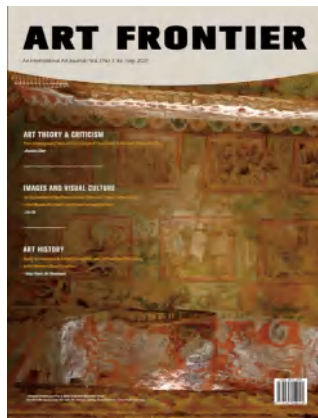




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The Contemporary Value of the Concept of Chuanshen in Ancient Chinese Painting

Boxian Chen

Abstract

Chuanshen (Shen-Conveying), as a core concept in Chinese painting, has not yet had its profound contemporary value fully activated and interpreted within the current artistic creation and intellectual context. This article transcends traditional art history research, revealing through intellectual history tracing and conceptual analysis that Chuanshen Xiezhao (Shen-conveying depiction) is actually a methodological principle unifying aesthetic transcendence and technical functionality, thus demonstrating that Chinese painting, since the Wei-Jin period, has achieved its autonomy of value through “skill approaching the Dao (ji jin hu dao)”. It further elucidates how this concept, by connecting the individual with the cosmic Dao, promotes the awakening of artistic subjectivity and the independence of Chinese landscape painting, ultimately establishing the ontological status of Chinese art. In the contemporary context, this article explores the holistic perspective and inherent transcendent thought inherent in Chuanshen (Shen-Conveying), providing unique aesthetic resources for critiquing technical rationality and overcoming the objectification of humanity, making it a living intellectual paradigm capable of participating in the dialogue of modernity.

Key Words

Chuanshen Xiezhao, Form and Shen,¹ artistic self-awareness, contemporaneity, Chinese aesthetics

Since Gu Kaizhi of the Eastern Jin Dynasty proposed the concept of Chuanshen, this idea has gradually evolved into a shared ideal encompassing art forms such as painting and calligraphy, becoming an axial concept in classical Chinese aesthetics and painting theory. It marks a shift in Chinese art from pursuing mere resemblance to emphasizing the expression of inner life and spiritual temperament, taking root and flourishing in the traditional philosophical debate between Form and Shen, profoundly shaping the intrinsic value of art. However, the critical energy of this concept in contemporary times has not been fully activated, and there is still much room for in-depth exploration. This article, through tracing the concept's origins, elucidating its theoretical foundation, and analyzing practical cases, reveals how the concept of "Chuanshen Xiezhao" has promoted the self-awareness of the value of Chinese art. It aims to promote dialogue between classical aesthetic resources and contemporary intellectual issues through a "return to the source to open a new chapter" approach.

1. The Conceptual Origins of Chuanshen

Our starting point lies in the philosophical roots of the concept of Chuanshen, which helps explain how it is intellectually related to Dao within traditional Chinese culture.

The concept of Chuanshen Xiezhao can be traced to the Eastern Jin artist Gu Kaizhi. It first appears in the text *A New Account of the Tales of the World* (Shishuo Xinyu) of the Southern Dynasties, which was compiled by Liu Yiqing, in which its use in describing Gu Kaizhi's figure painting is mentioned. The record of Gu Kaizhi in the first chapter of the *Xuanhe Painting Catalog* also mentions that he furthered this idea when he was painting the eyes of a figure. Nonetheless, as far as can be determined, it was not this theory that Gu Kaizhi developed in his three surviving treatises on painting. *The Xuanhe Painting Catalog* was probably based on the *Shishuo Xinyu* of Liu Yiqing. This instead suggests that Chuanshen Xiezhao may be seen as a refinement of the painting philosophy attributed to Gu Kaizhi by later generations. Considering that Gu Kaizhi himself never gave a clear and strict

explication of Chuanshen Xiezhao, it is necessary to analyze and reconstruct the formation context and specific components of this concept. There are three surviving treatises on painting by Gu Kaizhi: *On Painting* (Lun Hua), *Comments on the Paintings of Famous Masters of the Wei and Jin Dynasties* (Wei Jin Shengliu Huazan) and *Record of Painting the Yuntai Mountain* (Hua Yuntaishan Ji).² Some of these conceptual elements associated with Chuanshen Xiezhao include Shen expressed through form (yi xing xie shen), conveying Shen (chuanshen), Shen-essence (shenqi, the quintessential spirit), Shen and manner dwelling in the mind (shen yi zai xin), and getting in touch with Shen through contemplation (wu dui tong shen). They are similar in nature because the keyword Shen appears many times. In this way, the conceptual connotations of Shen are important for understanding the main idea of Chuanshen Xiezhao.

