

The Problem of the Authenticity of the Aesthetic Concept *qiyun shengdong*: Xu Fuguan's Analysis and Interpretation¹

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Abstract

The article explores Xu Fuguan's analysis and interpretation of the concept of *qiyun shengdong* 氣韻生動, which is considered to be one of the most important, fundamental and complex concepts in Chinese aesthetics and art. It was created by Xie He in the Wei Jin period (220–420 AD), which is marked as a turning point in the development of Chinese aesthetics. The complexity of the concept of *qiyun shengdong* is reflected in literary works, painting, calligraphy, and music, as well as in literary theory and the theory of painting.

According to Xu Fuguan, *qi* refers to the external features of the artwork, while *yun* expresses the internal characteristics that are a matter of the human spirit. For Xu, *shengdong* signifies the manifestation and fusion of *qi* and *yun* in the artwork. Xu Fuguan claimed that the profound comprehension of this concept is fundamental for understanding the essence of Chinese art. The article also addresses the problem of translating this aesthetic concept into English and discusses the problem of its authenticity.

Keywords: Xu Fuguan, *qiyun shengdong*, Xie He, Chinese aesthetics, Indian theory of painting

Problem avtentičnosti estetskega koncepta *qiyun shengdong*: Xu Fuguanova analiza in interpretacija

Izvilleček

Članek proučuje Xu Fuguanovo analizo in interpretacijo koncepta *qiyun shengdong* 氣韻生動, ki velja za enega najpomembnejših, najbolj temeljnih in najkompleksnejših konceptov v kitajski estetiki in umetnosti. Vzpostavil ga je Xie He v obdobju Wei Jin, ki pomeni prelomnico v razvoju kitajske estetike. Kompleksnost koncepta *qiyun shengdong* se odraža

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tako v literarnih delih, slikarstvu in glasbi kot tudi v literarni teoriji in teoriji slikarstva. Po Xu Fuguanovem mnenju se *qi* nanaša na zunanje lastnosti umetniškega dela, medtem ko *yun* izraža notranje značilnosti, ki se tičejo človeškega duha. Za Xu Fuguana *shengdong* pomeni manifestacijo in zlitje *qija* in *yuna* v umetniškem delu. Xu Fuguan je trdil, da je poglobljeno razumevanje tega koncepta bistvenega pomena za razumevanje bistva kitajske umetnosti. Članek obravnava tudi problem prevajanja tega estetskega koncepta v angleščino ter problem njegove pristnosti.

Ključne besede: Xu Fuguan, *qiyun shengdong*, Xie He, kitajska estetika, indijska teorija slikarstva

Introduction

Xu Fuguan (1903–1982) is one of the representatives of the second generation of Modern Confucians, a philosophical current that was established in the second half of the 20th century in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Modern Confucianism as an important philosophical discourse in contemporary China did not emerge due to the desire for a modern synthesis of the Confucian and Euro-American traditions alone, but also as a consequence of an axiological crisis in both traditions (Rošker 2016, 154).

Besides Xu Fuguan, the members of the second generation were Mou Zongsan (1909–1995), Tang Junyi (1909–1978) and Fang Dongmei (1899–1977). Xu Fuguan's research fields mainly covered philosophy, the sociology of culture and literary and art criticism, and he was one of the first theoreticians of the specific Chinese aesthetics in Contemporary Chinese thought. In this respect, Xu Fuguan's historical, conceptual and semantic analysis and interpretation of one of the most complex concepts in Chinese aesthetics, namely that of *qiyun shengdong*, is considered one of the most comprehensive and profound.

In Western sinological, aesthetic and art theory works, *qiyun shengdong* 氣韻生動 is mostly translated as “rhythmic resonance”, “spirit resonance”, “creating rhythmic vitality”, “spiritual resonance and life motion”, “spirit consonance engendering a sense of life”, and similar terms.² Xu Fuguan is however very critical of translating *yun* 韻 in terms of “rhythm” or “resonance”, because according to him *yun* has much wider conceptual spectrum and its meaning also depends on the context in which it occurs (*ibid.*). As an aesthetic concept, *qiyun shengdong* was first

2 As we will see further on, *qiyun shengdong* is very hard to translate into Indo-European languages because of its wide range of connotations.

mentioned by Xie He³ in his *Record of the Classification of Ancient Paintings* (*Gu huapin lu*⁴) in the middle of the 5th century AD, where he set it as the first and most important law and characteristic in the theory of Chinese painting.⁵ However, *qiyun* itself appeared much earlier in poetry. This principle remained valid until the beginning of the 20th century, when the Japanese and Chinese theoreticians began to associate it with the idea of subjectivism, and subjective expression as something that was opposite to the form and, consequently, the objectivity of Western realism (Vampelj Suhadolnik 2013, 97–98).

Xu (2002, 91, 92) writes that *qiyun shengdong* was already mentioned by Gu Kaizhi before Xie He, although Gu used different terminology, namely “the transfer of spirit” (*chuanshen* 傳神) as the main criteria (or law) of painting. Gu claimed that the crucial meaning in the art of painting is precisely the author’s “portrayal of the transfer of spirit” (*chuanshen xiezhao* 傳神寫照⁶) 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. The “spirit” (*shen* 神) is the essence of human beings and the specific characteristic of every individual. According to

