

The Aesthetic Value of “Qi” in Ancient Chinese Painting

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Abstract: “Qi” (peculiarity, novelty or uniqueness in English) represents a vital aesthetic category in Chinese painting, initially influenced by philosophy, military strategy, and literature. Artists emphasized novelty in brushwork, composition, and content, striving for lively spiritual ambience in their artworks, resulting in paintings that surprise and captivate. In ancient Chinese paintings, “Qi” is primarily manifested in content, brushwork, composition, and spiritual ambience, showcasing the beauty of transcendence, the beauty of sorrow and resentment, the beauty of temperament, and the beauty of spiritual ambience.

Keywords: Qi; Painting; Aesthetic Value

1. Introduction

“Qi” is a crucial category in Chinese classical aesthetics, first emerging as a philosophical and military strategic concept, in contrast to “Zheng” (the norm). Beginning in the Wei and Jin dynasties, with the prevailing societal trend of seeking novelty, the concept of “Qi” was gradually incorporated into the realm of artistic theory and criticism. People began to recognize the influence of “Qi” on literature, calligraphy, and paintings. By the mid to late Ming dynasty, influenced by the growth of the commodity economy, Wang Yangming’s philosophy of the mind and Li Zhi’s “innocence of childhood” theory, there was a profound interest and immense emphasis on “Qi”. It became a widely accepted aesthetic standard of the era, solidifying its revered status. Presently, most studies on “Qi” are found in the literary domain, with detailed research focusing on Liu Xie’s “Dragon-Carving and the Literary Mind” and its discussion on “Qi-Zheng”. Compared to literature, studies on “Qi” in the field of painting are relatively limited, and research considering “Qi” as an aesthetic category in ancient Chinese painting theory is still scarce. Thus, this paper focuses on the role of “Qi” in ancient Chinese paintings, revealing its expression and exploring its aesthetic significance.

2. Tracing the Origins of “Qi”

The concept of “Qi” in philosophy, military strategy, and literary theory often predates its introduction in painting theory, which later significantly influenced the art of painting.

2.1 “Qi” as a Military Term

As a term in philosophy and military strategy, “Qi” first appeared in the “Laozi”. In Chapter 58, it states: “Normality and oddity can interchange, just as goodness and evil can cycle into each other.”¹ Here, “normal” signifies adhering to moral principles. “Qi” indicates that consistently upholding these principles isn’t easy, and only a few can persistently do so. Therefore, only those who can maintain “normality” can truly achieve “Qi”. Moreover, the effect of persistently adhering to these principles can also be termed as “Qi”. Laozi affirmed the superiority of employing “Qi” in military strategy. In Chapter 57, he mentions, “Govern a nation with normality, wage war with surprise moves,”² delineating the respective domains of “Qi” and “Zheng”. That is, one should govern the nation with conventional wisdom, but in warfare, one should employ unpredictable and cunning tactics. Laozi underscored the positive guiding significance of “Qi” in warfare. During the Spring and Autumn Period, Laozi’s idea of using “Qi” in warfare was theoretically elucidated in Sun Tzu’s “The Art of War”. In the “Tactics” chapter, it states that “All warfare is based on deception”, emphasizing the importance of “Qi” in real warfare and advocating for constant innovation. Furthermore, Sun Tzu discussed the dialectical relationship between “Qi” and “Zheng” in the “Configurations” chapter, pointing out that only by properly managing their relationship can one achieve consistent victories. “One who can ensure the enemy’s reception of him without loss is due to his

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manipulation of Qi and Zheng.”³ No matter from which direction the enemy attacks, one can use “Qi-Zheng” to counter. Thus, mastering the dynamics of “Qi-Zheng” is vital for determining the outcome of a war. In military strategy, “Zheng” is the standard approach—planned and predictable. In contrast, “Qi” is the unorthodox approach—unexpected and surprising. During actual combat, many unforeseen situations may arise. Besides adhering to established strategies, one should employ flexible new tactics to catch the enemy off guard, achieving victory through surprise. “In war, one achieves alignment with Zheng and victory with Qi.”³ Sun Tzu elaborated on the concept of “Qi and Zheng being interdependent”, affirming the role of “Qi”, which promoted its development in military thought. After Sun Tzu, Sun Bin also delved deeper into the concept of “Qi” in his “Sun Bin’s Art of War”. It’s evident that in military thought, “Qi” represents a form of cleverness and technique used during warfare with the aim of achieving victory through surprise.