Shen is traditionally contrasted with Form in the theory of Gu Kaizhi's painting, referring to inner spiritual character or vital resonance that goes beyond the external appearance. This conception of Form and Shen is deeply rooted in the intellectual soil of the Wei-Jin era. Since the Western Han text *Huainanzi* (compiled under the auspices of Liu An and others) promoted the idea that "Shen is more important than Form (shen gui yu xing)"³, the discussion of Form and Shen has been an important philosophical problem in China. Even though there have been arguments concerning the problem of the perishing of Shen (shen mie)⁴ and the imperishability of Shen (shen bu mie), the ontological nature of Shen as the spirit of life and the dualistic nature of Form and Shen had become embedded in the intellectual tradition. This gave a pure philosophical rationale to the transition in painting from simply replicating external forms to expressing the internal resonance of Shen.

Going back even further, this notion of Form and Shen quite literally parallels the discussion of Xiang (phenomenal image) in Daoist philosophy. According to chapter 51 of the *Daodejing*, "Dao gives them life; De (virtue/potency) nurtures them; matter gives them Form; circumstances nurture them, to completion."⁵ It means that the myriad things have to possess Form to exist after the process of being engendered

by Dao and being nurtured by De. Form is then the essential medium by which a thing manifests itself and enters the world of perception. In this case, Form is the externally apprehensible manifestation that results after Dao and De have acted upon a concrete entity. Conversely, Chapter 21 of the same text, stating “Dao as a ‘thing’ is only indistinct and elusive. Indistinct and elusive, yet within it there is Xiang; elusive and indistinct, yet within it there is a thing,”⁶ reveals that Xiang is not the internal state of a thing. Rather, it precedes the thing, serving as the incipient intimation and vague configuration presented by Dao in its indistinct and elusive state. This Xiang aligns with the Great Xiang (da xiang) described in Chapter 14 as “the form of the formless, the Xiang of the thingless,”⁷ both refer to the mode through which Dao manifests itself, whose essential nature is formless. In contrast, Form is the external configuration possessed by a concrete thing after it has come into being. Therefore, in later painting theory, the Shen conveyed through Chuanshen is philosophically closer to Dao or the Great Xiang, the indistinct, formless, and originary source of life for all things. Conversely, the Form captured through Xiezhao (depiction) corresponds to the external appearance of a concrete object or phenomenon. The Eastern Jin scholar Ge Hong, in his *Baopuzi (Embracing Simplicity)*, more explicitly articulates the relationship between Form and Shen: “Form relies on Shen to stand;” “Form is the abode of Shen.”⁸ Thus, at its root, the relationship between Form and Shen can also be compared to that between the formed thing and the formless Dao.

The core mechanism for the translation of the Form-Shen relationship from philosophical speculation into painting practice lies in the guidance of Conception (yi) and the execution of technique (ji). This line of thought can be traced to the conceptual mode of “setting up the Xiang to fully express the Conception” in the *Xici Shangzhuan (Upper Xici Commentary)* of the *I Ching*. That is, through the creation of images, one conveys their subtle connotations and aesthetic essence, thus charting a direction for artistic creation: the Form in painting should serve the purpose of “fully expressing the Conception (jin yi).” By raising Conception to an ontological rank through his doctrine of “obtaining the Conception and forgetting the Xiang (de yi

wang xiang)”, Wang Bi of the Wei-Jin era directly encouraged a creative attitude in painting theory that valued above all the resonance of Shen rather than formal likeness. This approach allowed artists a good deal of freedom in their use of Form, enabling it to be the very medium which brings both Shen and Conception into existence. The idea of painting theory is directly reflected in the proposal of Wudui Tongshen by Gu Kaizhi. He outlined a definite process of transforming philosophical speculation into practice by developing a creative praxis: “observe things to realize Form; constitute Form to bring about Xiang; selecting from Xiang to deplete conception; associate conception with Shen; combine Shen with Dao.” Thus, Chuanshen is, in short, a creative methodology that is directed by Conception, and that bases metaphysical reflection on a rational process of observation, expression, and aesthetics.

