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**The Integration and Expression of Chinese Traditional Aesthetic
Thought in Oil Painting--The Example of QiYunShengDong (气韵生
动)**

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Abstract

QiYunShengDong is an important concept in traditional Chinese aesthetics. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Western aestheticians have translated QiYun into rhythm in the West, because they see that the emphasis on rhythm in modern Western art is related to the influence of traditional Chinese painting. However, QiYunShengDong in the traditional Chinese sense is not rhythm. Rather than rhythm being like QiYun, it is more like the Freehand in traditional Chinese painting. This article will take the integration and expression of Chinese traditional aesthetic thought in oil painting--the example of QiYunShengDong, and take the works of Chinese oil painters who stayed in France at the beginning of the 20th century and those of modern Chinese oil painters as examples to explain the meaning of QiYunShengDong in the understanding of Chinese painters and the expression of its application to oil paintings, so as to have a more in-depth understanding of how the artist In order to have a deeper understanding of how artists integrate traditional spirit and culture into oil paintings. Combined with the current development of contemporary oil painting, I will show my practice of freehand traditional painting with oil painting, and try to have new creation and self-reflection in the practice.

Keywords: QiYunShengDong;Chinese traditional aesthetic;oil painting

1 The aesthetic meaning of QiYunShengDong

1.1 based on the interpretation of traditional Chinese philosophy

Qiyun shengdong” (气韵生动) is the first canon of “Six Methods” (六法) , the Six methods of Chinese painting, the earliest systematic methodology of Chinese painting put forward by Xie He in the late fifth century. Xie He lived during the Southern Qi dynasty (479–501). He published Guhua Pinlu (Notes on the Classification Old Paintings) c.500, in which the six canons were first set forth. The first of them, “QiYun ShengDong”, is believed to be the highest aesthetic criteria of Chinese painting, and one of the most important aesthetic principles of traditional painting criticism and literary criticism in China.

(Wang,2020,pp.43-54)

As you can see from the quote, QiYunShengDong has an important meaning in traditional Chinese aesthetics, it is not an empty talk, but has experienced more than a thousand years of precipitation to develop to the present day. Xie He did not further elaborate on his theory when he proposed the "Six Methods" until Zhang Yanyuan in the late Tang Dynasty wrote a section entitled "Six Methods of Painting"(论画六法) in his "Record of Famous Paintings Throughout the Ages", and it was only in the history of Chinese painting that there appeared the first person to comprehensively elaborate on Xie He's "Six Methods", so when it comes to the "Six Methods", it is not easy to find out the meaning of the "Six Methods of Painting". Therefore, when talking about Xie He's "Six Methods", Zhang Yanyuan's "Records of Famous Paintings of All Ages" is a topic that cannot be bypassed, and tracing back to its roots, it is right to make an in-depth study of "Records of Famous Paintings of All Ages".

From the etymology of the word, the word "QiYun" can be traced back to the traditional Chinese philosophy of Zhuang Zi. Zhuang Zi emphasises the integration of subject and object, seeing man and nature, mind and matter as a whole, a state of "unity of heaven and man", and a state of pursuing freedom in life. The "Qi" in "QiYun" is influenced by the yin-yang and five elements of the two Han dynasties as well as the theory of rational Qi of the Song Dynasty, and corresponds to the author, usually referring to the author's character and momentum. Yun was an important concept used in the appreciation of human relationships at that time, and it was a person's appearance that revealed his or her style, mood, and personality, such as Zhang Yanyuan's words, "the nobility of clothes", "the elegant and noble". As for the relationship between "QiYun" and "ShengDong", "ShengDong" is a kind of complementary description of "QiYun", and "ShengDong" can reflect vitality. when there is "QiYun", there is "ShengDong".

In the Six Methods of Painting in the Record of Famous Paintings of All Ages (历代名画记), it is mentioned that "As for the ghosts. There is a vividness that can be shaped, and it has to be divine and then complete"(2011).It reflects the decisive role that "QiYun" plays in the word "ShengDong".

