences, i.e. a poem, or the painting title presented in calligraphy. In this respect, it is easy to realize the harmony among painting, poetry and calligraphy. Second, the white space also makes contribution to the layout of a painting. It allows details in the painting to connect with each other and creates the impression on the space of the canvas.

Regarding elements to compose the empty space in ink wash paintings, we could consider Kei Shoki's painting Landscape with People Going Uphill as an instance.

In ink wash painting, how the details are arranged is termed composition. The concept of composition was first expressed in the theory of ink wash painting by the art historian and critic Xie He from Southern Qi around the 5<sup>th</sup> century. In his theory of six principles of Chinese painting, the fifth principle discusses division and planning or placing and arrangement, corresponding to composition, space and depth. It is a coincidence that ancient Indian painting also mentioned six Sadanga limbs, recorded in the ancient book Vatsyayana, in which the rule of composition is stated in the second limb: Pramanani – accuracy and precision of measurement and structure. The leading Japanese ink wash painters such as Sesshu Toyo (1420-1506), Tohaku Hasagawa (1539-1610), Sosatsu Nonomura (1576-1645) certainly studied Xie He's Six Principles thoroughly, which helped them to promote the Japanese spirit and Japanese painting technique for their ink wash painting with only two colors, black and white.

Although the location business in the art of water always changes, it can be said that three rules should not be excluded: distance, depth and height. On the basis of these three rules, the artists would improve the layouts with the participation of space such as focusing on the left side, focusing on the two sides and the middle is less focused, focusing much on the top and the bottom is less focused, focusing on the bottom and the top is less focused, scattering the whole painting, focusing on the left or right side with different scattering and these must assist one another.

When considering these rules and structures, Kei Shoki landscape painting in 15<sup>th</sup> century with people sitting in the hill seems to belong to focus on the left or right side with different scattering and these must assist one another. In this painting, the artist not only produced the details such as rocky mountain, pine tree, hill, boat, the roof of the house but also left some empty space or painted in a vague way. The effect of such empty space is great since it creates the harmony in terms of layout, creating an airy and vitalizing space for the painting. Simultaneously, that is the silent space connecting all the details in the drawing and the display of the painting is not stuffy. As a result, it creates the high value in beauty for its landscape.

Empty space in painting of landscape also focuses and depends on the possibility of asking audience imagination. To implement this, the artists do not paint the whole painting but part or detail. A typical for this is the painting of bamboo and sparrow painted by Kao in the 15<sup>th</sup> century; however, its prioritizes is the position. First, audiences must use their eyes to feel the position of this painting, and then they would understand the message of the whole painting. The hiding and display as well as the reverse way position of the cluster and leave create the life path for the painting. The common position of the bamboo cluster and leaves is upward; however, some of the small leaves fade down to create the force for the bamboo. The empty space between the clusters not only helps balance the contrast directions naturally, but also creates space for audience to feel such position. The contrast position between the sparrow and the grass under the rock is created in the similar way.

### 3.3. *The empty space in Haiku poem*

When Buddha philosophy, especially Zen Buddhism affected Japanese poem, the ideology of empty space has been accepted and become a beauty concept. That is the concept of unaccountable beauty – in which we cannot count. This beauty is grown in an accident way and is immaculate with greediness, revenge and adoration. A thought like this is truly a poem spirit. In such spirit, the beauty and those who enjoy are one. To express this spirit, haiku poem has a unique way: using the empty space in a poem which is called 間 or ま. This empty space in haiku poem is regularly created due to the elimination of unnecessary words and images. The importance is that the empty space in terms of vocabulary has contributed to the clearance of border caused by discourse between readers and reality. The behavior between the experienced people and thing needs to be ended so that we can deeply understand the reality of such thing. To achieve this, the unnecessary thing of linguistic veil must be minimized. The knowledge here means the understanding in Zen Buddhism spirit and haiku poem is one of the most outstanding features. While describing things, both haiku and Tang poems use the outstanding feature and leave much empty space in the poem's world art. While the outstanding feature of Tang poem follows a dedicate way, the poem of haiku is simple and pure.

Such outstanding feature is close to Zen Buddhism because according to Japanese Zen masters' vision, medication means the daily beauty. We can try experiencing a beautiful poem written by Yosa Buson (1716 – 1784) to understand this outstanding feature as well as the empty space spirit in haiku poem.

*Oh Brassica napus flower!  
When the Sun goes down in the western sky  
And the moon rise in the East [12, p. 35]*

Yosa Buson is both a poet and an artist. That is why his poem is rich in art. The poem displays an afternoon with the meeting of the moon and the sun. The past and the presence exist at the same time. There is a deep afternoon with a distance empty space. There is also a yellow light of the sun by the end of the day combined with the light yellow of the moonlight. Besides, we can also feel the pure yellow of Brassica napus flower in the green background. There are a lot of details that we can imagine when reading the poem. However, they are not described. By including several words, the poem is not responsible for containing the whole reality that it

mentions. The words here play role as a door in which the readers walk and get to the realm of art as well as life by themselves.