The strategy of seeking access to authenticity by means of artistic form, as intrinsic to the idea of Chuanshen, is not a form of wisdom unique to China. It is echoed in considerable reflection on the nature of art in other human cultures. In contemporary Western philosophy, Martin Heidegger, in his work *The Origin of the Work of Art* (*Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*), considers the essence of art as “the becoming, and happening of truth,”⁹ and sees beauty (Schönheit) as “a way in which truth occurs as unconcealment.”¹⁰ This provides a philosophical perspective amenable to comparison. Although the concept of truth (aletheia) addressed by Heidegger originates from the ancient Greek tradition, and thus has a provenance entirely different from that of the Chinese Dao, both share at their core a pursuit of a realm of transcendence characterized by subject-object unity. The distinction lies in the fact that Heidegger’s path involves the clearing of Being through unconcealment, whereas Chuanshen achieves the realization of Dao through intuitive apprehension. The Fourfold (Geviert) of “earth and sky, divinities and mortals,” proposed in Heidegger’s later thought, finds an intriguing resonance in its structural conception with the “Dao-realizing” tradition in Chinese art, exemplified by notions such as the unity of heaven and humanity (tian ren he yi) and the fusion of self and things (wu wo

liang wang). Joseph Beuys proposed a holistic worldview that emphasizes humanity's essential connections: to animals, plants, and nature on one hand, and to angels and the divine on the other.¹¹ This universalization of divinity across society and all things resonates intrinsically with the logic of extension inherent in the concept of Chuanshen, as it expanded from the human figure to landscape and the myriad things. Nevertheless, the transcendence of Beuys is directed outward towards social change and social action, whereas Chuanshen is inward, in search of an intense harmonisation of the individual soul with the cosmic principle.



Figure 1. Gu Kaizhi, *Admonitions of the Court Instructress*. Full scroll, ink and color on silk, 24.8 cm × 348.2 cm. Eastern Jin Dynasty (Song Dynasty copy, detail). The British Museum, London.

Therefore, the modern relevance of the concept of Chuanshen derives, in part, from precisely this kind of cross-cultural resonance. It is grounded in the deepest traditions of Chinese Dao-learning and the dialogue of Form and Shen, with its very essence of opening up the infinite Shen with the finite Form, thereby accessing the Dao of creation. Whereas its point of departure and the practical problems it focuses on are different from those in modern Western thought, the two traditions agree in recognizing the redemptive power of art in the era of instrumental rationality. This Chinese intellectual tradition not only presents a distinctive aesthetic frame of reference to contemplate the problems of modernity but also points to a real critical-constructive praxis. First, in restoring phenomena to their source in the Dao, it manifests their specific vital power. It is the animating force generated in this act that

is the indispensable dynamic producing the aura as it is envisioned by Walter Benjamin. Second, it recommends an intellectual antidote to alienation, countering the modern symptom identified by Herbert Marcuse: the reduction of human beings into “one-dimensional man”.

Since its inception, the concept of Chuanshen has been intrinsically linked to the awakening of human consciousness. It expresses this basic orientation as a deep affirmation of individual spiritual resonance, as a conscious protection and recognition of the true value of life. This artistic concept, which possesses strong Chinese national characteristics, triggers a dynamic spirit of thought and innovation in the modern world. To go further, what the artist must endeavour to do is to cut through the veils of social symbols, to re-experience the true spiritual existence of what it is to be human, and in doing so to rediscover and restore a rich, profound and integral subjectivity of the individual. Thus, a modern re-articulation of Chuanshen is not just a systematization of ancient intellectual resources but essentially a critical engagement with universal questions concerning the nature of art and the human condition. This provides a sound intellectual fulcrum that supports its creative transformation in the current era.

An overview of prior scholarship shows that foundational contributions, including the explanation of its Zhuangzi-ist roots by Xu Fuguan, and its placement in his theory of artistic conception (yijing) by Zong Baihua, have established a solid base upon which an interpretation of the concept of Chuanshen may be based. Nevertheless, most works to date have considered it primarily in terms of its history and aesthetics. The potential to further examine the methodological tension in Chuanshen and Xiezhao as two facets of a unified whole, its central position in the formation of the ontological value of art, and especially its latent intellectual power to solve the dilemmas of modernity is still significant. This is exactly where the current study begins: we should move beyond the traditional view of Chuanshen as a fixed aesthetic standard, and restore it to a contextual interpretation as a complete theory of artistic production. Only then can we explain how it came to be transformed into a principle

of figure painting, and a fundamental theoretical basis of the autonomous value of Chinese art.

