

13. EXPLORING THE AESTHETIC CONCEPT OF 'YIJING' IN SHANGHAI SCHOOL OIL PAINTING

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Abstract: *This paper centers on the core concept of yijing in traditional Chinese aesthetics, exploring its manifestation in Shanghai School oil paintings and its unique role in the fusion of Eastern and Western art. Shanghai School artists, while adopting Western painting techniques, preserved the aesthetic of yijing rooted in Chinese tradition, creating a modern oil painting style characterized by the lively spirit Vivid Spirit of Chinese painting. This paper examines aspects such as composition, color use, and the interplay between emptiness and substance within Shanghai School oil paintings to analyze how yijing aesthetics emerge through the integration of Eastern and Western artistic techniques. Using case studies of specific works, it demonstrates how yijing conveys emotion and deepens the meaning of the canvas.*

Key words: *Shanghai School Oil Painting; Yijing Aesthetics; Vivid Spirit; East-West Artistic Fusion*

1. Introduction

The concept of yijing, one of the core ideas in traditional Chinese aesthetics, permeates Chinese art, especially in painting and literature. More than a mere visual presentation, yijing serves as an artistic method to convey internal emotions and philosophical reflections through imagery. Since the Tang Dynasty, yijing has become an aesthetic ideal pursued by artists—a means to express boundless spiritual realms within limited visual compositions. In the 19th century, as Shanghai emerged as a cultural crossroads due to the Qing government's open-door policy, the Shanghai School of painting was born in this unique context. Artists of the Shanghai School integrated Western techniques to enrich their expressive capabilities while retaining the traditional Chinese pursuit of yijing. This synthesis endowed their oil paintings with both the Vivid Spirit of Chinese painting and Western visual elements such as light, shadow, and perspective. This paper aims to examine the aesthetic representation of yijing in Shanghai School oil paintings and its distinctive role in East-West artistic fusion. Through case studies, it delves into the unique characteristics of yijing as expressed in composition, color, and the interplay between emptiness and substance, illustrating how Shanghai School artists achieved artistic innovation and aesthetic refinement by harmonizing Chinese and Western techniques.

2. The Concept and Status of Yijing

Yijing is a core concept in Chinese aesthetics, representing the fusion of emotion, thought, and nature within an artwork. In traditional Chinese art, particularly in painting and literature, yijing goes beyond the depiction of objective realities; it is a way for the artist to convey inner emotions and philosophical

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reflections through imagery. Wang Guowei, in Renjian Cihua, describes yijing as the vivid portrayal of a harmonious blend of scene and sentiment within a work, giving rise to a boundless space for aesthetic imagination, which surpasses the mere literal expression of the literary object. [1 p. 4] The term yijing first appeared in the Tang Dynasty with Wang Changling's **Shige**, where he states, "Yijing an artists extension of intention and reflection upon the heart's thoughts, captures the truth" [2 p. 97] This concept underscores that only by personally experiencing and expressing the essence of yijing can an artist reach a true artistic realm. In Chinese art, yijing is not merely about surface imagery but about expressing infinite spirit and emotion through limited forms. Artists must rely on their inner insights to reveal this "truth" to the audience, inviting them to experience profound emotional and philosophical dimensions. This process of "extending intention and reflecting upon the heart" is the key to achieving yijing.

3. The Expression of Yijing in Shanghai School Oil Painting

After Shanghai opened to foreign trade in the late Qing Dynasty, it became a central meeting point for Eastern and Western cultures. Foreign residents, merchants, and intellectuals gathered here, introducing a diversity of artistic ideas and cultural influences. Shanghai School painting carried forward the traditional Chinese aesthetic of yijing while incorporating Western painting techniques and concepts, especially in areas like perspective, light and shadow effects, and realism. This synthesis brought about richer expressive methods and visual language, driving transformations within traditional Chinese painting styles.

