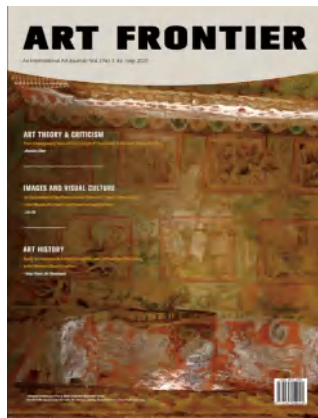




ART FRONTIER

An International Art Journal/Vol. 3, No. 3 (Total Issue No. 10) Published: 2025-06-30

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To cite this article: Li Meixuan "From Aesthetic Arousal to the Wellspring of the Mind: The Generative Aesthetics of Painting in Wang Wei and Shitao" Painting, P 21 - 30, At Frontiers 3, no.3 (Dec. 2025). DOI: [HTTPS://DOI.ORG/ 10.64212/](https://doi.org/10.64212/EYND9841)

EYND9841 DOI: [HTTPS://DOI.ORG/ 10.64212/EYND9841](https://doi.org/10.64212/EYND9841)

ISSN: 2835-5490

EISSN: 2836-841X

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This article has undergone double-blind peer review.

Website: <https://www.cafrontierpress.org/>

Email: editorial2023@artfrontier.org

Publishing Frequency: Quarterly (March, June, September, December)



From Aesthetic Arousal to the Wellspring of the Mind: The Generative Aesthetics of Painting in Wang Wei and Shitao

Li Meixuan

Abstract

Conventional Chinese painting theory is built on the concept of a particular approach where subject and object combine in an art-making process. Due to the position stated by Wang Wei that external objects might be able to move people (“心因物動”), he emphasized the way that nature as a natural element evokes emotional responses in artists. The opposite of it is Shitao who claimed that art has to go beyond the bounds of Heaven-and-Earth (“畫脫天地牢籠之手”), where the central point was subjective creativity rooted on the fountainhead of the mind (心源). He urged painters to cast off the constraints of established rules and learn from nature while creating new expressions of their own. From Wang Wei’s “Facing the spring breeze... the spirit soars” (“臨春風，思浩蕩；望秋雲，神飛揚”) to Shitao’s “One-Painting Theory” (一畫論), a shared aesthetic trajectory emerges. Through selected works by Shitao, this article examines how Chinese painting moves from aesthetic arousal to generative creation, forming an intrinsic logic in which emotional resonance, inner integration, and artistic production unfold as a continuous process.

Key Words

Wang Wei, Shitao, aesthetic arousal, wellspring of the mind, generative aesthetics

Introduction

Chinese painting has long emphasized the artistic realm produced through the fitting correspondence between subjective feeling and objective scenery. By responding to the myriad phenomena of nature, the painter’s affective arousal is first awakened, then brought into fusion with the external world, and finally transformed through the creative activity of the mind into pictorial form. The Southern Dynasties theorist

Wang Wei argued in *Xu Hua* (《敘畫》) that painting should not be limited to objective depiction but should instead embody the painter's subjective spiritual conception. He maintained that external things could activate aesthetic feeling — “the mind is stirred by things” (“心因物動”) — thereby endowing landscape painting with an expressive resonance distinct from that of cartographic representation.

More than a millennium later, the early Qing painter Shitao, working at the historical juncture between the late Ming and early Qing, championed learning from nature and advanced his “One-Painting Theory”. He placed particular emphasis on the generative role of the wellspring of the mind in artistic creation, urging painters to contemplate the myriad things through the self and to generate new artistic realms. Shitao proposed that when “the brush falls, the idea follows” (“隨筆一落，隨意一發”), forms will arise naturally; only in this way can painting “break free from the cage of Heaven-and-Earth and return to nature” (“自脫天地牢籠之手，歸於自然矣”).