2. Chuanshen Xiezhao: The Fusion of Transcendence and Practicality

In what way does Chuanshen Xiezhao, as an integrated concept, construct a methodological principle of Chinese art, which represents the “advanced skill to approach Dao”, and unite transcendent pursuit with a practical foundation?

Subsequent scholars, in accentuating the transcendent quality of Chuanshen Xiezhao, separate Chuanshen from Xiezhao, with the former as an aesthetic ideal and the latter as a secondary technical instrument. This interpretation, however, does not adequately reflect the integrity of Gu Kaizhi’s original thought or its historical context. Chuanshen and Xiezhao are not two opposite ideas but are a dialectically unified methodological framework. The core of this concept lies in the fact that the aesthetic transcendence of painting should be firmly grounded in the practical basis of craft.



Figure 2. Gu Kaizhi, *Nymph of the Luo River*. Full scroll, ink and color on silk, 27.1 cm × 572.8 cm.

Eastern Jin Dynasty (Song Dynasty copy, detail). The Palace Museum, Beijing.

Xiezhao is the essential technical means of Chuanshen. In the context of Gu Kaizhi, Xiezhao does not refer to what is now termed realistic. In the three surviving treatises on his painting, much space is devoted to explaining the techniques and essentials of Xiezhao. There are certain things he points out in his *Comments on the Paintings of Famous Masters of the Wei and Jin Dynasties*: “If there is in the least discrepancy of length or brevity, hardness or softness, depth or shallow, breadth or

narrowness, the dotting of the eye pupils, where (high or low), the size, or how thick the ink, then the Shen-essence will also be altered.”¹² It stresses that the transfer of Shen-essence is highly dependent upon the careful treatment of details, including formal construction, brushwork, ink, and composition. Commenting in his *On Painting* on his representations of *Fuxi* and *Shennong*, he says that they have a “Shen that is of the dark and limitless, and that they evoke a feeling of approaching the One (de yi).”¹³ In this case, the transcendence of Shen is essentially based on the realistic Xiezhao of “possessing extraordinary bone form together with comeliness.”

The copies of the *Admonitions of the Court Instructress* and *Nymph of the Luo River* by Gu Kaizhi, which have been transmitted, can be seen as the classical examples of Chuanshen Xiezhao. In the *Admonitions of the Court Instructress*, Gu Kaizhi uses continuous, flowing lines to outline the flowing gowns and draped shawls, thus giving the figures a sense of life and a graceful,¹⁴ reserved Shen-resonance (shenyun) of the courtly women. His illustration of the gaze is especially thorough: the figures are either gazing intently or lowering their eyes attentively. The very position of the eye sockets and the gentle rhythm of the linework precisely determine the manifestation of the inner soul of the figure. The curvy lines of the sleeves of the goddess billow in the *Nymph of the Luo River*, merging with a linear rhythm of the streamers and flowing water, creating an ethereal, dreamy quality. The birth of Shen cannot be separated from the delicate Xiezhao of each detail. In this way, it becomes clear that in painting, the development of Shen cannot be separated from a deep study and a skillful depiction of Form.

Nevertheless, refined Xiezhao by itself is not the final aim of aesthetic pursuit. The contribution of Gu Kaizhi is to give Xiezhao the spiritual direction of Chuanshen. His suggestion of using Form to express Shen characterises this expression (xie) as an active, creative process of extraction and expression rather than a passive process of registering reality. This subordinates Form to the manifestation of inner life. In *On Painting* (Lun Hua), Gu Kaizhi advances the argument that “the spirit and manner are held in the mind, and the hand answers to the eye (shen yi zai xin, er shou chen qi

mu).”¹⁵ He assumes that the Shen of the subject should be refined in the mind of the painter first and then be embodied by skill, finally reaching that wordless aesthetic understanding of the “mystical appreciation that does not need to be explained (xuan shang ze bu dai yu).” Through his practice, Gu Kaizhi concretized the abstract ideal of Chuanshen, effecting a crucial transvaluation of value. Having the dialectical relationship of Form and Shen set, painting was no longer a practical art of using colors to capture and distinguish reality, nor only a means of teaching morals and educating society. At a deeper level, it became an enduring medium in which the literati were able to cleanse the mind to meditate on Dao and to calm the spirits.