2.2 “Qi” as a Literary Concept

During the pre-Qin and Han dynasties, Zhuangzi, in “Knowledge Rambling in the North”, introduced the term “Shenqi” (miraculousness in English), which is related to beauty. He said, “Therefore, everything is one. What is regarded as beautiful is ‘Shenqi’, and what is despised is ‘rotteness’. The ‘smelly and rotten’ can be transformed into ‘Shenqi’, and ‘Shenqi’ can be transformed into ‘rotteness’.” He pointed out that “Shenqi” and rottenness can interchange, offering significant insights for later artistic creations pursuing the aesthetic effect of “Shenqi”. Yang Xiong in “Fayan·Junzi”(a philosophic book) mentioned, “Zi Chang loves Qi the most.” This refers to Sima Qian in “Shi Ji” showing a preference for tragic heroes like Jing Ke, Xiang Yu, and the images of merchants. Wang Chong in “On Balance” stated, “The nature of the worldly is to love the language of the odd and strange.” He believed that people rarely focus on mediocre works but are drawn to unique and eccentric language. Wang Chong also said, “Text originates from the heart, and the heart is represented by text. Upon observing the text, if it is extraordinary and outstanding, it can be deemed as sound discussion.”⁴ Writings are the external manifestations of the author’s inner world. A heart can produce remarkable texts. Different texts present various aesthetic styles, and through reading extraordinary works, one can appreciate the beauty of art. Overall, during the pre-Qin period, “Qi” meant unconventional, illogical, and also unexpected and outstanding.

Entering the Southern Dynasties, “Qi” shifted from philosophy and military domains to the literary field. Liu Xie held “Qi” in high regard. The Southern Dynasties was one of the most chaotic periods in Chinese history, during which Liu Xie lived. Given such a historical backdrop, rulers greatly valued military thought. This influence can be seen in Liu Xie’s “Dragon-Carving and the Literary Mind” where phrases like “guided by military leaders” and “using soldiers to quell chaos” reflect his views on military thought. Addressing the formalism and aestheticism prevalent in contemporary literary circles, Liu Xie proposed his perspective on Qi-Zheng. In “Tixing”, he introduced “Qi” as a literary style, laying the foundation for its role in literary theory, marking a significant development in the category of “Qi”. Zhong Rong, a contemporary literary critic of Liu Xie, held an important position in the literary world with his “Shipin”. In it, he used “Qi” as a standard for poetic appreciation, further affirming the status and function of “Qi”. Subsequently, literati from various eras presented their views on “Qi”, enriching and developing its category. In ancient Chinese literary theory, “Qi” primarily refers to the following aspects.

Firstly, “Qi” refers to the uniqueness of the words in poetry and prose. It signifies language that is rich and employs ingenious, novel expressions, making it extraordinary. In “Dragon-Carving and the Literary Mind”, it is mentioned that “At the beginning of the Song Dynasty, literary compositions underwent changes. The philosophies of Zhuangzi and Laozi receded, giving rise to landscape poetry. Poets competed to capture the essence of scenes in just a hundred characters or to highlight the novelty in a single phrase. They strove to portray objects in their most vivid and genuine forms, pushing the limits of language to seek novelty.”⁵ In the early Song dynasty, philosophic poetry gradually faded, while landscape poetry began to flourish. These poems emphasized parallelism, with each sentence holding unique value, pushing the boundaries of expression to create novelty. In “Dragon-Carving and the Literary Mind”, Liu Xie points out that Yang Xiong, in writing “Ganquan Fu”, drew inspiration from Sima Xiangru’s embellished style, describing rare and exotic trees as more precious than jade trees and depicting towering palaces so high that even gods and spirits would fall.⁵ Zhong Rong criticized Ren Fang and Wang Yuanzhang in “Shi Pin Xu” for not seeking novelty in their verses but instead using obscure and novel references.