With regards to beauty, the empty space in haiku poem is not just a method to express beauty, but sometimes, becomes a beautiful object described in the poem.

*The flock of swallows has left  
The front field seems to be distant* [13, p.253]

The Zen readers who are much familiar with internal observation know those images, internal impression would appear and then exit without any signs. In the above poem, the flock of swallows has fled through the field and the sky before disappearing. However, the poet's imagination is still there. In such imagination, the emptiness has expanded the space. Here, we see that the space in the poet's eyes has motion; therefore, such space becomes lively in a strange way. This is similar to some lines in Du Fu poem.

*The stars fall down to the large field  
The moon shape is present in the river's surface* [14, p.143]

Empty space in haiku is different from art in a way that it rarely has linking function. Haiku does not focus much on structure like the Tang poem since it includes the empty space between lines and images. An illustration is as follow:

*The peony cluster  
Suddenly falls down  
In a distant sky* [12, p.56]

The awareness of beauty stems from the fields of peony falling is deeply dominated in reader impression because of the emptiness in such fields and flowers. The empty space between these flowers suggests sparseness.

Besides the internal emptiness created by the disjointedness between words and images, haiku poem also has the external empty space. When a haiku poem ends, the work is still haunted in readers' mind and is called sound is bounded by sound, sweet spice is bounded by sweet spice. We can call it the external space created by the poem. Such space represents for the strong desire of the poem and it empowers the readers so that they would be considered as the second poet. In general, the Zen poem and haiku poem in particular, use the word material; however, the poem reaches the destination of word limitation that the word itself cannot. The nature of emptiness does not have such words and can be understood through the anonymous feature of such thing.

*The Spring has come  
Such anonymous hill  
Is covered by early morning fog* [15, p.64]

That hill itself does not have name and people just give it a name because the name would recall the convention as well as rule value. When the poet – medication master Matsuo Basho looks at the hill in a naïve way (he does not recall the past memories as well as the available convention), the hill suddenly comes back to the no-name time. This is reality which does not belong to the limitation of word deduction.

Sometimes, the reality is out of all measurement and is directly said with the state of “unknown” or “not yet known”:

*Such a flower tree  
That I haven't known yet  
Would leave me a perfume* [15, p. 65]

The Zen awareness does not look at the things that normal people can see. When enjoying the current moment, the poet will accidentally recognize that such moment, past and known thing cannot be caught. That is emptiness of the “not yet known” thing and is not polluted by the prejudice. However, such emptiness is not the seen one when comparing to the left emptiness which is not painted in the painting. It is innocent like a perfume. Also, the line where the poem pauses is not present and such space will be continued by meaning. The line can stop but the

meaning is non-stopped. This difference is caused by the complex nature of linguistic signs and this is also different with the image intuitiveness. When Matsuo Basho writes:

*There are a lot of things  
Recalling us memories of  
The peach petals* [15, p. 30]

All the things are recalled in one's mind even these are not listed. The only thing is that the poem ends at the things that are not allowed to be recalled. Despite this, readers still understand even though they do not have the same feeling and thinking with the writer. Surprisingly, the poet and readers can still communicate with one another and feel the beauty of peach flowers.

#### 4. Conclusion

It can be said that the emptiness in haiku poem and empty space in wash painting lie in technique area and there are causes of art materials. In wash painting, the empty space is present in structure and recall the beauty in the object. In haiku poem, the empty space is present when the lines link to one another. Such space between words and image does not mainly create the feeling of the object's beauty but participate in the process of the line and whole poem meaning.

Emptiness in haiku poem has 3 main signs namely emptiness which is outside the poem since it has fewer words, emptiness between images of the poem and the typical feature. Meanwhile, the empty space in wash painting also has 3 signs; however, each sign would have the typical feature and is different in nature when comparing to this in haiku poem. That is the passive space when the painter creates such space by producing the surrounding details and leaves the space in the middle (drawing clouds to present moon), the space created by painting the drawbacks: the artist aims to skip some details of the image to make this space, and finally the space created by the unclear veil of the context: all the details in the painting are mixed together.

Overall, although the emptiness in haiku poem and wash painting is different, we still find out the similarities in which it is an artist trick – focusing more on recalling than describing to catch the object attraction and audience imagination; sometime, emptiness appears as a part of presence and it is re-created in the painting or poem to bring back the liveliness for the present objects. Both haiku and wash painting emptiness are the lively signs of Zen philosophy and the marks of Eastern culture ideology.

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