



The Changes of “Shen” and “Yi” in Chinese Painting Aesthetics: From Gu Kaizhi to Ni Zan

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Abstract

In the history of the development of Chinese painting, the change of “Shen” and “Yi” has always been a topic of discussion. From the Wei and Jin Dynasties to the Song and Yuan Dynasties, from the emphasis on the “Shen” to the “Yi”, reflecting the development of Chinese painting constantly absorbing and innovating. Taking Gu Kaizhi and Ni Zan as representatives, this paper analyzes the painting theories and painting styles of painters from two different eras to demonstrate the relationship and change of “Shen” and “Yi”, and to consider the direction of the development of the contemporary painting appraisal system.

Subject Areas

Culture, Literature

Keywords

Shen, Yi, Classical Chinese Painting

1. Introduction

The four grades of “Shen, Miao, Neng and Yi” in the evaluation system of Chinese paintings are generally regarded by scholars as having been proposed by Zhu Jingxuan in the Book of Famous Paintings of the Tang Dynasty during the Tang Dynasty, while Huang Xufu in the Book of Famous Paintings of Yizhou during the Song Dynasty put “Yi” at the top of the list, starting the era of “Yi” as the highest standard of Chinese painting evaluation, which has been inherited to the present day. The era of “Yi” as the highest standard of Chinese painting evaluation has continued to this day [1]. The change from “Shen” to “Yi” implies a trend of change in the standard of evaluation of classical Chinese painting, and

also shows the change in the spiritual world of Chinese painters.

1.1. Traceability and Development of “Shen” and “Yi”

1.1.1. Traceability of “Shen”

The idea of “Shen” can be traced back to Zhuang Zi, a thinker of the pre-Qin period. As early as in Zhuang Zi - Zhi Bei You, there is the assertion that “Spirit is born from the Tao, form is born from the essence, and all things are born from form”. During this period, Zhuang Zi proposed the concept of form and “Shen”, which is beyond form and body, and pursued the realization of the “Shen” and the way of things. At this time, “Shen” only remained at the philosophical level, and was not applied to the theory of painting [2].

Han Fei, a thinker during the Warring States period, first embodied the concept of form in the theory of painting. In Han Fei Zi (韩非子-外储说左上), it is mentioned that “a guest painted for the King of Qi, who asked, ‘Which is the most difficult to paint?’ He said: ‘Dogs and horses are the most difficult.’ ‘Which is the easiest?’ He said: ‘The ghosts are the easiest.’” It can be seen that the theorists of this period had already realized that form, as an objective thing, was the foundation and focus of painting. This viewpoint established the importance of form, but failed to realize the important connection between form and “Shen”.

The final molding of the theory of form and “Shen” began with Gu Kaizhi. Later, Xie He of the Southern Dynasty categorized paintings into six grades, with “Shen” at the top of the list.

1.1.2. Development of “Yi”

In the history of Chinese painting theory, it is generally believed that it was Zhu Jingxuan of the Tang Dynasty who first explicitly utilized the concept of “Yi” [1]. Scholar Han Gang, however, believes that “Yi” had already been fully expressed in Xie He’s “Records of Ancient Paintings”, and was not created by Zhu Jingxuan [1]. It was in the Tang Dynasty that the term “Yi” was first proposed. During the Tang and Five Dynasties period, Zhang Huaiguan wrote “Book Break”, which said, “Zhang gets his flesh, Lu gets his bone, and Gu gets his spirit. The most wonderful of all, Gu, is the one who has lost his square.” By comparing and summarizing the different characteristics of each of the three great painters, he proposed “Shen, Bone and Flesh” as well as “Shen, Wonderful and Capable”. In the Tang Dynasty, Zhu Jingxuan absorbed the views of Zhang Huaijiao and Li Zizhen and proposed in the Record of Famous Paintings of the Tang Dynasty that the artists should be evaluated on the basis of four grades, namely, “Shen, Wonderful, Capable, and Yi”, among which “Shen, Wonderful, Capable” was divided into three grades, namely, upper, middle, and lower. Painters with “unconventional painting style” were categorized as “Yi”. This inspired the values of literati painting in later generations [3]. In the Song Dynasty, Huang Huofu’s “Record of Famous Paintings in Yizhou” discusses paintings in terms of the four qualities of “Yi, Shen, Miao, and Neng”, and the development of “Yi Pin” reaches its peak, formally entering into the vision of Chinese painting appraisal, and

becoming an aesthetic standard pursued by painters, calligraphers, and theorists alike.