Secondly, “Qi” refers to the uniqueness of content and themes. In “Dragon-Carving and the Literary Mind”, “rich in content and extraordinary”⁵ indicates the distinct features of latitude books. Comparing “Chu Ci” with classics in “Dragon-Carving and the Literary Mind”, Liu Xie highlights their “four similarities” and “four differences.” One of the differences is the bizarre content of “Chu Ci”, such as Gonggong crashing into the heavenly pillar causing the earth to tilt, Hou Yi shooting down nine suns, and the tree-pulling strongman having nine heads. This indicates that one of the reasons Liu Xie termed “Chu Ci” as “peculiar texts” was due to its innovative content. Such unique content can evoke exquisite imaginations, leading to a beautiful ambiance in poetry and prose.

Besides, “Qi” refers to the marvelousness of ideas and conceptualization. In “Dragon-Carving and the Literary Mind”, it is written: “When observing its splendid explanations, it encompasses the ‘Odes’ and ‘Hymns’.” Thus, it is known that brilliant and unique interpretations arise from the unconventional norms of discourses.”⁵ Liu Xie believes that works by Qu Yuan and Song Yu were influenced by the peculiar style of the political strategists, resulting in bright and extraordinary conceptualizations. In “Dragon-Carving and the Literary Mind”, it is mentioned that “A man of vision and purpose always seeks to create something extraordinary, often delving deep into the realm of the mysterious and profound,”⁵ indicating that writers who excel in ideation often aim to create novelty, frequently immersing their thoughts in profound and mysterious realms. It is evident that for a work to achieve aesthetic beauty, not only does the language and content need to be unique, but the ideas and concepts should also stand out as unexpected and novel.

“Qi” in poetry and prose refers to the richness of emotions, presenting natural sincerity and robust momentum. In “Dragon-Carving and the Literary Mind”, there is a line: “If a piece lacks a unique spirit, and its words are devoid of novel charm, then its ornate phrases merely dull the senses.”⁵ Here, “Qi” signifies the writer’s temperament, character, emotions, and the intrinsic vitality of the piece. If a work lacks emotion and vigor, it can weary readers. Zhong Rong, in “Shi Pin”, praises Cao Zhi’s poetry for its “exceptional spirit and splendid expression,” emphasizing that poetry with strong emotions and momentum can have a powerful artistic impact. He comments on Lu Ji’s work as possessing a “direct and touching uniqueness.” “Direct” here means straightforwardness. For Zhong Rong, only pieces that candidly express genuine feelings can be termed “Qi” and exhibit a beauty of uniqueness.

Lastly, “Qi” denotes a work’s distinct and novel artistic style. In “Dragon-Carving and the Literary Mind”, Liu Xie categorizes literary styles into eight types, one of which is “novelty and uniqueness,” described as pieces that diverge from ancient traditions to pursue the modern and novel. In “The Twenty-Four Poetic Styles,” Sikong Tu introduced the artistic style of “Qingqi” (refined and extraordinary), stating, “As pleasing as jade, walking in search of seclusion. Looking around, stopping to gaze, the sky vast and serene. Its spirit transcends ancient norms, so ethereal it cannot be grasped. Like the dawn of the moon, like the autumn of the air.”⁶ Unlike Liu Xie’s inclination towards novelty and distinctiveness described as “precariously leaning towards the eccentric,” what Sikong Tu refers to is a poetic style that is elegant, refined, and transcending the mundane, presenting a beauty that is both fresh and ethereal yet graceful and removed from the commonplace.