Building on the painting theories of Wang Wei and Shitao, this article examines the aesthetic process through which Chinese painting moves from affective stimulation to the creative activation of the mind. By integrating analyses of Shitao's representative works, it seeks to clarify how this aesthetic orientation is realized in practice and how Chinese painting achieves the interpenetration of subject and object and the unity of feeling and scene. Such an interpretation would have to be applied in the present circumstances to understand the expression - the spring of the mind-creative creation (愴興一心泉一創造) better, which does not just imply a sequence of discrete claims about Chinese painting, but more so its developmental evolution in creative processes related to paint-making because the focus here has been placed on investigating what happens when art-works are made through the

means of resonance mechanisms, internalization, and reimagining.

1.Wang Wei's Xu Hua: The Aesthetic of Affective Arousal through "The Mind Stirred by Things"

As concerns the artistry of Wang Wei, it is stated that painting need not concentrate on technique specifically, but can be viewed as one of the notions of images (象) within Confucian thought by Yijing. This daring affirmation demonstrates how profound was his understanding of ontology played by the painting: this does not mean that it represents something outside the world only, but also means expressing inner emotions and thoughts in pictures, which have their own principles of heaven, earth and beings.¹ Wang Wei disagreed with such opinions that claimed painting ought to assume the status of a mere survey chart. The survey crews who would draw boundaries between city limits, identify areas, demarcate territories or mark elevations, or rivers were despised ("案城域，辨方州，標鎮阜，劃浸流") because it made them so very lifeless and rigid. On the contrary he asserted, however, that a landscape painting ought to have been other than representations of maps, since it is necessary to represent not just spirits behind nature pictures, but also desires of painter-emotions itself ("效異山海"). To wrap up Xu Hua, there comes a strong expression of happiness upon having sighted mountains or visited charming places: "The soul flies up when one looks at autumn clouds, the spirit flows under the view of spring winds" ("望秋雲，神飛揚；臨春風，思浩蕩"). Switching scenery out of doors immediately brings out excitement of an artist's inner energy as well as his imaginative power which will then result in lyrical animation, as well as vitality in landscapes painted so. It is precisely this aesthetic experience of affective arousal (感興) that enables landscape painting to transcend the sensory pleasures offered by precious materials

and to become an incomparable form of spiritual enjoyment.²

With regard to artistic inspiration and creative process, Wang Wei regarded mountains, rivers, and vegetation as the primary sources that awaken artistic inspiration, proposing that painting requires the moment when “the numinous spirit descends in clarity” (“明神降之”). He placed particular emphasis on the relationship between form and spirit, asserting that “that which is rooted in form becomes animated through the fusion of the numinous, and transformation arises from the mind” (“本乎形者融靈，而動者變心”) lies at the heart of painting. Here, “form” refers to outward appearance, while “numinous vitality” (靈) denotes inner expressive spirit; the two are fundamentally inseparable and must not be treated in isolation.³ Wang Wei thus critiqued the then-prevalent tendency to divide form and spirit, affirming that form and spirit are inherently one and maintaining instead that they constitute an intrinsic unity. Natural scenery itself undergoes no essential increase or decrease; what truly transforms and enlivens it is the painter’s subjective mind. He expresses it thusly: it is the soul which through its influx of the numen causes transformation (the confluence of spiritual elements causes change-the heart). Externally speaking, the outer peaks and trees provide a mere catalyst-like scenario; they can be understood as a sublime aesthetic realm by their inner refinement process in the mind.

The contribution of the mind to pictorial creativity could also be explained in more depth, therefore Wang Wei provided an idea-picture of artistic thought i.e. that the situation where a painting can be done by only one stroke of the brush (by using just one brush - 用一支毛筆來繪寫太虛體). The artist would need to picture themselves as seeing the whole scenery through mental visualization first and creating the image of the Great Void (太虛之體) within their imagination depending on what

the actual condition was. Here the word “Great Void” is neither synonymous with emptiness nor the other-world condition away from the realities it is rather supposed to signify an inherent psychological picture based upon feelings connected to some object. When a painter faces mountainous terrain and bodies of water, they provoke emotions but actually go into layers of creation not in how those objects appear outside but how they feel inside having been refined inward as part of atmosphere and architecture.⁴ Hence, such a concept, known as form of the Great Void, bears very little resemblance if any when referring to reproduction literally depicting real landscapes; rather it stands out as an expression of reality which incorporates imagery, personal views along aesthetics. It serves the significant role in between what people visually perceive externally versus its eventual depiction pictures-wise.

