

The Theory of “Qi-yun Sheng-dong” in Early 20th-Century China^{*}

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Abstract: This paper examines the modern transformation of the central concept of Chinese art theory, “Qi-yun sheng-dong,” focusing on the discourses of the 1920s and 1930s. Chen Shizeng was among the first to begin using this concept, while Teng Gu returned to the context of art history and traced the historical evolution of “Qi-yun sheng-dong” to clarify its nuances. Meanwhile, Deng Yizhe reinterpreted “Qi-yun sheng-dong,” considered the highest standard of art, as a type of ideal existence, using Western perspectives such as author and recipient theories. Furthermore, Zong Baihua linked it to classical Chinese philosophical thought, laying the foundation for today’s aesthetic discourse on “Qi-yun sheng-dong” in China.

Keywords: Qi-yun Sheng-dong, Xing-si, Chinese Art Theory, Twentieth-century China

Introduction

This study aims to outline an aspect of the development of Chinese art theory by examining the modern evolution of the central concept of “Qi-yun sheng-dong 氣韻生動,” focusing primarily on the discourse of the 1920s and 1930s. Proposed by Xie He 謝赫 during the Six Dynasties period as a standard for art criticism, “Qi-yun sheng-dong” signifies “liveliness” or “vitality.” However, over the long course of Chinese art history, interpretations of this concept have varied significantly. During the early 20th century, the influence of Western painting, noted for its realism, sparked criticism of traditional Chinese painting (especially literati painting) among social reformers and many other commentators¹. In response, a movement to re-evaluate Chinese painting emerged in the 1920s, bringing renewed attention to “Qi-yun sheng-dong” as a unique attribute of Chinese art. Previous studies have already examined the perspectives, methods, and intellectual foundations of key figures from this period—such as Chen Shizeng 陳師曾, Feng Zikai 豐子愷, Teng Gu 滕固, Yu Shaosong 余紹宋, Zong Baihua 宗白華, Deng Yizhe 鄧以蟄, and Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書—demonstrating the diversity in the modern understanding of “Qi-yun sheng-dong².”

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¹ For a critique and re-evaluation of 20th-century Chinese painting, refer to Pan Gongkai’s *The Path of Chinese Modern Art*, [中国現代美術之道] translated by Ishii Satoru et al., Sayusha, 2020.

² For example, Zeng Xiao’s “Multidimensional Interpretations of ‘Qi-yun’ in the Modernization Process—Taking Zong Baihua, Deng Yizhi, Qian Zhongshu, and Xu Fuguan as Examples,” [氣韻範疇在現代化進程中的多維闡釋——以宗白華、鄧以蟄、錢鍾書、徐復觀為例] *Academic Research*, 2018, First Issue. Also, Usami

However, the progression and deepening of interpretations of this concept, as revealed through the relationships between these various understandings, have not been fully clarified. While earlier studies have paid attention to the chronological sequence of these discussions, this paper aims to consider the stages of intellectual awareness indicated by each argument. For example, by comparing the discourse of the aforementioned commentators, one can observe the process by which the concept of “Qi-yun sheng-dong” came to be established as an independent term used in art criticism. That is to say, rather than explaining which aspects of the concept were understood or not understood according to each argument from the standpoint of the current view of “Qi-yun sheng-dong,” it is essential to trace how this concept itself has unfolded a rich interpretive potential through each argument; in other words, it is necessary to return to the historical context. By doing so, we may gain a genuine understanding of the academic advancements of the time.

In this paper, I will focus on four theorists—Chen Shizeng (1876–1923), Teng Gu (1901–1943), Deng Yizhe (1892–1973), and Zong Baihua (1897–1986)—whose interpretations of the concept of Qi-yun sheng-dong brought about significant shifts. Much of the discussion on Qi-yun sheng-dong among theorists of the time remains fragmented, and analyzing each viewpoint individually has limitations for understanding the broader development of the concept. Therefore, rather than examining each theorist’s interpretation in isolation, this paper will take a macroscopic approach by comparing their perspectives to clarify the evolution of Qi-yun sheng-dong in the academia at large of that period. The analysis will focus on two key perspectives essential to understanding Qi-yun sheng-dong. The first is the question of its locus—whether the “vitality” resides in the subject depicted in the painting or in the painter themselves. The second is the relationship between Qi-yun sheng-dong and Xing-si 形似 (resemblance in form), examining whether Qi-yun sheng-dong depends on or stands in opposition to the formal resemblance in painting³.

1 Early Usage: Chen Shizeng’s “The Value of Literati Painting” (1922)

One of the earliest instances of the concept of Qi-yun sheng-dong in modern China can be traced back to Chen Shizeng’s 1922 essay, “The Value of Literati Painting.” Li Yunxiang and Zhang Shengjie (2008) argue that Chen Shizeng was a pioneer in affirming the value of Chinese literati painting via a “theoretical framework” within China⁴. However, as Hu Jihua (2005) points

Bunri’s *Chinese History of Art Theory: Philosophical Discourses* [中国藝術理論史研究] (Sobunsha, 2015) provides a comprehensive discussion of important discourses in both Japan and China in Notes (6) of Chapter 1 of Part 1, pp. 58-60.

³ This article does not address another important issue regarding “Qi-yun sheng-dong,” namely whether it is “Qi-yun and sheng-dong,” or “Qi-yun is sheng-dong,” (in other words, whether “Qi-yun” and “Sheng-dong” each have distinct meanings, or if they are synonyms). This issue is primarily concerned with exegetical research, and during the period covered by this paper, a deep exploration of this issue was not undertaken. A representative discussion of this issue can be found in Qian Zhongshu’s works from the 1960s and 1970s, where he supports the interpretation of “Qi-yun is sheng-dong” (Qian Zhongshu, *Guan-Zhui Bian* [管錐編], Vol. 4, All Four Volumes, Beijing: Joint Publishing, 2007, pp. 2109-2127).

⁴ Li Yunxiang, Zhang Shengjie, and Run Lijun, eds., *Chen Shizeng’s Painting Theory* [陳師曾畫論], with a preface by Li Yunxiang and Zhang Shengjie, “The Imperishable Decay—Written Before the Publication of *Chen Shizeng’s Painting Theory*,” China Bookstore Publishing House, 2008, p. 4.

out, although Chen identified the essence of Chinese artistic spirit (namely Qi-yun sheng-dong), he did not fully endorse traditional literati painting⁵.

Chen Shizeng was a prominent figure in the 1920s Beijing art world, both as a seal carver, painter, and theorist, with an academic background that included studying in Japan from 1901 to 1909. In “The Value of Literati Painting,” he uses the concept of Qi-yun in two passages.