In summary, “Qi” is contrasted with the ordinary and mundane. In ancient Chinese literary criticism, it mainly refers to the novelty and uniqueness of poetry and prose in terms of language, content, intent, and style, characterized by abundant emotion and an extraordinary demeanor.

3. The Embodiment of “Qi” in Ancient Painting

The concept of “Qi” in ancient Chinese art theory originated from influences of philosophy, military strategy, and literature. “Qi”, as a strategic technique employed by military experts to achieve victory, influenced literary creation, starting with the conception and content selection, followed by meticulous crafting of sentences, ultimately resulting in works with fantastical content and a transcendent style. The same principle applies to painting. Painters emphasize novelty in brushwork, composition, and content, flexibly employing elements to capture the lively spirit of the work, aiming to create paintings that surprise and captivate. In paintings, “Qi” is manifested in the uniqueness of content and brushwork.

3.1 The “Qi” in Content

Ancient Chinese art theory often mentions phrases such as “exceptional shapes,” “strange spirits

and deities,” “bizarre flowers and rocks,” and “unusual appearances.” These highlight the unique content within paintings. One of the earliest mentions of “Qi” in the context of painting can be traced back to Gu Kaizhi’s “On Painting,” where the term appears four times. Gu Kaizhi commented on the painting “Fuxi Shenong” as, “Though not resembling modern people, it possesses unique bone structure and beauty, with a mysterious aura”.⁷ He described “Sun Wu” as having a “very peculiar bone structure”⁷ and praised “Three Horses” for its “extraordinary bone structure, as if soaring into the void”.⁷ Here, Gu uses “Qi” to describe “bone,” referring specifically to the unique, interesting, and beautiful anatomy of animals and humans in paintings. Yao Zui, in “Continuation of Painting Evaluations,” said of Zhang Sengyou’s paintings, “Excellent in depicting temples, surpassing many. Dresses of both the past and present are perfect. Bizarre appearances from various regions are genuinely wondrous”.⁸ He uses the characters’ unique appearances as a reference for masterpieces. Li Sizhen also noted in “Later Painting Evaluations” that Zhang Sengyou’s paintings have “an extraordinary and grand bone structure,” and they “change in myriad ways, with peculiar shapes,”⁹ deeming them top-tier.

In paintings, artists often employ grotesque, clumsy, and strange imagery to achieve the pursuit of “Qi.” Historical records tell of Tang Dynasty painter Wu Daozi’s “Hellish Transformation Picture” which was so eerie and terrifying that butchers who saw it were said to have been instantly enlightened out of fear. Song Dynasty’s Li Song’s “Skeleton Fantasy Picture” features two skeletons, unifying life and death within a single painting, creating a bizarre and eerie effect. In Chinese Buddhism, figures like the Arhats are often depicted with peculiar features - prominent noses, deep-set eyes, and exaggerated brows. For instance, the Arhats in the “Sixteen Arhats Picture” by the Five Dynasties’ Guan Xiu are renowned for their exaggerated peculiarities. The “Xuanhe Painting Manual” describes them as “full cheeks, furrowed brows, deep eyes, large noses; or huge jaws and wrinkled necks, resembling foreign or exotic beings, astonishing all who see them”.¹⁰ Chen Hongshou’s “Heroes in the Water Margin” intentionally exaggerated and deformed the figures, their twisted postures and odd faces delivering a strong visual impact, hence it was praised as “depicting forty figures from Water Margin, all in bizarre shapes”.¹¹ The “Qi” in painting content refers to depictions of sickly, deformed, or broken figures and things in decay, like withered trees, aiming to evoke a sense of astonishment in viewers.

