

# In Defence of Subjectivity and Autonomy: Shitao's Aesthetic Theory and His Critique of the Mainstream School of Painting in the Early Qing Dynasty

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## Abstract

The article explores the aesthetic theory of Shitao, an early Qing dynasty painter who belonged to the Individualist school of painting which advocated painting from subjective experience of life and learning from the Dao, thus following the aesthetic tradition of literati landscape painters. Shitao composed his own theory of painting and aesthetics in the work *The Remarks on Painting* (*Huayulu* 畫語錄), which was the result of his artistic practice and philosophical reflections collected throughout his life. The article delves into Shitao's critique of the Traditionalist school of painting which prevailed in his time as the mainstream painting style, advocating imitation and repetition of the old masters. For Shitao and other Individualist painters, such an approach and attitude towards art led to creative stagnation and a departure from the aesthetic ideals of classical landscape painting. With their artistic and theoretical intervention, however, they managed to preserve, upgrade and bring to life new perspectives in artistic production and aesthetic theories. This paper presents Shitao's defence of subjectivity as a vital catalyst for the rejuvenation of artistic perspectives and the restoration of Chinese art, thus providing an invaluable contribution to the discourse on artistic creativity and subjectivity.

**Keywords:** Shitao, Holistic brushstroke, aesthetics, subjectivity, Traditionalist school of painting, Individualist school of painting

## V bran subjektivnosti in avtonomiji: Shitaova estetska teorija in njegova kritika prevladujoče struje slikarstva v zgodnji dinastiji Qing

### Izvleček

Članek prouči estetsko teorijo slikarja Shitaota iz zgodnjega obdobja dinastije Qing, ki je pripadal struji individualističnega slikarstva. Ta zagovarja slikarstvo, ki izhaja iz subjektivnih izkušenj življenja in učenja od Daota, s čimer sledi estetski tradiciji krajinskega slikarstva literatov. Shitao je ustvaril lastno teorijo slikarstva in estetike v delu *Zapisi o*

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*slikarstvu* (*Huayulu* 畫語錄), ki predstavlja rezultat njegove vseživljenjske umetniške prakse in filozofskih razmišljanj. Članek se osredotoča na Shitaovo kritiko tradicionalistične struje slikarstva, ki je kot glavni slog slikarstva prevladovala v njegovem času in temeljila na doslednem posnemanju starih mojstrov. Za Shitaota in druge individualistične slikarje je takšen pristop in odnos do umetnosti vodil v ustvarjalno stagnacijo in odklik od estetskih idej klasičnega krajinskega slikarstva. S svojim umetniškim in teoretskim posredovanjem so individualistični slikarji uspeli ohraniti, nadgraditi in oživeti nove perspektive v umetniški produkciji in estetskih teorijah. Članek predstavi Shitaovo zagovarjanje subjektivnosti kot ključne pobudnice v produkciji novih umetniških perspektiv in obnovitvi kitajske umetnosti, ki predstavlja neprecenljiv prispevek k razpravi o umetniški ustvarjalnosti in subjektivnosti.

**Ključne besede:** Shitao, Holistična poteza čopiča, estetika, subjektivnost, tradicionalna struja slikarstva, individualistična struja slikarstva

## Introduction: Shitao's Life and Work

Shitao 石濤 (1642–1707, birth name Zhu Ruoji 朱若極) was one of the most important painters of the early Qing dynasty. He belonged to the so-called Individualist or non-Traditionalist school of painting (*feizhengtong pai* 非正統派), which advocated painting from the artist's subjective experience of life, learning from nature and freedom in artistic expression. This approach opposed the Traditionalist school (*zhengtong pai* 正統派) which favoured imitation and copying of the old masters of painting in terms of technical skills in brushwork and style. Shitao created his own aesthetic theory, in which he directly criticized the Traditionalist painters and sought a revival of aesthetic taste of the literati landscape painters that emerged in the Wei Jin period (or the Six dynasties; 220–589 CE) and gradually developed fully with Song dynasty painters. For Shitao, the aesthetics of literati painters represented the genuine essence of Chinese art and aesthetics.

Shitao was born in 1642 in Guilin, and was part of the eleventh generation of descendants of a grandnephew of the founder of the Ming dynasty (1364–1644). He was only two years old when the Ming dynasty collapsed (Strassberg 1989, 12). When Shitao was around ten years old he was taken to a Chan Buddhist monastery in Wuchang in Hebei province and began studying calligraphy following the renowned Tang master, Yan Zhenqing 顏真卿 (709–785). Captivated by the master's bold and vigorous brushstrokes, as well as the solid structure of his work, Shitao developed an enduring fondness for these artistic qualities that would last a lifetime.

He was later encouraged to explore the style of the famous late Ming dynasty painter, Dong Qichang 董其昌 (1555–1636), a founder of the Traditionalist

school.<sup>1</sup> However, upon examining Dong's work, Shitao was far from taken by his approach. Instead, he decided to wholeheartedly embrace the artistic expression of more ancient styles (Strassberg 1989, 14). At the age of fourteen he had already gained reputation as a talented painter of flowers, birds, landscape and figures. From this young age on, Shitao travelled around China and practiced painting and Chan Buddhism. In 1657, he declared his affinity with the Individualist path in art and disdained the Traditionalist approach, as written in a colophon of a painting from that year:

In painting there are the “Northern” and “Southern” schools ... do I follow them or do they follow me? Suddenly I grasp my sides and break out in laughter as I say, I use my own method (*wo fa* 我法). (ibid., 15)<sup>2</sup>

In 1662, Shitao started Chan training under the guidance of the renowned Chan master Lü'an Benyue 旅庵本月, and received the transmission of the dharma from him two years later. However, Shitao was always travelling around China, and throughout his journeys he frequently visited the Huangshan mountain in Anhui, which became his profound source of inspiration and played a pivotal role in his artistic development. He stayed in Anhui for a decade, and during that period Shitao came into contact with prominent Individualist painters and poets from the local Anhui school and further explored the artistic depiction of Huangshan. Anhui Individualist circle held paramount importance in Shitao's artistic development, as it offered him a unique and powerful example of nature from which he could reassess the unconventional compositions and ink effects of the Individualist approach. In 1680, he travelled to Nanjing and became a resident in a temple south of the city. There he embraced a solitary life, fully devoting himself to meditation and eventually achieving the status of a Chan master (ibid., 22).

In the tradition of Chinese art, the role of a monk-painter was well-established practice and did not conflict with a religious vocation, as both pursuits acted as mutually reinforcing paths toward spiritual enlightenment. Shitao even referred to his profession as “painting Chan” (*hua chan* 畫禪). In a colophon to a painting, he stated:

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- 1 The Traditionalist school (*zhengtong pai* 正統派) is often referred to as the Orthodox or Loyalist school of painting by art historians. However, due to its religious connotations, I prefer to avoid using the term “Orthodox”.
  - 2 In the reference to two subsequent colophon entries on Shitao's paintings, Strassberg does not provide the original Chinese text.