- 3 Xie He 謝赫 (ca 479–502 AD) was a painter and art critic. He is best known for his “six laws of painting” (*buihua liufa* 繪畫六法), which must be taken into account in the critical judgment of a painting. Xie wrote these *six laws* in his foreword to the book *The Records on Ancient Painting* (*Gu huapin lu* 古畫品錄), where he classified the artworks of 27 painters into three categories according to the artistic value of their works. These six laws changed over time, gaining different and new meanings, but within the framework of Chinese aesthetics they are still considered as the basic criteria of Chinese painting. Xie He’s six laws are written in the form of parallelism, which is a typical form of writing in classical Chinese. According to Xu Fuguan, the first two characters are the core of parallelism, while the other to refer to its concrete application as revealed in praxis. The credibility of the translation of the six laws is still a subject of academic debate.
- 4 Xie He specified the laws in the form of numerical listing, which was, according to Victor H. Mair adopted from an Indian theory of painting, the *Sadanga*. (The credibility of Mair’s hypothesis will be discussed at the end of the article.) Xie He’s six laws or principles are as follows: 一曰，氣韻生動是也 *yi yue qiyun shengdong shi ye* (“the first is principle is the harmonious dynamics of creativity”); 二曰，骨法用筆是也 *er yue gufa yongbi shi ye* (“the second principle is the usage of brush to present the balanced qi”); 三曰，應物象行是也 *san yue yingwu xiangxing shi ye* (“the third principle is portraying the image in accordance to objects”); 四曰，隨類賦彩是也 *si yue suilei fucai shi ye* (“the fourth principle is application of colour in accordance to the type of object”); 五曰，經營位置是也 *wu yue jingying weizhi shi ye* (“the fifth is the placement and positioning”); 六曰，傳移模寫是也 *liu yue chuanyi moxie shi ye* (“the sixth is copying the old masters to transmit the tradition”). The English translation of the first and second laws, which are the most difficult to translate, will be thoroughly explained and discussed in the last part of the article.
- 5 Although Xie He’s theory of painting was still somehow in the embryonic stage, it later became a concise and comprehensive system, which was, according to Xu, already a masterful creation right from the very beginning (Xu 2002, 84).
- 6 In traditional Chinese painting, the verb to “write or describe” (*xiehua* 寫畫) was often used instead of the verb “to paint” (*buihua* 繪畫), because painting as an artistic genre actually evolved from calligraphy (Xu 2002, 85).

Xu, the expression and representation of the human spirit (and human relations) through painting was a conceptual shift in aesthetics that happened in the Wei Jin period (220–420 AD). During this period, painting focused on representation of the inner world which became the main object in the art of painting. In the Wei Jin period, representations of the human being aimed to reflect the beauty of the human character and interpersonal relationships, and thus were not about the depiction of human physical characteristics, but rather the depiction of the human spirit. This tendency was not only revealed in painting, but in all art genres. In contrast to the sculptures and paintings of the Han dynasty (206–220 BC), where painters mainly depicted the legends and famous personalities of Chinese antiquity, the aesthetic elements of the Wei Jin period reveal a completely new direction in Chinese art. Although the theme of Han dynasty painting and sculpture was partially transposed to Wei Jin, it was with the difference that the painters focused primarily on the display of their spirit, through which they expressed their inner value and meaning. Representation of the human spirit therefore became the main principle and criterion of Wei Jin art and aesthetics. This conceptual shift represents remarkable progress in traditional Chinese art, which is especially evident in the field of painting.⁷ According to Xu, *qiyun shengdong* is precisely what makes this kind of transformation possible (namely, the transfer of human spirit into the painting or any work of art) (Xu 2002, 91, 92).

The “transfer of spirit” (*chuanshen*) is thus the basis of figural painting in China that has been transmitted from the Wei Jin period. Xu believes that the significance of Gu Kaizhi’s *transfer of the spirit* is more clearly and accurately reflected in Xie He’s description of the concept of *qiyun shengdong*. In other words, all that Gu Kaizhi called *chuanshen*, as well as all other concepts related to the spirit, such as *shenqi* (“vitality of the spirit”), *shenming* (“clarity of the spirit”), *shenling* (“the divine spirit”), were merged into one by Xie He, which he called *qiyun shengdong* (ibid.).

For Xu, *qiyun shengdong* is in fact a concretization and refinement of the idea of the spirit, hence it is worthy of careful and profound examination. Xu Fuguan’s research is thus multi-layered. He investigates individual concepts within the concept *qiyun shengdong*, namely the concepts *qi* and *yun*, that embody their own meanings and connotations but, as we will see further on, are inextricably connected in the artwork. In the following subsections, which follow Xu Fuguan’s structure of analysis, we will examine and evaluate his analysis of individual concepts within the phrase (or category) *qiyun shengdong*.

7 It is therefore not surprising that Xu emphasizes (2002, 91) that Chinese painting as an independent artistic genre does not begin before the Wei Jin period.

Qi as the Philosophical and Aesthetic Concept

Qi 氣 is one of the most complex concepts in Chinese intellectual tradition and philosophy. In Indo-European languages there exists a whole range of different translations of this term; the most frequent ones are “air”, “breath”, “vitality”, the “source of life”, “energy”, “matter”, and the like. Below, we are going to have a closer look at a series of additional connotations of this concept that are important for a more comprehensive understanding of the aesthetic concept *qiyun shengdong*.

Qi has belonged to the most basic categories of understanding reality from China’s earliest philosophical discourses (Rošker 2017). Primarily, the ancient Chinese philosophers understood *qi* as an embodiment of natural phenomena. For them, there existed six types of *Heavenly qi* (*Tianqi*): *yin*, *yang*, rain, wind, darkness and light that were connected to the five phases (*wuxing*) of the Earth: metal, wood, water, fire and earth. Of the six *Heavenly qi*, the rain and the wind brought the birth of all things or beings. *Qi* of the light and darkness shows the change of day and night as one of the laws of nature; in this context, the binary category *yin* and *yang* represents the character of all earthly or weather phenomena. In addition to creating all phenomena of nature, *qi* of Heaven and Earth also created human beings (Wong 1989, 46). This definition can be found, for example, in the chapter “*Neiye* (Inner Aspects)” of the important political text *Guanzi*, written in the Spring and Autumn period around 770–476 BC:

All human beings are created in a way that Heaven contributes its essence and the Earth its form. When the two merge, a human being is created.

凡人之生也，天出其精，地出其形，合此以為人。(*Guanzi*, *Neiye*: 7)

This essence (*jing*) is defined earlier in the text as the essence of *qi*:

The essence is the essence of *qi*.

精也者，氣之精者。(*ibid.*: 3)

The concept of *qi* as the essence or source of life has thus become a kind of ontological foundation of existence:

Things are alive, as long as the *qi* is present (in them); without *qi*, they die.

有氣則生，無氣則死。(*ibid.*, *Shu yan*: 1)

The cosmic *qi* thus creates all things, and since it provides for the survival of humans (and all other beings), a person has to respond to it in such a way that he or

she behaves virtuously, otherwise the balance of Heaven and Earth is disturbed and this leads to chaos:

If human beings do not act according to the *qi* of Heaven and Earth, chaos prevails among people.