3.2 The “Qi” in Brushwork

In “Shanjingju Studio’s Treatises on Painting”, Fang Xun highlighted the relationship between the standard and the unconventional in brushwork. A systematic approach to brushwork, following set rules and sequences, is termed “Zheng” On the other hand, unpredictable and constantly varying brushwork that deviates from the norm is termed “Qi.”

In “Ancient Painting Commentary”, Xie He commented on Lu Sui, saying “every dot and stroke, every movement of the brush is unique”.¹² He praised Jin Ming Emperor’s brushwork as “extraordinary with a sense of wonder”, remarked on Mao Huiyuan’s “comprehensive brushwork, nonconformity in every aspect, exceptional execution and unrestricted strokes”¹², and appreciated Zhang Ze’s “overflowing ideas, fresh brush movements, and unique perspectives”.¹² Terms like “dot and stroke”, “movement of the brush”, and “execution” refer to the effects created by the brush on paper. Xie He believed that Mao Huiyuan’s brushwork was freely expressive and disregarded conventions, resulting in an impressively splendid effect, while Zhang Ze’s brushwork was endlessly innovative so he is “endlessly ingenious, like a ring with no end”. Both Lu Sui and Jin Ming Emperor displayed brilliant and wondrous brush techniques.

Zhang Yanyuan, in his critique of Lu Tanwei, described him as “extremely polished, innovative, and exceptional, unmatched in the Song dynasty”.¹² Guo Ruoxu commended Zhao Deqi’s works as “remarkably unconventional and peerlessly executed”¹³, while Li Zhi opined that Shi Ke, “with his unrestrained nature, created a playful world in his paintings, thus, his brushwork was bold and occasionally went beyond the usual boundaries, yet always remained unique”.¹³ Liu Daochun mentioned about Shi Ke’s minimalist brushwork: “He likes the bizarre and takes pride in his unrestricted brush.” In this context, “Qi” describes the painter’s innovative and unconventional use of brush and ink, demonstrating unrestrained and free brushwork, thereby creating visual effects that are “beyond the usual norms.”

During the Tang and Five Dynasties period, the development of portrait painting matured, and various brush techniques became increasingly diverse. For instance, Zhou Wenju’s “trembling brush”, Li Houzhu’s

“golden chisel”, and Wu Daozi’s “waterweed delineation”. The emergence of these brush techniques was a key element in the continuous innovation and pursuit of uniqueness in ancient Chinese painting. Tang dynasty painter Wu Daozi was renowned for his extraordinary brush techniques, expressing audacity and personality through his strokes, depicting unique and unconventional forms.

3.3 The “Qi” in Composition

In “Complete Notes and Comments on Paintings from the Little Penglai Fairyland Pavilion”, it is mentioned that the essence of military strategy lies in positioning and the same principle applies to painting.¹ Military strategists stress the importance of positioning troops during battle, and when applied to painting, this refers to the overall composition and directionality of the main subjects. This concept is also emphasized in calligraphy discussions, which are abundant in content. Emperor Tang Taizong once used the military as a metaphor for calligraphy, emphasizing that the structural strength in calligraphy is like the formation of opposing armies in battle. The situation is not fixed, nor is the form of writing. Only those who can seize the moment can achieve surprise victories.

Regarding the composition in paintings, there are discussions in painting theory. Xiao Yi’s “Criteria on Painting of Landscapes, Pines and Rocks” set up a clever posture to depict the vastness of mountains and waters.¹⁴ In landscape paintings, artists pay great attention to portraying the overall atmosphere of the landscape through ingenious compositional design. Wang Zhirui, a painter from the late Ming to early Qing dynasty, once said: “A painting can be sparse or dense, surprising or standard, only then can one be deemed skillful”.¹⁵ Deng Shiru of the Qing Dynasty mentioned in “Two Oars of the Ship of Art” that “in calligraphy and painting, sparse areas should allow a horse to pass, dense areas shouldn’t let the wind through. Always balance white with black, and the uniqueness emerges”.¹⁶ Artists arrange composition considering aspects like density, posture, void and solid, twists, and turns to make the painting intriguing. Shen Zongqian in “A Compilation of Jiezhou’s Studies of Painting” discussed the arrangement of elements in a painting. He pointed out that traditional landscape paintings have reasonable composition, but blindly following conventions can result in blandness, thus affecting the painting’s quality. Therefore, he praised Wang Yuanqi’s works for achieving a balanced composition using unconventional positioning. Gong Xian discussed the composition using the terms “An (stable)” and “Qi”. “An” refers to being steady and fitting, while “Qi” denotes breaking from convention, introducing disharmonious elements. Gong Xian opposed bland compositions, sought originality in composition, aimed for uniqueness within stability, and clarity within chaos, producing grand and broad-visioned works.