Conception can be defined as the refinement, elaboration and transformation of natural scenery using aesthetic imagination. It neither negates the main principles upon which things rest, it returns to coherence and unity rather than fragmentation and randomness. And at that exact moment, the relationships between subject-object pairs also change: no longer does the landscape remain merely as an object, but instead becomes the impetus to inspire thought; whereas previously the subject was passive, the modern-day subject is active in engaging himself in and transforming his world by way of mentalization and arousal of esthetics in order to manipulate all forms of form, henceforth producing a novel sensation within this particular context of what could potentially have been regarded as the essence of the Form or of the Form in itself ("太虛之體").

Within the indicated process, the subjective aspect of a painters brain is an intermediate link in objective objects (object imagery) and the images utilized by art

(image imagery). Artists use emotions and creativity intellect to come up with their aesthetic world that may transcend into the preliminary stage in form of things. The last step transforms into being a painting on the landscape which will reflect the actual state of mountains and waters as well as express the certain kind of spiritual energy beyond them, just like what was noted by Wang Wei as, it has the ability to respond to matters according to suitability but searches its truth through some sort of inner soul water spring (“應物象而取其宜，在心源而求其真”).⁵ Such creative mechanism-based on personal sensations and focused on resonance and internalization-can be specifically analogous to the recent discussions of perceptual architecture and generative processes in aesthetics when considered within general theoretical perspective. However, what sets the Chinese school of thinking regarding paintings apart is their dependence on self-cultivation and experiential knowledge at all stages in history.

2. Shitao's Huayu Lu: The “Mind's Wellspring” and the Consciousness of Creative Subjectivity

Shitao asserted that “the law of the single brushstroke is established by the self” (“一畫之法，乃自我立”), maintaining that the fundamental principle of painting must be grounded in the painter's own mind. Only by proceeding from the self can the artist transform the absence of a fixed method into method and respond to the myriad transformations of the world through an original brush and ink language. Here, the “self” precisely refers to the painter's subjective spirit, or the “mind's wellspring” (心源). As Zhu Liangzhi observes, Shitao's notion of the self does not denote an isolated individual consciousness but rather a living subject that continuously unfolds through resonance and generative interaction with Heaven and the myriad things; artistic

creation is thus, in essence, a process of “life generating life.”⁶ Adopting the tone of Chan enlightenment, Shitao further stated: “In great antiquity there was no method, and the primal simplicity was undivided... Where is method established? It is established in the single brushstroke” (“太古無法，太樸不散.....法於何立？立於一畫”). At the primordial moment when Heaven and Earth had not yet assumed form, no law could be fixed; yet with the emergence of the “single brushstroke,” the myriad phenomena came into being, and order and method were thereby instituted. For the painter, this first stroke is both an experiential apprehension of the Dao of nature and the point at which personal emotion becomes integrated into artistic practice — namely, “from non-being giving rise to method, and through method penetrating the multitude of methods” (“以無發生有法，以有法貫眾法”).⁷

In contrast to earlier painters who adhered rigidly to inherited conventions, Shitao strongly championed creative freedom and the liberation of individuality. He once challenged: “When we speak of the Northern and Southern Schools — do I follow them, or do they follow me?” (“今問南北宗：我宗耶？宗我耶？”), immediately answering, “I use my own method” (“我自用法”). Throughout his writings, Shitao repeatedly proclaimed “establish no single method, yet abandon no method” and advocated that “methodless method is the supreme method,” thereby foregrounding the painter’s subjective creative agency — “I have my own method.”⁸ This position may be understood as a further elaboration of the principle of “attaining the mind’s wellspring within” (中得心源): while “taking nature as teacher” (外師造化) requires direct engagement with the natural world to obtain material, “attaining the mind’s wellspring” entails the refinement and re-casting of experience through the

self, thereby freeing the artist from dependence on ancient formulas and objective appearances. In this process, the painter's subjectivity is brought to the forefront as the central driving force of pictorial creation.