Discussing painting is like discussing Chan: what is important is to forget one's knowledge of things and enter into the Primary principle,<sup>3</sup> which is what defines the master. Otherwise, one sinks into dualism, which definitely indicates that one is not an expert. (ibid.)

Around 1693, Shitao renounced his formal status as a Chan master and assumed the role of a Daoist priest. His Daoist name, *Dadizi* 大滌子, meaning "The Pure One" (or according to Chai (2021, 97) "Master of Great Cleansing"), symbolized the purification of all accumulated worldly impurities. This decision reflected his rejection of the political corruption that had become associated with Buddhism (Coleman 1978, 29).

Shitao resided in Yangzhou from 1697 until his death. Around 1700, he completed writing his renowned theory of painting, *The Remarks on Painting* (*Huayulu* 畫語錄). A revised version of the text, known as *Manual for Painting* (*Hua Pu* 畫譜), was published ten years later<sup>4</sup> (ibid.).

Shitao's aesthetic theory that he wrote in the last decade of his life encompasses his entire theoretical and practical knowledge as a philosopher and an artist. His *Remarks* eloquently reflect the profound influence of classical philosophy, i.e. the *Yijing*, *Daodejing* and Chan Buddhism, and of literati landscape painting. This influence is evident in the aesthetic concepts, categories and rhetoric that he masterfully employs in his theory of painting.

Shitao's aesthetic theory undoubtedly promoted a subjectivity and artistic freedom that led to innovative forms and expressions in art.

As mentioned above, Shitao's painting theory challenges the "traditionalist" understanding of art, which adheres to strict rules and promoted the imitation of the old masters.<sup>5</sup> This approach advocates exact copying (*fang* 仿), correctness (*zheng* 正) and the transfer of past techniques (*gu* 古) as the ultimate model to be imitated in the present and future, dismissing individual expression as unnecessary and even undesirable. Shitao, however, vigorously resisted this mainstream school that prevailed in his time and led to a creative closure in art.

3 The concept of the Primary principle originated from Song poetry critic Yan Yu 嚴羽 (1180–1235), who emphasized that poets should experience spiritual enlightenment. For Shitao this represented a profound insight into reality, surpassing mere knowledge of styles and techniques. While Shitao embraced Daoism when he wrote *The Remarks on Painting*, many of his ideas can be traced back to Chan or remain highly compatible with its teachings (Strassberg 1989, 36).

4 For an in-depth study of Shitao's life, see Hay (2001).

5 Paul D'Ambrosio describes this attitude as a "tradition-focused approach", which "requires coherence to the past in its support of 'new' interpretations" (D'Ambrosio 2023, 52).

According to Strassberg (1989, 3–4), Shitao's approach to overcoming creative stagnation goes beyond the constraints of historicism and embraces a holistic foundation in art. By tracing the act of painting back to the principles of unity and autonomy, Shitao strove to recover the innate harmony between nature, art, and the heart-mind, as originally formulated by the classical literati painters. This pursuit of a spiritual connection with nature and an attempt to visually represent one's inner self revitalizes painting as an original and unique experience, liberating it from mere imitation of other artists' styles. Within the Chinese aesthetic tradition, there is no other theory that exhibits such deep literary consciousness and originality of expression, eloquently voicing a distinctively personal perspective (ibid.).

Shitao's *Remarks on Painting* is composed of eighteen relatively short yet comprehensive essays or chapters exploring the notions of the “holistic brushstroke” and “method”, while the subsequent three essays examine the act of painting. Chapters eight to 14 specifically elucidate these concepts in relation to painting's symbolism and its profound power of representation. The concluding four essays interweave the aforementioned themes through discussions on the paradigmatic person (*zhiren* 至人), the interdependence of things, and the art of mastering life (Chai 2021, 98).

## Historical Development of Literati Painting and the Formation of the Traditionalist School

Literati painting (*wenrenhua* 文人畫) refers to art created by scholars and writers that shows a distinctive aesthetic taste. Its origins date back to a change in the status of painters. Unlike other professional painters, who were trained in workshops, literati painters had a humanistic education and excelled in poetry, calligraphy and painting, which together are known as the three perfections of Chinese art. For them, painting became an extension of writing and calligraphy, linking the visual arts to the written word (Gao 2018, 66). From the Six dynasties (220–589 CE) to the Tang dynasty (618–907), the theoretical foundations of figure and landscape painting were gradually established by important artists such as Gu Kaizhi 顧愷之 (344–406), Zong Bing 宗炳 (375–443) and Xie He 謝赫 (479–502). During the Tang (618–907) and Song dynasty (960–1279), landscape painting gained prominence and became a central focus in literati art and aesthetics.

Literati painting, however, fully developed during the Tang dynasty, especially with Wang Wei 王維 (699–759), who was a famous poet but excelled not only in poetry but also in painting and music. He incorporated poetry and prose into his

landscape paintings, blending water, ink and landscapes to create a simple and lyrical mood. Wang Wei significantly influenced the development of literati painting in his time, and served as a model for future generations of literati painters.

During the Northern Song period (960–1127), literati painting was represented by the intellectual circle of poets, writers, painters, calligraphers, and theorists of aesthetics around Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101), a poet and calligrapher, who praised Wang Wei's ability to combine his poems with painting to create a poetic feeling. The scholars of the Northern Song period believed that painting should go beyond the mere appearance of forms and express the ideas and cultivation of the artist. Literati theory however, placed the utmost importance on painting as a means of expressing individual character. It was seen as a "mind-print" (*xin yin* 心印) that transmitted the artist's inner cultivation and the aesthetic quality of *qiyun* 氣韻 (harmonious resonance of *qi*)<sup>6</sup> shaped through a process of spiritual refinement rooted in a profound understanding of the patterns of natural order (*li* 理) in nature and from broadly absorbing the spirit (*ru shen* 入神) of great masters. Within the creative process, the artist was envisioned as actively participating in the spontaneity of the universe, crafting their work without deliberate reference to techniques typically associated with professional painters (Strassberg 1989, 4). This approach, profoundly influenced by Daoist and Chan philosophy, laid the cornerstone for literati painting.