夫天地之氣，不矢其序，若過其序，民亂之也。(Guoyu in Wong 1989, 47)

Qi, as a onto-cosmological entity, thus obtained a moral character which had a central importance in Confucianism. The concept of *qi* in the sense of “cultivation of *qi*” (*yangqi*) begins with Mencius (379–289 BC), and shows a connection with physical, bodily aspects, and thus we can also call it the “physical life force” (*shenglide shengmingli*) (Xu 2002, 94). However, Mencius emphasized that moral virtues are indispensable for the cultivation of *qi* in the human body, especially righteousness and sincerity, which reciprocally work on the operation of Heaven, as reflected in a calm and stable social and political situation (Wong 1989, 48).

Awareness and cultivation of *qi* was of course also central to Daoist physical and meditative practices such as *qigong*, *taiji quan*, “fasting of the heart-mind” (*xin-zhai*) and “sitting in forgetfulness” (*zuowang*). The main difference between Daoist and Mencian or Confucian techniques of perfecting the personality is that the goal and purpose of the first was to achieve a harmonious fusion of humans with *Dao* or nature, and the purpose of the latter the cultivation of moral character.

As the essence of life, *qi* is therefore closely related to bodily senses and perception. In this sense, it already reaches the sphere of Chinese aesthetics:

Heaven has six sorts of *qi*, they give birth to five tastes, they manifest themselves in five colours and are fulfilled in five tones.

天有六氣，降生五味，發為五色，徵為五聲。(Chun qiu zuo zhuan s.d. Zhao Gongyuan nian: 2)

As mentioned earlier, *qi* as a moral concept first appears in the philosophy of Mencius. As a basic aesthetic concept it occurs in the Wei Jin period. Tastes, colours, sounds and other elements are all transmutations of *qi*. The mediation of *qi*, especially its essence, which is reflected through the interacting of *yin* and *yang*, is the central and most fundamental purpose and goal in Chinese art (Wong 1989, 45).

As an aesthetic concept, *qi* was first mentioned in the late Han dynasty by Cao Pi in relation to literature in his work *Discussions on Literature* (*Dianlun lunwen* 典論論文) where he stated:

In literature, *qi* is the master, it can be dim clear and bright or dim and murky and cannot be attained by force.

文以氣為主，氣之清濁有體，不可力強而致。

According to Xu, *qi* is connected to the physical in the sense of the creative potential that is transformed into the artwork. For him, human emotions, feelings, and an imagination are born in *qi* and are secondarily expressed in a work of art, so for him all metaphysical connotations of *qi* are redundant (Xu 2002, 95).

The *qi* which in literary art expresses itself through ideas, emotions and imagination is actually the accumulated *qi*. Therefore, the individual character that shapes the artwork is determined by *qi*. The transmission of the “spirit” (*chuan-shen*), which we mentioned above, is actually expressed through *qi*. The *qi* which sublimates and fuses with the “spirit” (*shen*), becomes an artistic *qi*. Thus, through the acting of *qi*, the artist’s inner life becomes visible outwardly. According to Xu (ibid.), this is one of the most interesting features of Chinese literary theory, and Chinese art in general. The connection of the *qi* with the “spirit” (*shen*) becomes the entity or unity. Therefore, the term *shenqi* (“the spirit of *qi*”) was used very often at that time (ibid.).

On the other hand, *qi* also represents the artist’s “moral character” (*pinge* 品格) as a lofty quality that creates the background of the artwork. In the Wei Jin period, *qi* in the context of art was considered as the “power of *qi*” (*qili* 氣力) or the “momentum of *qi*” (*qishi* 氣勢). Often the character *gu* 骨 (“framework or bone”) was used instead of 氣, which in fact symbolized it (ibid.).

From the foregoing, we see that *qi* as an aesthetic concept refers to human creative potential, which is the basis of artistic creation. This potential is closely linked to the emotions, feelings and imagination that emerge through perception and comprehension of the world through the sense organs, and in the aesthetics of the Wei Jin period reflect the beauty of human inwardness. The representation of this inner world was the fundamental goal and aesthetic criterion in the art of the Wei Jin period.

Basic Semantic and Aesthetic Connotations of the Concept of *yun*

The word *yun* 韻 first appeared in the Han dynasty. We can find it in the oldest Chinese etymological dictionary *Shuowen jiezi* from the first century AD, where it is defined as a “harmony” or “to harmonize”: *yun, he ye* 韻, 和也. The same definition also appears in the *Guangya* encyclopaedia from the Wei period in the 3rd

century AD. According to Xu Fuguan, at that time the character for harmony 和 (*he*) was replaced by the character *yun* 韻 (Xu 2002, 94).

As in the case of *qi*, the meaning of *yun* also differs according to the particular context and artistic genre. In phonology (*yinyunxue* 音韻學) it holds the meaning as “tone”. In poetry it means “rhyme”. In painting, *yun* is most often translated as a “rhythm” or “rhythmic resonance”. As mentioned earlier, in Xu’s view such a translation is not adequate because it does not cover all its meanings. Wong (1989, 57) also believes that in the Chinese theory of music the translation of the word *yun* as a “rhythmic resonance” is not incontestable.

In aesthetics and philosophy, *yun* has more profound and more complex meanings, and therefore it is necessary to study in detail its original meaning as well as its various connotations in different contexts.

In Chinese tradition, *yun* was related predominately to music. The earliest appearance of *yun* can be traced to Cao Zhi’s 曹植 (192–232) *Essay of the White Crane* (*Baihe fu* 白鶴賦):

I listen to the pure and clear *yun* of the subtle *qin*.⁸

聆雅琴之清韻. (Cao Zhi in Wong 1989, 57).

We can also find it in Ji Kang’s (224–263 AD) poetic essay on *qin* (*Qinfu*), where the following is written (*ibid.*):

From the change of *yun* and subtle melody, a wonderful feeling appears.

改韻易調, 奇弄乃發.

Although at first *yun* was used with the meaning of rhythm in music, the character *lü* 律 soon replaced it, and from then on *yun* was rarely used in relation to music (Xu 2002, 98). In music, *yun* referred to the musical expression or the melodic movement. But later, it was transferred to literature and phonetics. In the latter, *yun* is more or less defined as a tone. In poetry or in poetic essays, the meaning of *yun* becomes much clearer if we take a look at Liu Xie’s definition, written in his famous work *The Literary Spirit and the Carving of the Dragon* (*Wenxin diaolong*), the most important Chinese classic on literary theory and literary aesthetics, written in the 6th century AD:

The sequence of different tones is called harmony, and the sequence of the same sounds is called *yun*.