2. Gu Kaizhi's "Theory of Shen"

Gu Kaizhi made "Shen" the standard for art creation and criticism. "Shen" means that artistic creation should not only focus on the realism of appearance, but should also express the spiritual world of the subject [4]. About Gu Kaizhi's "The Theory of Shen", its core ideas can be roughly divided into: "Express Shen in Form", "Moving Thinking and Wonderful Getting" and "Choosing Images to Express the Spirit".

2.1. Express Shen in Form

Gu Kaizhi believed that form and spirit are interdependent. "Shen" is the spirit of object. Spirit is intrinsic to the object, while form is the external thing, the foundation upon which spirit exists. "For the sake of Shen, there is no departure from form [5]", "Shen" must be expressed through the precise molding of the form, and the precision of the form is precisely for the purpose of expressing Shen. In Gu Kaizhi's painting theory, there are a large number of expressions about form and spirit. "The appearance is in the heart, and the hand is called its vision." [6] When drawing a character, one should pay attention to the consistency of the external appearance and the inner emotion, and only through the artist's hands appearing on the visible image can the spirit be conveyed. At the same time, changes in form also cause changes in spirit [4]. Gu Kaizhi believes that "if the length, rigidity and flexibility, depth, width and narrowness, and eye-dotting joints, up and down, size, thickness, there is a small loss, then the spirit and all change with it." [6] He paid great attention to the use of the brush to show the object of spirit, the brush is the expression of the form of tools, and brush strokes are part of the form, but he does not brush strokes smoothly as the pursuit of painting, but focus on the accuracy of the contours [4]. In general, form and spirit are interdependent and inseparable.

The spirit in painting with form refers to the spirit of the object, and cannot be separated from the object to talk about writing the spirit. And as a subjective person, to recognize the spirit of the objective object, rely on feeling and cognition [4]. How to experience the objective object of the spirit, Gu Kaizhi gave the answer "to think and get".

2.2. Moving Thinking and Wonderful Getting

The so-called "Moving Thinking and Wonderful Getting", from the literal understanding of the author's thoughts "move" to the conception of the art object, in-depth understanding of the objective world and "wonderful get" [7]. In the object of the "mystery", master the object of thought and feeling and characteristics, the painter and then refined and processed to artistic techniques will be the object on the picture, and ultimately become an artistic image [7].

At the same time, some scholars believe that the “thought” in “Moving Thinking and Wonderful Getting” is neither the thought of the objective object, nor the thought of the painter, nor a combination of the two thoughts, but a kind of “understanding” [8]. This understanding is not a simple “transfer” of the painter’s thoughts and feelings, but a more complex and profound mode of thinking. It is recorded in “The New Sayings of the World” that Gu Kaizhi painted a portrait of Pei Shuzhe, and through careful observation, he found that Pei Shuzhe had hairs on his face, so he added three tiny hairs to the finished painting. This is how the artist arranges and organizes the picture through understanding and observation, using rational “understanding”.

2.3. Choosing Images to Express the Spirit

“Choosing images to express the spirit” means conveying the spirit of a person or an object in a painting. The “Shen” is conveyed by the character image, and the value of the character image is determined by the “Shen”. “Choosing images to express the spirit” is extended on the basis of “Express Shen in Form” and “Moving Thinking and Wonderful Getting”. It is through the selection of the character image, coupled with careful painting, and ultimately achieve the effect.

Tang dynasty Zhang Yanyuan very respected Gu Kaizhi, listed Gu Kaizhi and others as “on the top grade”, and said, “Gu transport thought subtle, lapel spirit unpredictable, although the trace of the ink, its spirit floating above the sky...” At this time, Zhang Yanyuan’s evaluation of Gu Kaizhi still remained at the level of “Shen. Miao. Neng”, but it was not limited to this, and he believed that Gu Kaizhi’s paintings and character had already exceeded the scope of the evaluation system, *i.e.*, “There is nothing more wonderful than... the divine and the marvelous... can’t be sought between the grades!” [1]

3. Ni Zan’s “Yi”

The promotion of “Yi” reached its peak in the Song and Yuan dynasties, and “Yi” existed as the highest standard in the evaluation of paintings. Ni Zan’s “Yi” is mainly categorized into “Self-indulgence” and “People-oriented” [9].