Thus, as a whole unit in itself, Chuanshen Xiezhao takes the art of painting to a level where practicality and transcendence merge and further exalt the practicality to the discovery of the spirit of life and at times even the cosmic Dao. The Six Laws of Xie He emphasize vital resonance and movement (qi yun sheng dong) over the correspondence to objects and depiction of forms (ying wu xiang xing). This, in effect, creates in the theoretical discourse a system of values in which spiritual resonance is prior to technical likeness and thus constitutes a crucial recognition of the above change. In this structure, practical skill is still the basis of painting, but applied to different purposes from craft production or likeness. Rather, it is cultivation itself that brings about transcendent aesthetic pursuit. At the same time, the transcendent ideal of Chuanshen is given a concrete material basis through the mastery of Xiezhao. As Zhuangzi saw, “skill approaching the Dao” means that the most complete expertise of all is precisely the means by which Dao expresses itself. Thus, the intrinsic value of painting as such is established, enabling the talented painter, in the self-conscious production of Wudui Tongshen, to be an interpreter such that he is able to open the door between the material vehicle of the concrete and the metaphysical Dao of the transcendent.

Prior to the Wei-Jin period, the essence of figure painting lay in the maintenance of forms (cun xing) as a means of ethical teaching or historical record. Be it the tomb occupant whose soul is being guided to ascend to the heavens in a Western Han Feiyi

(non-garment) banner painting, or the serially arranged paragons of sagehood, loyalty, and martyrdom in the Eastern Han Wu Liang Shrine pictorial carvings, these figures were almost always represented in typified and symbolic forms. Their value lay more in designating social identity, moral archetypes, or ritual codes than in expressing individuality and inner soul. According to the *Guanzi*: “The scholars, farmers, artisans and merchants are the four classes of the people, the cornerstone people of the state.”¹⁶ This latent idea was a product of the Qin-Han united political system, which integrated separate individuals (ren) into the socialized and ingrained idea of “the people (min)”. To the extent that painting was a way of creating such a comprehensive visual order, it was naturally more inclined to create images of persons as roles, as opposed to lives. The introduction of the theory of Chuanshen by Gu Kaizhi was the turning point in the orientation of painting: not the representation of the individual as a social position but the attention to the individual as a life. When painters dedicate themselves to the expression of the Shen of a figure, the abstract idea of “the people” is thus made a concrete person, who has inner spirit-resonance and a spiritual world.



Figure 3. Zhan Ziqian (attributed to), *Spring Excursion*. Ink and color on silk, 43 cm × 80 cm. Sui

Dynasty. The Palace Museum, Beijing

3. The Generalization of Chuanshen and the Genesis of Artistic Self-Consciousness

The concept of Chuanshen had a far greater historical importance than merely establishing a creative approach to figure painting. It played a deeper role in that it served as a core value proposition that systematically triggered and represented the overall awakening of artistic subjectivity in Chinese painting. This brings us to the second main question of our inquiry: How did the establishment and generalization of this concept become the decisive driving force behind the movement towards artistic self-consciousness? This is most importantly expressed in two mutually supporting historical vectors: the first, the objects of Chuanshen expanded to include landscapes and the myriad things, which resulted in the unprecedented liberation of the subject matter and spirit of painting; the second, the standard of Chuanshen became a system of evaluation and judgment, creating an independent, intrinsic standard of value for painting. This sense of self-consciousness outlines the classical spirit and self-sufficient world of Chinese painting. And looking from the perspective of technological rationality and consumer culture of the modern world, we can see how this traditional idea could be involved in the formation of a new spiritual life.



Figure 4. Fan Kuan, *Travelers among Streams and Mountains*. Ink on silk, 206.3 cm × 103.3 cm.