3.1. Qiyun Shengdong in Shanghai School Oil Painting

Shanghai School artists continued the tradition of qiyun shengdong, a core concept of yijing aesthetics. Originating during the Wei and Jin dynasties, qiyun shengdong, as introduced by Xie He, emphasized that an artwork must embody vitality and resonance; it should not only mimic the form of nature but also convey a sense of life's dynamic spirit. This notion laid the foundation for yijing, initiating the aesthetic pursuit of moving from mere imagery to deeper symbolic expressions. In qiyun shengdong, qi represents the elemental energy of all things, while yun reflects personal grace, style, and the revelation of inner character. In painting, this means that portraits must capture a person's spirit and appearance. With qiyun, the painting naturally comes to life; it instills vitality into the depicted figures.

Liu Haisu, a representative Shanghai School oil painter, adopted the strategy of "seeking parallels between Chinese art history and the spirit of Western Post-Impressionism" [3 p.42]. His works fuse Chinese artistic spirit with Post-Impressionist media, techniques, and ideas. *Liushutai misty drizzle* (Fig. 1), painted in 1936 after Liu was influenced by Cezanne and other Post-Impressionists, demonstrates this synthesis. The brushstrokes are bold, with vivid, simple colors; the forms are sketched with minimal strokes. The composition uses "deep distance" perspective, depicting four mountain peaks in bright orange and green strokes, with white clouds between them and a blank space pressing against the upper-right peak. In qiyun shengdong, qi is not only manifested within the objects but also extends into the surrounding void. Without this void, there is no qiyun shengdong, and the artwork loses its life force. In the symbolic structure of ancient Chinese poetry and

painting, voids and blank spaces hold significant roles. Without emptiness, the yijing of Chinese poetry and painting cannot emerge.[4 p. 29]

Liu Haisu's *Liushutai misty drizzle* exemplifies this layering effect through the blank space left for clouds, preserving the depth of traditional yijing. Drawing from Western perspective techniques and light and shadow effects, Liu broke away from traditional flat compositions, creating a more three-dimensional and modern aesthetic. *Lushan at Hanpo Pass* (Fig. 2) is a landscape oil painting created by Liu Haisu in 1956. The work showcases his increasingly adept and confident control of the oil painting medium, drawing heavily on Post-Impressionist techniques regarding perspective, color, and brushwork. In terms of color, the darker areas of the painting also incorporate significant amounts of blue. While Cézanne employed extensive horizontal brushstrokes to portray the undulating contours of Mont Sainte-Victoire, Liu Haisu utilized vertical brushstrokes to convey the towering presence of Lushan Mountain. His rendering of trees similarly reflects a resemblance, indicating Liu's substantial absorption of Post-Impressionist painting techniques in his own work.



Fig. 1. Liu Haisu *Liushutai misty drizzle* 1936

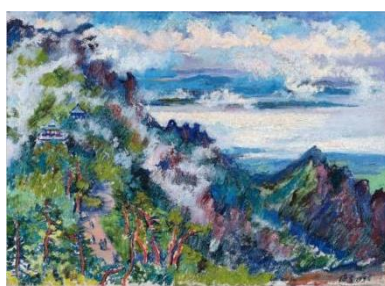


Fig. 2. Liu Haisu *Lushan at Hanpo Pass* 1956

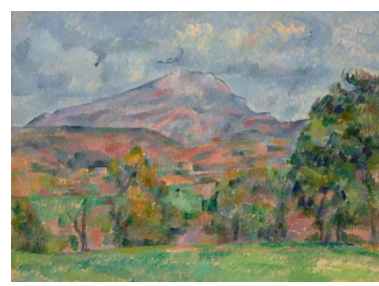


Fig. 3. Cézanne *Mont Sainte-Victoire* 1888-1890

For Liu Haisu, compared to *Liushutai misty drizzle*, the colors of the mountains in *Lushan at Hanpo Pass* are more vibrant and daring. However, the representation of clouds and mist in both paintings illustrates that traditional Chinese yijing aesthetics continued to influence Liu's artistic creation. Yi refers to the creator's thoughts, emotions, and subjective intentions, while jing denotes the objective scenes, atmospheres, or settings portrayed in the work. Yi and jing cannot exist independently; their integration produces true artistic beauty. This means that inner emotions must be conveyed through specific scenes and objects, while external imagery should be deepened in meaning through emotional rendering.

