

The Beauty of Emptiness—The Foundational Root of Chinese Aesthetics

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Abstract

The article explores how the concept of “emptiness” (*xu* 虛) emerged as the defining aesthetic principle in the tradition of Chinese “literati painting” (*wenrenhua* 文人畫). Far from denoting absence or nothingness in the strict sense of the word, *xu* represents a dynamic and generative force—an underlying condition through which artistic form, meaning, and spiritual insight arise. Tracing its development from the Wei-Jin period (220–589 CE) onwards, the article examines how *xu* evolved at the intersection of Neo-Daoist metaphysics (*Xuanxue* 玄學) and Chan Buddhist philosophy, transforming from a metaphysical abstraction into a concrete aesthetic language.

Focusing on five key figures—Gu Kaizhi, Zong Bing, Xie He, Jing Hao, and Shitao the study highlights how each articulated core aesthetic principles that grounded painting in the expressive possibilities of emptiness. Concepts such as *liubai* (留白, unpainted space), *qiyun* (氣韻, vital resonance of spirit), and *yihua* (一畫, the holistic or primordial brushstroke) demonstrate how emptiness manifests visually and philosophically. Ultimately, the article argues that *xu* is not only central to Chinese aesthetic theory, but serves as the silent generative force that animates the entire tradition of literati art.

Keywords: Chinese aesthetics, “literati painting” (*wenrenhua* 文人畫), “emptiness” (*xu* 虛), Daoism, *Zhuangzi*

Lepota praznine – temeljni izvor kitajske estetike

Izvilleček

Članek raziskuje, kako se je pojem praznine (*xu* 虛) uveljavil kot osrednje estetsko načelo v tradiciji kitajskega slikarstva učenjakov (*wenrenhua* 文人畫). Daleč od tega, da bi označeval praznino ali ničnost v dobesednem pomenu besede, predstavlja *xu* dinamično in ustvarjalno silo – temeljno stanje, iz katerega vznikajo umetniška forma, pomen in duhovni uvid. Članek sledi razvoju tega pojma od obdobja Wei-Jin (220–589 n. št.) dalje ter analizira, kako se je *xu* oblikoval na stičišču neodaistične metafizike (*Xuanxue* 玄學) in chan budistične filozofije ter se sčasoma preoblikoval iz metafizične abstrakcije v konkreten estetski jezik. S poudarkom na petih ključnih osebnostih – Gu Kaizhi, Zong

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Bing, Xie He, Jing Hao in Shi Tao – študija izpostavlja, kako je vsak od njih oblikoval temeljna estetska načela, ki slikarstvo utemeljujejo v izraznih možnostih praznine. Pojmi, kot so *liubai* (留白, neposlikani prostor), *qiyun* (氣韻, vitalna resonanca duha) in *yihua* (一畫, celostna ali izvorna poteza s čopičem), prikazujejo, kako se praznina uresničuje tako vizualno kot filozofsko. Članek v zaključku trdi, da *xu* ni zgolj osrednji pojem kitajske estetske teorije, temveč tiha ustvarjalna sila, ki oživlja celotno tradicijo umetnosti učenjakov.

Ključne besede: kitajska estetika, slikarstvo učenjakov (*wenrenhua* 文人畫), praznina (*xu* 虛), daoizem, *Zhuangzi*

Introduction

This article examines how the concept of “emptiness” (*xu* 虛)¹ became the defining aesthetic principle in the tradition of Chinese “literati painting” (*wenrenhua* 文人畫). Rather than referring strictly to absence or nothingness in a narrow sense, *xu* conveys a dynamic and generative force—a foundational principle that shapes both artistic creation and aesthetic perception. In this sense, true emptiness is a dimension in which things are without any fixed essence, self, or substance (Nelson 2023, 34).

Tracing its evolution from the Wei-Jin period (220–589 CE) onward, the article explores how emptiness emerged at the intersection of Neo-Daoist “metaphysics”

1 Although this article focuses on the concept of *xu* (虛) in Chinese aesthetics, it is essential to note that *xu* is closely connected with the related notions of *kong* (空) and *wu* (無). While each stems from a distinct philosophical background—*xu* and *wu* from Daoism, and *kong* from Buddhism—they collectively shape the foundation of Chinese aesthetic thought. Although they are conceptually distinct, these three terms are deeply interwoven in Chinese aesthetics, where emptiness is not a lack, but a vital force of meaning and creativity. As presented in the article, *xu* refers to emptiness as openness, receptivity, and latent potential. It is not a mere void, but a dynamic space that allows for spontaneity, transformation, and suggestiveness. In painting and poetry, *xu* often appears as empty space that evokes meaning precisely through what is left unsaid or unpainted. *Kong* denotes emptiness as the absence of inherent, independent existence and reveals the illusory nature of fixed forms, pointing to the impermanence and interdependence of all things. In aesthetics, it imbues works with a sense of transience, detachment, and contemplative stillness. *Wu*—most often translated as “absence”, “being-without”, “non-being”, or “nothingness”—is rendered in this paper primarily as “absence” and signifies the primordial, undifferentiated source from which all things arise and to which they return. Aesthetically, *wu* manifests in the value placed on “naturalness” or “spontaneity” (*ziran* 自然), effortless action, action without forcing or “non-intervention” (*wu wei* 無為), and the subtle presence of the formless within form. For an in-depth examination of the distinctions between these three concepts, see Rošker (2025b).

(*Xuanxue* 玄學) and Chan Buddhist philosophy, gradually transforming from a metaphysical abstraction into a vital aesthetic category.²

In Chinese aesthetics, *xu* signifies potentiality—the fertile void from which form emerges and meaning unfolds. In literati landscape painting, emptiness is made visible through *liubai* (留白), or “the unpainted space”, which invites the viewer’s imagination and contemplative engagement. It appears as mist, void, or spatial openness, evoking the presence of the *Dao* through what is left unsaid and unseen.

The literati painting tradition took shape during the Wei-Jin period as scholar-artists—often poets, calligraphers, and philosophers—rejected technical virtuosity in favour of an art form that embodied spiritual cultivation and harmony with nature. Their approach reflected broader shifts in Chinese intellectual history, including the collapse of Han Confucian orthodoxy, the rise of *Xuanxue* thought, and the integration of Buddhist “emptiness” (*kong* 空) with Daoist notions of “absence” or “nothingness” (*wu* 無). For these artists, brushstroke became more than a technique—it was a medium for communion with the cosmos.

In this article, I examined how five influential figures of literati painters—Gu Kaizhi 顧愷之 (344–406), Zong Bing 宗炳 (375–443), Xie He 謝赫 (479–502), Jing Hao 荆浩 (ca. 855–915), and Shitao 石涛 (1642–1707)—each articulated core aesthetic and philosophical principles that shaped the tradition of literati painting. Gu Kaizhi emphasized capturing the *spirit* (*shen* 神) of his subjects; Zong Bing proposed a Daoist view of landscape painting as a “vehicle for the *Dao*” (*shanshui yi xing mei dao* 山水以形媚道); Xie He developed the influential “Six Principles” (*liufa* 六法), placing *qiyun* (氣韻, “vital resonance of spirit”) above realistic representation; Jing Hao explored the hidden “genuine reality” (*zhen* 真) embedded in nature; and Shitao offered a synthesis of emptiness and creativity through his concept of the “holistic or primordial brushstroke” (*yihua* 一畫).

