

The Generation and Flux of Qiyun: A Conceptual Historical Inquiry from Character Appraisal to Landscape Spirit

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Abstract

Original Research Article

This study examines the evolution of qiyun shengdong from the Wei-Jin to the Ming-Qing dynasties from a conceptual historical perspective. Its meaning originated in character appraisal, denoting the spiritual demeanor of figures. During the Tang and Song, through theoretical transformation by scholars such as Jing Hao, it became a key category signifying landscape vitality and creative subjectivity. From the Yuan through the Ming and Qing, it was deeply integrated with brush-and-ink cultivation and the Northern and Southern Schools narrative, solidifying as the supreme aesthetic criterion of literati painting. Through this linear investigation, this study reveals the dynamic process of reinterpretation and reshaping of this core category in Chinese painting throughout history, as well as the active role of art-historical writing in the canonization of concepts.

Keywords: Qiyun; Conceptual History; Character Appraisal; Landscape Spirit; Art-historical Writing

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1. Introduction: Qiyun as Discursive Event

The term qiyun shengdong, since Xie He of the Southern Dynasties listed it as the first of the "Six Principles" in Records of the *Classification of Ancient Painters*¹, has been like a seed planted in the soil of Chinese painting theory, growing over nearly fifteen centuries into a towering tree whose influence has covered the entire aesthetic domain of Chinese painting. Continuously pursued, interpreted, and discussed by literati, connoisseurs, and theorists across generations, it was eventually enshrined as the supreme criterion for evaluating paintings and the core of the *Chinese artistic spirit*². However, precisely because of its self-evident canonical status, its connotations have gradually solidified through

historical sedimentation, acquiring a transcendent, essentialized semblance of truth—as if it had always been a clearly defined and eternal aesthetic principle. This essentialist reading of qiyun, while underscoring its centrality, has inadvertently obscured the richness, dynamism, and contestation inherent in it as a historical concept. In most unexamined narratives, qiyun is treated as a universally applicable label, its complex and vibrant conceptual history reduced to a unilinear process from discovery to veneration. Contemporary scholars, such as Xu Fuguan in *The Chinese Artistic Spirit*, have made significant contributions through systematic philosophical interpretations of qiyun; yet such studies have largely focused on synchronic

¹ Xie He. Records of the Classification of Ancient Painters [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 1991.

² Xu Fuguan. The Chinese Artistic Spirit [M]. Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2001.

system-building of its connotations, paying insufficient attention to its ruptures, turns, and reconfigurations over time. If qiyun is regarded as a static, completed entity, we cannot answer a series of key questions: why did a concept originally used for appraising figure painting become perfectly applicable to landscape painting devoid of human figures? Why, after the Song and Yuan, did qiyun gradually shift from denoting the vitality of the depicted object to being closely tied to the painter's character, cultivation, and even specific brush-and-ink techniques? The answers to these questions lie precisely in the history of qiyun's own transformation.

To break through this essentialist myth, this paper proposes to treat the generation and evolution of qiyun as a series of closely interwoven discursive events. This shift in perspective draws on the conceptual-historical and archaeological methods advocated by Foucault³ and others. It requires that we no longer ask "what qiyun is," but rather inquire into how, at specific historical junctures, the concept was proposed, debated, redefined, and what complex networks of interaction it formed with contemporary philosophical trends, artistic practices, power relations, and art-historical writing strategies. In other words, qiyun is not a transcendent entity, but a discursive practice continuously spoken, used, and contested throughout history; each shift in its meaning marks a profound intellectual turn and paradigm shift within Chinese painting theory. Accordingly, the core task of this paper is to trace, through the warp and weft of conceptual history, the trajectory of qiyun's semantic migration from the Wei-Jin through the Song-Ming period—a crucial historical span. This paper will first return to the context of its birth, namely the Wei-Jin practice of character appraisal, analyzing its initial appearance as a criterion for figure painting. It will then examine the Tang-Song transition, when, against the backdrop of landscape painting's rise to prominence, theorists represented by Jing Hao undertook creative misreadings and transformations, endowing qiyun

with the new mission of expressing the vitality of the landscape cosmos. Finally, it will scrutinize the Yuan, Ming, and Qing periods, during which, in the process of establishing the literati painting discourse, qiyun became deeply integrated with such concepts as brush-and-ink, lineage, and mind-nature, and was canonized by art-historical narratives like the Northern and Southern Schools into an exclusive aesthetic ideology. Through this series of investigations, this paper aims to reveal that the history of qiyun's evolution is in fact a condensed history of intellectual contestation within Chinese painting theory. The demystification and historicization of this core concept will not only enable us to understand more profoundly the complex dynamics of the self-construction of the Chinese painting theoretical system, but also provide a solid and illuminating historical vantage point from which to reflect on contemporary research and practice in Chinese painting.