Shitao theoretical principles are considered in artistic interest to both brush drawing and life drawing. The well-known proverb of this, namely, that one should exhaust unusual hills and sketches (to search out all unusual mountains and draft them; to go out to the most famous rivers and mountains and see them with their eyes so that he might discover a well-sprouted inspiration of his paintings can be cited: Nature offered many wonders which people were supposed to learn to hearten, internalize, reshape on their account: By means of his painting called as After-exhaustion-of-Exquisite-Peaks (Drawing No.1) there is none of mountains represented by means of scrolls rather it represents an outcome after a lot of trips through the natural environments with constant viewing sessions, where several images combined each other to generate a picture with a mountain form: The ridge lines and paths stretched across the scrolls like layer over layer, and every step had meant something of changing scene on foot (移步換景). Composition and orientation of strokes was not guided by conventions they developed naturally inside painter whose compositional system has evolved according to thinking patterns about the landscape perception in thought or imagination (以心運景). Here nature stopped being a passive object being depicted but was given a new order due to this joint action rooted into an imaginary world and reshaped into some kind of pictorial form endowed with inner rhythm and spirituality directed at reaching certain goals. Hence painting could not have been reduced to mere illustration of outer characteristics of heaven and earth instead its task turned into recreating another world of arts through

experiencing it with sensitive transformation when artist was thoroughly immersed in observing the process of occurring in nature.



Figure 1. Shitao, *Drafting after Exhausting the Extraordinary Peaks* (handscroll), ink on paper, 42.8 × 285.5 cm, Palace Museum, Beijing.

Only by “taking nature as teacher” (外師造化) and delving deep into life to draw nourishment from lived experience can the painter activate the inner wellspring of the mind and generate new pictorial schemas and artistic realms. At the same time, Shitao emphasized the moment of intuition and inspiration in execution: “once the brush falls and intention issues forth, the work naturally achieves its primordial completeness” (“隨筆一落，隨意一發，自成天蒙”). He required that genuine feeling permeate every stroke, freeing the artist from mundane constraints and allowing the vital interest of life to flow through the brush. When the artist reaches this state — forgetting both self and object, the brush moving with seemingly divine spontaneity — one may “live everywhere free from worldly dust” and thus “cast off the shackles of Heaven and Earth and return to nature” (“處處脫塵而生活……自脫天地牢籠之手，歸於自然”).⁹ Here, the “cage of Heaven and Earth” may be understood as the constraint imposed by the surface appearance of objective things and by habitual formal conventions. Only by breaking through these limitations and escaping the

prison of imitation can the painter truly return to the generative vitality of nature and create an unprecedented pictorial realm. To the mind of Shitao painting became a kind of subjective restructuring of an objective reality - an operation that was representable by describing any variety of things contained within heaven and earth but giving these things shape of self («This is my idea that there exists a depiction of all thousand of things present in the Heaven and Earth and they might turn to be otherwise due to myself (“寫天地萬物，而陶泳乎我”)), whereby the principles of all things assume new form through the agency of the “I”.¹⁰ There is creativity in it since art gives new birth into Heaven and Earth by recreating minds to recreate Heaven and Earth.

3. From Affective Resonance to Generative Creation: The Interpenetrative and Integrative Aesthetics of Painting

Wang Wei and Shitao perspectives of one another are visible because they have both given the same ideas but in a different way, which eventually results into uncovering of the underlying general principle behind Chinese painting i. e. to paint through love and to make it mentally, between feelings and thoughts resonance, with creation on springtime of the mind and generativity. First, affective resonance is when an object responds emotionally to an outside happening or influence, wellspring of the mind means the spiritual unification and the world as it has been envisioned by the individual and creative generation is the emergence of new works of art on the basis of resonance and relationship between subject and object. The distinctive quality of Chinese painting lies precisely in the fact that its creative process is not a unidirectional act of mimetic reproduction, but rather a reciprocal process in which subjective sentiment and objective scenery mutually stimulate and interpenetrate, before being reshaped by the mind. It is within this progressive movement — from