3.4 The “Qi” in Spiritual Ambience

The “Qi” in content, brushwork, and composition are the tangible “Qi”. However, there’s also an intangible “Qi” hidden within painting, which is its spiritual ambience. Wang Anshi, a representative of the Song Dynasty advocating “uniqueness”, once mentioned in “Poem for Zhang Siye”: “What seems ordinary is the most unique; what appears easy is the hardest”.¹⁷ Uniqueness is not about being cryptic, but about revealing extraordinary insights in ordinary settings. The ordinary here isn’t mundane, but is flavorful and uniquely beautiful within its simplicity, seek the best point of resonance in the ordinary, and find the “extraordinary” within the “usual.” Yet, ordinary here doesn’t refer to the typical mundane; it means there’s a distinct flavor within the plain, and within that flavor lies a unique beauty. Shen Zongqian in “A Compilation of Jiezhou’s Studies of Painting” introduced the concept of “uniqueness within the ordinary”. “Those who can patiently explore it through their brushwork achieve true uniqueness”.¹⁸ Seeking the extraordinary within the serene is the essence of “uniqueness within the ordinary”. The beauty of a work does not solely rely on astonishing language, content, or form but on conveying unsaid words, unseen symbols, and hidden meanings within the mundane. This is the pinnacle of “uniqueness within the ordinary”, where one feels the enchanting beauty of the unique spirit.

Wang Yu of the Qing Dynasty mentioned in “Dongzhuang Old Man’s Comments on Paintings”: “It is said by the master (referring to Wang Yuanqi) that ‘uniqueness’ lies not in position but in spirit and rhythm, not in tangible but in intangible places”.¹⁹ Similarly, Wang Yuanqi’s disciple, Fang Xun, in “Shanjingju Studio’s Treatises on Painting” pointed out: “In calligraphy and painting, it is vital to possess a unique spirit, not merely in the form but in the essence”.²⁰ Thus, the “uniqueness” in painting stems from its intrinsic natural spirit. Seeking “uniqueness within the ordinary” means not fervently chasing external novelties but pursuing a lively spirit and seeking uniqueness within it.

Chinese literati emphasize expressing inner emotions, often projecting feelings onto objects. Viewers then sense this unique spirit within the painting. Mi Fu, evaluating Su Shi in “History of Painting”, said: “When Zizhan (Su Shi) painted deadwood, its branches twisted aimlessly, and the rocks’ textures appeared strangely unique, reflecting the turmoil in his heart”.²¹ In Su Shi’s “Deadwood and Strange Rocks”, a withered tree, stripped of its leaves by harsh weather, is depicted with an ugly rock pressing on its branches, distorting its trunk. Yet the tree’s main branch strives to grow upwards. Through this painting, viewers can feel the suppressed emotions in Su Shi after his official dismissal, symbolizing his inner turmoil.

4. Aesthetic Value of “Qi”

4.1 Transcendent Beauty

“Qi” carries an inherent strength and a noble spirit, showcasing transcendental characteristics. By transcending the mundane and ordinary, and surpassing the trivialities and fleeting moments of the present, it aims to achieve an elevated and free aesthetic and life realm.