Together, their ideas reflect a shared conviction: that true art transcends representation—using form to suggest the formless, and substance to evoke the void. By tracing this intellectual and artistic lineage, we see how Daoist emptiness became the silent heartbeat of Chinese painting—an invisible force that shaped brushwork, structured composition, and ultimately invited viewers to perceive the *Dao* through the aesthetic experience itself.

2 It should be emphasized that this transformation is situated within the framework of a much broader turning point in the philosophical, linguistic, and axiological theories of the School of Mystery philosophers. This constituted one of the most significant theoretical shifts in the history of traditional Chinese thought (Rošker 2018, 166). Indeed, it can be argued that the discussions of the School of Mystery philosophers concerning the relationship between language and meaning represent a theoretical advancement of ancient disputations across virtually all areas of philosophical theory.

Through this exploration, the article aimed to show how the concept of emptiness permeates Chinese aesthetics at every level—serving not only as a foundational idea, but as the very essence of artistic expression in literati tradition.

The Birth of Chinese Aesthetic Theory and the Influence of *Xuanxue* and *Qingtan*

The Wei-Jin period marked the first systematic theorization of aesthetics in China, shifting art from moral-didactic Confucian frameworks (e.g. “art as moral instruction”) to Daoist and Buddhist infused philosophical explorations of spirit, emptiness, and transcendence. This transformation was driven by *Xuanxue* metaphysics, a philosophical movement that reinterpreted Daoist thought—particularly the *Laozi*, *Zhuangzi*, and *Yi jing*—through a lens of abstraction and ontological inquiry. At the heart of this reorientation lay the concepts of “absence” and “emptiness” (*wu* 無 and *xu* 虛), which would become the cornerstone of Chinese aesthetic theory for centuries to come.

This era marked a pivotal shift in Chinese aesthetics, as Daoist and Buddhist philosophies reoriented artistic expression toward the intangible, the spontaneous, and the spiritually profound. Prior to the Wei-Jin era, Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) art and aesthetics had been largely governed by Confucian principles, emphasizing the accurate depiction of social rituals, historical events, and moral exemplars. The Wei-Jin period saw art transcend mere representation of the external world to engage with metaphysical questions of existence and the nature of beauty. According to Xu Fuguan (1966, 157), this historical moment represents what we might call the “double awakening” of Chinese painting: both its conscious self-realization as an art form and its attainment of complete aesthetic autonomy.

This shift was catalysed by *Xuanxue* thinkers such as Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249 CE), its foremost thinker, who reinterpreted the *Laozi* to argue that all existence originates from *wu* (absence, nothingness). *Xuanxue*’s central debate revolved around the relationship between *you* (presence) and *wu* (absence). Wang Bi argued that all existence originates from *wu*, an infinite and formless ground. His commentary on the *Laozi* crystallized this view:

天下之物，皆以有為生。有之所始，以無為本。

All things under Heaven are born of presence, but the beginning of presence is absence.³ (Wang n.d., 40)

3 Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Chinese are my own.

This ontological stance⁴ gave aesthetic foundations to emptiness—*xu* 虛⁵—as an active compositional force referring to the ineffable *Dao* as the source of both cosmic and artistic truth. Emptiness became an active compositional force (for instance *liubai* 留白—intentionally leaving the unpainted space in painting) and a dynamic field where *qi* (vital energy) circulated, binding form and spirit. For Wang Bi, beauty lay not in formal perfection but in the embodiment of “boundlessness” (*wuxian* 無限), a quality that transcended sensory limitations to evoke the *Dao*’s purity and spontaneity.

Xuanxue sought to elucidate key Daoist principles—such as “absence” (*wu*), “presence” (*you* 有), “emptiness” (*xu*), “spontaneity” (*ziran* 自然), “effortless action” (*wuwei* 無為), and “non-governance” (*wuzhi* 無治)—through rigorous logical analysis, often drawing from the dialectical techniques of the Moist School of Names (*Mingjia* 名家 or *Mingjiao* 名教). In this tradition, emptiness was not mere negation but a foundational metaphysical concept representing the generative ground of being, a necessary void from which presence (*you*) arises and finds meaning.

In parallel, *Qingtán* 清談, or “Pure Conversations”, was an intellectual and aesthetic practice in which Wei-Jin scholars engaged in witty, abstract dialogues on Daoist and Confucian metaphysics, privileging rhetorical elegance, paradoxical insight, and spiritual freedom over political utility. While *Qingtán* was primarily discursive, it was deeply interwoven with aesthetic expression, incorporating poetry, calligraphy, music, and meditative practices as embodied ways of attuning to the ineffable *Dao*. At its core, however, *Qingtán* was shaped by *Xuanxue* which served not only as its main philosophical content (Chan 2003, 214), but also as a guiding mode of aesthetic sensibility. Through *Qingtán*, the key ideas of *Xuanxue*, and particularly emptiness (*xu*), were not only rhetorically articulated but also artistically performed and existentially enacted. Emptiness was valued as an inner stillness, a receptive openness that enabled spontaneous resonance with nature and alignment with the unfolding *Dao*.

4 The cosmological concepts of “nothing” (*wu* 無) and “something” (*you* 有), as they relate to *Dao*, do not refer to non-being and being but to a hidden and omnipresent generative force that resides within each of the Ten Thousand Things. It seems to be nothing at all, but as such, it is everything. Thus, *Dao* is a “nothing” that “appears to not be but is” (Turner 2025, 35).

5 Sometimes, Wang describes this absence with a (somehow more concrete) compound *xuwu* 虛無 (“void”), and at times he even uses the term *xu* 虛 (“emptiness”). On the other hand, however, he still remains faithful to the principle of complementarity defining all mutually opposing antipodes, and he emphasizes that the complementary interaction between any two antipodes (any binary category) is always rooted in the same origin: beautiful and ugly is like love and hate; good and evil are like right and wrong; love and hate grow out from the same root, and right and wrong come through the same door. This ultimate principle of complementarity is always unnameable, empty, and immovable, for every (form of) presence started from the vacuity (*xu*), and every (form of) movement began in “quietude” (*jing* 靜). Hence, even though everything that exists functions in a binary way, it always returns to this empty stillness in the end, which is the ultimate authenticity (Rošker 2025a, 104).