affective resonance to the mind's wellspring, and ultimately to generative creation — that one of the intrinsic aesthetic logics of Chinese painting takes shape. At the same time, this process-oriented view of pictorial generation may be placed in dialogue with contemporary discussions of process aesthetics and theories of becoming. Some recent studies, particularly from the perspective of ecological aesthetics in Chinese painting, have re-examined the generative thinking and holistic vision embedded in classical landscape theory, thereby suggesting the potential extension of traditional painting discourse within contemporary contexts, while its conceptual foundation remains deeply rooted in the traditional Chinese intellectual horizon of the unity of Heaven and humanity and the cultivation of the subject, as well as the inherent ideological vein of Chinese thought.¹¹

First, the stage of sensing and arousal — affective resonance — marks the point of departure for pictorial inspiration. As Wang Wei observed, “the mind is stirred by things” (“心因物動”): the beauty of clouds, wind, mountains, and waters first touches the strings of the painter's feeling. Without being moved by scenery — without genuine affection and responsiveness — no artistic inspiration can take root. Wang Wei's lines, “gazing at autumn clouds... facing the spring breeze” (“望秋雲... 臨春風”), vividly register the intense inner resonance that arises when the painter encounters nature.¹² Shitao is yet another example of the individual who puts theory into practice; creative work requires strong involvement of emotional responses. Three visits to Mount Huangshan have gained their famous phrase which says: “My master is Mount Huangshan and I am friend of Mount Huangshan” (“黃山是我師、我是黃山之友”). He perceived prominent mountains and rivers as teachers and companions full of enlightenment knowledge capable to enlighten his intelligence.

Figure 2 was never realized as a result of just drawing sessions but instead after long travels, careful studying and memorizing the impressions. By repetition of climbs, where strange peaks and rocks along with shifting sea clouds are observed-Shitao finally absorbed his feelings about landscapes as part of life-experiences-feelings. In order to paint Shitao was not interested to be hasty repeating what was seen in front of him eyes he took his time waiting till nature phenomena would influence his psyche before coming up with visualized concepts characterized by constant unity. Going outside of celebrated hills Shitao applied his concept of journey (旅行), or better say the very notion of traveling being an act of creation itself. Journey in Zhanggong cave (figure 3): this painting recalls an obsolete notion of journey that has been utilized multiple times throughout history in paintings. Its meaning should not be understood as presenting anything beautiful, although it could imply academic fantasies of isolation, escape out of everyday life realities. He would not have been content copying old styles because of the fact that his conception of travel on the basis of real expeditions made alteration emotionally significant world into view-possible-world perceptible visually available mentally thus travel turned really entrance point into creative act.¹³



Figure 2. Shitao, *Huangshan* (handscroll), ink on paper, 26.1 × 168 cm, private collection.



Figure 3. Shitao, *Traveling to Zhanggong Cave* (handscroll), ink and color on paper, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

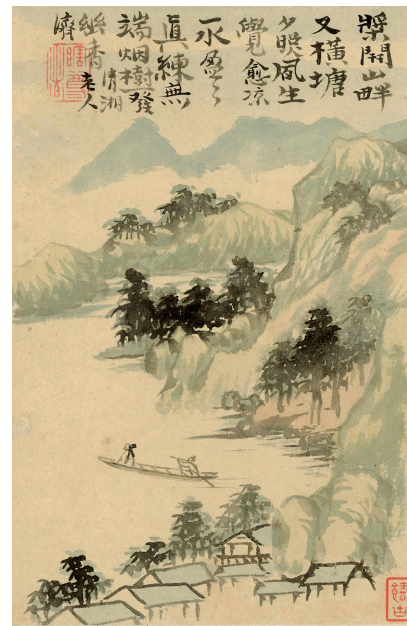
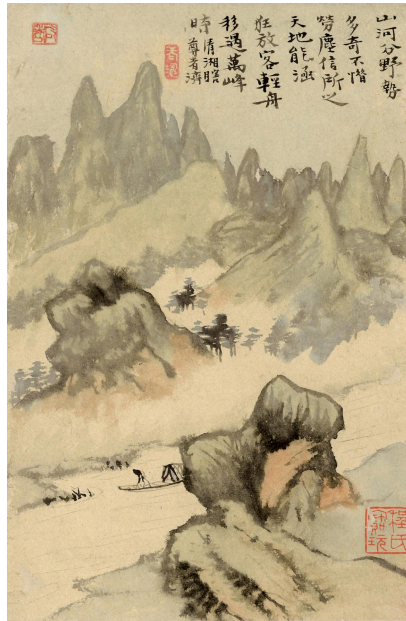
Copying old masters in secluded spaces was the concept that Shitao disagreed with, but painters were supposed to have penetrated nature and look ideas in the objectivity of life. In his view, nature contains inexhaustible principles of creation and sources of beauty; only through being present on-site — responding and then expressing — can painting be infused with living vitality.¹⁴ Whether in Wang Wei or Shitao, affective exchange with mountains and landscapes is treated as an indispensable starting point for artistic creation: external sensation gives rise to inner arousal, providing the driving force for artistic conception.