1.2 Interpretations based on Western aesthetics

QiYunShengDong has also been noted and studied in the West. In An Introduction to the History of Chinese Painting and Art(1918), Giles introduced XieHe's Six Methods, in which he translated " QiYunShengDong " as "rhythmic vitality". In an article on Kelekian's collection, Fry explains the similarities between modern European painting and Oriental antiquity; Kelekian was originally a collector of Oriental antiquity (rhythmic vitality) , but later began to collect the works of modern Parisian painters, and was an early promoter of modern European painting. On the surface, Kelekian's two kinds of collections were unrelated, even irrelevant, but Fry found the rationality of collecting them together, dividing the art world of the time into two camps: one pursuing "beauty", represented by Greco-Roman and Renaissance art; the other is the art of pursuing "expression", represented by modern European art and ancient Oriental art. Fry argues that it was Kelekian's eye for modern Parisian painting, trained by the Orient, that enabled him to recognise it, and Fry comments on Kelekian:

His collection of modern paintings thus proves that his method was extremely correct. His long immersion in the early art of the Orient has sharpened his taste for what is really significant in art, and has given him the courage to choose modern works, a courage that has not failed him".

(Fry,1920,pp.304)

Fry has described himself:

I have tried to show that there are at least two kinds of aesthetic pleasure that can be deduced from the fugue of the line - the pleasure derived from the rhythmic sequence of the line itself, which I have called the calligraphic element, and the pleasure derived from the action of the modelling form, which I have called the structural element, on the human mind. One could say that the calligraphic line is a line that stays on the page, whereas the structural line enters three-dimensional space. The calligraphic line is a record of a gesture, in fact a record of that gesture so pure and so complete. so much so that we can trace it with a

kind of pleasure, as we trace the movement of a dancer. It tends to express the unstable and subjective side of conception more than any other fugitive quality, and in the structured line the artist shows himself to be almost entirely committed to the objective realisation of form.

(ShenYubing,2010)

The "calligraphic line" is the line that is directly visible on the screen, and what we see directly is the line; the "structural line" is not directly visible on the screen, but dissolves into the reproduction of the object, and what we see directly is the shape of the object. Although Fry does not make a value judgement between the two types of line in this essay, but only makes a clear distinction between them, it can be seen, in conjunction with his other texts. The "calligraphic line" is the expressive line, which is the line in modern painting and ancient oriental art; the "structural line" is the reproduction line, which is reflected in classical European art.

2 Analysing the Specific Expression of QiYunShengDong in Oil Painting through Case Studies

2.1 Case Study 1: Analysing the Works of Chinese Oil Painters in the Early 20th Century

Different expressions of line can also explain the artist's conception and idea of the work, and the rhythm and vitality translated by QiYunShengDong is also reflected in the calligraphic line. In the following, I will use case studies to explain the meaning of QiYunShengDong in the understanding of Chinese painters and its expression in oil paintings. The group of Chinese artists who studied in France at the beginning of the twentieth century was chosen because of their significance in the development of Chinese art history. A famous curator of Chinese painting exhibitions, Hongmei, once said, How we came into contact with Western culture, the modernity in us, the new Chinese painting that merges the East and the West, was given to us by these artists who studied in France, this group of pioneers. As Hongmei said, the Chinese artists who stayed in France at the beginning of the 20th century made the first attempts to combine Chinese and Western art creations, and the expression of indigenous spirit in their works is very obvious.

Pan Yuliang, trained in traditional painting in China, studied in France and lived there for forty years until his death. Taking her work "Fan Dance for Two" (Figure 1) as an example,

the combination of Chinese and Western elements of the work is firstly reflected in its ethnic characteristics, she borrowed the colour effect of the traditional Chinese New Year paintings of red and green, and integrated the elements of Greater China, such as the traditional costumes, floral patterns, lanterns and so on. Besides, she applies the technique of "white space" in traditional Chinese painting, combining with the principle of complementary colours, and fills up the whole white space by using the expression of dabbing and interlacing, almost abandoning the depiction of the environment in the oil painting, so as to make the main body have a real content, and to express the spirit of Chinese painting in western painting, and the language of the oil painting is more condensed, more general, and the colours are more simple. The language of oil painting is more condensed, the colours are more simple, and the lines tend to be rough.