This philosophical shift mirrored broader cultural changes. Amid political turmoil, the Wei-Jin literati turned inward, cultivating an aesthetic of individuality and emotional depth. Poetry and painting became vehicles to explore human fragility—themes of mortality, grief, and the fleeting joy of existence permeated the arts. The idealized state of absolute freedom of “free and easy wandering” (*xiaoyao you* 逍遙遊) of Zhuangzi’s sages found expression in a new artistic ethos: the pursuit of *shen* 神 (spirit) over *xing* 形 (form). As will be discussed more in detail in the succeeding subchapter, Gu Kaizhi’s dictum “transmitting spirit through depiction” (*chuanshen xiezhao* 傳神寫照) captured this ideal, where a portrait’s power derived not from likeness but its ability to suggest the subject’s spirit through minimal, evocative brushwork.

Xuanxue’s hermeneutics of “words and meaning” (*yan* 言 and *yi* 意) further shaped aesthetic theory (Rošker 2018, 166). Wang Bi’s assertion that “images exist to convey meaning; once meaning is grasped, the images are forgotten” (象者所以以存意, 得意忘象) underscored art’s role as a conduit to the inexpressible which brought forth the concept of “suggestiveness” (含蓄 *hanxu* or 暗示 *anshi*) in art. It emphasizes conveying meaning indirectly, through implication rather than explicit statement, allowing space for the viewer’s and reader’s imagination to participate in completing the artistic experience.

Emptying of the Self as a Precondition for Aesthetic Observation and Creativity

According to Daoist theory, the *Dao* itself is nothingness. It is not any sort of thing that can be directly perceived or named. Thus, one must take the abandonment of sensory experience and conceptual knowledge as a precondition for grasping the *Dao*. In this sense, nothingness is not only a defining feature of the *Dao*, but also a quality the human psyche must cultivate to embody it. As Zhuangzi proposed in the method of *xinzhai* 心齋 (“fasting of the heart-mind”) and *zuowang* 坐忘 (“sitting in forgetfulness”) one should perceive the *Dao* only with *qi* 氣 and not with the perceptual organs such as eyes and ears, because they are limited. The *Dao* is present only in emptiness, and emptiness is the fasting of the heart-mind.⁶

Here, emptiness (*xu*) is not passive, but is receptive. This directly anticipates the aesthetic ideal of the artist who does not impose a vision but receives inspiration from nature, spirit, or form through an emptied “heart-mind” (*xin* 心).

6 無聽之以耳，而聽之以心；無聽之以心，而聽之以氣。耳止於聞，心止於符，氣也者，虛而待物者也。唯道集虛，虛者，心齋也。(Zhuangzi n.d., “Renjianshi”)

In the chapter “The Great Master” (*Dazongshi* 大宗師), Zhuangzi presents the method of *zuowang* by which diminishing of bodily and cognitive faculties leads to the state of emptying in which such transformational process enables the unity with *Dao*.⁷ *Zuowang* becomes a powerful model for the aesthetic ego dissolving into *Dao*—a precursor to later theories of non-intentional creativity, where great art flows from “non-self” (*wuwo* 無我 or *wuji* 無己) and “effortless action” (*wuwei* 無為).

In these passages, references to the human body—such as “the ears” and the faculties of sharp hearing and sight—symbolize the link between the body and sensory desires, perception, and emotions. In contrast, mentions of the heart-mind and wisdom reflect the human tendency to fixate on conceptual distinctions like true and false, good and bad, beautiful and ugly, or useful and useless. These two aspects—bodily senses and cognitive judgments—form the roots of habitual or prejudiced thinking, which in turn give rise to everyday emotional states such as joy, anger, sorrow, and love, as well as behaviours like striving for rewards or avoiding punishments. From a Daoist perspective, only by shedding these attachments—both to desire and to discriminating knowledge—can one return to a state of inner stillness, simplicity, and wholeness. It is in this empty state of mind that a person can genuinely perceive, experience, and align with the *Dao* (Fan and Sullivan 2010, 562).

Neo-Daoist reinterpretation of the *Laozi*, especially through Wang Bi’s emphasis on nothingness, formlessness, and subtlety, laid the groundwork for a metaphysical aesthetics based on emptiness. Zhuangzi’s inner disciplines of self-cultivation offered powerful meditative models of aesthetic receptivity rooted in the dissolution of self and form.

These Daoist practices are not merely spiritual, as they establish the conditions for aesthetic perception and expression. The emptied heart-mind becomes the resonant field where form can arise without obstruction. Later artists and critics—beginning with Zong Bing—will adopt this model to describe the artist’s mental state as one of clarity, stillness, and atonement.

This movement—from metaphysical emptiness to contemplative openness—marks the shift from ontological to aesthetic *Dao*, preparing the ground for the emergence of Chinese landscape painting and art theory rooted in spiritual limitless spaciousness.

In classical Chinese aesthetics, e.g. the aesthetics of the literati painters, emptiness—expressed as *xu* in Daoism and *kong* in Chan Buddhism—is not a void devoid of meaning, but the very ground from which meaning emerges. Rather than a form of negation, emptiness operates as an active, receptive, and generative

7 墮肢體，黜聰明，離形去知，同於大通，此謂坐忘。(Zhuangzi n.d., “Dazongshi”)

force—a space of openness, resonance, and spiritual potential. From the metaphysical writings of early Daoist and Buddhist thought to the theoretical reflections of painters and critics, emptiness has stood at the heart of Chinese aesthetic tradition since the Wei-Jin period.

Central to this tradition are aesthetic concepts such as *shen* (神, “spirit”), *qi* (氣, “vital energy”), *yun* (韻, “resonance” or “harmony”), the complementary interplay of *yin* and *yang* (陰陽), *qing* (清, “clarity” or “purity”), *zhuo* (濁, “murkiness”), *dan* (淡, “subtlety” or “blandness”), *jing* (靜, “tranquillity”), and *yuan* (遠, “farness” or “depth”). Each of these arises from the principle of emptiness and expresses its influence across all artistic forms in the Chinese aesthetic tradition.

This philosophical and aesthetic understanding of emptiness as a generative ground found its first profound artistic expressions in the work of Gu Kaizhi 顧愷之 (c. 344–406) and Zong Bing 宗炳 (375–443), who translated these abstract principles into concrete painting theory and practice. Where Daoist and Buddhist texts articulated emptiness as a metaphysical concept, these pioneering artists revealed how it could become the very method of artistic creation.

Gu Kaizhi and Zong Bing: The Aesthetics of Spirit-Transmission (傳神 *Chuanshen*)

Gu Kaizhi, the foundational theorist of Chinese figure painting, revolutionized artistic practice by prioritizing the “transmission of spirit” (*chuanshen* 傳神) over mere physical likeness, demonstrating that true representation depended not on meticulous form, but on capturing the spirit (*shen* 神)⁸ through strategic emptiness.

Gu claimed that the crucial aesthetic ideal in the art of painting is precisely in the author’s portrayal of the spirit and its representation via the external form. This kind of representation is what we are able to see, while the spirit belongs to the unseen, but can be felt. Here, the “spirit” (*shen*) refers to the essence of human beings and the specific characteristic of every individual (Xu 1966, 158).