Second, the stage of the mind's wellspring marks the deepening and gestational phase of artistic formation. Once external phenomena stir inner feeling, the painter does not remain in a state of passive emotional response; rather, the artist actively integrates his own spirit into the object, achieving a subtle and wonderful fusion between subject and object. Wang Wei's proposal that painting should “model the form of the Great Void” (“擬太虛之體”) in fact calls for the painter to reconstruct, within the mind, a world infused with subjective understanding. Such reconstruction is precisely the process by which the painter, through the inner mind's wellspring,

penetrates and assimilates the object. On the one hand, the painter repeatedly contemplates the forms and vital spirit of the myriad things observed; on the other, personal cultivation, emotion, and conceptual orientation are gradually incorporated. As Wang Wei suggests, “form and spirit” (“形與神”) are fundamentally unified: external form acquires vitality only after being refined through the workings of the mind.

Shitao demonstrates an even more self-conscious awareness of this process. He asserts that “the method of the One Stroke arises from generating the existent out of the non-existent and unifying the many methods through the one” (“一畫之法，蓋以無發生有，以有法貫眾法”). The dialectic between “non-being” and “being” here is in fact a manifestation of the operation of the mind’s wellspring: the painter begins from the formless principles of creation, forms structured conceptions within the mind, and then employs this fundamental method to articulate endlessly varied pictorial expressions.¹⁵ Shitao has a lot of respect on the subjective talents-energy of the painter and the numinous disposition of him or her asserting that individuality must arise through engagement with outside expressions. Therefore, he states that once having studied mountains long-time painters do not depict every single one of them mechanically instead they say “Use all unusual peaks as a first draft”, which in Chinese is written as 搜尽奇峰打草稿 (so ju qi feng da cao gao), meaning the idea of mental pictures on the most striking summits and finally portray the same picture in a distinct form and manner.¹⁶ Figure 1 illustrates how changing from acquiring knowledge of nature switches to comprehending its source inside the mind. Although it does not show any particular peak, but depicts what was gathered over years traveling around the globe seeing numerous places. Ridges overlap each other; tracks

cross these ridges spatial extension cannot be imposed by convention, it forms itself naturally according to total perception received through imagination of the writer. The given answer confirms the fact that the subject already surpassed the point where they just reproduced something outer. With his command over the inner source, he transformed observed scenery into another cosmos i.e., internal organization within forms and rhythms that guided him towards creation of his personal vision of the visual universe grounded on observation of the natural world. Album of River Journey figures 4-7 explain such concept better by attributing this piece to mental springs occurring during travels drawing activities. Common scenarios - banks riversides, vessels movement etc., are portrayed on those leaves but careful usage of empty spaces along side atmospheric washes and brush stroke formations helps to regulate depicted environment as graphic land ruled by inner laws.¹⁷ Only through exploration and synthesis of countless impressions into an entire being can an artist imagine a view of landscape with all its beauty inside their mind which would cause their brush to flow with inspiration similar to divine inspirations combined with the soul of heaven-earth.