"Fan Dance for Two" draws on Matisse's pure colours and flat paintings,



Figure 1: Fan Dance for Two for Pan Yuliang (1955)

which are representative of Fauvism, to make the whole picture free and unrestrained. The two girls in the painting are dressed in red and green traditional Chinese costumes, and the circular outline they form is extremely tense. There is a certain sense of femininity in her painting, whether it is the shape of the folding fan or the lantern hanging on the right, or the use of complementary shades of red and green, which visually assist the subject in forming a complete and self-contained world, and which further enhance the "eight trigrams"-like figure of the painting composed by the two of them. However, the position of Yang (male) is replaced by Yin (female). This cosmic world of complementary genders, formed by women, reflects Pan

Yuliang's inner search for security. Most importantly, Pan Yuliang incorporates the Chinese painting technique of linear outlining, which not only focuses on the strength and rhythm of the lines, but also integrates subjective feelings into the lines in order to express his own emotions, and expresses a joyful festive atmosphere. It also embodies the aesthetic realm of naturalness and vividness, fully displaying its vitality and infectiousness, as proposed in the QiYunShengDong. The Chinese motifs and symbols in Pan Yuliang's works are the symbols of traditional culture, and she takes Chinese history and culture as the source of her creativity, reflecting her self-consciousness and national consciousness in her painting art, which is well exemplified in this work.

2.2 Case Study 2: Combining Contemporary Painting Techniques and

Expressive Content in Practice

The above case study mainly analyses the works of Chinese oil painters at the beginning of the 20th century. In my practice, in addition to considering how to integrate QiYunShengDong into oil paintings, I have to create new works by combining them with the development of contemporary art. The first consideration is the form of expression. Contemporary painters continue to innovate in the use of materials and the choice of techniques, and pay attention to the combination of techniques and expressive content, using modelling to show the uniqueness of the picture. For example, in Shao Yuhao's "At the Table - Sequel" (Figure 2) and "Gloves Series" (Figure 3), we can see that the use of acrylic material is free, while highlighting the



Figure 2: At the Table - Sequel for Shao Yuhao (2012)



Figure 3: Gloves Series for Shao Yuhao (2012)

dynamics of watercolour itself, and the organic combination of the two will greatly enrich the space of painting with water-based materials, making the presentation of the object more realistic and natural. Therefore, in my practice, I will use watercolour, oil painting, acrylic, oil stick, ink painting and other media to complete my creations. I will use a mixture of these media to create a style that is a fusion of Chinese and Western styles, which in turn reveals the vividness of the QiYunShengDong.

Taking my current practice Breakfast (Figure 4) as an example, the first is the combination of watercolour and oil stick, i.e. on the basis of watercolour, oil stick is used as an oily pigment.

The specific steps are as follows: the first step is to use saturated watercolour to spread the dye on the paper first, the effect presented is still the characteristics of watercolour; the second step is to use oil stick to paint in the local area, and in actual creation, according to the need, it is also possible to carry out multi-layer coverage; the third step is to use watercolour line to outline the overall outline. In the first two steps, water-based materials are used, and the watercolour base is fresh and light. The texture of the upper layer is brightly coloured, and the lively lines make the whole picture bright and soothing. The combination of the two complements each other, reflecting the breath of modern art.

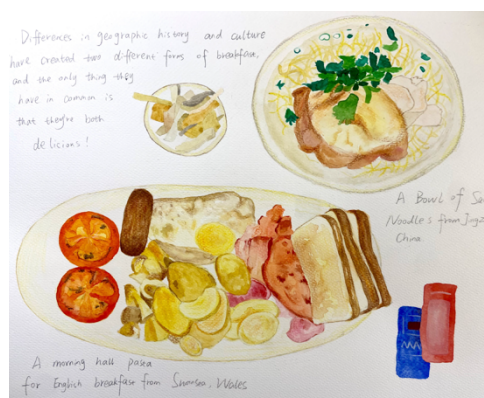


Figure 4: Breakfast for my practice (2023)

2.3 Case Study 3: The Practice of Oil Painting Integrated with Traditional Freehand Painting

In my practice, I will focus on the relevance of the content and subject matter of my works to QiYunShengDong. In the choice of themes for my works, I often look for them from daily life, combine them with traditional Chinese humanistic meanings, and practice them in the form of imagery, pictorial expression, and the creation of symbolic language. Freehand Painting is mainly about depicting the mood. The "Freehand Painting" is an important category of traditional Chinese aesthetics, and it is an indispensable factor that constitutes the beauty of art.