In the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) a significant change occurred in the orientation of literati painters, who moved away from the artistic traditions of the Song masters. The concept of antiquity gained prominence and became the most important value in art.<sup>7</sup> By the 13th century, the evolved tradition of landscape painting had established stylistic models that sparked debates among artists about how to effectively convey the spirit of antiquity (*gu yi* 古意) and which styles to follow. Yuan artists turned away from the naturalistic depictions of humans within the vastness of nature typical of the Song period, and instead took a more expressive

6 The concept of *qiyun shengdong* 氣韻生動 was first introduced by Xie He (6th century) in his work *The Records on Ancient Painting* (*Gubua pinlu* 古畫品錄) as the first (and the most important) of the six principles (or methods *liufa* 六法) of painting. For an in-depth research of this aesthetic concept, see Sernelj (2021).

7 The shift towards antiquity during the Yuan dynasty was probably not merely a cultural and aesthetic preference, but a deliberate effort to uphold the Han tradition in the face of foreign rule. The Yuan dynasty's non-Han rule prompted a re-evaluation of traditional Chinese values and a resurgence of interest in Confucianism, which was closely associated with the Han dynasty. Scholars and literati of the time turned to the classics and the philosophical teachings of Confucius to help define and preserve Chinese identity and cultural values during this period of political change. Restoration of Confucian art and philosophy became a prominent trend among Chinese intellectuals and literati of the time, aiming for preservation of the rich cultural heritage of China.



approach that emphasized formal structure. Their focus shifted to technical aspects such as schemes, brushstroke textures, recurring formal motifs, and compositional arrangements, collectively referred to as “methods” (*fǎ* 法). This emphasis on technical skills and formal elements redefined the process of creating and appreciating paintings (*ibid.*, 6).

This played an important role in the subsequent Ming dynasty, where these techniques formed the basis for various art schools. Finally, they laid the foundation for the emergence of Traditionalist painting in the 17th century, which sought a standardized and traditionalist approach to painting.

During the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), literati painting underwent a process of differentiation, giving rise to distinctive schools. This evolution ultimately resulted in the classification of Northern and Southern schools of painting, and later the categorization into Traditionalist and Individualist schools formulated by the renowned painter and art theorist Dong Qichang.

Dong Qichang, a multifaceted figure who served as an official, scholar, and esteemed art collector, played a significant role in the preservation of traditional Chinese painting styles. He diligently recorded the stylistic attributes of authentic ancient paintings, encompassing aspects such as brushwork and ink techniques. Dong’s meticulous work involved copying these ancient masterpieces and supplementing them with his insightful annotations.

Of particular importance was Dong’s deep appreciation for artistic style and a commitment to upholding tradition, which left a lasting impact on the evolution of Chinese literati painting during the Ming dynasty.

In his interpretation, the famous contemporary expert on Chinese aesthetics, Wang Keping (2021, 306–307), highlighted Dong Qichang’s advice to painters, urging them to channel their focus towards contemplative concentration and heartfelt tranquillity. Dong called for painters to establish a profound connection with the vital rhythm of Heaven and Earth, suggesting that by aligning with nature they could create their most exceptional “mind-inspired paintings” (*xin yin* 心印) that would reveal the profound beauty of the universe. Dong underscored the significance of directly experiencing and perceiving the vital rhythm inherent in all things, a practice that not only led to artistic pleasure but also held the potential for longevity in the artist’s work.

In contrast, Strassberg (1989, 8) sheds light on a distinct aspect of Dong’s position, emphasizing that he made a clear distinction between the “correct” lineage of painting and the “heterodox” one. By introducing his influential theory of the “Northern” and “Southern” schools, where he defined these two lineages, he

unapologetically asserted the superiority of the latter. For Dong, the Southern school, as exemplified by renowned painters like Wang Wei 王維, the Four Masters of the Yuan dynasty, and Ni Zan 倪瓚, had effectively preserved the genuine value of painting. In contrast, Dong believed that the Northern school had experienced a decline in quality. Dong not only traced the authentic continuum of artistic traditions but also provided a structured process for artists to identify with these great masters, with the ultimate goal of achieving a “Great synthesis” (*Dacheng* 大成) of formal elements derived from past works.

While Dong had adopted the concept of historical style transformation from the Individualists, he explicitly rejected the notion of creating one's own style:

... Some people say, “One must create one's own style”. This is terribly wrong. For willows, follow Chao Pochu, for pines, Ma Hezhi, for died-up trees, Li Cheng. These methods are unchanging and eternal. Even if some further transformation of them should be attempted, it should not depart from the basic source. How could there be individual creativity apart from the methods of antiquity? (Strassberg 1989, 9)<sup>8</sup>

Dong advocated studying paintings, particularly those of the old masters, as a precursor to observing nature. This approach, known as the correct transformation of correct style, established a confined realm of creative activity wherein transcendent spiritual meaning could be continuously transmitted and recycled (*ibid.*). The primacy of studying paintings first and then turning to nature is reflected in his famous saying:

以境之奇怪论，则画不如山水，以笔墨之情秒论，则山水绝不如画。

From the state point of amazing scenery, painting cannot equal natural landscape; when it comes to the wonders of brush and ink, landscape is no match for painting. (Cf. Kong 2022, 11:10)

This obviously gives a taste for brush and ink a very high status, and had a great influence on later generations.

These painters, however, were staunch proponents of Confucian traditionalism, which led to the prevailing practice of imitating (*fang* 仿) the correct style (*zheng* 正) of the old ancient masters during the late Ming and early Qing dynasty.

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8 Strassberg does not provide the original text in Chinese.



In the early Qing dynasty, Wang Shimin 王時敏—who was Dong Qichang’s student and successor—favoured ancient techniques (*gufa* 古法) and promoted them as equal to those of the “Southern” school, as defined by Dong. He focused on imitating ancient masterpieces, and by constantly reworking these he looked to gain new inspiration. This approach was upheld by all “Four Wangs”,<sup>9</sup> commonly known as similarity (*lin* 臨) and resemblance (*mo* 摹), which both involve close replication. On the other hand, copying (*fang* 仿) and nurturing (*fu* 扶) entailed following the styles of predecessors (Strassberg 1989, 9).

The early Qing dynasty Traditionalist school, as represented by the Four Wangs following Dong Qichang’s style, laid particular stress on brushwork, and their work shared common compositional characteristics in being fragmentary, building up the scenery in layers, elements following one another rather than mirroring what real mountains and rivers look like. This reflects a division-based technique of composition. It deprives landscape of its boundlessness and makes it impossible for viewers to see the vigour of the universe. However, their paintings excel in numerous kinds of brushwork and texture strokes, mainly derived from the Southern school. In composition they follow the classical principles of three levels<sup>10</sup> (cf. Kong 2022, 11:00–13:15).