3.2. The Three Distances in Shanghai School Oil Painting

The concept of "High Distance," "Deep Distance," and "Flat Distance," proposed by Guo Xi in *Linquan Gaozhi* summarizes the spatial representation in landscape painting and delves into the yijing of the artwork. This "Three Distances" compositional method not only visually presents expansive space but also guides viewers through progressively layered spatial designs into different spiritual realms, creating a unique aesthetic experience in landscape painting.

Yan Wenliang, a realist artist within the Shanghai School, excels in expressing landscapes through delicate light and shadow. His painting *The Great Wall* (Fig. 4) employs a "Deep Distance" composition to convey the Great Wall's majestic extension along the mountain ranges. This compositional style is

commonly used in traditional Chinese painting to depict landscapes. The essence of yijing is to transcend the limitations of the "image" and approach the infinite, inherently linking it to the notion of "distance." The aesthetic nature of yijing is to express the "Dao" , and "distance" leads to the "Dao."

In his works, Yan Wenliang assimilated Western oil painting techniques for modeling light and shadow while integrating traditional Chinese compositional principles. Shitao's *Sketch of Seeking Out Unique Peaks* (Fig. 5) utilizes a "Deep Distance" composition, where the undulating mountains encircle sharp peaks and cliffs, with streams winding through, eventually merging into the great river, and mist rising over distant peaks. This composition draws the viewer's spirit into the natural landscape, away from the mundane social world. The Great Wall in Yan Wenliang's painting shares a similar effect with the streams in Shitao's work, extending the viewer's gaze into the distance and igniting the imagination, transitioning from the finite to the infinite. The tangible form of landscapes embodies the "real," while the "distant view" and "distant momentum" of landscapes lead towards the "void". [5 p. 289]



Fig. 4. The Great Wall Yan Wenliang



Fig. 5. Sketch of Seeking Out Unique Peaks (part)

3.3. The Interaction of Reality and Illusion in Shanghai School Oil Painting

Artists of the Shanghai School inherited the traditional aesthetic of density and sparsity, as well as the principle of the interaction of reality and illusion. Laozi posited that all things in the universe represent a unity of "nothingness" and "being", as well as a unity of "void" and "substance". With this unity, all things can flow, transform, and thrive endlessly. This principle asserts that artistic representations must combine reality and illusion to authentically reflect the living world. [Ye 1985, 29] Wu Dayu stands as a representative of abstract oil painting within the Shanghai School and is a foundational figure in China's native abstract art. In his work *Momentum of a Thousand Miles*, the lines rich in the aesthetic essence of brushwork flow and leap, revealing Wu Dayu's highest pursuit of understanding rather than mere technical skill. The central vertical lines contrast starkly with the irregular

black lines.

The title of the painting, combined with its enormous vertical strokes, evokes the image of a waterfall cascading from great heights. Wu Dayu moves away from realistic depictions, blending reality and illusion, where the virtual informs the actual. The upper part of the painting features raw spaces that suggest water or sky, yet they do not convey emptiness. Instead, these areas evoke meaning, exemplifying the principle of the interaction of reality and illusion, which embodies the yijing aesthetic.

4. The Role of Yijing in Shanghai School Oil Painting

In Shanghai School oil painting, artistic conception continues traditional Chinese aesthetic principles while integrating Eastern and Western cultures. Shanghai School artists embrace Western techniques without abandoning their promotion of Chinese culture. This Eastern aesthetic is skillfully woven into Western composition and color practices. Their works blend "commodity" with folk art and uphold the spirit of Chinese artistic conception. This influence extends beyond the scholar-official class, reaching ordinary households and enriching people's artistic experiences.

5. Conclusions

Shanghai School painters blend traditional Chinese aesthetic principles like "Vivid Spirit" and "Reality and Illusion" with oil painting and Western art, creating works that reflect contemporary sensibilities and a unique style. They innovate boldly in brushwork, color, and composition, using personalized artistic language to express their understanding of life, nature, and society. While inheriting Chinese aesthetic traditions, they emphasize individual expression and expand the forms of Chinese painting, significantly promoting the development of modern Chinese art.

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