Li Keran, a famous Chinese aesthetician, said:

Context is the soul of art, it is the concentration of the essence of the objective part of the object, coupled with the casting of human thoughts and feelings, after a high degree of artistic processing, to achieve a blend of circumstances, the scene, the expression of feelings, thus showing the artistic realm, the realm of poetry, is called the Freehand Painting.

(Zhan Youpeng, pp.14)

With the help of the traditional Chinese aesthetics category of "Freehand Painting", Chinese contemporary oil painters are more aware of its heart. When they hold the oil brush in their hands and face the oil canvas, when they make a kind of cultural attempt, it is actually done under the guidance of a kind of subcultural consciousness. When Ren Chuanwen creates a

series of "floating life imagery", the fabrication of "mood" is the first priority, and also serves as a kind of "true" attitude when he creates. as a kind of "true" attitude in his creation. The Chinese painter Ren Chuanwen said :

For me personally, the process of applying some traces on paper or cloth to sort out all kinds of feelings from life and nature, and translating the perceptions of my eyes and mind into a visual and materialised scene, makes me experience a kind of self-gratification in viewing and the joy of thinking. I have completed the construction of the picture both consciously and unconsciously, during which those accidental and inevitable factors will form a *dojo*, calling for the proximity of the way and the emotion, and the merging of the mental image and the physical image... I insistently believe that the thing that gradually emerges in the process of intermingling between the picture and me is my true heart, which should also be the heart of heaven! I am also the heart of heaven.

(Zhangqun,2013)

The key to the creation of "Freehand Painting" lies in the bridging of "mind" and "object", a connection between the accidental and the inevitable. This is even more emphasised in the creation of contemporary Chinese landscape oil paintings, and this kind of bridging and connection is a kind of expression that directly refers to the "mental image".

Here are a few examples of works by modern Chinese oil painters for illustration. First of all, they focus on expressing the spirit of art by means of imagery. Take Shang Yang's *Diagnosis-1* (Figure 5) as an example, Shang Yang employs an extremely simple graffitied human

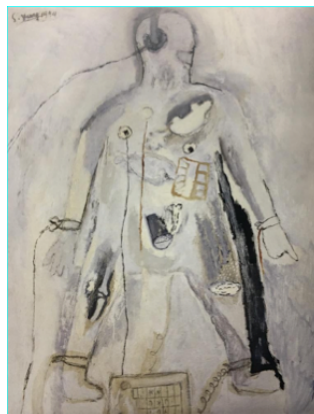


Figure 5: *Diagnosis-1* for Shang Yang (1994)

figure, with diagnostic instruments with long lines drawn on the head, chest, wrists, and ankles, which is undoubtedly the most direct feeling of the person being diagnosed. The work does not, however, present the inner tension and irritation of the diagnosed person, but rather the image of a silly, joyful figure that seems oblivious to all the discomfort is presented by this faded figure. This is clearly an intentional transformation: the transformation of the individual's inner

discomfort into a numb adaptation to an uncomfortable "social rationality". It is in this numb and joyful image that the work shows a double questioning of the "social rationality" that constantly shapes the modern living situation. On the one hand, the image of this kind of giggle itself is quite ironic, and it is the lowest intensity of the individual's life when facing the "reality" that he or she has to bear. On the one hand, this image of giggling is ironic in itself, which is the lowest intensity of resistance when an individual life faces the "reality" he has to bear; on the other hand, this numb and joyful image of giggling is in fact the result of the continuous moulding of modern "social rationality".(Tang Guanke&Mao Weiqing,2018,p.65) The above is a case study on imagery.