However, this approach to painting prompted the Individualist artists, such as Shitao, Zhu Da 朱耷 (1626–1705, style name Bada Shanren 八大山人) and others, not only to question the custom but to completely abandon it (Chai 2021, 94), as they regarded it as a theoretical foundation for the complete closure of artistic creativity. They strove for the revival of the genuine spirit of Chinese art and aesthetics as formed by literati painters from the Wei Jin period onwards. The Individualists’ rebellion against conservatism of the Traditionalist theory however, consequentially led to new and innovative expressions in art, and still has a significant influence on contemporary Chinese artists (see Yeh 2008).

Thematically, the Traditionalist theory emphasized conservative Confucian values, which resonated with the ruling class’s ideology. It advocated for the preservation of the hierarchy of artistic sages and faith in the superiority of the past as a model. The paintings showcased bureaucratic values by skilfully handling technical intricacies and creating an atmosphere of serene philosophical tranquillity and impartial judicial detachment (Strassberg 1989, 12).

Moreover, the Qing court actively promoted this kind of conservative culture as part of its campaign to rebuild order and reintegrate “native” Chinese values

9 Wang Shimin 王時敏, Wang Jian 王鑒, Wang Hui 王翬, and Wang Yuanqi 王原祁.

10 As we will see in the next subchapter, Shitao severely criticized this traditional division.

following the collapse of the Ming dynasty. The Traditionalist school was favoured by the Kangxi Emperor, who bestowed official commissions upon its painters in the capital. On the other hand, the Individualist painters faced constant struggles for their everyday survival. Without patrons and commissions, they would not be able to sustain themselves solely through their art (ibid.).

## Shitao's Aesthetic Theory of the Holistic Brushstroke

Shitao's aesthetic theory is based on the fundamental idea of the "holistic brushstroke" or "oneness of brushstroke" (*yihua* 一畫<sup>11</sup>), which represents his ultimate method of painting the so-called "method of no method" (*wufa zhi fa* 無法之法), or in short "no method" (*wufa* 無法). However, the term *fa* (法) in Chinese also conveys the notion of copying or imitating. As a result, its translation and conceptualization can vary depending on the context. In certain situations *fa* can be interpreted as a method that necessitates avoiding imitation or copying entirely, while in other contexts it signifies the elimination of any prescribed methods of painting style. The nuanced nature of the term therefore calls for a flexible interpretation, demanding careful consideration of the specific context in which it is used to precisely capture Shitao's intended meaning in his *Remarks on Painting*.

He considered the process of painting as a cosmogonic act in itself, the holistic brushstroke acting as the creative principle of the cosmos. By grasping the law of creativity, Shitao stressed that one must not adhere to fixed and restrained methods in the painting process, nor copying one's predecessors. Instead, the painter must seek freedom from rules. His holistic method derives from the absence of all methods and consequently represents the method or operation of the Dao itself. As such, the holistic brushstroke has the ability to reflect the entire universe on a microcosmic scale precisely because of its ability to represent the innermost reality (or structure) (*li* 理) of all things. Shitao's aesthetic theory of the holistic brushstroke, however, is deeply grounded on the onto-cosmology of the *Yijing* and *Daodejing*.

11 The concept of *Yihua* was not coined by Shitao, but is an ancient concept in Chinese painting. According to Chai (2021, 98), the earliest recorded use of *Yihua* can be traced back to Cui Yuan 崔瑗 (78–143 CE), a renowned master of the cursive-script calligraphy style and the author of the influential essay "Configuration of Cursive Script" (*Cao shu shi* 草書勢). This marks the inception of *Yihua* as an aesthetic concept. Soon after, it was accompanied by the emergence of "one-stroke writing" (*yibishu* 一筆書), exemplifying the cursive-script calligraphy style of Wang Xianzhi 王獻之 (344–386 CE). Additionally, "one-line drawing" (*yibihua* 一筆畫) gained prominence, referring to the painting style pioneered by Lu Tanwei 陸探微 (dates unknown, approximately 485 CE) (ibid.).

In the first chapter of the *Remarks*, Shitao defines his holistic brushstroke as a no-method. The method used, however, refers to the principles of painting that were established in the past, i.e. by the literati painters who established them as cosmological principles deriving from the oneness of the Dao. Already in the second line of the first chapter, Shitao writes that people nowadays (i.e. referring to the Traditionalist school's painters) are not aware of this cosmological unity anymore and he himself established a holistic brushstroke which holds in itself the cosmological source of creativity.

太古無法。太樸無散。太樸一散而法立矣。法於何立。立於一畫。一畫者眾有之本。萬象之根。見用於神。藏用於人而皆人不知。所以一畫之法乃自我立。立一畫之法者。蓋以無法生有法。以有法貫眾法也。夫畫者。從於心者也。(Huayulu 畫語錄 s.d., 1)

There were no (painting) methods in remote antiquity, for the Uncarved block had not yet disintegrated. When it did, methods were established. But what is the basis of any method? They are all based on the Holistic brushstroke. The Holistic brushstroke is fundamental to depicting everything in existence and is the root of all images. It is perceptible spiritually, yet works mysteriously in the human-mind so my contemporaries remain unaware of it. Therefore, I, myself, established a “method” of Holistic Brushstroke. This method is created out of “no-method” to string together all other methods. Painting is guided by the heart-mind. (Trans. by Strassberg 1989, 61)

The opening two lines can be seen as a parallelism which connects remote antiquity (*taigu* 太古) with primordial simplicity (*taipu* 太樸), usually translated as the uncarved block. In the Laozi, *pu* is used for the description of the *Dao*. In the Chapter 32 of the *Daodejing* we read:

道常無名。樸雖小，天下莫能臣也。(Daodejing s.d., 32)

*Dao* is constant and cannot be speak of. Although small, no one can subjugate it.<sup>12</sup>

In the third line, Shitao writes that the principles emerged when primordial unity dispersed, which resonates with Chapter 28 of the *Daodejing*, where it is stated that the formation of material forms emerged after the dispersion of pure simplicity.

樸散則為器。(Daodejing s.d., 28)

The dispersion of primordial unity forms vessels.

12 If not noted otherwise, the translations of Chinese texts are mine.

Shitao's holistic brushstroke is grounded on the metaphysical level, presumably referring to the onto-cosmology of the *Yijing*:

形而上者謂之道，形而下者謂之器。(Yijing, *Xi Ci*, I/12)

What is above forms is called the *Dao*. What is below forms is called the vessel.

Following the genuine cosmological principles of the literati painters, Shitao emphasized that there were no methods in the distant and remote past, which means that the painting methods were natural and spontaneous, following the way of the *Dao*, and were not the product of artificiality and purposeful endeavour. However, after the dispersion of oneness, the holistic brushstroke was established which is the essence of everything and the root of all phenomena-images (*xiang* 象). Yet his contemporaries were not aware of the great creativity of the *Dao* that is the source of any artistic action. The holistic brushstroke is thus a physical manifestation of the *Dao* in the art of painting and is the root of all subsequent interventions or methods in the painting process. The same onto-cosmological statement is presented in Chapter 42 of the *Daodejing*:

道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物。萬物負陰而抱陽，沖氣以為和。(Daodejing s.d., 42)

*Dao* gives birth to one, one to two, two to three, and three to myriad entities. Myriad entities, bearing *Yin* and embracing *Yang*, form a unified harmony through the fusing of these vital forces.