“When humans attempt to depict the infinite, they cannot find a finite, sensory image in the realm of phenomena that perfectly represents it. However, there is something peculiar or unique in sensory images that can somewhat hint at the vastness of the infinite. Therefore, the uniqueness becomes a general form of representing the sublime: it symbolizes the sublime, guiding the soul towards the infinite realm of sublimity.”²² Zhuangzi’s writings are filled with many unique individuals who embody transcendental features. In “Man in the World, associated with other Men” and “The Seal of Virtue Complete”, Zhuangzi depicts numerous individuals with grotesque appearances and physical deformities. Some have bent legs, others have lost their feet, some lack lips, and some have large tumors on their necks... Although they may seem bizarre and extremely unattractive, Zhuangzi believes that “virtue can be prominent while physical appearance is forgotten.” Whether one possesses a harmoniously beautiful appearance is not vital; what is crucial is their moral virtue and inner spiritual demeanor. By portraying characters with grotesque appearances, Zhuangzi paradoxically emphasizes their inner spiritual nobility and strength.

Zhong Kui, with his strange and ugly appearance, has always been a favorite subject among artists throughout the dynasties. Artists such as Wu Daozi, Shi Tao, and Li Fangying have painted images of Zhong Kui. Despite his peculiar and unattractive appearance, Zhong Kui embodies a sense of justice capable of expelling evil. As a deity tasked with capturing ghosts and demons, people pin their hopes of vanquishing evil onto him. Xu Wei integrated his personal experiences of bitterness, pain, and loneliness into his paintings, cultivating an intense and unrestrained style. He hoped to transcend the limitations of life through his art, seeking eternity. As he wrote in “Responding to a Monk”: “A hundred years in vain serve as a prelude for a millennium, how can an individual face with a myriad of eyes?”²³

4.2 Beauty of Sorrow and Indignation

The “Qi” incorporates the artist’s bitter experiences and indignation towards society and life. The internal frustration becomes the drive for creation, placing critical and combative spirit onto “Qi,” endowing the artwork with profound thought and depth.

Starting from the “Book of Songs” where it says, “My heart is troubled; I sing and lament,” to Confucius’s “Poetry can express resentment,” Qu Yuan’s “Pour out feelings in indignation,” Sima Qian’s “Write in anger,” Han Yu’s “Speak out when feeling wronged,” and Ouyang Xiu’s “Driven to achieve due to poverty,” to Li Zhi and Jin Shengtian considering “Water Margin” as a “work of resentment” and “book of indignation,” the development of literature has formed a progressive literary tradition imbued with a democratic spirit, which can be summed up as “speak out when feeling wronged” and “write in anger.” Authors, instead of being disheartened by adversities, pick up their pens to passionately express their resentment towards bleak reality and their patriotic concerns. This literary tradition has influenced the field of painting, where artists use “Qi” to satirically comment on societal issues and convey their feelings of resentment.

In the painting “Peacock with Bamboo Stone Painting” the usually elegant peacock is portrayed by Bada Shanren in a comically grotesque manner, reminiscent of the ornamental feathers worn on Qing Dynasty official hats. Through this painting and its accompanying poem, Bada Shanren expressed his sarcasm and ridicule towards officials who lost their integrity to side with the Qing royalty, highlighting his staunch position as a loyal subject of the previous dynasty. The Yangzhou Eight Eccentrics, living among

the common people, understood deeply the hardships and sufferings of the working class. Li Fangying was fond of depicting bamboo amidst fierce winds; his “Wind and Bamboo” painting embodies his unyielding spirit and noble character, illustrating resilience in the face of adversity.

4.3 Beauty of Temperament

“Qi” encapsulates the genuine character of the artist, becoming a representation of the artist’s true self, highlighting unobstructed freedom of expression.