Northern Song Dynasty. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

The successful application of Gu Kaizhi's theory of Chuanshen in figure painting brought forth a principle that could overcome the limitations of Form and capture and express the inner life-spirit of the object. However, the metaphorical strength of the principle of Chuanshen Xiezhao can be applied not only to figure painting. When this conceptual logic had been laid down, it could not but aspire to a greater sphere of expression. The generative vitality and cosmic rhythms that permeate the landscape and the multifarious objects, given that the Shen of each individual life may be sensed and expressed, in fact, represent a manifestation of the Shen as well. In this way, the development from conveying the Shen of figures to conveying the Dao of landscape is a natural extension of the logic inherent in the concept of Chuanshen. The driving power of such a radical change in values lay specifically in the redefinition of relations between humans and nature by the Wei-Jin literati. In his poetic dialogues, *Dialogs among Form, Shadow, and Spirit (Xing Ying Shen Zengda)*, Tao Yuanming develops the idea that the spirit identifies with Nature (shen bian ziran) through a triadic conversation between Form, Shadow (ying), and Shen. This contemplation goes beyond the attachment to the physical form and the Confucian doctrine of names (mingjiao), placing the self in the dynamism of the Heaven and Earth.¹⁷ During the Liu-Song period, Zong Bing, in his *Preface to Painting Landscape (Hua Shan Shui Xu)*, provided the vital theoretical background. He combined the aesthetics of landscape and cosmic ontology, suggesting the most famous theses: "Forms delight Dao (yi xing mei dao)" and "Shen, who has neither form nor trace, resides in forms and resonates with its kind (shen ben wu duan, qi xing gan lei)".¹⁸ This means that aesthetic value in the Form of landscape lies not in its indication of geographical position or its signification of divine auspiciousness, but, specifically, in its immediate expression of the immanent, generative and universal Dao. In his own time, Wang Wei, in his *Preface to Painting (Xu Hua)*, denounced the utilitarian perspective, which equated landscape painting with practical plans of marking off territories and demarcating administrative areas. Instead, he insisted that it is a medium for the unfettered flow of Shen, as evoked in the lines "Gazing upon autumn clouds, the spirit

soars; Confronting the spring breeze, thoughts expand boundlessly.”¹⁹ He fused the subjective Shen-thought (shensi) of the creator with the objective vitality-interest (shengji yiqu) of the landscape into a unity. This bears a similar orientation to Gu Kaizhi’s concept of “attaining marvels through empathetic imagination (qian xiang miao de).” This further generalized the object of Chuanshen: from capturing the Shen of an individual life to encompassing a holistic apprehension of the spirit of Heaven and Earth.

Theoretical self-consciousness bore substantial fruit in creative practice as well. Landscape painting formally emancipated itself from its subordinate status as a background for figures or a cartographic illustration, establishing itself as an independent genre. In fact, Gu Kaizhi was not only a preeminent figure painter but also an early practitioner of Chinese landscape painting. This generalization is already present in the *Nymph of the Luo River*. His landscape environment does not serve only to provide the picture with a view of nature²⁰ but also to express the emotional coloring of the scene. Landscape took on absolute status as a subject during the Sui-Tang period, as in the supposed painting *Spring Excursion* attributed to Zhan Ziqian. By applying the coloration of blue and green and using a bird’s-eye view, he expressed the dance of life of spring coming back into the world. This signifies a macrocosmic awareness of the Shen of nature. The landscape painting practice and theory reached their maturity in the Song Dynasty. One of the best illustrations is the *Travelers among Streams and Mountains* by Fan Kuan of the Northern Song. Its monumental, high-reaching composition, exuding the spiritual essence of the northern landscape, makes the work a model of Chuanshen. Landscape painting of the Yuan Dynasty extended this generalization to its culmination, laying the foundation for subsequent theories of literati painting. For instance, Ni Zan’s “untrammelled-brushwork landscapes (yibi shanshui),” with their spare, desolate, and austere scenery, convey the painter’s aloof, unyielding character and solitary mindset. This achieved the ultimate shift from “conveying the Shen of landscape” to “expressing the untrammelled spirit from within the breast,” thereby completing the

liberation of painting's subject matter, and establishing a self-sufficient aesthetic world capable of reciprocally engaging with the spirit of the subject.



Figure 5. Ni Zan, *Rongxi Studio*. Ink on paper, 74.7 cm × 35.5 cm. Yuan Dynasty. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

The concept of Chuanshen not only guided creation but was also sublimated into an autonomous evaluative system.

In the Southern Dynasties, Xie He's Six Laws (Liu Fa) transformed the ineffable Shen into the more apprehensible, holistic, and quasi-musical resonance (yun) through the