However, his famous principle of “transmitting spirit through form” (*chuanshen xiezhao* 傳神寫照)⁹ was realized precisely through what he chose not to paint—

8 According to Xu Fuguan, *shen* is the essence of a person and also their distinctive character. “神是人地本質也是一個人的特性” (Xu 1966, 158) However, this definition of *shen* probably refers to its expression in the context of figure painting.

9 In traditional Chinese painting, the verb to “write” or “describe” (*xiehua* 寫畫) was often used instead of the verb to “paint” (*huihua* 繪畫), because painting, as an artistic genre actually evolved from calligraphy (Xu 2002, 85).

most notably in his deliberate hesitation to dot the pupils of his subjects' eyes, leaving space for the viewer's imagination to complete the spiritual presence.¹⁰ This technique embodied the Daoist paradox: that the most vital element of a portrait exists in its unpainted voids. His famous dictum reveals his Daoist-inspired belief that true artistry lies in *evoking the invisible through the visible*.

四體妍蚩本無關於妙處，傳神寫照正在阿堵¹¹中。

The beauty or ugliness of four limbs has fundamentally nothing to do with the essence of subtlety. What is crucial in this is the portrayal of the spirit. (Gu, in Li 2003, 88)

Gu's technique embodied the idea that the most vital element of a portrait exists in its unpainted spaces or void. By withholding precise depiction of the pupils, Gu created a "void" (*xu*) that invited viewers to project the subject's spirit themselves. The eyes became a liminal space where the painted form met the viewer's imagination. This technique mirrored Laozi's idea:

道冲而用之或不盈。

The *Dao* is empty, yet inexhaustible. (*Daodejing* n.d., chap.4)

The "incomplete" eyes functioned like Laozi's hub of a wheel or the empty space of the clay vessel – their emptiness enabling dynamic spiritual exchange. Gu's theory of "depicting spirit through form" (*yi xing xie shen* 以形寫神) established a core tension in Chinese aesthetics. The physical image (*xing* 形)—posture, drape, even the "dotting of the eyes" (*dianjing* 点睛)—was merely the vessel (*qi* 器) for the spirit. The subject's *shen*, their essential vitality and individuality, had to transcend its material representation. This idea resonates with Zhuangzi's forgetting of a fish trap:

筌者所以在魚，得魚而忘筌。

The fish trap exists for the fish; once you've caught the fish, forget the trap. (*Zhuangzi* n.d., chap. Waiwu)

and with Wang Bi's idea that "images exist to convey meaning; once meaning is grasped, the images are forgotten".

10 Gu Kaizhi famously avoided dotting the pupils in his portraits, declaring, "The spirit-resonance [*shenyun* 神韻] of a figure lies precisely in these dots". This deliberate hesitation reflected his belief that the eyes captured the soul—once completed, the painting's lifeforce would be irrevocably fixed.

11 阿堵 is a vernacular used during the Wei-Jin and Tang dynasties which means "this". In this context, it refers to the eyes and implies a small but expressive part that reveals essence.

Gu Kaizhi promoted the idea of integrating the subject's feeling into the object so that a spirit of the object will obtain artistic image. Such an aesthetic image thus embodies the life spirit of the object (Zhu 2022, 236). The image serves as the vessel through which the spirit expresses itself, with the spirit being the essence behind the image's purpose. The image gains its life and energy from the spirit, and in turn, the spirit depends on the image for manifestation. The synergy of image and spirit is essential for art to align with the *Dao* (ibid., 115).

The aesthetic revolution initiated by Gu Kaizhi's concept of *chuanshen* in figure painting found a profound extension in Zong Bing's theory of landscape (Zong n.d., 375, 443). Gu captured the spirit (*shen*) through subtle absences—most famously in the unarticulated depths of a subject's eyes—while Zong Bing shifted this principle from the human form to the natural world, discovering *Dao* in the voids between mountain peaks.

In his *Preface to Landscape Painting (Shanshuihua Xu 山水畫序)*, Zong redefines painting as a spiritual practice in which the landscape becomes both subject and expression of the *Dao*. In this work, which represents the first text of landscape painting, the painter becomes a sage who communes with the *Dao* through imagined landscapes. Emptiness becomes both a spatial technique and a contemplative state. Here, we witness the first theoretical articulation of painting as a spiritual practice grounded in emptiness.¹²

Zong was a devout Buddhist and an inheritor of the Daoist contemplative tradition, and his theory of landscape painting draws heavily on Zhuangzian practices of emptying and mental quietude (*xinzhai*) as well as “free and easy wandering” (*xiaoyao you*) of the human spirit pertaining to the aesthetic experience of emptiness and free flow of imagination (*shensi* 神思,¹³ “spiritual reflection”). Zong

12 As Heubel writes, mountain-water painting (*shanshuihua*), understood as an exercise in aesthetic cultivation, moves between the concealed and the manifest. It is the abstention from colours and expressive effects that opens up a sphere of subtle perception in the diffuse liminal area between “without-being” (*wu* 無) and “with-being” (*you* 有), between “emptiness” (*xu* 虛) and “fullness” (*shi* 實). Aesthetic cultivation thus turns around an “energetic transformation” (*qihua* 氣化) in which the manifest emerges out of the concealed and again disappears in concealment. It is the fine shades and barely noticeable transitions between the apparent and hidden that perception learns to be attentive to. In literati painting, an aesthetic limit-experience is practised, which has to do with changing states of breath-energy (Heubel 2021, 278).

13 *Shensi*, as an aesthetic category, refers to the process of artistic-creative thinking and encompasses the full range of mental activities involved in the creation of art—from preparation and conceptualization to inspiration and the actual production of the artwork (Zhang 2021, ix). As both an aesthetic concept and a method, *shensi* involves the imaginative capacity of the artist, the expression of the “spirit” (*shen*) through a harmonious unification of will (*zhi*), understood as the faculty of the heart-mind (*xin*), and vital energy or potential (*qi*). To achieve this unity, the artist is called to “fast the mind” (*xinzhai*), a practice rooted in Daoist thought, which enables access to the true essence of creativity and allows the work to emerge spontaneously and effortlessly. Moreover,

famously asserts that the *Dao* is present within landscape, and thus landscape painting has the power to convey metaphysical truth.

聖人含道暎物，賢者¹⁴澄懷味像。至於山水，質有而趣靈。

The sage embodies the Way and illuminates all things; the worthy one purifies his mind and tastes [appreciates] appearances. As for mountains and rivers, their qualities evoke spiritual charm. (*Shanshui hua xu* n.d., sec.1)

As we see in the passage, the sage’s internal alignment with the *Dao* allows them to understand or reflect the world. The artist’s “purified mind” (澄懷 *chenghuai*) mirrors Zhuangzi’s *xinzhai*, creating an internal void to receive the *Dao*. With the empty heart-mind the artist is in a state of contemplative, aesthetic engagement with the world.