There is another kind of reflection on history that is expressed by unique images. Take Wei Guangqing's Red Wall - Family Harmony (Figure 6) as an



Figure 6: Red Wall - Family Harmony for Wei Guangqing (2020)

example. In this work, the artist's choice of images is ingenious and symbolic. Specifically, the image of the "red wall" symbolises China's traditional culture and moral model, while the "film" symbolises the arrival of the image age and consumerism. The essence of moral textbooks such as Zhu Zi's Family Trainings is the maintenance of feudal and authoritarian cultural values, and the artist borrows the prints of Zhu Zi's Family Trainings to symbolise the influence of traditional morality on reality. In fact, it is through this juxtaposition of different cultural backgrounds and different time and space that the artist realises the overlap between history and reality. These illustrations from traditional cultural contexts construct the sense of history in his images. Using the power of repetition, the artist combines symbolic images with the reality of contemporary society, changes the red wall into his personal artistic symbols, and places various imports of modern civilisation alongside one another in his images, thereby creating a wonderful sense of vision. While re-transforming and rethinking the ancient classics,

Wei Guangqing does not completely abandon the tradition, and through his works he reflects the complexity of the intertwined meanings of traditional culture, consumerism, political rights, and the operation of capital, as well as the relationship between human beings and the society, human beings and the nature, and human beings and human beings in the process of modernisation.

Last but not least, there is also a way of forming one's own unique symbolic language by means

of humour and banter. Take Yue Minjun's Pyramid (Figure 7) and Self-indulgent Me (Figure 8) as an example, the notable style of his works is the repetition of



Figure 7: Pyramid for Yue Minjun (2016)



Figure 8: Self-indulgent Me for Yue Minjun (2015)

open-mouthed giggling. He repeatedly depicts an image through strong colours and exaggerated shapes, creating a powerful impact on the viewer's vision. Yue Minjun is a realist artist, and his way of speaking is to repeatedly use his own image as a model, posing with all sorts of weird and ridiculous actions, and playful expressions, and through self-deprecating depictions of these actions and expressions, he expresses the empty and boring spiritual world of today. "People don't think when they laugh, and I think the less they think, the happier they are. (Guangzhou Tianzhi Culture,2023) Therefore, the characters in Yue Minjun's works laugh out loud with their eyes tightly closed, neither thinking nor opening their eyes to see. This is also a reflection of Yue Minjun's own mental condition. Yue Minjun's mocking "smiley faces" have become a classic symbol. These smiley faces seem to be absurd and cynical, with his eyes always closed and heartless, but they are a kind of rebellion against life. He wants to survive but is not willing to do so, so he has to take out his "shrewd" way to express his dissatisfaction with the reality. The above is a case study of symbolic language. In general, painters, on the one hand, establish a symbolic pattern with new visual aesthetics as a metaphor for the literati spirit that should be possessed in the new era; on the other hand, they shift their aesthetic attention to people's daily life, and find a new demand for visual aesthetics in the

interaction between the elite and the aesthetic public. Similar to the visual aesthetics of paintings in the early 20th century, contemporary painters focus on the real world, taking into account both Eastern and Western artistic spirits, with the aim of inquiring and reflecting on the value of contemporary human life. At the same time, they have given contemporary oil painting a mission and responsibility: in the diversified world pattern, how to obtain a new visual aesthetic demand for Chinese contemporary oil painting, which involves the value and meaning of Chinese painters' creation. It can be said that what contemporary painting conveys is no longer a mere reproduction of the objective world, nor is it a conveyance of the subjective spirit, but a search for the expression of the visual aesthetics of the new era between reality and the virtual. In terms of viewing style, Chinese contemporary oil paintings are free from the constraints of "resemblance", combining the real with the imaginary, inheriting the essence of the aesthetics of QiYunShengDong, and expressing the understanding of the human state of life through the inward-looking way.

3 The Development of QiYunShengDong in Contemporary Oil

Painting

3.1 The Importance of Image Symbols and Painting Language in Oil Painting

Contemporary oil painting is infused with linguistic symbolic expression, while QiYunShengDong is the need to show rhythm and vitality in painting. Therefore, in my practice, I will try to incorporate rhythmic, local style image expression. In contemporary times, the relationship between pictorial symbols and linguistic symbols has entered the stage of "merging". The dynamic transformation relationship between image and language not only eases the occurrence of image generalisation to extend the narrative and linguistic nature of image, but also makes the linguistic symbols dependent on the image symbols, which is a kind of dynamic process of pictorialisation. The pictorial sign acquires the same importance as the linguistic sign, as Michel points out:

Viewing (looking, gazing, scanning, observational practices, surveillance, and visual pleasure) may be as profound a problem as the various forms of reading (deciphering, decoding, interpreting, etc.), and visual experience or 'visual literacy' may not be fully explained in terms of textual modes.