Applying the first stroke to the empty surface recapitulates the decisive moment of bringing things into being and set into motion the forms of nature and to endow the artwork with the spiritual coherence of the universe (Strassberg 1989, 39).

In this sense, Shitao emphasized the importance of subjectivity, since for him true creativity is possible only on the basis of one's own experience and understanding of the nature of things, which is then transferred onto the artwork. The transformation of the external reality into the artwork is hence twofold, being spiritual and artistic at the same time. For Shitao, the Traditionalist school of painting which advocates the exact copying and repetition of styles and techniques of the great masters from the past and neglects subjective expression denies the art of painting this essential spiritual dimension.

The holistic brushstroke can be understood as the first and initial act that pervades the painting process from the beginning till the end. It is done in one vital breath, which means that the scene or landscape that is to be presented in the painting as a microcosm of the macrocosm is already structured in the artist heart-mind. It gives the liveliness to the painting in the sense that it is a recreation of reality which is the result of spiritual synchronicity of the artist with the external world. For Shitao, the realization of the holistic brushstroke is attained through the complementarity of the ink and brush. The interplay of ink and brush, however, is a cosmic union of the two poles, i.e. the *Yin* and *Yang* which form a pair responsible for arranging all aspects of reality and their universal transformations or changes. This is reflected in Shitao's reference to the meaning of *Qian* and *Kun* from the *Yijing* (*Huayulu* 畫語錄 s.d., 2).

The operation of the holistic method is hence rooted in the naturalness of the Dao (*daofa ziran* 道法自然). Using the principle of the oneness of *Yin* and *Yang*, the Dao harmonizes all things by allowing these natural elements to self-regulate and manage (*zhi* 治) themselves. Shitao argued that the holistic brushstroke, rooted in primal simplicity, governs the myriad strokes that emanate from it. This regulation occurs as the brush and ink freely alternate their positions of dominance and inferiority, much like the dynamic interplay of *Yin* and *Yang*, without disrupting the overall harmony of the artwork (Chai 2021, 103).

In Chinese art theory and aesthetics, the concept of copying (*mimesis*) reality (nature) and its entities (*wanwu*) is not something that has any particular aesthetic value. Instead, the artist should imitate and recreate it in such a way that it seems natural and spontaneous, in other words, the artist paints a microcosm of macrocosm. This is attainable through precise observation and profound understanding of external reality, along with a complete fusion of the inner world of human spirit with the external world, reflecting the ancient philosophical concept of the unity of humanity and nature (*tianren heyi*). In this context, artistic practice and the creative process have an extremely important place, in fact a fundamental one, in Chinese aesthetics. This is not limited to the mastery of artistic technique or skill, but extends to the sphere of aesthetic transformation and transcendence. In this sense, self-cultivation of the artist refers to emptying of the self and harmonizing one's spirit with the cosmic Dao. Only on such grounds can the artist create the artwork that has the genuine aesthetic value which is able to transmit a transformative and transcendent experience of life to the audience.

## Critique of Traditionalist Painters

Shitao claimed that a painting should follow and grasp the simplicity of nature (i.e. the Dao), in a process of artistic creation following the aesthetic ideal of the landscape literati painters. Hence for him the Traditionalist painters who blindly followed the styles and techniques of the past disregarded the essence of the art of painting. As we have seen, the aesthetic ideal of the landscape literati painters was by far not technical but spiritual. A truly genuine artwork was the product of a profound contemplation of the inherent nature of things, of the external world, i.e. the nature or universe on the one hand, and of internal reality on the other, i.e. of the human heart-mind or the spirit that is displayed in the artwork. In this context, they advocated that the artist should carefully observe transformation and changes in nature in order to grasp its intrinsic qualities which are then recreated in the painting.

Shitao's critique of Traditionalist approaches to the art of painting is elaborated in the subsequent two chapters of the *Remarks*, where he further explains and elaborates in a more concrete and detailed way the problem of the method (*fā*) illuminated in the first chapter. Shitao's greatest issue with methods, however, is that they are limited, inhibited and restrained, which hinders freedom of creativity and subjective expression in art:

規矩者。方圓之極則也。天地者。規矩之運行也。世知有規矩。而不知夫乾施坤轉之義。此天地之縛人於法。人之役法於蒙。一畫明。則障不在目。而畫可從心。畫從心而障自遠矣。夫畫者。行天地萬物者也。舍筆墨其何以形之哉。(Huayulu 畫語錄 s.d., 2)

Compass and ruler measure perfect circles and squares. Heaven and Earth move in the patterns marked by compasses and rulers. While people know about these tools, few understand the activity of the Creative and Receptive forces of the Universe. Such a conception of Heaven and Earth traps one in rules, keeping one in ignorance [...] when Holistic brushstroke is understood, then inhibitions vanish from sight and painting can proceed naturally [from the heart-mind]. When painting proceed naturally, inhibitions fade away by themselves. Painting represents the forms of Heaven, Earth and all things. How else could they be depicted but with brush and ink? (Trans. by Strassberg 1989, 63)

Compasses and square sets were used in ancient Chinese painting as the instruments for drawing lines—the latter for straight lines and the former for circles and curves. In the Tang dynasty, the famous painter critics and historian, Zhang



Yanyuan 張彥遠 (ca. 815–907) discussed the traditional division made between “real” paintings and “dead” paintings.<sup>13</sup> The latter referred to paintings made using instruments, whereas real paintings were made freehand. As Zhang asserted:

Now, if one makes use of marking line and ruler, the result will be a dead painting. But if one guards the spirit and concentrates upon a single thing, the result will be a real painting. Is not even plain plaster better than a wall of dead painting? Yet even one stroke of real painting will show its breath of life. (Gao 2018, 4)

In this passage of the second chapter, Shitao obviously refers to this distinction and criticizes the Traditionalists’ rigidity in following the methods and rules that lead to the creation of so-called dead paintings because they were not aware of the true creativity that is behind real paintings, i.e. deriving from the creative source (the creativity of nature or Dao) itself via the spirit (the heart-mind) of the artist. Creative forces of Nature are represented by *Qian* and *Kun* (i.e. *Yang* and *Yin*) in the following lines, which argue that people were not aware of the true meaning of the harmonious creative dynamics of the two.