3.1. Self-Indulgence

Ni Zan emphasized the “self-entertainment” function of painting. From Ni Zan’s statement in the “Self-Painted Ink Bamboo”, we can see that the main function of his paintings is to express the “Yi” to please himself [9]. The aesthetic sense of classical Chinese painting comes from the philosophical ideas of Confucianism and Taoism: Confucianism advocates entering the world, being active and enterprising, and emphasizes the educational function of painting, with regulating the social order and saving the general public as the highest goal of art; Taoism pursues avoidance of the world, indulging in the beauty of nature, and pleasing the self as the goal of painting, which is opposed to the educational function of Confucianism [10]. For Ni Zan, painting was a form of emotional support. This

is also closely related to the context of the era in which Ni Zan lived. During the Yuan Dynasty, the Mongol rulers pursued a policy of ethnic discrimination, dividing all ethnic groups into four classes, with the Han Chinese at the bottom of the hierarchy, hence the phenomenon of cultural ostracism and boycott. As a result, the southern literati were forced to move from Confucianism's "entering the world" to Taoism's "leaving the world," and to devote their energies to the creation of poetry and painting for their own amusement. Ni Zan's "Yi" combines the Confucian concept of entering the world, the Taoist concept of inaction, and the Buddhist concept of transcendence, which is based on the simplicity of the Great Dao. [9]

3.2. People-Oriented

Ni Zan's concept of "people-oriented" painting returned to the sense of self-subjectivity. He emphasized human ethics in dealing with natural landscapes, combining his own rationality with the sensibility of painting. Taking human ethics as the subject of painting emphasizes the painter's sense of self-expression, transforming painting from objective realism to subjective expression. He demanded that painters unify their personal character, disposition, scrolls, and brushwork, believing that reading and personal cultivation were necessary conditions for painters to paint [9].

The essence of Ni Zan's "Yi" is to emphasize the painter's personal disposition, breaking through the traditional realistic concept of pursuing both the form and spirit of objects since the Tang Dynasty, and focusing more on the subjective consciousness and self-awareness of human beings [9]. This change reflects the completion of traditional Chinese painting from the importance of "Shen" to the important transition of "Yi". Since then, literati painting began to focus on the painter's subjectivity and individuality, advocating the venting of inner emotions through painting, with the nature of self-indulgence.

4. Changes in "Shen" and "Yi"

"Shen" and "Yi" are not absolutely isolated and mutually exclusive, but more of a symbiotic relationship. From Gu Kaizhi to Ni Zan, from "Shen" as the first, "Yi" as the second, to "Yi" as the first, "Shen" as the second. Such a shift reflects the awakening of the subjective consciousness of Chinese painters as they learn from the best and continue to innovate. While the Tang and Five Dynasties emphasized form and spirit, the Yuan Dynasty focused on "Yi", "Shen" and "Yi" are inextricably linked. "Yi" is always based on "Shen" and is formed by absorbing the essence of "Shen" [11]. Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties for the "Yi" importance does not mean that the "Shen" out, just because of social thought, living area, political tendency is different, leading to the literati painter's thinking and painting function's of the change from the importance of the appearance of the portrayal of the object of the spirits to the beginning of the painter's personal aesthetic preferences as a starting point for the direct expression of the mind.

It can be argued that behind the aesthetic shift from “Shen” to “Yi” lies a change in the conception of the evaluation of ancient Chinese paintings, which epitomizes the continuous progress and innovation in the development of Chinese paintings.

5. Conclusion

Gu Kaizhi emphasized “Shen”, Ni Zan advocated “Yi”, the ancient standards of painting evaluation varied according to the times, and the different aesthetic standards of painting also led to different evaluations of the same work in different times. As Chinese painting enters a new era, art creations are becoming more and more diversified, and art trends are more active than ever. However, there is a great lack of an evaluation system for Modern Chinese Painting, and there is an urgent need to establish a contemporary evaluation system for Modern Chinese Painting. Whether it is the “Shen” or the “Yi”, they are both indispensable components in the evaluation of traditional Chinese paintings. We should clarify the development of the ancient Chinese painting evaluation system, especially the definition of the issues of “Shen” and “Yi”, in order to guide the current painting criticism [12].

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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