first law, “vital resonance and live movement (Qiyun Shengdong).” Thus, a hierarchy of value was established that elevated spiritual character above technical rules. In the Tang Dynasty, Zhu Jingxuan, Zhang Yanyuan, and others further historicized and systematized this criterion, establishing hierarchical classifications such as “Shen (Divine), Miao (Exquisite), Neng (Proficient), Yi (untrammeled)”²¹ or “Naturalness, Shen, Miao, Jing (refined), Jinxi (meticulous).”²² Among these, Naturalness (Ziran) or the Untrammeled Class (Yipin) were regarded as the sublime consummation of skill unified with Dao, where the work appears utterly spontaneous and Heaven-made. This constitutes, in essence, the ultimate expression of Chuanshen. This hierarchical system constructed a ladder of value, with its rungs measured by the different states of attaining Chuanshen. It is on this basis that Huang Xiufu of the Northern Song systematically outlined the history of Chinese painting. Theoretical legitimacy of a creative approach characterized by “not being constrained by conventional methods, emphasizing subjective expression, and obtaining inspiration from the essence of nature” was officially granted by Zhu Jingxuan and Zhang Yanyuan, thereby contributing to the conceptual scope of Chuanshen. Their theoretical formulation presents the Divine Class (Shenpin) as the apt conveyance of the spirit of the object and the Untrammeled Class (Yipin) as the free expression of the spirit within the subject. These two constitute the subjective and objective aspects of the Chinese assessment of painting, although each of them is still rooted in the quest for Shen that goes beyond formal resemblance.

Chinese painting, with its entire discursive system, formed a system of self-legislation and self-assessment through the progression from the artistic quest of Chuanshen to the evaluative system of Qiyun (spirit-resonance) and Yige (untrammelled style). At this level, the comparative value of a work is determined by the extent to which it rises to the level recognized by its own tradition, as measured by both spiritual and aesthetic values. This signals that Chinese painting had attained a self-coherence based on the Chinese national tradition, becoming an art form with an autonomous cultural identity and confidence in its own values.

Nevertheless, this independent classical framework has faced serious challenges in the modern age. Max Weber's concept of the "disenchantment of the world" actually points to the weakening of the spiritual aspect of modern society. Today, this tendency has become more pronounced and pressing. Art has entered into a twofold predicament of calculative domination under instrumental rationality and the semiotic erosion of consumer culture. On the one hand, the arrival of the era of mechanical reproduction, as Walter Benjamin noted, has caused the dissipation of art's "aura"²³; on the other hand, the Situationist International and Jean Baudrillard indicate the dangers of art being turned into spectacular "hyperreal" simulacra or alienating it into symbolic capital in the spectacle-society context catalyzed by consumerism. Combined, the two tendencies have caused art to confront a dilemma of diminished spirit, gradually alienating it from the inner spiritual substance on which it is based and destabilizing the axiological base on which it rests.

4. Conclusion

The concept of Chuanshen evolved from Gu Kaizhi's methodological construction into the establishment of the spirit of landscape painting and evaluation systems, which become a profound ideological paradigm shaping the spiritual core of Chinese art. Through the practice of "skill approaching the Dao", it connects the pursuit of the transcendent Dao with the specific techniques of observation and expression, thus laying the foundation for the value autonomy of Chinese art. After tracing its historical context and theoretical structure, we must address the ultimate question of this article: in a contemporary era of the dissipation of "aura" and alienated images, can returning to the tradition of Chuanshen provide an effective intellectual path for reflecting on and transcending the dilemmas of modernity? This article's exploration demonstrates that the vitality of this concept stems from its inherent dialectical structure, namely the symbiotic relationship between Xiezhao and Chuanshen. This ensures that the transcendence of the spirit is always inseparable from the fundamental creative principle of material practice. The generalization from figure subjects to landscape and natural subjects illustrates the universal applicability

of this concept. Furthermore, the establishment of value systems such as Qiyun and Yige signifies that this concept has ultimately become an internalized and conscious standard for artistic judgment. Therefore, the contemporary interpretation of Chuanshen is essentially an intellectual practice that uses a return to the source to open up a new chapter. Revisiting this ancient intellectual resource in the contemporary context is not merely historical research, nor is it about tracing back to ancient painting techniques and themes. Rather, it is about reawakening the creative wisdom and value attitude that unifies technical depth, spiritual transcendence, and a contemplative insight into life, providing a unique aesthetic reference for reflecting on and addressing the dilemmas of modernity. In the age of artificial intelligence, this aesthetic wisdom rooted in its own tradition has irreplaceable revelatory significance for rebuilding the subjectivity of Chinese culture in a globalized context, reversing the trend of art becoming a tool, and ultimately securing the individual's spiritual world. The concept of Chuanshen has thus transcended millennia, continuing to participate in the eternal dialogue about the human condition and the essence of art as a living, critically charged intellectual resource.

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