Shitao also criticizes the traditional division of space on three levels (land, trees and mountains) or two sections (main scene below and mountains above)<sup>14</sup> in Chinese painting that prevailed in the Traditionalist theory. However, this issue is again directly addressed in Chapter ten of the *Remarks*, entitled *Defining space* (*jingjie* 境界):

分疆三疊兩段。似乎山水之失。然有不失之者。如自然分疆者。  
。。每每寫山水如開閉分破。毫無生活。(Huayulu 畫語錄 s.d., 10)

13 This distinction has also been discussed by many contemporary Chinese experts Chinese aesthetics, see e.g. Wang (2023, 17). It is also in accordance with some European scholars, such as Selusi Ambrogio who formulates a similar distinction: “Mere technique does not nurture life, while a technique-art that express itself through ‘artistic actions’ grounded on sensibility, emotions and humanness is able to penetrate and express Dao” (Ambrogio 2023, 164).

14 According to the first Chinese etymological dictionary *Shuowen jiezi* from the first century AD, the character *hua* 畫 consists of two graphic elements, consisting of the character *yu* 聿, which depicts a hand holding a bamboo stick, which takes on the meaning of a brush, and *tian* 田, an image of a field crossed by furrows. To paint therefore means to draw lines with a brush that outlines shapes in the same way that paths limit fields and determine their configuration. The dictionary therefore defines a painting as follows: a painting is made of borders, similar to paths that delimit fields. In Chinese painting, which actually originates from calligraphy, it is the line that dominates. However, this delineation is not about limitation, but rather, as the order of strokes the character *tian* suggests, the connection between above and below (Heaven and Earth) and left and right, which precedes it. The painter thus provides space for Heaven and Earth by inscribing the landscape between the two.

Dividing land areas, creating “three levels” or “two sections” may seem to doom a landscape to failure. Yet, there are such cases when Nature itself divides the land... But whenever a landscape is composed by chopping up the surface, it always lacks vitality. Such failure can be recognized immediately. (Trans. by Strassberg 1989, 77)

For Shitao this traditional division is too restrictive and like cutting the space into pieces. When there is a demarcation, its role is not so much to isolate, separate, and define, but above all to establish interdependence between individual parts, in order to open up the field of their interactions which consequently represent vitality. Shitao's rejection of rigidity through the integration of all divisions is to avoid lifeless copying, in other words, it is his general admonition against conforming to the methods of past masters. He posits that in painting these three levels the painter must first of all integrate them into a united atmosphere by employing the single pervasive creative vitality or the breath—energy (*qi* 氣): 先要貫通一氣. (*Huayulu* 畫語錄 s.d., 10)

In the next lines of the second chapter, we read:

古今法障不了，由一畫之理不明。一畫明，則障不在目而畫可從心。畫從心而障自遠矣。。。法無障，障無法。法自畫生，障自畫退。法障不參。而乾旋坤轉之義得矣，畫道彰矣，一畫了矣。 (*Huayulu* 畫語錄 s.d., 2)

Throughout time, the reason that people have not liberated themselves from the inhibitions of methods is that the natural order (*li*) inherent in the holistic brushstroke has not been properly understood. When it is understood, then inhibitions vanish from sight and the painting can follow the heart-mind.<sup>15</sup> If painting follows the heart-mind then the inhibitions fade away by themselves... True method [holistic brushstroke] is without inhibitions, just as inhibitions destroy true method. True method arises from the act of painting, while it is through the act of painting that inhibitions are banished. When method can be separated from inhibitions, then the activity of creative and receptive forces [*Qian* and *Kun*] can be grasped. The Dao of painting will shine forth and enlightenment gained into the holistic brushstroke. (Trans. by Strassberg 1989, 63)

15 Heart-mind refers to intuitive mind and its penetrating power is sensitive to the moral and aesthetic and is not limited to rational, analytical or discursive thought (Coleman 1978, 44).

Shitao's holistic method arises from the absence of all methods, representing the method or operation of the Dao itself. Consequently, the holistic brushstroke possesses the unique ability to encapsulate the entire universe on a microcosmic scale, precisely because it can depict the innermost nature, or structure (*li* 理), of all things.

### The Importance of Individual Artistic Subjectivity and the Unity with the Dao

This understanding of the innermost nature (i.e. the Dao), extends to the comprehension and application of transformation and change in nature within an artwork through the use of the holistic brushstroke, or no-method. Nevertheless, in the third chapter Shitao underscores that successfully portraying change in a painting is only achievable when one is open to transforming oneself accordingly. Here, Shitao delves into the notion that knowledge of past masters, or antiquity, should serve as a tool for the painter. He clearly expresses his critique of the Traditionalist school of painting by emphasizing the significance of the self in the creative process. In this context, the engagement of the self has a dual role. It serves as the origin for creating an authentic artwork that represents the Dao, grounded in a profound understanding of the nature of things. Simultaneously, it signifies one's capacity to self-transform and change.

Shitao most explicitly and lucidly presents his critique of the mainstream school of painting in the third chapter of the *Remarks*, elucidating the distinctions between his no-method and the conventional painting methods of the past. He highlights the primary reason behind his critique.

古者。試之具也。化者。試其具而弗為也。具古以化。未見夫人也。嘗憾其泥古不化者。是識拘之也。識拘於似則不廣。故君子惟借古以開今也。(Huayulu 畫語錄 s.d., 3)

Antiquity is but a tool of knowledge. Transformation involves recognizing it as but a tool while refraining using it in this way. For I have never seen anyone achieve transformation by using antiquity as a tool. Often I lament those who are mired in antiquity, unable to transform themselves because their knowledge has trapped them. It traps them in stylistic imitation so that their vision is narrowed. For this reason, the superior man just uses antiquity to expand the potentials of the present. (Trans. by Strassberg 1989, 64).

When Shitao refers to the “ancients”, he is not including all painters of the past, but rather specifically those who had succeeded in comprehending the fundamental principles underlying all things. These masters transcended established rules, and by reshaping and synthesizing their acquired knowledge, they ultimately forged their own unique artistic paths. It becomes evident that the art of any of these great ancient painters is a direct outcome of their profoundly personal life journeys. Consequently, any attempt to appropriate their artistry can only produce lifeless results (Lucchi 2021, 73).

The examination of past masters should solely arise from a painter's innate understanding that engaging in such a pursuit will enable them to attain novel insights beneficial to their own artistic journey. Implicit in this is the recognition that there exists no compulsion to study the ancients if one discovers that such an endeavour would yield unfavourable outcomes.