(Chen Zhijun, 2019, pp.4)

This means that a purely verbal description of the image cannot complete the visual experience of reproduction, and that in order to convey a vivid meaning through pictorial expression, the pictorial symbol needs to be established in an interdisciplinary manner in the form of an "image" that needs to be sutured (a concept Michel borrowed from the psychoanalysis of cinema) in order to realise a different way of returning to the same place.

From my theoretical research, I know that since the twentieth century, Chinese oil painters, in the midst of the conflict between Chinese national painting and Western painting, have

presented the pluralistic relationship between human beings and the world through the modern transformation of visual aesthetics, generating a new meaning of images based on the reality of the society, which is the painters' understanding of visual aesthetics at the beginning of the development of oil painting in China, and it also directly influences on the paintings. As Pan

Yuliang's calligraphic lines in *Fan Dance for Two*, this is the artist's expression of the use of QiYunShengDong and the fusion of East and West a hundred years ago. Specifically, painters generate emotional experiences during the creative process, and through the combined effects of vision, perception, and hearing, aesthetic imagery is fused. Under the social, cultural and historical factors behind the vision, the subject of viewing, through the modern attributes of visual aesthetics, elevates the relationship between human beings and the world to a kind of viewing experience, and endows the "visible things" with the concept of "invisible things". QiYunShengDong is the "invisible thing", and how it is conveyed to the viewer requires something in the picture to show it. The artist conveys perceptual experience to the real world through a new way of looking at art forms such as colour, space and texture. This change is not only a transformation of the image itself, but also a transformation of the overall cultural concept. This way of seeing is embedded with traditional cultural concepts, but is also grounded in contemporary society, highlighting the vitality of traditional art and realising spiritual freedom and the sublimation of personality. The significance of this transformation carries over into contemporary painting, where Chinese painters influenced by the Western concept of modern painting attempt to express the visual experience and inner needs of contemporary people through the images themselves. Instead of pursuing specific scenes and specific events, they emphasise the emotions of modern people through overview and inductive depictions of everyday life. So I will try to seek the intrinsic connection between painting and reality from image symbols and language symbols, pay attention to the relationship between art and history, culture, and society, and try to explain image symbols and the relevance to QiYunShengDong behind them through narrative descriptions. At this time, image as a special language, mostly expresses the content, theme and spiritual meaning with symbolic, individual and even replicated images. My cultural background and the environment of the times affect my expression and understanding of QiYunShengDong. The images in my practice are no longer a reproduction of daily life or a medium for recording social reality, but rather an intuitive linguistic symbol to be presented to the viewer, so as to express my attitudes and reflections on social life, my understanding of aesthetic thought, and the artist's inner introspection and experience.

3.2 Conclusion: The spiritual heritage of QiYunShengDong

The main correlation between QiYunShengDong and oil painting lies in the artist's perception of the spirit of traditional Chinese painting, on the one hand, it is the achievement of the temperament of the picture, and on the other hand, it is the exploration of the spiritual dimension. Therefore, in my practice, I will focus on the aesthetic meaning of QiYunShengDong, including but not limited to the study of graphic symbols, writing, calligraphic lines and other forms in

my works, and in the subsequent exhibitions, I will experiment with a variety of mediums, in an attempt to collide with a new personal style and images in the picture. In addition, although this research is based on tradition, it is not the same as returning completely to traditional discourse. Traditional discourse itself is a living and developing system, and cannot be understood as a system that no longer changes. With the development of new life and new practices, new discourses are inevitably created. Therefore, I have cited examples from the early 20th century and also made some new interpretations in the light of the development of contemporary oil painting.

The study of QiYunShengDong is a rich theoretical resource that can be utilised to inherit and develop its ideology and spirit, and to give it new vigour by combining it with modern art media.

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