In the middle and later periods of the Ming Dynasty, there was an unprecedented development in the commodity economy. This economic prosperity profoundly changed lifestyles. As material wealth proliferated, people sought out the unusual and unique to satisfy their curiosity, indirectly liberating human nature. During this period, the trend of embracing spontaneity and Zen flourished, merging with Wang Yangming’s philosophy of introspection and later evolving in Li Zhi’s concept of “childlike innocence.” This era emphasized genuine feelings and encouraged the purity of a child’s heart. Li Zhi’s “childlike heart” represents sincere feelings and opposes the mundane. Tang Xianzu stated, “the essence of writing does not lie in following established patterns. It’s the natural spirit that comes unexpectedly, without deliberate thought. It is bizarre and extraordinary, beyond words to describe,”²⁴ emphasizing that to achieve artistic uniqueness, one should awaken the “childlike heart.” Only with such innocence can one create lively works with an inexplicable charm. Both Tang Xianzu and Li Zhi advocated for awakening the unique feelings within and emphasized uninhibited expression.

The freehand bird and flower paintings by Chen Chun and Xu Wei marked the onset of paintings focusing on emotional expression. Their works bore distinct personal imprints and resonated with the societal trend of uninhibited expression. As each individual is unique, the “Qi” presented in artworks is diverse and ever-changing. For instance, Ni Zan’s landscapes depict a unique elegance, Wang Shishen’s ink plum blossoms embody unrestrained exuberance, and Xu Wei’s freehand paintings are bold and unrestrained. Shen Zongqian believed that the peculiar strokes, charm, and structure in paintings stem from the artist’s temperament. Only when it stems from the true nature of the creator’s inner self can the work present extraordinary beauty and become a lively and distinctive masterpiece of art.

4.4 Beauty of Life’s Vitality

“Qi (奇 : peculiar or unique)” harbors the universe’s vividness, revealing the mysteries of life and the universe, expressing the ultimate understanding and enlightenment about life, and elevating artworks to the realm of “unity of man and nature.”

“Qi (气 : vital material force)” represents the life essence and substance of everything in the universe. Zhuangzi, in “Knowledge Rambling in the North,” posits that everything in the world is “Qi.” Whether something is magical or rotten, its essence is “Qi,” allowing for transformations between the two. The goal is to depict the universe’s vitality, regardless of whether the object’s appearance is beautiful, harmonious, unique, ugly, clumsy, or wild. Xie He, in “Ancient Painting Commentary,” introduced the concept of “liveliness of spiritual ambiance” placing it at the forefront of painting’s “Six Principles.” This focuses on presenting the inner life and soul in artworks, culminating in the realm of “Tao” – integrating oneself with the universe’s grand life force, allowing the artist’s vitality to meld with nature, and entering an aesthetic realm of limitless integration with the universe. Hence, artists brilliantly balance and adapt, using “Qi (peculiar or unique)” to represent the universe’s vitality.

In “Collection of Shi Tao’s Poems on Paintings,” Shi Tao wrote: “Through the profound principles of the universe, the unique works will last for generations.”²⁵ In his view, the reason “Qi” artworks endure is that they embody the principles of the universe and the great ways, allowing viewers to discern profound meanings within. Su Shi’s depiction of withered and seemingly lifeless trees appear as if they have reached the end of their life. Yet, they continue to twist and stretch resiliently towards the sky, weighing down on the withered trees are sturdy and grotesque rocks, blending the sharp and round, seemingly spinning rapidly, evoking a sense of motion. The trees and rocks together manifest an undying and resilient vitality, exhibiting a majestic aura. Behind these rocks, Su Shi paints slender bamboo shoots, infusing a sense of hope. This “Deadwood and Strange Rocks” painting fully embodies Su Shi’s life philosophy.

In conclusion, “Qi” portrays the genuine feelings and indomitable spirit within the artist. It transcends mediocrity and mundanity, revealing the principles and spiritual ambiance of the universe. “Qi” challenges the long-standing dominance of the “beauty of moderation,” bringing forth a captivating beauty that

intrigues and fascinates.

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