(A)

[Literati painting] naturally follows its own path, without adornment; it is sufficient to express individuality and manifest an independent spirit. ...Therefore, Xie He’s Six Principles 六法 emphasize “Qi-yun” first, followed by “Gu-fa yong-bi 骨法用筆 [structural use of brush],” thereby setting a fundamental importance, establishing a foundation and providing a guiding principle. As for “Ying-wu fu-xing 因物賦形 [隨類賦彩] [correspondence to the object to provide a form],” “Sui-lei fu-cai 隨類傳 [賦] 彩 [according with type in color],” and “Chuan-yi mo-xie 傳摹移寫 [copying and transference],” these are simply techniques to gain entry, mere conveniences for artistic form, and should not be regarded as methods to achieve excellence. (35. square brackets indicate the annotators’ notes; the same applies below.)⁶

(B)

The highest realms of art cannot be determined solely by form. ...Without “Qi-yun” and “Gu-fa,” ...one cannot achieve the essence of literati painting.” (36)⁷

From passage (A), it is clear that when Chen Shizeng uses the concept of “Qi-yun,” he adheres to its original framework within Xie He’s “Six Principles.” According to Xie He’s *Catalogue of ancient paintings* [*Gu-hua Pin-lu* 古畫品錄], the Six Principles include: Qi-yun sheng-dong, Gu-fa yong-bi 骨法用筆 (structural use of brush), Ying-wu fu-xing 應物象形 (correspondence to form), Sui-lei fu-cai 隨類賦彩 (according with type in color), Jing-ying wei-zhi 經營位置 (composition), and Chuan-yi Mo-xie 傳移模寫 (copying and transference)⁸. Among those “Six Principles,” Chen regarded Qi-yun sheng-dong and Gu-fa yong-bi as central to the “individuality” and “spirit” of literati painting, whereas he saw the other principles as mere convenient techniques unrelated to the essence of art. Passage (B) shows that Chen Shizeng viewed Qi-yun sheng-dong in opposition to form (material appearance of painting).

In passage (A), Qi-yun sheng-dong seems synonymous with the “individuality” and “spirit”

⁵ Hu Jihua, *Zong Baihua: Cultural Introspection and Aesthetic Symbolism*, Wenjin Publishing House, 2005, p. 110.

⁶ The following citations of Chen Shizeng’s “The Value of Literati Painting” are from Wu Xiaoming, ed., *Selected Essays on Republican Era Art Theory* (Xiling Seal Engraving Press, 2013), and are indicated by page numbers only. The original text: 純任天真，不假修飾，正足以發揮個性，振起獨立之精神，…故謝赫六法，首重氣韻，次言骨法用筆，即其開宗明義，立定基礎，為當門之棒喝。至于因物賦形，隨類傳彩，傳摹移寫等，不過入學之法門，藝術造形之方便，入聖超凡之借徑，未可拘泥于此者也。(35)

⁷ The original text: 藝術之勝境，豈僅以表相而定之哉？…舍氣韻骨法之不求，…蓋不達乎文入畫之旨耳。(36)

⁸ See Usami Bunri, “Translation and Commentary on *Gu-hua Pin-lu*,” *Shinshu University Faculty of Arts Bulletin*, No. 27, 1993, pp. 27-28. Also explained clearly in Usami Bunri’s *Introduction to Chinese Painting*, Iwanami Shinto, 2014, pp. 42-43.

of literati painting. However, beyond these references, Qi-yun is not mentioned further in “The Value of Literati Painting.” In contrast, terms like “individuality” and “spirit” recur throughout. At the start of the essay, Chen defines literati painting as follows:

What is literati painting? It must carry the character and taste of the literati within the painting, without investigating the technicalities of art within the painting itself, but rather reveal the feelings of the literati beyond the [material existence of] painting. This is what is referred to as literati painting. (34)⁹

Chen’s essay also includes terms like “character,” “taste,” “feelings” or the “ideals and tastes” of painting (35). This suggests that, according to him, Qi-yun might simply be a synonym for these other expressions.

In fact, it appears that Chen Shizeng had yet to use Qi-yun as a clearly defined art-theoretical concept. As widely known, his 1922 essay “The Value of Literati Painting” was a refined version of his 1921 work “The Value of Literati Painting” (written in vernacular Chinese), developed further through exchanges with art historian Ōmura Seigai¹⁰. While the earlier essay emphasized spirit over form, consistent with the later essay, it did not include the term Qi-yun Sheng-dong, instead using words like “taste,” “thought,” and “feeling.”¹¹

In contrast, Ōmura Seigai’s 1921 work *The Revival of Literati Painting*, includes a section titled “The True Value of Qi-yun [気韻の真価],” where he asserts, “The reason literati painting is so esteemed... lies in its central focus on Qi-yun.”¹² He interprets “Qi” as “nothing other than the artist’s own feelings.”¹³ This influence likely led Chen to incorporate Qi-yun shengdong as a term in his revised 1922 essay, aligning the concept with the distinctiveness of literati painting. Thus, Chen attributed the essence of Qi-yun to the artist’s ability and disposition, concluding that “the essential elements of literati painting are, first, character; second, scholarship; third, talent; and fourth, thought.”¹⁴

Chen Shizeng’s somewhat undeveloped understanding of Qi-yun sheng-dong can also be observed in his major work *History of Chinese Painting*, based on lectures he gave in Jinan in 1922. In the fifth chapter, “Painting of the Northern and Southern Dynasties,” he discusses Xie He’s theory but merely using the term vaguely, without engaging with subsequent significant discussions on Qi-yun. For example, he applies the term to painters like Li Gonglin 李公麟, Xia Gui 夏珪, and Dong Qichang 董其昌 without providing specific reasoning, as if simply using it to praise artists or works - he did not differentiate them - that he found intuitively

⁹ 何謂文人画？即画中帶有文人之性質，含有文人之趣味，不在画中考究芸術上之工夫，必須于画外看出許多文人之感想，此之所謂文人画。(34)

¹⁰ See Haneda Jessica, Kai Katsuji, and Aida Fusako, “Chen Shizeng (Hengque)’s ‘Value of Literati Painting’ Translation and Commentary,” *Fukuoka University Journal of Humanities* (Vol. 48, No. 4, pp. 1-18) Part 1.

¹¹ Chen Shizeng, “The Value of Literati Painting,” in Lang Shaojun and Shui Tianzhong, eds., *20th Century Chinese Art Anthology*, Vol. 1, Shanghai Calligraphy and Painting Publishing House, 1999.

¹² Ōmura Saiga, *The Revival of Literati Painting*, Kōgeisha, 1921, pp. 27-28. The original text: 文人画の尚ぶべき所以は、…更に偉大なる一事なり。即ち気韻を主とするに在り。

¹³ Ōmura Saiga, *The Revival of Literati Painting*, Kōgeisha, 1921, p. 28. The original text: 即ち作者自身の感想に外ならず。

¹⁴ 文人画之要素，第一人品，第二学問，第三才情，第四思想。(Chen Shizeng, 38)

excellent¹⁵.