8 A Chinese string instrument similar to a zither.

異音相從謂之和，同聲相應謂之韻。(Liu Xie: VII, Shenglü: 2)

Wong⁹ (1989, 58) points out that in this case *yun* refers to rhyme and not to rhythm.

According to Xu, no matter if we use *yun* in music or literature it contains the meaning to be in harmonious proportion or to harmonize. For Xu, one of the connotations of *yun* refers to the harmonious sound or the spirit of sound, but in no case it could be understood as rhythmic (Xu 2002, 99).

Wong (1989, 62) specified the meaning of *yun* in music, which in fact means the art of mastering the modulation of the tone, that creates a kind of “surplus of feeling” (*yunwei* 韻味).

In the art of painting, *yun* appears primarily in relation to *qi*, and therefore in the context of painting it is difficult to study *yun* independently, therefore their connection in the concept of *qiyun* will be discussed in more detail below. However, we will first devote ourselves to some additional connotations of the term *yun* in the context of aesthetics.

As an aesthetic concept, *yun* primarily refers to the expression of human character and spirit as revealed in the artwork. Xu also defined it as the recognition of “human relations” (*renlun jianzhi* 人倫鑑識), which was comprehended as a reflection of self-cultivation in the *Xuanxue* philosophy. In this context it actually expresses the “unity of spirit and form” (*shenxing heyi* 神形合一) that is represented outwardly, namely through images in the work of art. At that time, it was termed the “atmosphere” or “general feeling” (*fengqi* 風氣). According to Xu, this connotation of *yun* exists in nature: 自然有雅韻 (Xu 2002, 100).

Xu’s interpretation of *yun* as the concept expressing the recognition of human relations (or their ethics) refers to mapping the harmony and reciprocity of sounds onto human relations (ibid., 101). He believes that *yun* in music and literature is actually created through the unity of various sounds. This variety of sounds is exceeded in music of high quality and thus the so-called unified sound is created. We are able to experience this unity, but on the other hand it is not a matter that we can specifically point out. Therefore, we can say that *yun* is the spirit of the sound. We can imagine this by using the analogy of human beings: people cannot abandon their physical form or their character, but on the other hand, they are able to transcend their spirit into harmonious unity with others. Xu Fuguan is therefore convinced that *yun* carries the meaning of the beauty of an individual’s character and their feelings, but

9 Besides Xu Fuguan’s interpretation of the concept *yun*, I also refer to Wong’s interpretation because he thoroughly researched its original meaning in the context of Chinese music.

only as long as they are harmonious and based on the internalization of Confucian ethics. In this regard, Xu does not relate *yun* to sound. This type of beauty is reflected outwards, namely through human expression. This sort of *yun*, where the spirit and the external world are fused together, is expressed in paintings and this is precisely the central meaning of *yun* in the concept *qiyun* (Xu 2002, 102).

At first glance, it seems that *yun* as an aesthetic concept depends on *qi*. *Qi* is a vital or creative force that manifests itself throughout an artwork, while *yun* is reflected in the fragments of individual images or expressions. Therefore, the concept of *qi* was the central criterion in the evaluation of an artwork, while *yun* was more the expression of its (*qi*) perfection. A similar definition of both concepts in Chinese traditional aesthetics was given by Wang Qingwei (2004), arguing that *qi* is the source of all things and the basic idea of the cosmos, life and art itself in traditional Chinese culture, but the presentation and expression of *qi* are achieved precisely through *yun*. The characteristic of *yun* is not the description or depiction of the external form, but the expression of human inwardness (or human spirit) which shows things beyond their external image and as such depends on the state of the spirit of the subject (Wang 2004).

In the Song dynasty *yun* was considered as the highest beauty that an artist is able to achieve (Wong 1989, 63). Since then, *yun* has been, if not more important than at least as important as *qi* in Chinese aesthetics, representing a disclosure of perfected artistic performance, accompanied by a mature and accomplished personality (ibid.).

But in general, it was considered that *qi* includes *yun*. However, those elements such as inwardness, feeling and expression are factors that are more related to *yun* than *qi*.

Although there are differences between *qi* and *yun*, both concepts are essentially inseparable and reciprocal:

If *qi* is considered to be the substance of the work, then *yun* determines the way in which the substance is expressed. *Qi* is a vital creative force, and *yun* a wonderful and sophisticated expression of *qi*. (Wong 1989, 65)

In the next subsection, we will focus on the reciprocal relationship between *qi* and *yun* and have a closer look at the internal structure of the term *qiyun*.

The Concepts of *qiyun* and *qiyun shengdong*

As we have seen, *qi* and *yun* both express the human spirit. Hence, *qi* was often defined as *shenqi* 神氣 and *yun* as *shenyun* 神韻. Xu (2002, 101) considered

that *qiyun* 氣韻 is “humans’ second nature” (*ren de di er ziran* 人的第二自然). The beauty of art can only occur within and on the basis of this second nature, as already described by Zhuangzi (*ibid.*). Xu emphasized that Zhuangzi pointed out the possibility (or potential) that humans in their first nature recognize their second. This is mainly about achieving the unity of nature (cosmos, *Dao*) and man. It is a state of breakthrough, which represents the highest sphere of Zhuangzi’s philosophy. This breakthrough is a kind of inspirational leap, an act of transformed human consciousness, accompanied by a state of absolute freedom where a human being enters some other world or is able to see the world from a different perspective (*ibid.*). For Xu, *qiyun* is a deeper reflection of the emergence of this other human nature, namely, the “fusion” or “unity of man and nature” (*tianren heyi*), which is manifested in works of art. At the same time, Xu believes that both *qi* and *yun* derive from the recognition and respect of interpersonal relations. This recognition refers primarily to the human feelings and emotions that are common to all people.

Qi and *yun* also clearly express the beauty of the unity of the spirit and external form. In this context, Xu emphasized that *qiyun* has no connection to sounds whatsoever, and therefore he strongly rejects the idea of translating the term *yun* as rhythm (Xu 2002, 102).