夫聖人以神¹⁵法道，而賢者通；山水以形媚道，而仁者樂。不亦幾乎？

The sage models the Way through spirit, and the worthy one connects with it; mountains and rivers embody the Way through their forms, and the benevolent delights in them. Is this not near [to the Way]? (*Ibid.*)

shensi includes refined aesthetic emotions—elevated responses to life and the world that arise through contemplative engagement with external objects and situations. In this dynamic process, the aesthetic subject remains in constant interaction with the external world, being stimulated and inspired by its forms, rhythms, and transformations. The concept of *shensi* was first discussed by Lu Ji 陸機 (261–303) in his work *The Art of Writing* (*Wen fu* 文賦) and was later developed into a more systematic theoretical framework by Liu Xie 劉勰 (ca. 465–ca. 522) in his seminal literary treatise *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (*Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍). Zong Bing’s offered a pivotal reflection on *shensi* in the visual arts in his *Preface to Landscape Painting*. He described how painting can convey the spirit (*shen*) and thought (*si*) of both the artist and the natural world, enabling a resonance between the viewer’s inner mind and the cosmic rhythms embodied in the landscape. Zong’s account positions *shensi* as a mediating force between inner contemplation and external representation, central to the metaphysical function of painting.

- 14 The difference between the sage and the worthy lies in the degree and scope of spiritual attainment. The sage acts effortlessly in harmony with the *Dao*, with full understanding of Heaven, Earth, and humanity. The worthy is highly virtuous and capable, but not yet at the transcendent level of a sage. They present a model for moral cultivation and wisdom, achievable through learning and practice. The worthies follow and understand the Way (*Dao*) but may still struggle or rely on deliberate effort.
- 15 In my understanding, *shen* refers to the spiritual essence or transcendent dimension of a person, while *xin* (心) denotes the mind or heart-mind—encompassing reason, emotion, thought, and desire. The *xin* is often regarded as the active and conscious aspect of the self and must be emptied for the *shen* to manifest spiritual insight and a deeper attunement to the *Dao* or cosmic order.

The sage is in spiritual resonance with the *Dao*, and worthy persons on the other hand have intellectual or moral access to the Way. As Zong notes, “mountains and rivers [nature] allure the *Dao* through their forms” (山水以形媚道) precisely because their “material forms” (*xing* 形) are permeated by immaterial voids (mist, streams, clouds). Blank silk or paper becomes emptiness (*xu*) which is not a passive background, but an active cosmological space.

聖賢曠於絕代，萬趣融其神思。余復何為哉，暢神而已。神之所暢，孰有先焉。

The sages and worthies shine beyond their era, and myriad forms merge into their spiritual thought. As for me—what more can I do? I simply let my spirit flow. Where the spirit flows freely, what could precede it? (Ibid., sec. 8)

This passage celebrates the transcendent union of art, nature, and the mind. The sages embody timeless wisdom, their spiritual thoughts harmonizing with the infinite vitality of the world (“萬趣融其神思”). For the artist, the highest purpose is not imitation but spiritual liberation (“暢神”) as an unmediated flow of intuition where the self dissolves into creative communion with the cosmos. The rhetorical question (“孰有先焉”) suggests that such moments of unblocked inspiration (of the spirit) are primordial, surpassing even the authority of tradition.

Although Zong Bing is not yet speaking directly about emptiness as an aesthetic category, his emphasis on mental emptiness presents a foundation of spiritual engagement with the landscape which leads to harmonious resonance with the external world. This attitude reflects a novel approach in art of painting and aesthetic theory that was further developed by famous painter Xie He.

However, in my opinion transference of Zhuangzi’s mental emptiness or *xin-zhai* unto the field of aesthetics and artistic practice in Zong Bing’s *Preface* presents the foundational basis for further development of emptiness as an aesthetic category that prevailed in Chinese aesthetics. In this sense I disagree with Susan Bush, who argues that the aesthetic and theoretical contributions of Zong Bing pertain primarily to the consistent representation of forms in the art of painting and that convincing representation is all the artist needs concern himself with (Bush 2012, 14). This formalist (or reductionist) reading of Zong Bing misinterprets the radical ontological shift embedded in his landscape theory. A close reading of the *Preface* reveals that Zong’s project was never about mere verisimilitude, but about reconfiguring painting as a dialectic of presence and absence—a contemplative practice grounded in Wei-Jin Daoist and Buddhist philosophy.

When Zong instructs artists to “depict forms by forms” (以形寫形), he paradoxically subordinates representation to spiritual cultivation, which again echoes Zhuangzi’s famous dictum once you’ve caught the fish, forget the trap. For Zong, the painted mountain serves as just such a provisional construct—its material form is important only insofar as it points toward immaterial *Dao*.

However, according to Zong Bing’s *Preface*, in order to present the *Dao* on landscape painting through form (山水以形媚道), one has to present the forms in the landscape by forms and colours by colours (以形寫形，以色貌色也). Zong insists on depicting forms “as they are” (以形寫形) not for realism’s sake, but because the *Dao* self-reveals through nature’s unadorned beauty. The artist’s emptied mind becomes a transparent medium allowing the landscape’s *shen* to imprint itself.

On this grounds, Zong’s theory transcends mere representation. His “myriad forms merging into spiritual thought” (萬趣融其神思) describes a dialectical process of emptying of the self in order to let the landscape’s *qi* (氣) flow into that void which results in the painting becoming *shensi*—“spiritual reflection and imagination”—a fusion of outer perception and inner emptiness.

This idea was later refined by Xie He 謝赫 in the sixth century into a formalized aesthetic principle. His concept of *qiyun shengdong* (spirit resonance and life-movement) crystallized the artistic philosophy of emptiness (*xu*), establishing it as a lasting standard in Chinese art and aesthetics.

The Interplay of Emptiness and Fullness (*xushi* 虛實): *Qiyun Shengdong* 氣韻生動

Building upon Zong Bing’s theory of landscape painting as a spiritual practice grounded in mental emptiness and resonance with the *Dao*, we arrive at a significant turning point in the sixth century with Xie He. While Zong redefined painting as a meditative communion with the *Dao* through form and emptiness, Xie He synthesized this spiritual sensibility into the foundational aesthetic category of *qiyun shengdong* (氣韻生動) in his influential treatise *Guhua Pinlu* (古畫品錄, *The Record of the Classification of Old Paintings*).

This concept serves as a bridge between Gu Kaizhi’s *chuanshen*, Zong Bing’s emptied mind and free spirit in landscape painting, and the fully codified theory of aesthetic movement and vitality in Xie He. As Xu Fuguan (2002, 91) notes, all earlier notions of spirit—*shenqi* 神氣 (“spirit-vitality”), *shenyun* 神韻 (“resonance of spirit”) *shenming* 神明 (“clarity of spirit”), *shenling* 神靈 (“divine spirit”)—are ultimately integrated into this singular and generative principle of

qiyun shengdong.¹⁶ In this synthesis, the Daoist-Buddhist idea of emptiness transforms from a meditative state into a dynamic aesthetic force, animating both artist and artwork. In the context of figure painting, *qi* 氣 refers to the inner vitality or spiritual quality of a person, while *yun* 韻¹⁷ denotes the outward rhythm or demeanour through which this inner quality is expressed.