In sum, Chen Shizeng’s writings mark an initial phase in modern Chinese Qi-yun sheng-dong theory. This “initial” phase does not merely indicate a chronological precedence but also the lack of a fully established term within art criticism. Nevertheless, Chen’s work can be seen as setting a foundational direction for modern Qi-yun sheng-dong theory. His “The Value of Literati Painting” sparked considerable interest upon publication, influencing other theorists¹⁶. Notably, Yu Shaosong 余紹宋, recognized as a significant figure in modern Qi-yun sheng-dong discourse, drew directly from Chen’s ideas. In his 1937 lecture at National Central University, “On the Qi-yun Issue in Chinese Painting,” Yu stated that painting “must be based on the artist’s spirit and emotions” and that if the “individuality [of the artist] is expressed, qi-yun will naturally emerge.”¹⁷ Although Yu engaged with post-Xie He discussions on qi-yun that had been overlooked by Chen, he too did not fully trace its development or usage as in the phase which followed.

2 An Art Historical Examination: Teng Gu’s 1926 “A Brief Analysis of Qi-yun Sheng-dong”

2.1 “Qi-yun Sheng-dong” as the Union of the Animation of All Things and Emotions

Four years after Chen Shizeng’s “The Value of Literati Painting” and *The History of Chinese Painting*, Teng Gu, in 1926 “A Brief Analysis of Qi-yun sheng-dong,” newly organized the genealogy of the concept of Qi-yun sheng-dong in line with the development of Chinese art history. Teng Gu was an art historian and aesthetician who studied in Japan from 1920, becoming proficient in Japanese. From 1921 to 1924, he attended Toyo University, where he broadly studied art. Later, starting in 1931, he studied art history at the University of Berlin and earned a doctoral degree. As noted by Maromitsu Tsukamoto (2016), Teng Gu overcame the traditional Chinese scholarly model of the “painter=art historian”—to which the aforementioned Chen Shizeng precisely belonged—and brought about a significant transformation in the development of modern Chinese art history by introducing Heinrich Wölfflin’s theory of style¹⁸.

The short 1926 essay “A Brief Analysis of of Qi-yun sheng-dong” was written before Teng Gu studied in Germany when he began his full-fledged career as an art historian. Nonetheless, it demonstrates his interest in art history and his sharp perspective as an aesthetician. In this essay, Teng Gu discusses the theory of Qi-yun sheng-dong by referencing related discourses from various historical texts: Zhang Yanyuan’s *Record of Famous Paintings of Past Dynasties* 歷代名畫記 (Tang dynasty), Guo Ruoxu 郭若虛’ *Notes of Experiences in Painting* 圖畫見聞志 (Song dynasty), Dong Qichang’s *Essays from the Hua-chan Studio* 畫禪室隨筆 (Ming dynasty), and Fang Xun 方薰’s *Theories on Painting from Shan-jing Studio* 山靜居論畫 (Qing dynasty). All four of these texts remain highly valued in contemporary research.

¹⁵ See Chen Shizen’s *History of Chinese Painting*, Zhejiang People’s Fine Arts Publishing House, 2013, p. 76, 72, and 129.

¹⁶ Figures such as Chen Banding 陳半丁, Yu Shaosong, Hu Peiheng 胡佩衡, and Qin Zhongwen 秦仲文 are notable in this context. See Cheng Pei, “Chen Shizeng’s Theory of Literati Painting,” *Art Research*, 2005, p. 62.

¹⁷ *Selected Essays on Republican Era Art Theory*, previously cited, pp. 202-211.

¹⁸ See Tsukamoto Maromitsu, *The Formation of Northern Song Painting History*, Chūō Kōron Bijutsu Publishing, 2016, Introduction.

Teng Gu first discusses Zhang Yanyuan's *Record of Famous Paintings of Past Dynasties*. He quotes the following passage from the work.

[α]Ancient [Chinese] paintings placed aside the “Xing-si 形似” of objects and revered what is called “Qi-gu 氣骨 [lit. air and bone].” They sought something beyond mere “Xing-si” in their art. [β]...However, for things like architecture, trees, stones, palanquins, and objects, there is no “Sheng-dong 生動 [lit. life-like]” quality to be captured, nor any “Qi-yun” to emulate. Only the arrangement and relationships of things in space are of concern. ...For demons, gods, and human figures, only when there is something “Sheng-dong” to capture and “Shen-yun 神韻 [lit. spiritual rhythm]” to convey, can they be fully expressed. (Part of Teng Gu's quotation is omitted. The notation [α] and [β] are by the author. The following is the same.)¹⁹.

In this regard, Teng Gu comments as follows.

[Regarding α ,] the three terms “Gu-qi [same as Qi-gu]”, “Qi-yun,” and “Shen-yun” used by him [Zhang Yanyuan] have almost the same meaning and are in contrast to “Xing-si.” “Xing-si” refers to the external shape of the subject of the painting, while “Gu-qi” [= “Qi-yun”] represents the significance of that shape or what is referred to as the spirit. [However,] the result of his dualistic approach seems to be not yet thorough. This argument should be respected as a kind of idea suggesting that painting can maintain its value by relying on the latter [significance, spirit]. However, looking at the latter part of the argument [β], there is a remarkable limitation in this view. When he discusses in the latter part the depiction of inanimate things like “architecture, trees and stones,” he states that Qi-yun sheng-dong cannot be realized, and only in the depiction of demons and gods can it be found. In his thought, Qi-yun sheng-dong [derived from the subject matter] is the material of painting, and it has not yet become something based on the “reproduction of one's own life.” (64-65)²⁰

In other words, according to Teng Gu, Zhang Yanyuan's “dualistic approach” of “Qi-yun” and “Xing-si” highlights the importance of Qi-yun, but it has limitations in that it considers inanimate objects as lacking Qi-yun. Specifically, the deficiency lies in the fact that he does not regard Qi-yun as being based on the “reproduction of one's own life.” So, what does Teng Gu mean by “Qi-yun” in terms of the true “reproduction of one's own life?”