The fusion of *qi* and *yun* into a single concept (or binary category) occurred in the Wei Jin period. The fact that Xie He determined *qiyun shengdong* 氣韻生動 as the first aesthetic criterion is not that surprising. As we will see below, Xie He added to the concept of *qi*, which is already multifaceted itself, the concept *yun*, which can also be understood as its binary counterpart.

In the context of Wang Bi’s ontology of *benmo* 本末 (“root and branches”) we could also consider comprehending *qi* as *ben* and *yun* as *mo*. In this sense, *qi* would mean the essence and *yun* its expression (or reflection). Below, we are going to explore whether *qiyun* could in fact be understood as a binary category.

Xie He discussed *qiyun* in relation to artworks, which are never determined objectively but instead established by the artist’s personality. Before Xie, this relation was already discussed by Liu Xie in his work *The Literary Heart-Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (*Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍) (Xu 2002, 102). The artist’s personality consists of *yin* 陰 (“shady side”) and *yang* 陽 (“sunny side”), *gang* 剛 (“strong and solid”) and *rou* 柔¹⁰ (“softness and tenderness”). All four principles are transferred to the work of art. *Yinyang* and *gangrou* are the expressions of the dynamics of *qi*. According to Xu, Xie understood *qi* as depicting the “beauty of

10 These concepts or principles originate from the *Book of Changes*, in addition to the Heavenly and Earthly *qi*.

yang and *gang*” in the artwork, (*yanggang zhi mei* 陽剛之美), and *yun* the “beauty of *yin* and *rou*” (*yinrou zhi mei* 陰柔之美), where the basis of beauty lies in “clearness” (*qing* 清). For Xu, this clearness refers to the artist’s personality that is liberated from selfish desires and utilitarian tendencies (*ibid.*).

Despite the difference between *qi* and *yun*, we need to take into consideration their mutual and dynamic relationship. Therefore, they cannot be absolutely separated, and although some people consider that *qi* is the guiding principle, since it appears first in the term *qiyun*, neither of the two poles can dominate or be primal (Wong 1989, 64).

Yin, *yang*, *gang* and *rou* have to coexist in an artwork, and none of them should be too expressed or neglected. An artwork that contains too much *qi* has a lack of sensibility, if there is too much emphasis placed on *yun*, it can lead to a lack of internal tension and expressive power. Therefore, preservation of a harmonious balance between *qi* and *yun* is crucial for the creation of a great artwork (*ibid.*), and consequently for its aesthetic evaluation.

On the other hand, from the aforementioned analysis of *qi* and *yun* and their mutual relation, they can also be understood as a binary category in the sense of Wang Bi’s ontology of *benmo* and his aesthetics of *yixiang*¹¹. As mentioned above, in this binary category *qi* appears as a “root”, “basis” or “essence” (*ben*), while *yun* is a sophisticated and perfected expression of this “essence” (*mo*). In this respect, *yun* cannot exist without *qi*, and the quality of the expression of *qi* itself is thus possible only and merely through *yun*.

Xu Fuguan saw the structure of their relationship in a similar way, but draws attention to the fact that in art *qi* can exist without *yun*, while *yun* cannot exist without *qi*. According to Xu, the very idea of *qiyun* originates from Zhuangzi’s philosophy, since it contains many Zhuangzian concepts, such as *qing* (“clearness”, “brightness”), *xu* 虛 (“emptiness”), *xuan* 玄 (“depth”) and *yuan* 遠 (“distance”, “remoteness”) (Xu 2002, 102).

The question of the second part of the phrase *qiyun shengdong*, the *shengdong* part, was also discussed by Xu. In classical works we cannot find a more detailed or unambiguous explanation as to whether *shengdong* has an independent meaning or is the manifestation of their complementarity, as Xu suggested. He emphasized that before the Wei Jin theoreticians began to use the word *shengdong*, they often referred to the term *shengqi*, which can be interpreted as “movement” (*yuedong* 躍

11 *Xiang* (“image, symbol”) and *yi* (“meaning, idea”) are the central concepts in Wang Bi’s cosmological and epistemological theory. Both concepts were transferred to the field of art and aesthetics. Their fusion is known as *yixiang*, which was first discussed by Liu Xie and is considered as an important aesthetic ideal.

動), “birth”, “reality” and also the “production of *qi*”. It seems that this concept was later transformed into the term *shengdong* (Xu 2002, 108).¹² The whole structure of the concept *qiyun shengdong* is the same as the structure of the concept *qiyun*. While its first element can exist without the other, the reverse is not possible (ibid.).¹³

According to Xu Fuguan, the significance of Xie He’s *shengdong* in the concept *qiyun shengdong* is defined as:

If there is *qiyun*, then there is also *shengdong*. (ibid.)

有氣韻，則有生動矣。

Since the term *shengdong* can also be understood as the “dynamics of life” or the “life force”, and since *qiyun* is therefore a precondition for its manifestation, Xu Fuguan is probably right when arguing that *qiyun* is the “sublimation of the life force” or—in a Daoist sense—“the essence of life”. Since this is about the essence of the artwork, which is the product of human creativity, the question arises as to whether *qiyun* is a matter of cultivation and education, or it is a product of intuition, talent and the perfected character of the artist.

The concept of *qiyun* in the artwork cannot be understood merely as the beauty of the balance between the individual elements or parts that compose the work of art, but it is primarily the expression of human feeling and emotion. Of course, we can talk about universal feelings, which in fact are felt by all people, but *qiyun* is primarily the expression of the individual inwardness of an individual and their unique spirit, which in its own way experiences the internal and external world, and is able to express and reflect it through the artwork. In this context, Xu believes that *qiyun* is not something that a person can learn through education and practice, but is a natural (or inborn) talent that cannot be acquired.

Xu argued that one of the greatest abilities of the artist is precisely that they are able to recognize *the second nature* of human beings in the first one (Xu 2002, 119). To

12 *Shengqi* is actually the basis of the concept of the “spirit” (*shen*) in Gu Kaizhi’s concept of “the transfer of spirit” (*chuanshen*) and in Xie He’s *qiyun*. *Shengdong* is the external expression of feeling that is displayed in the painting, while *shengqi* refers to the inner life that reveals itself via external appearance, namely the artwork. From this, we can conclude that *shengdong*, in its internal meaning, does not reach the depth of the meaning of *shengqi*. *Shengdong* occurs through *qiyun* and is its natural, spontaneous effect, to which narration is added. Therefore, *shengdong* refers exclusively to *qiyun* and has no independent meaning (Xu 2002, 108).