又曰。至人無法。非無法也。無法而法。乃為至法。凡事有經必有權。有法必有化。一知其經。即變其權。一知其法。即功於化。夫畫天下變通之大法也。山川形勢之精英也。古今造物之陶冶也。陰陽氣度之流行也。借筆墨以寫天下萬物。而陶泳乎我也。今人不明此。動則曰。某家皴點。可以立腳。非似某家山水。不能傳久。某家清儉。可以立品。非似某家工巧。祇足娛人。是我為某家役。非某家為我用也。縱逼似某家。亦食某家殘羹耳。於我何有哉。(Huayulu 畫語錄 s.d., 3)

Moreover, it is said the perfect man relies on no-method but this does not mean that he does not employ any method at all. His method is to empty out other methods which is the consummate “method”. All things have both a constant aspect and one which responds to circumstances; similarly, any method must be capable of transformation. If one understands what is constant, then one can change what responds. Similarly, once any method is understood, one can bring about its transformation. Painting is the greatest method for representing the world in the process of transformation and interaction, for capturing the essential beauty of landscape's dynamic forms, the eternal activity of creation, the succession of day and night and of the seasons. With brush and ink, I can describe everything between Heaven and Earth, for all this is molded by myself. People nowadays don't seem to understand this so they are prompted to say, “One can use this master's texture strokes and dots as foundation”, or “Unless it resembles that master's landscapes, it won't survive the test of time” or, “With the understated manner of this master one can reach a high level” or, “Works which fail to resemble that master's artistry are

merely entertaining”. This is how the artist becomes a slave to this or that master, rather than the master serves the needs of the self. Even if one forces oneself to achieve a resemblance to such a master, it would be no better than feeding on his leftovers. What good is that to me? (Trans. by Strassberg 1989, 64)

Here, Shitao is directly addressing Dong Qichao’s opposition to the idea of creating one’s own artistic style, and suggestion that artists should follow established methods associated with specific natural elements, like willows, pines, and dried-up trees, as exemplified by Chao Pochu, Ma Hezhi, and Li Cheng, respectively. For Dong, these timeless methods should serve as a foundation, discouraging significant deviations. Shitao questions the capability of one’s own creativity if it is based on such foundations. He firmly believes that genuine creativity in the art of painting should originate from the individual self. It is only through the deep engagement of one’s self with the world that one can truly represent it, akin to the concept of the Dao.

Shitao, however, recognized the importance of rules in an artist’s learning journey. In the first three chapters of the *Remarks*, he underscores that the emergence of any order or system invariably results in the establishment of specific rules. However, the crux lies in the artist’s ability to initially differentiate between the intrinsic rules of the universe and those that are artificial and, consequently, derivative. Even more crucial is the pursuit of understanding the fundamental principles upon which these rules are founded. Only by accomplishing this can an artist transcend the established rules, which were crafted by preceding masters and gradually incorporated into the traditional painting canon, enabling the creation of a genuinely unique style. As Shitao articulates, failure to grasp the concept of the holistic brushstroke will leave an artist subservient to rules, following them blindly (Lucchi 2021, 74).

Shitao perceives the artist’s role as extending beyond the mere utilization of past knowledge, passionately advocating the imperative to transform that knowledge to convey one’s distinctive individuality and produce innovative artworks that spring from the inner self.

知有古而不知有我知也。我之為我。自有我在。 。 。我於古何師而不化之有。(Huayulu 畫語錄 s.d., 3)

One may know of the existence of the ancient, but not realize that they have the existence of their own. I exist as myself. I am within myself... In the face of the ancient, how could I have learned from it without transforming it? (Trans. by Strassberg 1989, 64).

His perspective underscores that the holistic brushstroke, a perfect method, is the sole means to capture the dynamic process of change in the world through painting. He places great emphasis on the artist's agency in the creative process, rather than blindly following the masters. This agency stems from the artist's aesthetic immersion in the world and is manifested in their artwork.

Painting thus transcends being a mere action or object, and becomes an extension of the Dao's creative essence. Through brush and ink, the artist mirrors the fundamental processes of creation, making the painting a manifestation of life itself (Lucchi 2021, 72).

Shitao also critiqued the Traditionalist school's approach to the artistic process. Drawing from Daoist and Buddhist philosophies in literati painters' aesthetics, he stressed the importance of self-cultivation in the act of creation. Letting go of worldly concerns was key to liberating the heart-mind and achieving the holistic brushstroke, symbolizing a profound unity with the Dao. According to Shitao, this state was the starting point for joyful painting.

In Chapter 14, titled "Departing from the Dust of the World" (*Yuan chen* 遠塵), Shitao perceived the art of Traditionalist painters as the product of labour, devoid of the effortless spontaneity he advocated. Their work seemed driven by utilitarian goals, in contrast to Shitao's belief that a painting should physically manifest the embodied experience of unity with the Dao. This fundamental aesthetic concept had been overlooked by the Traditionalist painters. He writes:

人為物蔽。則與塵交。人為物使。則心受勞。勞心於刻畫而自毀。蔽塵於筆墨而自拘。此局隘人也。但損無益。終不快其心也。我則物隨物蔽。塵隨塵交。則心不勞。心不勞則有畫矣。畫乃人之所有。一畫人所未有。夫畫貴乎思。思其一則心有所著。而快所以畫。則精微之人。不可測矣。想古人未必言此。特深發之。 (*Huayulu* 畫語錄 s.d., 14)

When a person's vision [a painter] is beclouded by things, one associates with earthly matters [i.e. with the dust of the world]. When a painter's vision is determined by things then his heart-mind is burdened. A burdened heart-mind portrays a self-destructing painting, the artist movement of brush and ink that is beclouded by worldliness becomes self-restricting. This is a situation of narrow people. But it is the loss without any gain since in the end they lose all joy [enthusiasm] in their heart-mind. As for me, I leave things to becloud other things and dust of the world associate with the worldliness. My heart-mind is then not burdened by these matters and I can paint. People know how to paint



but no one knows about the holistic brushstroke. The most valued thing in painting is the thought [contemplation]. When the artist concentrates on oneness then one's heart-mind has something to paint and is joyful. Then a person who is following this profound and subtle realm becomes unfathomable. I think that ancients may not have speak of this unique profoundness that I have expressed here.

The critique of the Traditionalist departing from the genuine spirit of literati landscape painters who saw the painting as the result of the artists' spiritual and creative communion with the nature (i.e. the Dao) based on one's own understanding and experience of its processes and transformations is even more evident in the fifteenth chapter, titled "Casting off the Vulgarly" (*Tuo su* 脫俗<sup>16</sup>). In this essay we see that for Shitao painting is not just another human activity, but is based on an enlightened insight into the nature of things. For him, such an ideal artist is a *zhiren* (智人), i.e., a person who has gained profound understanding of the Dao and acts (i.e. artistically engages) in accordance with its fundamental principle, and thus in a spontaneous, effortless way. The precondition for any true creativity, which is a manifestation of the spiritual communion with the world, is wisdom. Among other issues, such wisdom includes *leaving no traces* (*wu ji* 無跡) in the representation of forms. This refers to an action that is in complete resonance with the way of the Dao, so effortless that it mirrors the creativity of the Dao itself. The artistic production of Traditionalist painters who are more or less only reproducing artworks is for Shitao problematic precisely because it lacks this essential spiritual dimension. This can be seen as a critique of artistic production that produces art for art's sake, without reflecting its metaphysical origins, along with the absence of the subject's own individuality reflecting the world and expressing their own creativity in a unique way.