¹⁹ The following citations of Teng Gu's statements are from *Teng Gu's Collected Writings on Art* (Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 2003), and are indicated by page numbers only. The original text: 古之画或遺其形似，而尚其氣骨，以形似之外求其画……至于台閣樹石，車輿器物，無生動之可擬，無氣韻之可俸，直要位置向背而已。……鬼神人物，有生動之可狀，須神韻而後全。(63)

²⁰ 他所謂“骨氣”、“氣韻”、“神韻”三語，其意義略同，与形似相對立的。“形似”是画的所对之外面的形；“骨氣”等的三語是涌現其形的意義，或可以名之為精神。他這樣二元的考察之結果，似尚未免不徹底。所可貴之處，就是画依于後者，而保持其價值的一種思想；然而轉過來，觀其後半，這個見解上有一個重大的限制了。他在後半所举：画台閣樹石等的無生物，氣韻生動不会實現，惟在鬼神人物上求索。他的思想以氣韻生動為画的材料，未以為根据自身所有的生命之再現。(64-65)

Teng Gu follows Zhang Yanyuan and turns his attention to the discussions of Guo Ruoxu, Dong Qichang, and Fang Xun. According to Teng Gu, Guo Ruoxu’s interpretation holds that “if a person’s character is noble, their Qi-yun must also be elevated; if the Qi-yun is elevated, then the Sheng-dong must be realized as well,” and thus has its originality in regarding “Qi-yun” as “an expression of the entire personality” and as “something not to be learned from others” (65). Dong Qichang, continuing this line of thought, claims that “Qi-yun cannot be learned; it is something one is born knowing, naturally bestowed by Heaven,” and he views “Qi-yun” as “innate knowledge,” or what we might call “a priori” (65). In other words, according to Teng Gu, Zhang Yanyuan primarily emphasizes the life of the object being portrayed, while Guo Ruoxu and Dong Qichang place great emphasis on the abilities of the painter. In contrast, Fang Xun’s theory summarizes these views, asserting that the “true significance” of the concept of Qi-yun sheng-dong has finally emerged.

According to his [Fang Xun’s] thinking, within the movement [original word: Sheng-dong] of all things lies the rhythm of our pure emotions (Qi-yun). When emotions become intense, this rhythm naturally merges with the movement of objects. Things are objects, and emotions are the self. By transferring the self into the external, and spiritualizing the external, one thus creates an internal sense of pleasure. This aligns with Lipps’ Einfu[e]hlungstheorie. (66)²¹

In other words, the emergence of “Qi-yun sheng-dong” is considered to stem from the union of the artist’s emotions with the movement of the subject. Thus, it has become clear that Teng Gu’s reference to “one’s own life” does not merely signify the painter’s emotions but also necessitates alignment with the object. Furthermore, Teng Gu’s systematic review of historical theories on “Qi-yun” revealed that Chen Shizeng’s argument, which attributes “Qi-yun” to the artist’s abilities or innate qualities as examined in the previous chapter, represents only one facet of the historical discourse on the concept. Incidentally, Teng Gu’s discussion of the development

²¹ The original text: 照他的意思：万事万物的生動之中，我們純粹感情的節奏（氣韻），也在其中。感情旺烈的時候，這感情的節奏，自然而然與事物的生動相結合的了。事物是對象，感情是自己；以自己移入對象，以對象為精神化，而釀出內的快感。這是與 Lipps 的感情移入說（Einfühlungs-theories）同其究竟的了。（66）The importance of considering Lipps’ theory of empathy in relation to Chinese modern discussions of “Qi-yun sheng-dong” has been discussed. The theorist who furthered this exploration was Feng Zikai, who inherited Teng Gu’s ideas. However, the interpretation that incorporated Western ideas of empathy into “Qi-yun sheng-dong” is seen as an important development in modern Chinese aesthetics, but not necessarily contributing to a deeper understanding of the concept itself, so this will not be addressed in this article. Chen Shizeng’s 1922 *The Value of Literati Painting* also invokes the concept of “empathy” proposed by modern aestheticians, stating that literati painting can only exist because it contains “reflections” and “spirit,” using “empathy” as a general concept without considering its philosophical foundations. Aesthetician Zhu Guangqian 朱光潛 also referenced “empathy” and the Hegelian philosophical base in his discussions of “Qi-yun sheng-dong” in his 1930s-1940s *Poetics* 詩論, yet focused more on “Sheng-dong” rather than “Qi-yun,” indicating a departure from traditional understanding. See Li Lei, “The Relationship between ‘Qi-yun sheng-dong’ and ‘Empathy,’” *Aesthetics and Aesthetic Education Studies*, 2021, Issue 5, pp. 82-89. In Japan, there was also a movement to interpret and translate “Qi-yun sheng-dong” in terms of empathy (rather than by pinpointing its ideological correctness). For more, see Inaga Shigemi, “Between Empathy and Qi-yun sheng-dong: Divergence and Convergence—Between Layers of Retranslation and Deviations in Translating Back,” *Comparative Literature Studies*, no. 107, 2022, pp. 34-51.

of “Qi-yun,” drawing on sources such as *Record of Famous Paintings of Past Dynasties*, *Notes of Experiences in Painting*, *Essays from the Hua-chan Studio*, and *Theories on Painting from Shan-jing Studio*, and his conclusion that its culmination can be found in *Theories on Painting from Shan-jing Studio*, was later inherited in Feng Zikai’s 1930 “The Triumph of Chinese painting in contemporary art.”

However, Teng Gu’s interpretation is not merely based on pre-modern Chinese art theory but is also related to his understanding of art in general (beyond China). According to a passage about Xie He in Teng Gu’s 1926 *A Brief History of Chinese Art*²², written around the same time:

The first [of the “Six Principles of Painting”], Qi-yun sheng-dong, has forever been the highest standard of Chinese art criticism. From the perspective of today’s aesthetics, Qi-yun corresponds to “Rythmus”, and Sheng-dong to “Lebendigke[i]t Vital”. Together, they represent the ultimate requirements in art. (82)²³

The use of terms such as Lebendigke[i]t Vital to translate “Sheng-dong” provides a valuable hint for further investigation. In Teng Gu’s earlier essay, “Art and Science,” written two years prior, he asserts that “the essence of art lies in the character ‘Dong 動 [movement]’” (22), referring to not just any motion but an “inner vitality.” He elaborates that “[artists] should seek the essence of painting not in mere ‘emotion’ but rather in the Lebendiger [Lebendige] Aktivitaet brought about by emotion” (23). This conceptualization bears a notable resemblance to his interpretation of “Qi-yun sheng-dong.” “Art and Science” is regarded as a work in which Teng Gu integrated insights from his studies in Japan, presenting a relatively mature aesthetic thought²⁴. It can be surmised that his interpretation of “Qi-yun sheng-dong” at this stage emerged from his broader outlook on art as a whole.

Furthermore, the translation of “Qi-yun sheng-dong” into terms like “rhythm” and “lively vitality” by Teng Gu reflects the influence of contemporary English translations of the term. For example, in 1903 *The Ideals of the East: With Special Reference to the Art of Japan*, Okakura Tenshin rendered “Qi-yun sheng-dong” as “the Life-movement of the Spirit through the Rhythm of Things.” Similarly, in 1905, Herbert Allen Giles translated the phrase as “rhythmic vitality” in his *An Introduction to the History of Chinese Pictorial Art*.²⁵ It is worth noting that, according to Teng Gu, the rhythm = Qi-yun originates in human emotions rather than external nature. This contrasts sharply with interpretations from Japan. For instance, in Tenshin’s analysis, rhythm belongs to “Things” and is therefore grounded in the “harmonic laws of matter”²⁶, which are

²² This work is based on a lecture given by Teng Gu in 1926 at the Shanghai Fine Arts School [上海美術專門學校].