13 Of course, the word *shengdong* may also appear in other contexts in which it has no connection to the concept *qiyun*, just as the concept *yun* in other contexts (that is, outside of the art of painting and aesthetics) can also occur individually and independently of the concept *qi*.

what extent this ability is present (or not) becomes evident if the artist can, in their own life, creatively sublimate this second life. *Qiyun* in the painting or in any other artwork is the expression of its spirit. The spirit of this artwork originates from the spirit of the artist. The transformation of the artist's spirit and its transfer to the object of art are something that goes beyond the question of the artist's skill or technique. As Xu points out, *qiyun* is actually a "talent given from Heaven" (*tiancai* 天才) or a "kind of inborn (or innate) disposition" (*tianfu de qizhi* 天賦的氣質) (ibid.).

To transfer the spirit of the landscape means to express the *qiyun* of the landscape. To be able to express this *qiyun*, the artist must first be able to transform themselves and become united with the spirit of the landscape. This means that the artist must eliminate desires and express the silence and calmness that are the subject and essence of the spirit of art. In this way, the illumination of the subject of their artistic spirit, which is actually in the observation of the beautiful, is able to transform the landscape into the object of beauty—and this is precisely the illumination and display of the spirit of the landscape. Therefore, the spirit of the landscape spontaneously penetrates into the beauty of the spirit as the subject of art. In this they mingle, and this is called "the searching for an inner remote landscape", or *qiyun* in Chinese aesthetics (Xu 2002, 120).

Xu emphasized that this transfer of spirit or *qiyun* is not about imitation or mimesis of the landscape or the external world on the painting, but rather the representation of the spirit of the landscape through the artist's own spirit, which is revealed through their skill (ibid.).¹⁴ The source of this representation is therefore not the skill, but the essence of the spirit of art which arises through the transcendence and transformation of the life of the artist. For this reason, art itself has the ability to transform and transcend human beings (ibid.).

The precondition for the transfer of the spirit of life into the physical image of the artwork, namely the precondition for the realization of *qiyun* in the artwork, is the attainment of the empty and peaceful heart-mind and the state of absolute freedom that Zhuangzi speaks about in his philosophy "of free and easy wandering (floating)" (*xiaoyao you*).¹⁵ Thus, for Zhuangzi, the creative input of *qiyun* into the work of art also derives from the purification or fasting of the heart-mind (ibid.).

Xu argued that if an artist wants to achieve *qiyun* in their artwork, they must follow a certain structure that can be represented through the mastering of technique

14 隨手寫出，皆為山水傳伸 (*suishou xiechu, jiewei shanshui chuanshen*).

15 This is not just Xu Fuguan's opinion, but is also a view that was represented by other traditional Chinese aestheticians. For example, Guo Ruoxu, a renowned art critic of the 11th century, wrote: "In all art paintings, the essence of *qiyun* is in the floating of the heart-mind (*Fan hua, qiyun ben hu you xin* 凡畫，氣韻本乎遊心)" (*Zhongguo hualun* 2017).

or skill. But *qiyun*, which is manifested through the art object, in fact originates from the artist's own efforts with regard to self-cultivation, which clears the "mud and chaos" from the heart-mind. In the fusion of the spirit of the artist with the artistic object, there exists liberation.

According to Xu, this kind of self-cultivation (in a Confucian sense) and the ability to liberate one's own spirit (in the Daoist sense) were required if one were to become and be considered as a great artist in traditional China. Having such an ability or not was actually a dividing line that separated true masters from those who only master the skill (Xu 2002, 120).

The Problem of Translating the Concept of *qiyun shengdong* and the Question of Its Autochthony

In the final part of this article, we will provide a critical evaluation of Xu's interpretation of this important concept in Chinese aesthetics. We will focus mainly on two points that run like a red thread throughout Xu's whole discussion of this concept. The first is Xu Fuguan's emphasis on the autochthony of the concept of *qiyun shengdong* and his negation of theories assuming that it (together with the other five laws of painting) was adopted from the ancient Indian art theory of Sadanga (six limbs). A critical evaluation of these views in a contemporary context is important in the framework of re-evaluating classical Confucian and Daoist elements in classical Chinese art theory or aesthetics, as well as for integrating intercultural dimensions into discourses of this academic field.

The second point is Xu's position that we cannot translate the concepts *yun* and *qiyun* into Western languages as rhythm or rhythmic vitality.

Xu Fuguan came across the idea of the resemblance and presupposed adoption of Sadanga by Xie He in Percy Brown's book *Indian Painting*, written in 1920, but he strongly rejected this assumption (Xu 2002, 121). Xu actually believed that the similarity of the two is merely a coincidence, and that the origin of Xie He's *six laws* cannot be attributed to the Indian Sadanga, even though the very origin of the latter is supposed to have been even a few centuries older. Xu also argued that one can only find three out of the six laws of painting that correspond to Sadanga. Presumably one of them is supposed to be formal equivalent to *qiyun shengdong*, but Xu emphasized that its meaning is less profound and complex than Xie He's *qiyun shengdong*.

In the article "Xie He's 'Six Laws' of Painting and their Indian Parallels" (2004, 81), Victor H. Mair,¹⁶ using linguistic and historical analysis, puts forward a thesis

16 Victor H. Mair is a sinologist and specialist for Chinese history, literature and Buddhism.

that Xie He's laws of painting were actually adopted or influenced to a great extent by Indian Sadanga. Mair argues that both classical works were created around the same time and had a significant influence on the theory of painting in both cultures. India and China had a lot of contact at that time, especially through Buddhism, which strongly influenced Chinese culture during the Wei Jin period. Mair therefore argues that it is very likely that Xie He actually adopted the structure and content of Indian Sadanga in his theory of painting. For Mair, this assumption can be verified by the fact that ancient Chinese texts, namely the classical texts before the arrival of Buddhism, do not contain a numerical enumeration, which Xie used in his six laws of painting. Mair also mentions that most Chinese academics hold the opposite view, arguing that the first two of the six laws were already visible in earlier works of the authentic Chinese traditional aesthetics of painting (ibid., 116).