愚者與俗同識。愚不蒙則智。俗不濺則清。俗因愚受。愚因蒙昧。故至人不能不達。不能不明。達則變。明則化。受事則無形。治形則無跡。運墨如已成。操筆如無為。尺幅管天地山川萬物。而心淡若無者。愚去智生。俗除清至也。(Huayulu 畫語錄 s.d., 15)

An ignorant person and vulgar person denote the same thing. If ignorance is not concealed, then there is wisdom. If vulgarity is not splashed

16 Interestingly, "su" (俗) also means customs, conventions, secularity, popularity, and tastelessness. It stands in opposition to "ya" (雅), which means elegant, graceful, refined, and correct. Confucius made a very clear distinction between popular or vulgar music (*suyue* 俗樂) and elegant court music (*yayue* 雅樂), with the latter being perceived as promoting morality, while popular (*su* 俗) music was seen as harmful and morally corrupting.

around, then there is purity. Vulgarity derives from ignorance, and ignorance derives from obscurity. The genuine person attains understanding and enlightenment. Because one understands, one changes; because one is enlightened, one undergoes transformations. The genuine person perceives things beyond the form. In managing forms one leaves no traces [of effort]. The movement of the ink then seems as the painting would already be created. The operation of the brush derives from effortless action, being spontaneous and natural. A few feet long scroll can contain heaven and earth, mountains and rivers and all existing entities, yet the heart-mind is bland as in a state of nothingness [or absence]. Then ignorance is banished and the wisdom born. Vulgarity is thus eliminated and clearness realized.

## Conclusion

Shitao's theory of the holistic brushstroke is without a doubt one of the most penetrating and breakthrough aesthetic theories in the field of Chinese painting. It is distinguished above all by its deep philosophical basis, which Shitao mapped onto the field of artistic process and production. Shitao's aesthetic theory, however, is deeply rooted in Daoist philosophy and aligns with the aesthetic theories that have been developed from the Wei Jin period onwards.

Nevertheless, in his *Remarks on Painting*, Shitao criticizes the Traditionalist school of painting because for him it represents the deviation or departure from the genuine essence of Chinese art. Shitao sees artistic process and production as the act of freedom. His holistic brushstroke represents the subject's total oneness with the world (or the Dao) and the painting as the active process has to be executed in effortless way (*wuwei* 無為) without any bonds or inhibitions. Therefore, the holistic brushstroke is defined as a method without the method (*wufa*) which directly mirrors the effortless action in the painting process. On the other hand, Shitao's holistic brushstroke liberates the artist from any limitations of imitating and copying in order to attain the Dao of painting.

Shitao criticizes the Traditionalist painters because they follow the regulations and methods of painting from masters at the expense of their own experience and engagement with the world, and are thus ignorant of the great oneness of art behind the rules and regulations of painting. The individualism that is strongly emphasized in Shitao's aesthetic theory derives from this position. Certainly, the painter must be familiar with the regulations. However, if one aims to create artwork in alignment with the Dao, the great oneness, these regulations must be

integrated to such an extent that they appear spontaneous and natural, allowing for the unimpeded expression of the artist's spirit. It is only through this approach that one can effectively convey individuality and foster artistic innovations. However, Shitao states that:

古之人未嘗不以法為也。無法則於世無限焉。(Huayulu 畫語錄 s.d., 3)

The ancients did not work without rules. Absence of rules leads to absence of restraints in this world.

In this context, Shitao refers to the ancient tradition of Chinese landscape painters who transferred the Daoist idea of unification with the Dao, into the painting. Through their artwork, these painters aimed to recreate the world's essential and deepest reality by drawing from their personal experiences and contemplations. Consequently, Shitao resonates deeply with these classical origins, a connection underscored in the closing chapter of the *Remarks* where he states:

古之人寄興於筆墨，假道於山川。不化而應化，無為而有為。(Huayulu 畫語錄 s.d., 18)

The ancients expressed their feelings through brush strokes and ink wash by painting mountains and rivers. Their approach was to meet all variations through the invariable. They proceeded to action through non-action.

This passage illuminates Shitao's commitment to upholding the essence of classical landscape painting. Nevertheless, as we have observed, he ardently opposed the institutionalization of rules and painting techniques. He issued a resounding caution about the hazards inherent in blindly adhering to prescribed rules without a comprehensive understanding of the foundational principles on which they rest.

Shitao's piercing critique of the Traditionalist school's inclination to rigidly mimic past styles, especially in its approach to technical brushwork and calligraphy derived from ancient masters, stands as a pivotal moment in the revival of the authentic essence of Chinese art. His brave dissent breathed new life into the art form, steering it away from the precipice of stagnation. This reawakening finds its roots in the profound tenets of Daoism, permeating the realms of ontology, epistemology, and aesthetics. Within this philosophical framework, Chinese art is not confined by imitation or convention, and instead it becomes a manifestation of the boundless, inexhaustible wellspring of human creativity. For Shitao, this creative

power only truly blossoms when the self is unshackled from all constraints, free to explore uncharted territories of artistic expression. In this unfettered state, the genuine transformative potential of art emerges, where the artist's unique subjective experience breathes life into their work, transcending mere imitation and echoing the deep resonance of the Dao.

Shitao's support for subjectivity as a fundamental postulate of artistic creativity does not solely stem from his practical and philosophical involvement with Daoism, but is also deeply rooted in his extensive commitment to Chan Buddhism throughout most of his life. Within the framework of his aesthetic theory, Daoism and Chan Buddhism seamlessly complement each other. This philosophical fusion becomes especially evident in the concluding chapters of the *Remarks on Painting*, where Shitao extensively explores mastering of life and enlightenment:

故至人不能不達。不能不明。達則變。明則化。受事則無形。  
(*Huayulu* 畫語錄 s.d., 15)

The genuine person necessarily attains understanding and clarity. Because one understands, one changes; because one obtains clarity, one undergoes transformations. The genuine person perceives things beyond the form.

Here, he accentuates the profound insight of the subject into the ultimate reality of things. According to Shitao, this insight serves as the cornerstone for any creative pursuit that transcends temporality, reaching the highest aesthetic realm.

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