²³ 其第一義氣韻生動，永為中國藝術批評的最高準則。在現今美學上說，氣韻就是 Rythmus，生動就是 Lebendigket Vital，都是藝術上最高的基件。(82)

²⁴ Wu Jian, “What Makes Art ‘Scientific’?—The Debate on ‘Scientific Mysticism’ and Teng Gu’s Art Theory,” *Art Studies*, 2021, Issue 5, pp. 95-101.

²⁵ Li Lei, “Cross-linguistic Practice of the Concept of ‘Qi-yun Sheng-dong’ in the Early 20th Century,” *Literary and Art Studies*, 2021, Issue 2, pp. 134-144.

²⁶ “For art is to him the great Mood of the Universe, moving hither and thither amidst those harmonic laws of matter which are Rhythm.” Okakura Kakuzo, *The Ideals of the East: With Special Reference to the Art of Japan*, Albany: Stone Bridge Press, 2007, p. 37.

located at a more tangible, material level. Teng Gu’s argument suggests a distinctive development within Chinese discourse on “Qi-yun sheng-dong.” In the 1930s, the aesthetician Zong Baihua advanced a related schema, positing that rhythm is both the movement of cosmic vitality (Tao) and the “human emotions and sensibilities = rhythm of the heart.”²⁷

2.2 The Relationship Between “Qi-yun sheng-dong” and “Xingsi”

Viewed Through the Lens of Literati Painting and Academy Painting

Teng Gu further offered a fresh perspective on literati painting, which has traditionally been associated with the concept of “Qi-yun sheng-dong,” thereby generating a novel interpretation of the concept. In his 1926 *A Brief History of Chinese Art*, Teng examined the intersection between literati painting [Wen-ren hu 文人画] and academy painting [Yuan-ti hua 院体画]. Academy painting, produced by court-employed artisan painters, is typically distinguished from literati painting, which was regarded as a pastime of scholar-officials. Notably, Chen Shizeng’s defense of Chinese painting did not address academy painting at all.

In contrast, Teng Gu’s *A Brief History of Chinese Art* notes that, following the flourishing of literati painting during the Yuan dynasty, there was a resurgence of emphasis on “Xing-si” in the early Ming dynasty. This revival was reflected in the works of artists like Wang Lü 王履, Dai Jin 戴進, Tang Yin 唐寅, and Qiu Ying 仇英, signaling a revival of academy painting (92). Based on this observation, Teng proposed a new classification: “pure literati painting” and “literati painting that incorporates the systems of academy painting.” This perspective continued to evolve in his later works, such as 1931 “On the Historical Consideration of Academy Painting and Literati Painting” and his magnum opus, 1933 *The History of Tang and Song Painting*. These ideas represent a distinctive aspect of Teng’s thought. In “On the Historical Consideration of Academy Painting and Literati Painting,” Teng provided the following explanation regarding the distinction between these two traditions:

... This distinction does not lie between scholar-officials [Shi-da-fu 士大夫] and technical artists but rather within two differing tendencies inherent in the lives of scholar-officials themselves. To introduce provisional terms, the former can be called the “Lofty Style” [Gao-dao Shi 高蹈式], wherein the scholar-officials, unrestrained by rules and conventions, disdain worldly concerns and seek transcendence. The latter can be called the “Bureaucratic Style” [Guan-ge Shi 館閣式], wherein scholar-officials, bound by the civil service examination system, act within the constraints of rules and conventions. (108)²⁸

²⁷ See Ding Yi, “The Application of Confucianism and Taoism in Zong Baihua’s Chinese Art Theory,” *BIGAKU*, no. 28, 2024, pp. 76-99. Additionally, the term “rhythm” was a key concept in China’s academic discourse in the 1920s and 1930s. For more on the intellectual background and movements of the time, see Hu Jihua, *The Aesthetic Dimension of the Chinese Cultural Spirit: A Brief Discussion on Zong Baihua’s Aesthetic Thought*, Peking University Press, 2009, Chapter 6.

²⁸ The original text: …不是士大夫与工技的分別；乃同一身分的士大夫生活之中，潛存着兩種不同的傾向之分別。我現在假定二個名稱：前一種是士大夫不甘囿于規矩法度，而傾向于玩世高蹈的“高蹈型式”；后一種是士大夫被科舉制度所束縛，進退于規矩法度之中的“館閣型式”。(108)

According to Teng, the distinction between literati painting and academy painting is not a matter of class but rather reflects two divergent tendencies within the art produced by scholar-officials. During the Song dynasty, these two tendencies coexisted without “hierarchical distinction.” However, from the Yuan dynasty onwards, the “Lofty Style” of literati painting became dominant, leading to the decline of academy painting’s focus on “Xing-si” and “formal techniques [Ge-fa 格法]” and marking a significant turning point in the history of Chinese painting (108-109).

The significance of Teng’s argument lies in its dismantling of the simplistic dichotomy that associates “literati painting” with Qi-yun and “academy painting” with Xing-si. Instead, Teng suggested that Qi-yun, as argued by Chen Shizeng, is not the exclusive domain of literati painting. While Teng did not explicitly discuss Qi-yun in this context, he did refer to related concepts, such as “Yi 意 [intent or meaning],”²⁹ and proposed that even literati-influenced academy painting of the Southern Song dynasty could possess Qi-yun. Conversely, literati painting incorporating elements of academy painting (such as that of Wang Lü) could exhibit Xing-si. This stands in stark contrast to Chen Shizeng’s argument, which used Qi-yun primarily to defend literati painting against criticisms of its lack of realism.

Through this exploration, it becomes evident that Teng Gu’s discourse brought about a critical transformation in modern understandings of Qi-yun sheng-dong. His work outlined the contours of premodern Qi-yun theory, via recovering its historical context. In contrast, Deng Yizhe offered a compelling perspective on Qi-yun, rooted not only in premodern Chinese art theory but also in modern conceptions of art in general.

3 A Philosophical Aesthetic Examination: Deng Yizhe’s 1935 “Qi-yun Sheng-dong”

Deng Yizhe, a renowned aesthetician and the fifth-generation descendant of the calligrapher Deng Shiru 鄧石如, possessed deep expertise in artistic practice and frequently engaged in the appraisal of paintings. Between 1907 and 1911, he studied in Japan, earning a Bachelor of Arts degree from Waseda University. Subsequently, from 1917 to 1923, he pursued studies in philosophy and aesthetics at Columbia University. Unlike many who later came to be known as “aestheticians” but actually began their careers in fields such as pedagogy, psychology, literature, or art studies (Kunstwissenschaft)³⁰, Deng Yizhe was notable for specializing in aesthetics as a branch of philosophy from the early stages of his career. Deng’s significant interpretations of Qi-yun sheng-dong are encapsulated in his 1935 essay “Qi-yun Sheng-dong” (later included in “Explorations into Painting Principles [Hua-li Tan-wei 画理探微]”) and in his 1941-1942 work “A Comprehensive Interpretation of the Six Principles [Liu-fa Tongquan 六法通詮]”. As will be discussed later, his 1935 essay is particularly notable for presenting a distinctive and original argument.