所謂氣韻生動就是要求繪畫生動地表現出人的內在精神氣質，格調風度。

Qiyun shengdong demands that painting vividly express a person's inner spirit, character, and demeanor—not through extravagant description of external circumstances, but through spiritual insight and expressive form ... (Li 2003, 86)

Yun is thus not merely style or tone, but the expressive trace of spirit embodied in form. Xie He appropriates this term from character appraisal or evaluation (*renwu pinzao* 人物品藻) of the *Treatise on Personalities* (*renwuzhi* 人物誌¹⁸), giving it aesthetic depth. According to Kang (2022, 31), *yun* conveys “the distinctive qualities of an individual”, and in painting it reveals how *qi* manifests through the subtleties of posture, gesture, and presence.

While originally grounded in figure painting, Xu Fuguan argues (2002, 920–93) that *qiyun shengdong* finds its true and fuller realization in landscape painting,

16 For an in-depth study of Xu Fuguan's analysis and interpretation of the concept *qiyun shengdong*, see Sernelj (2021).

17 “Yun” originally emerged in the Han dynasty (first to second century CE), where it was defined as “harmony” (和) in the *Shuowen Jiezi* dictionary. Initially tied to music, it described melodic expression and rhythmic flow. Over time, the term expanded to literature and phonetics, where it came to signify tonal resonance (e.g. rhyme in poetry). As Xu Fuguan notes in his in-depth analysis of the concept *qiyun shengdong*, that across all contexts—whether music, verse, or language—*yun* retains its core idea of proportionate harmony, blending elements into a cohesive aesthetic whole (Xu 2002, 99).

18 By the late second century, the art of character appraisal (*Renwuzhi* 人物誌) had developed into an independent discipline, though it continued to play a role in the official recommendation system during the Wei-Jin period. Notably, their approach to character appraisal was not solely physiognomic but also psychological, aiming to capture the individual's “spirit” (*shen*). This is clearly demonstrated in Liu Shao's 劉紹 (early third century) *Treatise on Personalities*, the only surviving characterological work from this period. Liu's treatise begins with an analysis of “human feelings” (*qing* 情) and “inborn qualities” (*xing* 性), which he considers the foundations of personality. In terms of physiognomic observation, the focus was on transcending physical appearance to grasp a person's spirit—particularly through the study of the eyes, which uniquely convey it. Liu Shao wrote that every person has a body, and each body possesses a spirit. He emphasized that no one can fully understand a person without understanding their spirit (Yu 2016, 140). It is quite possible—and even likely—that Gu Kaizhi, in his aesthetic concept of *chuan shen* (“transmitting the spirit”), was influenced by, or at least reflected, ideas similar to those found in Liu Shao's theory of character appraisal, particularly the emphasis on capturing a person's *shen* (“spirit”).

where it articulates the living breath of the cosmos. Here, *qi* becomes not merely the spirit of an individual, but the creative energy of nature itself, while *yun* becomes the harmonious resonance through which this *qi* is expressed in brushwork, rhythm, and composition. In this context, *qiyun* is not a fixed attribute but a dynamic interplay of complementary opposites, akin to the principle of *yin* and *yang* (陰陽). It manifests through paired polarities—such as “emptiness and fullness” (*xushi* 虛實), “hardness and softness” (*gangrou* 剛柔), “clarity and obscurity” (*qingzhuo* 清濁), “distance and proximity” (*yuanjin* 遠近). These are not merely formal contrasts; rather, they embody the rhythmic flow of the cosmos, expressing the aesthetic realization of Daoist metaphysics within the medium of painting. Xu also interprets *qiyun* through Wang Bi’s ontology of *benmo* (本末, “roots and branches”), where *qi* is the “generative root” (*ben* 本)—the emptiness-infused creative vitality—and *yun* is its manifest rhythm (*mo* 末). In this sense, “emptiness” (*xu* 虛) is the precondition for *qiyun*: only through an “emptied heart-mind” (*xu xin* 虛心) can the artist respond to and channel the primordial vitality of the world (*ibid.*).

Thus, in *qiyun shengdong*, we see the transformation of emptiness into aesthetic movement. The artist must first empty the self—release ego, intention, and form—so that the unforced flow of *qi* may shape the artwork from within. The resulting work is not an imitation of the world, but a resonance with the *Dao*, felt through rhythm, breath, and harmony. The “lifelike movement” (*shengdong* 生動) in the painting is not merely visual liveliness, but the *Dao* moving through form. In this way, *qiyun shengdong* is not just a stylistic criterion—it is a metaphysical principle. It expresses the living rhythm of the *Dao* as perceived by an attuned and empty mind. The artist becomes a medium for the cosmos, and the artwork a site of transformation—for both the artist and viewer.

Jing Hao’s *Bifaji* and the Aesthetics of Emptiness in Landscape Painting

In his 10th-century treatise *Bifaji* 筆法記 (*Notes on the Art of Brushwork*), Jing Hao fundamentally transformed the Chinese aesthetic concept of *qiyun shengdong* by expanding it from portraiture to monochromatic landscape painting,¹⁹

19 Between the Middle Tang and the Five dynasties period (eighth to 10th centuries), Chinese art underwent a profound transformation. Landscape painting began to eclipse portraiture, and richly coloured religious and narrative scenes gave way to the subtleties of monochromatic “ink-wash painting” (*shuimo* 水墨). While this shift might initially seem like a retreat from visual richness, Tang masters such as Jing Hao, Wang Wei, and Zhang Zao recognized in ink and wash a deeper expressive potential. They criticized the reliance on colour, arguing that it distracted from the essence of a scene. Instead, they embraced monochrome as a medium capable of penetrating beyond

while grounding it in aesthetics of emptiness. His work represents a pivotal moment where the invisible qualities of *qiyun*—previously applied to human subjects—were extended to the natural world, revealing how all things in the landscape possess their own vital spirit (*qi*) and resonant harmony (*yun*) that emerges from their essential emptiness.

Jing Hao’s conception of *qiyun* in landscape painting is deeply connected to the Daoist understanding of *wu* (nothingness) and *xu* (emptiness). He saw the landscape as composed of living elements, each containing distinctive inner qualities, with *qi* representing the fundamental life force that painters must capture—not through superficial representation but by conveying the dynamic emptiness from which all forms emerge. This is exemplified in his famous principle that:

山水之象，氣勢相生。

The imagery of landscapes arises from the interconnection between *qi* and dynamic configuration (*shi*). (Jing n.d., 18)

This dynamic *shi* (勢), the configurational energy or movement of forms, is not fixed but emerges from emptiness and through interrelation. The visible scene is not merely copied, but constructed through attentiveness to the hidden flows of energy, the shifting balances of *yin* and *yang*, and the presence of voids that give form its vitality.