Figures 4–7. Attributed to Shitao, *Album of River Journeys* (album leaves), light ink and color on paper,

32.2 × 22.4 cm each, private collection.

The final part of generative stage refers to the actualization of the artwork. Emotional stimulation, conceptual maturity: the painter has already created an inner landscape and brought into existence another image-world in no time but merely through one stroke of a brush and some ink. In Wang Wei painting ancient artists are

depicted as individuals who move their fingers upon receiving divine wisdom (運諸指掌，明神降之)，indicating that there is a divinity underlying how intangible thoughts acquire shape. It is at this point that the harmony of mind and body reaches its peak – “The eye reacts to the heart, the heart retaliates through the hand’s movements” (心手相呼應、眼到手到)，in which art recreates life as what exists on the outside. Shitao intensifies even further the subjectivity and liberty of creative act than ever before. In order to have their brush and ink accompany time (“筆墨應當隨時代”), and shed itself free of conventional restrictions painters had been urged towards using so-called the OneStroke where all heavenly and earth rotates around (大滌子一畫在手天地旋轉). His nick name of Great Purifier meant deliberate purification out of the outdated tradition trying to find new ways of expression without restraint. As he writes in *Huayu Lu · Chapter on Transcending the Mundane* (《畫語錄·脫俗章》), one should “use brush and ink to depict Heaven and Earth and let all things be immersed within the self” (“借筆墨以寫天地萬物，而陶泳乎我”) — that is, to depict all things under Heaven with brush and ink and let them merge into the artist’s spiritual world in a state of profound harmony, which reveals the essence of pictorial re-creation.¹⁸

Thus, the artwork is not a crude imitation of nature but a renewed generation of the natural world through the painter’s subjectivity. In Shitao’s view, merely copying the objective appearance of things would confine the artist within the “cage of Heaven and Earth,” whereas only the full activation of the mind’s wellspring can endow painted forms with new vitality and resonance, allowing the painter to merge with the myriad things of the cosmos. Such re-created images often contain meanings “beyond the image” and scenes “beyond the scene,” surpassing the limits of the original motif

and embodying a higher level of aesthetic significance.

Importantly, pictorial re-creation does not end with the painter but continues through the viewer's reception.¹⁹ Viewers of Huangshan (figure 2), for instance, are able to sense the creator's emotional investment and enter into affective correspondence with the painter, an echo that translates the artist's original affective response to nature and creative reimagining of artistic conception into aesthetic images communicable to the viewer. Meanwhile, *Drafting after Exhausting the Extraordinary Peaks* (figure 1), through its continuously unfolding spatial structure, guides viewers into a processual mode of looking that echoes the artist's own journeys and syntheses of landscape experience. The fact remains that despite their distinct styles of writing, these two texts indicate that there are still further phases to the generative process even after the picture has been made as it proceeds to the viewer and perception of the image. All motion- emotion reflection up through consciousness fountainhead of creativeness finds resolution upon completion in which the artist is united by nature together with a perceiver on an identical level of perception and feeling once completed artwork replies back at responder.

In conclusion, the views of Wang Wei and Shitao on art are at opposite ends of a spectrum, such as emotion provocation by the one hand and intellectual creation on the other hand both together help explain the process of integration between object and its observer in pictorial formation. Affective resonance takes precedence: an artistic energy is unimaginable without reacting to an infinite number of phenomena of Heaven and Earth. Generative creativity clarifies, no artist can transform perceived reality into a novel work of arts if he cannot activate the sources of thoughts and emancipate them self of traditionalities passed down throughout history. The coming together of their thoughts results in particular esthetics of resonance and creativeness represented in Chinese paintings. This way emotional adaptation causes not only life of artists, but also keeps going through the philosophy background of unity of heaven and man heritage and comes up with more advanced idea of individual creativity.

Under this condition, the transition of the feeling-resonance to the well-spring of the mind followed further to creative-creation will become an internal reasoning behind aestheticism of painting. Through this layered unfolding, nature, subject, and artistic image are continuously transformed into one another, ultimately completing the characteristic creative process of Chinese painting.

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Editor: Liu Ge

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