²⁹ For example, Teng Gu referenced Wang Lü’s 王履 saying: “意在形，取意舍形，無所求意；意溢乎形，失其形者，意云何哉” (109).

³⁰ Teng Gu, mentioned above, was also active as a literary figure and specialized in art studies. The two leading modern Chinese aestheticians, Zhu Guangqian and Zong Baihua, specialized in pedagogy and psychology, and art studies, respectively.

3.1 Qi-yun Incompatible with Xing-si

Deng Yizhe explicitly regards “Qi-yun Sheng-dong” as a “Li 理 [principle]” that lies “beyond art” (205)³¹, asserting that “among the various arts, there are only differences in genre, but the [ideal] principle of art should be unified” (205). To understand what Deng means by “Li,” it is necessary to return to his broader theory of art and provide further explanation.

In discussing art, Deng introduces three foundational concepts: “ti 体 [substance],” “Xing 形 [form],” and “Li.” “Ti” refers to practical, three-dimensional objects; “Xing” denotes patterns or designs; and “Li” refers to “Wu-li 物理 [the principle of things]” or “life.” For example, in the case of bronze vessels, the practical object constitutes the “Ti,” and the design carved upon it represents the Xing.” During the Shang and Zhou dynasties, patterns were created for the sake of the vessels, achieving a “unity of Ti and Xing.” However, in the Qin and Han dynasties, the two began to separate, and the patterns started to emerge as independent artistic forms. Further, from the Han to Tang dynasties, the creation of works was no longer satisfied with mere decorative patterns and shifted toward the “representation of the principle of things themselves” (200). It is at this point that Qi-yun begins to emerge. Wang Youliang (2005) compares Deng’s periodization to Zheng Wuchang’s 鄭午昌 1929 *A Comprehensive History of Chinese Painting Studies*, a groundbreaking art history text of the time. While their periodizations broadly align, Wang points out that Zheng focuses more on historical developments, whereas Deng emphasizes conceptual changes in Ti, Xing, and Li³². What is particularly relevant here is Deng’s argument that “Qi-yun” only comes into being by transcending “Xing” and that it is not influenced by “Xing-si” or even by the broader concept of “Xing” in painting.

To substantiate this argument, Deng critiques several painting expressions traditionally associated with Qi-yun, maintaining that none of them truly embody “Qi-yun Sheng-dong.”

Deng focuses on the genre of landscape painting—unlike paintings of demons, gods or figures, landscapes depict mountains and rivers, which are lifeless—and questions where Qi-yun resides within them. First, he addresses the issue of “light.” While painters of the Northern School [=academy painting school] during the Southern Song Dynasty emphasized the depiction of light, later Southern School [=literati painting school] painters regarded the techniques for rendering light, such as “through outlining with ink wash and then blurring the contours,” as mere “technical tricks” rather than orthodox methods (214). Next, he examines “clouds and mist,” citing Tang Zhiqi’s 唐志契 statement that “Qi-yun sheng-dong is different from the moistness of mist” to argue that these are not manifestations of Qi-yun (214). Similarly, the notion of “emptiness” [Kong-xu 空虛], often linked to Qi-yun, is dismissed as an expression rooted in “emotion” and “a certain artistic realm [Jing-di 境地],” which rely on external elements (lending, as criticized by Wang Fu 王紘) and thus do not constitute Qi-yun (214-215). Even “brush and ink [Bi-mo 筆墨],” which is most closely associated with Qi-yun, does not inherently guarantee it, as there are instances of brush and ink merely achieving Xing-si without embodying Qi-yun (215). As his conclusion, Deng’s analysis concludes that Qi-yun sheng-dong is unrelated to

³¹ The quotations of Deng Yizhe’s statements are cited from *Complete Works of Deng Yizhe* (Anhui Education Press, 1998), and are indicated by page numbers only.

³² Wang Youliang, *Deng Yizhe’s Aesthetics in the Context of “Modernity” Discourse*, Xinhua Bookstore, 2005, pp. 49-59.

expressions of light, clouds and mist, emptiness, or brush and ink.

However, from a practical perspective, while not all representations of light, clouds and mist, emptiness, or brush and ink inherently embody Qi-yun, these elements often contribute to Qi-yun in paintings that do possess it. Deng himself appears aware of the limitations of his argument. In his later work, 1941-1942 “A Comprehensive Interpretation of the Six Principles,” he explores the possibility that Qi-yun sheng-dong could be related to concepts such as “Yi-jing 意境 [=aforementioned concept of Jing-di]”, “Gu-yi 古意 [ancient meaning],” and “Bi-mo” (240-243). This does not contradict his earlier conclusions; rather, the argument in his 1935 essay rests on viewing Qi-yun sheng-dong as a “Li” beyond the specific art, akin to an absolute, ideal existence. Following the logic of Western idealist aesthetics, Qi-yun as a “Li” is detached from all concrete phenomena yet simultaneously manifests as a transcendent concept within all concrete entities. If one examines only “A Comprehensive Interpretation of the Six Principles,” Deng’s work might seem similar to other contemporary attempts to systematize premodern theories of art. However, when considered alongside the framework established in his 1935 essay, it reveals the distinctive philosophical aesthetic approach that explicitly defines Deng’s thinking.

Deng’s uniqueness lies in his ontological inquiry into the nature of Qi-yun. This approach contrasts with traditional Chinese theories of art, such as those explored by Chen Shizeng or Teng Gu, which focused on how and when Qi-yun arises or how it can be achieved. To understand the differences between traditional Chinese aesthetics and Western art theory, it is instructive to consider the evaluation of Teng Gu’s doctoral dissertation submitted to the University of Berlin. Li Xuetao (2017) notes that Teng’s 1932 dissertation, “Chinesische Malkunsttheorie in der Tang und Sungzeit [The Theory of Chinese Painting in the Tang and Song Dynasties]”, was highly praised for its meticulous analysis of Chinese art theory, which was still underexplored in the West. However, A. E. Brinckmann, one of Teng’s examiners, criticized the dissertation for insufficiently analyzing the frequently mentioned concept of Qi-yun (Rhythmus)³³. This critique likely stemmed from expectations of a clear definition of Qi-yun as an inherent quality. Teng’s dissertation, later published in Chinese as 1933 *The History of Tang and Song Painting*, avoided directly addressing the nature of Qi-yun. This omission reflects the absence of such an inquiry in traditional Chinese discourse. However, to defend Teng Gu’s argument, it was not that he ignored or failed to address the issue, but rather, this question did not originally exist in the traditional Chinese context.