The concept of *xiang* 象 (image-phenomenon) serves as the crucial mediator between visible form and formless origin in Jing Hao’s theory. Building on Wang Bi’s philosophical framework, *xiang* represents not just physical appearance or physical form of an “object” (形 *xing*), but the artist’s mental construction that bridges the tangible world and its intangible source (*yuan*). This creative process involves carefully selecting and rearranging natural forms to reveal their hidden cosmological origin:

須明物象之源。

Illuminating the source of the image of things. (Jing n.d., 17)

surface appearance to evoke the spirit of the landscape. Crucially, these artists understood the power of emptiness—not as a void, but as an active space that suggested distance, silence, and the ineffable. In this context, blank areas in the composition became as significant as inked ones, reflecting Daoist and Chan Buddhist concepts of non-action and inner stillness. The synergy of brushwork, tonal variation, and emptiness allowed artists to suggest movement, transformation, and inner life, achieving a dynamism that rigid replication could not. The ink-wash technique became the ideal medium to convey not only physical forms but the painter’s *qi*—the vital energy—imbuing the work with both immediacy and depth (Kang 2022, 27).

Jing Hao's *Six Essentials*²⁰ of painting further develop this relationship with emptiness. He describes the brush moving “neither confined to texture nor form, as if flying and running”, achieving a state of spontaneous creativity (*ziran*) that mirrors the *Dao*'s effortless generation of the world from nothingness. The painter must cultivate an empty mind (*xinzhai*), free from worldly distractions and technical constraints, to become a conduit for the cosmic *qi*. This culminates in Jing Hao's ultimate advice to “forget brush and ink” (*wang bimo* 忘筆墨), echoing Zhuangzi's ideal of *zuowang* (sitting in forgetfulness), where the artist transcends technique to directly participate in nature's creative process and to express the “genuine reality” (*zhen* 真),²¹ the *Dao* itself.

The harmonious interplay between ink and brush in Jing Hao's method also reflects this philosophy of emptiness. While ink defines forms through subtle tonal variations, it simultaneously conceals brushwork to avoid artificiality, allowing the painting's *qi* to flow unimpeded. The four forces of brushwork—from physical execution to spiritual expression—must align with the cosmic creative act, where form and emptiness, presence and absence, constantly give birth to one another.

Ultimately, *Bifaji* presents landscape painting as a spiritual discipline of emptiness. The painter does not copy nature's surfaces but reveals how mountains,

20 Probably following Xie He, Jing Hao proposed six essential principles of painting (*Liuyao* 六要) coupled with four forces (*sishi* 四勢: 筋, 肉, 骨, 氣) related to the brush skill. Jing Hao defined the six essentials as follows:

氣者，心隨筆運，取象不惑。韻者，隱跡立形，備儀不俗。思者，刪拔大要，凝想形物。景者，制度時因，搜妙創真。筆者，雖依法則，運轉變通，不質不形，如飛如動。墨者，高低暈淡，品物淺深，文採自然，似非因筆。(Vital energy [*qi* 氣] is that which your mind follows with the movement of the brush, grasping the image without hesitation. Resonance [*yun* 韻] is that which conceals traces [of the brush] when constructing forms, satisfying a sense of propriety and avoiding vulgarity. Thought [*si* 思] is to condense [the painting] into the most essential [features] and to manifest one's ideas in concrete forms. Scene [*jing* 景] is to properly examine the principles of the changing times and seasons and grasp the profound [*miao* 妙] to create genuineness [*zhen* 真]. Brush [*bi* 筆] is, while adhering to basic rules, to move the brush fluently and effortlessly with variations and changes, [confined] neither in texture nor in form, as if flying and running. Ink [*mo* 墨] is [to express] the depth of all things with the density [of the ink] and the thickness [of the strokes], creating expressions so natural that they appear as if they had not been done with a brush.) (Kang 2022, 34–35)

21 The philosophical foundation of *zhen* (真, genuineness) as a core ideal in landscape painting can be traced to the Daoist writings of Laozi and Zhuangzi. In Daoist thought, *zhen* is often contrasted with *wei* (偽, artificiality), expressing a fundamental return to the natural, unadorned state of being – embodied in concepts such as *su* (素, plainness) and *pu* (樸, simplicity). This ideal was further refined in Jing Hao's *Bifaji* where *zhen* is elevated as a central aesthetic principle. Importantly, in this context, *zhen* does not equate to mere “likeness” (*si* 似), but to a deeper act of “creation” (*chuang* 創) that requires a penetrating observation and understanding of nature. Rather than replicating appearances, the artist seeks to express the inner truth of a scene or “genuine landscape” (*zhenjing* 真景) through a process of introspective engagement and imaginative synthesis (Kang 2022, 28–30).

rivers and trees emerge from and return to the formless *Dao*. Through *qiyun*'s vital breath, *xiang*'s mediating images, and *wuwei*'s spontaneous brushwork, Jing Hao's theory embodies the *Xuanxue* ontology of "absence is the root of presence"—establishing emptiness as the very ground of artistic creation and perception in the Chinese landscape painting tradition.

The Decline and Revival of Literati Painting

By the late Ming dynasty, the spirit of literati painting—once rooted in personal expression, philosophical reflection, and the cultivation of inner emptiness—faced a slow decline as the Traditionalist School (*zhengtongpai* 正統派) came to dominate the mainstream. Emphasis shifted increasingly toward technical precision, formal repetition, and the mimicry of past styles.²² Yet, even in this atmosphere of aesthetic conservatism, voices emerged to reclaim the lost essence of the literati tradition.

Among the most profound theories in this discourse is that of Shitao, whose *Huayulu* 畫語錄 (*Treatise on Painting*) revitalized the foundational principles of literati aesthetics. Drawing on the *Yi jing*, *Daodejing* and Chan Buddhist thought, Shitao formulated his radical notion of *yihua* (一畫) the "one" or holistic brushstroke—through which painting becomes a cosmogonic act, mirroring the spontaneous, undivided emergence of all things from the *Dao*. His invocation of *pu* 樸 (simplicity) and *hundun* 混沌 (primal chaos) as the generative ground of artistic creation framed painting as a process of becoming, not replication.²³ His asser-

22 The decline of literati painting in Chinese history can be attributed to a convergence of political disruption, institutional transformation, and cultural disintegration, particularly during the transitional period between the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. The fall of the Ming dynasty in 1644 precipitated a crisis for the literati class: many scholar-officials who had long constituted the intellectual and creative core of literati culture were displaced, executed, or profoundly disillusioned under the foreign rule of the Manchu-led Qing regime. The erosion of Confucian values and the disintegration of the socio-political structures that had traditionally nurtured literati ideals contributed to a widespread cultural malaise. Simultaneously, the increasing professionalization and commercialization of art fostered a widening gap between the literati ethos and the practices of court and commercial painters. During the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), literati painting underwent a process of differentiation, giving rise to distinctive schools. This evolution ultimately resulted in the classification of Northern and Southern Schools of painting, and later, the categorization into Traditionalist and Individualist Schools formulated by the renowned painter and art theorist Dong Qichang 董其昌 (1555–1636) who explicitly favoured and prioritized the Traditionalist School (Strassberg 1989, 8).