Mair's position that the numerical classification,¹⁷ which is supposed to have been transferred from the ancient Indian text, is something rare in Chinese classical texts is completely wrong, however, because as even Mair himself points out it can be found in the form of numerical designation, such as "ten moral obligations" (*shi yi* 十義), "ten errors" (*shi guo* 十過), "five states" (*wu xing* 五行), etc., as well as in the work of Han Feizi and in the *Annals of Lü Buwei*. As for the last pair of characters, i.e. *shiyue*, Mair argues that he could not find these in dictionaries or lexicons with the meaning they are supposed to have in the six laws, in addition to which, in his opinion, they are very rarely present in classical texts, especially in sentences beginning with the first pair of characters, that is, *yiyue*. He points out that in Sanskrit it is quite common for sentences to end with *eso'isti*, which means "that is".

In fact, the situation is exactly the opposite, as the combination of the initial and final pair of characters, as well as the number of laws, can already be found in Xu Shen's etymological dictionary *Shuowen* from the 2nd century, which lists six categories of characters and ways of writing. In addition, in Liu Xie's literary theory work *The Literary Heart-Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (*Wenxin diaolong*), written shortly before Xie He wrote his theory of painting, we can also find the same structure of writing the individual laws of literary theory. Numerical enumeration can also be found in most Chinese classical works, whether Confucian, Daoist, or Moist, and even in the work *The Internal Classic of the Yellow Emperor* (*Huangdi Neijing*) from the 5th century BC.

17 The very structure of the sentence of Xie He's laws is, as already stated: 一曰氣韻生動是也 (*yiyue qiyun shengdong shiye*), 二曰骨法用筆是也 (*er yue gufa yongbi shiye*), etc. Mair focuses on the first and last pair of characters (*yi yue*: where *yi* means "one, the first"; *yue* means "to say", "it is said"; and *shiyue*, where *shi* means "this" or "that"; and *ye* means "is" or has the function of equalizing both parts of a sentence).

Although Mair himself points out in the article that Xie He may have been inspired by Xu Shen's dictionary, despite all these “technical” facts he still insists that Xie He took his theory of painting from the ancient Indian Sadanga and further tries to prove his thesis with the substantive parallels between the two theories. The six laws of Indian painting are:

- a) *Rupa bheda*: variety of forms—the depiction of things as they are seen concretely;
- b) *Pramana*: spatial distribution, relations between objects;
- c) *Bhava*: presentation of feelings, emotions;
- d) *Lavanya yojanam*: charm; the internal characteristics of the depicted figure;
- e) *Sadrashya*: similarity;
- f) *Varnikabhangam*: a way of painting and using colours.

Mair sees parallels between Xie He's first law, *qiyun shengdong* and *bhava*, and the second law of *gufa yongbi* (骨法用筆) with *lavanya yojanam*. I believe that *qiyun shengdong* does not include the representation of emotions or moods as required by the law of *bhava*, but reflects the dynamics of the binary and complementary poles of traditional Chinese cosmology and the harmonious unity of nature and man, which aesthetically expresses the artist's inner world.

As for the second resemblance, namely to *lavanya yojanam*, which means the inner properties of the image, it seems that the meaning of *gufa yongbi* is the expression of the balance of *qi* or vitality using (or via) the brush (*yongbi*). In his theory of literary art, Liu Xie speaks of *gu* (“skeleton, framework”) as the structural organization of the artwork. The etymological meaning of the character *fa* 法 is the “balance”. Xie He's first two laws are inherently related to each other, as they determine the aesthetic property and method for achieving the highest aesthetic value of the artwork.

As for the other laws of painting in both traditions, they are practically the same, as they highlight the universal (technical) laws of composition, since they also exist in the Western theory of painting. Although there may be some Indian influence in terms of inspiration for Xie He, I nevertheless agree with Xu Fuguan's view (as well as with the opinion of many other Chinese academics) that Xie He's theory of painting is authentically Chinese because it belongs to a tradition that is paradigmatically different from Indian or Buddhist ones, especially concerning the relationship between humans and nature or the cosmos. The fundamental

difference in the two aesthetics of painting can already be seen in the first law of Sadanga, namely the *rupa bheda*, which is a demand for a realistic depiction. As we have seen, the fundamental feature of the Chinese aesthetic of painting is precisely in recreation and not in representation.

When discussing the parallels between the two theories or the authenticity of Xie He's theory, it may not be irrelevant to consider the possibility that Xie He took the structural form of a hexagram from the *Book of Changes* when numbering the laws. The latter was at the forefront of the Wei Jin period within the Xuanxue Neo-Daoist school. Given that the concept of *qiyun shengdong* includes a manifestation of the dynamic relationship of *yinyang*, *gangrou* ("hard and soft"), and Heavenly and Earthly *qi*, which derives precisely from the *Book of Changes*, we may consider the possibility that it was on this basis that Xie He opted for such six-part classification.

Moreover, the six-part classification can also be found in the *Book of Poetry* (11th–7th centuries BC), where the individual forms and contents of the poem are divided chronologically. From these examples, we can conclude that the number six symbolized a kind of cosmic and structural order. Of course, this is also a subject for further consideration and research.

As we have seen from the analysis of the concept of *qiyun shengdong*, Xu Fuguan considers *qiyun* to be a traditional aesthetic concept that is older than its presentation in the work of Xie He. Although it is theoretically possible that Xie He actually encountered the Indian theory of painting and that he transferred Sadanga and its structure to the Chinese context, as Victor H. Mair (2004) argues, we must nevertheless be extremely careful with such claims, as they are ultimately unprovable and thus dubious.

Moreover, Xu Fuguan in his work *The Spirit of Chinese Art* also offers plenty of hard-to-refute evidence for the thesis that the foundations of aesthetics created by Xie He are Daoist in nature, and contain many elements of the ancient Chinese classics from the period of the autochthonous Chinese, namely the pre-Buddhist tradition.

All this once again confronts us with the problem of translating *qiyun shengdong* into Indo-European languages.