In contrast, Deng Yizhe introduced a Western perspective, particularly the influence of Hegelian thought³⁴. Deng utilized Hegel’s ideas of “absolute spirit” and “Idea” to interpret Qi-yun sheng-dong³⁵. Deng’s interpretation reflects Hegelian principles of the unity of concept and

³³ Li Xuetao, “Some Original Documents Related to Dr. Teng Gu’s Dissertation (Part II),” *Art Research*, 2015. However, this paper does not include the original German text of the review comments. Therefore, the translation in this paper is based on Li’s Chinese translation.

³⁴ Additionally, theories concerning the “idea” or “spirit” in art from thinkers like Johann Joachim Winckelmann and Benedetto Croce are worth noting. Refer to Liu Gangji’s 1982 “The Life and Contributions of the Modern Chinese Aesthetician and Art Historian Deng Yizhe,” *Complete Works of Deng Yizhe*, p. 435; and Song Xueqin, “Deng Yizhe’s Adoption and Reinterpretation of Western Aesthetics and Its Contemporary Implications,” *Chinese Literature and Art Review*, vol. 5, 2021, pp. 51-61.

³⁵ Song Xueqin, *ibid.*, pp. 52-53.

objective existence, presenting Qi-yun as an ideal concept within all phenomena. Deng’s inquiry into Qi-yun from a Western aesthetic perspective was a groundbreaking contribution to Chinese academia at the time.

3.2 Analyzing Qi-yun from the Perspective of the Author and the Recipient

Deng Yizhe argues that Qi-yun does not depend on form, but he also acknowledges that all paintings, as visual arts, require “form.” This raises the question: where does Qi-yun reside in a painting? In response, Deng offers an intriguing perspective: besides “form,” a painting involves “two additional factors-creation and appreciation” (211). He posits that Qi-yun resides on the side of both the author and the viewer.

The idea that Qi-yun exists on the side of the author is best illustrated by a passage from Ouyang Xiu’s 歐陽脩 “Shi-bi 試筆 [lit. Trial of Brush]” in the section “Appreciating Paintings [Jian-hua 鑑畫]”:

“Desolate and tranquil simplicity [Xiao-tiao dan-bo 蕭條澹泊]” is a subtle “idea” that is difficult to depict. Even if the author has captured it, the viewer may not necessarily perceive it. Consequently, shallow intentions, like “speed or slowness of motion,” are easier to grasp, while profound sentiments or spirit, such as “tranquility and solemn quiet [Xian-he yan-jing 閑和嚴靜],” are harder to materialize through form. Furthermore, aspects such as “height, depth, orientation, distance, and layering” are merely technical skills of the painter and not the concern of a connoisseur. (215, with some parts omitted by Deng Yizhe)³⁶

According to Deng Yizhe, Qi-yun sheng-dong does not manifest through form (e.g., “speed or slowness of motion,” or “height, depth, orientation, distance, and layering”). Instead, it resides in the author’s “Yi 意 (intent)” or “Xin 心 (sentiment or spirit),” reflected in ideas such as “desolate and tranquil simplicity” and “tranquility and solemn quiet.” However, even if the author possesses these “Yi” or “Xin,” they do not always communicate them to the viewer. Thus, Deng concludes that Qi-yun sheng-dong lies primarily on the author’s side (215).

On the other hand, Qi-yun sheng-dong is also connected to the viewer, as “a painting fundamentally arises for the sake of the viewer.” Based on this principle, the author’s “Yi” or “Xin” can be conveyed to a connoisseur (216). Deng discusses Zou Yigui’s 鄒一桂 statement in *Xiao-shan Painting Manual* [*Xiao-shan* [=Zou Yigui] *Hua-pu* 小山畫譜] that “Qi-yun is, first and foremost, a term for the connoisseur, not a method of the author.” Deng comments that this view is “both wise and unwise” (217). It is “unwise” because Zou fails to recognize that Qi-yun also pertains to the author’s method (217). However, it is “wise” in pointing out that “appreciation happens after the painting is completed, when Qi-yun sheng-dong emerges as a quality associated with the viewer” (217). Deng agrees with Zou Yigui’s perspective on the triadic relationship between the author, the work, and the viewer but disagrees with the

³⁶ 蕭條澹泊，此難畫之意，畫者得之，覽者未必識也。故飛走遲速意淺之物易見，而閑和嚴靜趣遠之心難形，若乃高下向背遠近重複，此畫工之芸耳，非精鑑者之事也。(215)

exclusive association of Qi-yun with the viewer. For Deng, Qi-yun involves both the author and the viewer. This line of thought is not rooted in traditional Chinese art theory. Although the triadic relationship of “author-work-viewer” is mentioned in classical Chinese texts, Deng’s reorganization of premodern discourse reflects a new aesthetic perspective rather than a simple restatement of traditional ideas.

4 Toward the Ideal of Chinese Art: Post-Zong Baihua

This study has examined the development of the concept of Qi-yun sheng-dong during the early 20th century. Chen Shizeng was one of the earliest to engage with this concept, though he did not establish it as a standalone term. Nonetheless, he set the basic trajectory for modern Chinese interpretations of Qi-yun sheng-dong. Teng Gu revisited the historical context of art and organized related discourses, tracing the historical evolution of the concept to clarify its range of meanings. His reevaluation of the relationship between literati painting and academy painting also provided an opportunity to reconsider the oversimplified linkage between Qi-yun sheng-dong and literati painting. Meanwhile, Deng Yizhe treated Qi-yun sheng-dong, considered the pinnacle of artistic standards, as a kind of ideal entity. By distinguishing it sharply from “form,” he reinterpreted it through the dual perspectives of creation and appreciation. In this way, Initially valued only as the first of Xie He’s “Six Principles of Painting,” the concept gradually regained depth by exploring its historical transformations and integrating modern Western perspectives on art.

However, these scholars’ discussions were not merely expositions of the traditional art-theoretical concept of Qi-yun sheng-dong. Their analyses also reflected their broader aesthetic thoughts. For instance, Teng Gu envisioned an ideal of art-one that aligned the vitality of the artist with that of their object-and projected this ideal onto Qi-yun sheng-dong. Deng Yizhe, on the other hand, analyzed Qi-yun sheng-dong fundamentally through the lens of Western aesthetics, despite grounding his discourse in Chinese tradition³⁷. These efforts reflect the intellectual explorations of the 1920s and 1930s when China was grappling with its artistic identity and drawing upon Western ideas to do so.