23 太古無法。太樸無散。太樸一散而法立矣。法於何立。立於一畫。一畫者眾有之本。萬象之根。(There were no [painting] methods in remote antiquity, for the Uncarved block had not yet disintegrated. When it did, methods were established. But what is the basis of any method? They are all based on the Holistic brushstroke. The Holistic brushstroke is fundamental to

tion that *wufa* 無法 (no method or no copying) is the ultimate method resisted formulaic constraint, affirming instead a dynamic openness to spontaneity and transformation.²⁴

Central to Shitao’s vision is the notion of *mengyang* 蒙養 (“nurturing potentiality” or “concealment”),²⁵ a subtle emptiness within the interaction of brush and ink, where form arises from formlessness. Shitao reasserted painting as spontaneous, contemplative, and alive—a process in tune with the transformations of Dao rather than bound by convention. This aesthetic of emptiness revived the true ethos of the literati: painting not as representation, but as cosmogonic act.²⁶

In the 20th century, the spiritual core of literati painting experienced a powerful revival in both artistic practice and philosophical reflection. Artists like Liu Guosong 劉國松²⁷ reinvigorated the literati tradition by merging its timeless principles with modern abstraction. His cosmic ink paintings dissolve the boundary between tradition and innovation, layering textured surfaces and vast spatial emptiness to invoke the Daoist notion of formlessness and suggest the sublime. This abstract visual language echoes the same emptiness-as-potential that Shitao once articulated, revealing a continuity of vision across centuries.

Parallel to this artistic renewal, Xu Fuguan offered a profound theoretical reinterpretation of literati aesthetics. In response to what he saw as the decline of

depicting everything in existence and is the root of all images.) (Shi n.d., *Huayulu*: 1; transl. by Strassberg 1989, 61)

- 24 至人無法。非無法也。無法而法。乃為至法。。。一知其法。即功於化。夫畫天下變通之大法也。(The Perfect man has no method. Yet it is not that he has no method. No method is the supreme method. Once you grasp this method, you become one with transformation. Painting is the great way (art) of the transformation of the world.) (Shi n.d., *Huayulu*: 3)
- 25 As Chai asserts, potentiality derives from the absence of method (法 *fa*) in antiquity; nourishment derives from the lack of differentiation in the primordial chaos. From lack of differentiation comes nourishment; from the absence of *fa* comes potentiality (Chai 2021, 105).
- 26 For an in-depth study on Shitao’s aesthetic theory, see Sernelj (2024).
- 27 Liu Guosong is widely recognized as the first and most influential figure in modernist and abstract Chinese painting in Taiwan, as well as a leading force in the island’s avant-garde art scene. A pioneering artist and theorist, Liu sought to break free from the rigid conventions of traditional Chinese ink painting by infusing it with abstract forms and experimental techniques. Yet, beneath this modernist surface lies a deep engagement with classical Chinese thought—especially the aesthetics of the Wei-Jin period. Drawing inspiration from the Wei-Jin emphasis on individuality, spontaneity, and metaphysical depth, Liu revived the ancient aesthetic ideals of *qiyun* (spirit resonance) and *ziran* (spontaneity) in a contemporary context. Just as Wei-Jin scholars and artists turned inward in pursuit of personal expression and alignment with the *Dao*, Liu embraced abstraction not as a rejection of tradition, but as a return to its most essential, expressive core. His works often reflect a meditative engagement with nature, emptiness, and cosmic rhythm, echoing the philosophical spirit of *Xuanxue* and the poetic sensibility of figures like Ruan Ji or Ji Kang. His most influential work on art and aesthetics is *The Path of Chinese Modern Painting (Zhongguo xiandaihua de lu* 中國現代畫的路), which was published in Taiwan in 1965.

existential depth in Chinese painting—driven by social and institutional pressures such as the civil service examination system—Xu critiqued the formalism rooted in Dong Qichang’s Northern-Southern School division. Rather than advocating a nostalgic return, Xu proposed a philosophical re-grounding of literati painting in the aesthetic category of *yuan* (遠), meaning “distance” or “farness”. For Xu, *yuan* was not only a visual principle of spatial emptiness but also a moral and spiritual dimension, enabling contemplative depth and inner clarity.

For Xu, *yuan* is not simply a spatial device but a metaphysical gesture—an expression of *xuwu* (虛無), an “empty without” that sustains spiritual resonance and ontological depth (Heubel 2021, 284). The distant mountains, receding rivers, and mists in landscape painting enact a subtle transition from the tangible to the invisible, the finite to the infinite. As Xu writes:

Farness is the extension of what is formed and material in mountain-water [painting]. This extension follows the visual perception of a person which unexpectedly shifts into the imaginary. Because of this shift, what is formed and material in mountain-water [painting] communicates directly with the empty without (*xuwu* 虛無), the finite communicates directly with the infinite... This without, however, is not a void without (*kongwu* 空無), but rather the cosmic source of the power and meaning of life, pulsating in the mist between the concealed and the manifest. (Xu in Heubel 2021, 284)

According to Heubel (*ibid.*), for Xu, the experience of distance in painting provides a distinctive mode of transcendence within immanence: through the artist’s composition and the viewer’s gaze, a transition unfolds from the tangible world to the invisible, where the finite realm of form opens directly onto the infinite.

Conclusion: The Persistent Presence of Emptiness in Literati Painting

In the grand arc from Gu Kaizhi’s *chuanshen* to Shitao’s *yihua*, and finally to Xu Fuguan’s vision of *yuan*, Chinese literati painting consistently turns to emptiness—not as absence or nothingness, but as the very ground of vitality, resonance, and meaning. In landscape painting, *yuan* becomes a silent but powerful force: a visual manifestation of emptiness, reminding the viewer that true depth lies not in what is depicted, but in the invisible distances that surround, sustain, and transform it. This aesthetic orientation reveals a profound metaphysical commitment: that emptiness is not void, but potential; not negation, but the condition for emergence. From Gu Kaizhi’s emphasis on the transmission of spirit through

form, to Shitao's single brushstroke that unifies multiplicity, and Xu's ontological reading of distance as a medium for moral and spiritual awakening, Chinese aesthetics unfolds as a meditation on the generative power of what cannot be seen. Rather than striving for representational completeness, literati painting invites the viewer into an active process of imaginative participation—where blankness is not a lack, but an opening; where stillness speaks; and where meaning arises not from assertion, but from attunement.

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