Xu disagrees with the translation of *qiyun* in terms of "rhythm" or "rhythmic", which he found in the works of prominent experts on East Asian art, such as Stephen Wootton Bushel's work *Chinese Art*, written in 1904, Laurence Binyon's book entitled *Painting in the Far East* from 1908, and *The Meaning of Art* by Herbert Read, written in 1931. Xu is thus problematizing the translation of *yun* as

“rhythm” or “rhythmic” itself, as well as the fact that the Western scholars transferred such translations to the whole concept of *qiyun shengdong*.

He emphasizes that in the work *Shishuo xinyu* (*A new Account of the Tales of the World*), the collection of dialogues and stories from the late Han dynasty (25–220) to the North and South dynasties (420–589), written by Liu Yiqing (403–444), *qi* and *yun* were not discussed together, but separately. From this work, Xu quotes a phrase where *qi* and *yun* are mentioned separately in the following phrase *fengqi yundu*, where the expression *fengqi* was one word that meant the “atmosphere”, while the other, namely *yundu*, meant “degree” or “intensity of the *yun*”. According to Xu, the painters and theorists clearly distinguished *qi* and *yun* from each other until Xie He (Xu 2002, 94).

Xu strongly rejects Herbert Read’s and Laurence Binyon’s position that *qiyun* can be felt as rhythm through the harmonious arrangement of brushstrokes. He argues that this is exclusively a matter of human imagination, subjective feeling and metaphor, and that *qiyun* is not rhythmic in this sense. According to Xu, *qiyun* is also linked to the “unified harmony of brushstrokes”, but this alone cannot create *qiyun shengdong*. In addition, Xu points out that the difference between Western and Chinese painting is that Western painters focus upon what is in the brushstrokes themselves, while Chinese painters pursue what is beyond them.

In Western painting, rhythm is a surplus that is expressed through the harmony of brushstrokes (or lines). Of course, Chinese painters also focus on brushstrokes, but the final goal of their creative process is that the painter forgets the lines, frees himself from their limitations and expresses creativity and the freedom of their spirit. Therefore, according to Xu, *qiyun* (or *yun*) cannot be translated as “rhythm” or something “rhythmical” (ibid.).

Given that, on the other hand, rhythm has been emphasized by Xu as something that relates exclusively to the sequence of sounds (ibid., 99), we can also ask ourselves whether Xu actually understood the English term correctly, since it is one that far exceeds the connotation of time-steady and repeated sequences of sounds in music. Besides, Xu also argues that the sophisticated (refined) *yun* “exists in nature” (*ziran you yayun* 自然有雅韵). From this *yun* (and also *qiyun*) can in fact be understood as a rhythm that is reflected through repeated processes in nature. Nature (or Heavenly *dao*) does have a rhythm of its own, which it follows and at the same time creates. If we transfer the meaning of the *yun* (which, of course, is not its only meaning) into the field of art and concrete artistic creations, it can actually be understood in this way.

If the aesthetic ideal of Chinese painting in the Wei Jin period and later, in the landscape painting of the Song dynasty, is the transfer of the spirit of nature in the most direct way (bearing in mind that Chinese painting is not about mimesis), this is also necessary for representations of the rhythms that actually happen in nature. These rhythms are created through brushstrokes, or in the case of poetry through rhyme, rhythm and the sound of individual words. However, I can agree with Xu that rhythm or rhythmic is not an appropriate translation of the concept *yun* or *qiyun*, because it does not cover all its conceptual meanings, but at the same time I consider that, given the aforementioned argument, rhythm is also one of its important and central connotations. But on the other hand, Xu's position that such a translation is problematic in the sense that it is something that only belongs to the sphere of human imagination seems out of place, because art and aesthetics are dealing precisely with human imagination, inspiration, human emotions, perception, and so on, where the inclusion and usage of metaphorical language is of immense importance.

Nevertheless, Xu's analysis and interpretation of the concept of *qiyun shengdong* clearly shows that it is actually very difficult, if not impossible, to translate it into any Indo-European language that could adequately express its complex meaning.

Of course, further research will demonstrate whether it would be most appropriate to adopt this term and use it in the original Chinese as *terminus technicus*,¹⁸ or the scholars dealing with Chinese aesthetics will decide on some general and hopefully credible translation of this central concept in Chinese art and aesthetics.

However, on the other hand, it is of course important that Chinese concepts find as many authentic translations as possible in other languages. That is why I have decided to translate *qiyun shengdong* as the "harmonious dynamics of vitality", which in my opinion captures the essential meaning of this term relatively well. Despite its complex and multifaceted meaning, I have translated *yun* as "harmony", which corresponds to its original or fundamental meaning. *Qi* is translated as "vitality" and *shengdong* as "dynamics", since in Chinese cosmology binary poles or categories such as *yinyang*, *benmo*, *liqi* as well as *qiyun* are in a reciprocal and dynamic relationship.

Conclusion

If we consider the aesthetic concept of *qiyun shengdong* as the principle that constitutes the artistic recreation of nature as revealed in the artwork, it should be

18 Like the adopted concepts in their original form like *qi*, *yin* and *yang*, *li*, *dao* for example.

understood within the framework of Chinese cosmology and Daoist philosophy. The binary category of *qiyun* represents the result of the operation of many complementary cosmic forces, such as the *yinyang*, *gangrou*, emptiness and fullness, nearness and distance, darkness and light, etc., which are revealed in the work of art, ideally in the same way that Dao creates the cosmos and all things. In Chinese tradition, the true artist was considered to be a person who was actually a sage in the sense that they were able to understand the ways of the external world and of the inner worlds of human beings. If one wants to enter the process of creativity, one must first empty oneself, and cut off desires and utilitarian inclinations, as Zhuangzi suggested in his methods of *fasting of the heart-mind* and *sitting in forgetfulness*. Therefore, this conceptual background, in my opinion, is quite contrary to Sadanga's *bhava*, which Mair sees as the counterpart of *qiyun shengdong*. *Bhava* as the depiction of human emotions and feelings into the painting is something that deals with the characteristics of human beings, while *qiyun shengdong* goes far beyond this and reveals the beauty of a highly cultivated personality on one hand, and the vitality of a dynamic and harmonious relationship between human beings and nature, on the other.

However, even if there may be some Indian influence in the sense of an inspiration for the establishment of the six laws by Xie He, I would argue that they are authentically Chinese because they belong to a tradition that is paradigmatically very different from the Indian or Buddhist one, especially in terms of the relationship between humans and nature.

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