On the other hand, there were also those who interpreted Qi-yun sheng-dong based on indigenous Chinese thought during the same period. One such figure was the aesthetician Zong Baihua, who, during the 1920s and 1930s, taught alongside Deng Yizhe at National Central University 中央大学 in Nanjing and co-founded the Chinese Society for Art History with Teng Gu in 1937. While Zong did not explicitly discuss Qi-yun sheng-dong during this period, he introduced another perspective that would later inform its understanding.

In his earliest aesthetic essay on Chinese art, 1932 “A Discussion of Chinese Painting Based on Two Books on Chinese Painting Studies” (hereafter abbreviated as “Chinese Painting Studies”), Zong wrote:

³⁷ Deng Yizhe discussed the origins of “Qi Yun Sheng Dong” in relation to Chu influences in Han-era art and Taoist pantheism (see *Complete Works of Deng Yizhe*, pp. 240, 281, 343). However, the former is closer to an art historical explanation relying on stylistic analysis, while the latter is only briefly noted.

Although the realm expressed in it [Chinese painting] is tranquil, the cosmos that operates according to natural laws is dynamic even in its tranquility. Similarly, human life, unified with the spirit of nature, is both dynamic and tranquil. Every subject depicted—mountains, rivers, figures, flowers, birds, insects and fish—is filled with the vitality of movement: Qi-yun sheng-dong.³⁸

This statement marks Zong’s first mention of Qi-yun sheng-dong in his discourse on Chinese art. For Zong, the objects depicted in Chinese painting—whether inherently living or not—are imbued with the vitality of movement as part of the cosmos’s continuous flow. He identified the governing principle of this cosmos as the Tao described by Laozi and Zhuangzi³⁹. Thus, Zong connected Qi-yun sheng-dong in Chinese painting with the classical philosophical concept of Tao.

While Zong’s early analysis relied heavily on his intuitive sense⁴⁰, his significant contribution lies in tracing the origins of Qi-yun sheng-dong to Taoist philosophy, grounding it not just in art theory but in Chinese classical thought. Zong thus proposed a theoretical foundation for Qi-yun sheng-dong as an ideal specific to Chinese art, rooted in the longstanding reverence for Qi-yun since Xie He’s time. Although Zong did not fully articulate the relationship between Tao and Qi-yun sheng-dong, his student Ye Lang continued this line of inquiry. In his 1985 *Outline of Chinese Aesthetic History*, Ye Lang elaborated on concepts like “Qi,” “Yun,” and “Xiang 象 [image],” demonstrating their connections to Taoist philosophy in greater detail and clarifying how Qi-yun reflected the ideals of Chinese art⁴¹.

Additionally, Zong offered a new interpretation of the relationship between Qi-yun and Xing-si. He described Chinese painting as striving to reflect the principles and laws of nature and the cosmos, claiming that it is “the most objective” and “the most realistic” art form⁴² (in “Chinese Painting Studies”). In another essay from the same period, 1932 “Xu Beihong 徐悲鴻 and Chinese Painting,” Zong argued that “Ancient Chinese paintings, having perfected the resemblance in form, ultimately attained the ‘wondrous realms of spirit’⁴³.” In this sense, Qi-yun, as Zong explained, is part of realism—not in the superficial imitation of forms but in the pursuit of the cosmos’s deeper truths.

Post-Zong, scholars such as Xu Fuguan’s 徐復觀 1966 *The Spirit of Chinese Art* argued that “regarding the relationship between Qi-yun and Xing-si, [Qi-yun] transcends Xing-si while ultimately returning to it as an expression of the object’s essential nature⁴⁴.” Li Zehou’s 李澤厚

³⁸ The original text: 它所啓示的境界是靜的，因為順着自然法則運行的宇宙是雖動而靜的，与自然精神合一的人生也是雖動而靜的。它所描写的对象，山川、人物、花鳥、虫魚，都充滿着生命的動——氣韻生動。Zong Baihua, “Chinese Painting Studies,” edited by Lin Tonghua, *Complete Works of Zong Baihua* in four volumes, Anhui Education Press, 1994, vol. 2, p. 44.

³⁹ *Complete Works of Zong Baihua*, *ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 44.

⁴⁰ For discussions on Zong Baihua’s Chinese art theory, refer to Ding Yi, cited earlier.

⁴¹ Ye Lang, *Outline of Chinese Aesthetic History*, Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Publishing House, 2017, Chapter 1.

⁴² *Complete Works of Zong Baihua*, *ibid.*, vol. 2, pp. 45-46.

⁴³ *Complete Works of Zong Baihua*, *ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 52.

⁴⁴ The original text: 氣韻与形似的關係，是由形似的超越，又復歸於能表現出作為对象本質的形似的關係。Xu Fuguan, *The Spirit of Chinese Art*, Beijing: Jiuzhou Publishing House, 2014, p. 196.

1981 *A Path of Beauty* further discusses how the concept of Qi-yun sheng-dong expanded into the genre of landscape painting during the Song and Yuan dynasties. In doing so, it explicitly distinguishes between external Xing-si (as in the so-called Western sense) and internal truth (that of the cosmos and nature) in Chinese painting. It argues that Chinese painting, while meticulously observing nature, expresses it in a generalized manner, pursuing an imagined truth rather than the sensory illusion characteristic of Western painting⁴⁵. These interpretations are indebted to Zong's foundational work.

It is worth noting that Zong also recognized the ideal of "vitality in movement" in Western art, as exemplified by Rodin's sculptures, which he praised in his 1920 "After Viewing Rodin's Sculptures." Nonetheless, Zong emphasized that the roots of Qi-yun sheng-dong lie in Chinese classical philosophy and used this concept to articulate the unique ideals of Chinese art. This perspective has shaped modern Chinese aesthetics, while the early 20th-century scholars discussed in this paper demonstrated the broader possibilities for interpreting Qi-yun sheng-dong. Through this process, perspectives emerged that connect to the examination of Qi-yun sheng-dong in modern Chinese aesthetics. The three theorists discussed in this paper demonstrated that, during the same period when Zong Baihua was laying the foundation for the modern theory of Qi-yun sheng-dong, there were also possibilities for other developments in the interpretation of this concept.

This paper has examined how Qi-yun sheng-dong was explored during the early 20th century as a marker of Chinese art's distinctiveness from Western art. By incorporating Western ideas and returning to China's own philosophical contexts, scholars deepened their understanding of this concept. Although touched upon briefly in this study, the influence of Japanese aesthetics on this discourse was significant. Japanese scholars had already begun examining concepts like Qi-yun sheng-dong within a different historical and intellectual framework. A comparative study of Qi-yun sheng-dong in modern Chinese and Japanese aesthetics remains a task for future research.

Acknowledgment

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⁴⁵ Li Zehou, *A Path of Beauty*, Beijing: Sanlian Press, 2016, pp. 174-175.