2. The Establishment of the Classical Paradigm—The Spirit and Demeanor of Figures: Qiyun as a Criterion of Appraisal

The concept of qiyun did not emerge ex nihilo; its birth was closely tied to the intellectual atmosphere and artistic practices of the Wei-Jin and Southern and Northern Dynasties. To delve into its original meaning as an aesthetic standard, it must be temporarily disentangled from the aura of later theorization and returned to its initial cultural context, namely an environment dominated by Neo-Daoist qingtan and character appraisal. Against this background, the formulation of qiyun represented Xie He's systematic theoretical response to the central artistic issues of his time.

2.1 Conceptual Site: Neo-Daoist Qingtan and the Ethos of Character Appraisal

During the Wei-Jin and Southern and Northern Dynasties (Fig. 1), Chinese history witnessed

³ Michel Foucault (1926–1984), French philosopher and social thinker. His research spanned philosophy, literary criticism, history, and the social sciences.

Major works include *The Order of Things* and *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.

significant intellectual emancipation. The entrenched paradigm of Han-dynasty Confucian classics was broken, and Neo-Daoism, centered on the *Laozi*⁴, the *Zhuangzi*⁵, and the *Book of Changes*⁶, became the dominant intellectual current. The literati class enthusiastically engaged in qingtian, and the appraisal of characters flourished. This appraisal was not simple moral judgment, but an aesthetic appreciation of individual life-tonality, spiritual demeanor, and personal charisma. Terms such as fengshen, shencai, qigai, and fengyun appeared frequently, forming a rich conceptual repertoire. Their common feature lay

in transcending outward form, directly pointing to the inner, ineffable life-quality and spiritual energy of the person. For example, contemporaries praised Ji Kang as "stately and solemn like a pine in the wind," and admired Wang Yan for his "lofty and sublime spirit and bearing." Such descriptions all point to a fluid, vibrant spiritual resonance. This was precisely the philosophical and aesthetic soil from which the concept of qiyun could sprout. From its very beginning, it distanced itself from mere formal likeness, carrying the genetic predisposition to value spirit over form.



Fig. 1 Gu Kaizhi, Admonitions of the Court Instructress (handscroll, detail), Jin Dynasty, ink and color on silk, 24.8 × 348.2 cm, British Museum.

2.2 Theoretical Breakthrough: Xie He's "Six Principles" and the Construction of an Appraisal System

Against this background, Xie He's *Records of the Classification of Ancient Painters* and his "Six Principles" were by no means an isolated artistic manifesto, but rather a concentrated expression of the zeitgeist in painting theory. By placing qiyun shengdong first, he established an unprecedented and systematic framework for painting appraisal. Within this classical paradigm, qiyun possessed a clear and specific connotation. First, its referent was primarily the human figure. In Xie He's appraisal practice, whether in evaluating Wei Xie as "though not fully attaining formal subtlety, attaining quite a robust spirit," or in appraising Zhang Mo and Xun Xu as

"bearing and manner most marvelous, participating in the numinous," the terms "spirit", "numen", and "bearing" all referred to the spiritual demeanor manifested by the figures in the paintings. At this stage, qiyun was an idealized life-quality inherent in the object; the painter's highest task was to capture and convey this quality—namely, to transmit the spirit. Second, its function lay in establishing gradations of rank. Qiyun was the core criterion by which Xie He distinguished the quality of painters and classified them into the "six grades." Whether a painter could vividly express the qiyun of the figures directly determined his artistic achievement. This transformed an originally vague notion derived from philosophy and character appraisal into a relatively operationalizable guideline for art criticism.

⁴ Laozi, annotated by Wang Bi. *Daodejing* [M]. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2008.

⁵ Zhuangzi, annotated by Fang Yong. *Zhuangzi* [M]. Beijing: Zhonghua Book

Company, 2015.

⁶ Guo Yu, annotated. *Zhouyi* [M]. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2006.

2.3 The Preliminary Solidification of Discursive Practice

Following Xie He, his theory was quickly recognized as authoritative discourse. Yao Zui of the Southern Dynasties, in his *Continued Record of Painters*⁷, although dissenting from some of Xie He's specific evaluations, fully inherited the core of his evaluative system—qiyun. Yao Zui praised Xie He for "omitting nothing in his attention to the minutest detail," while criticizing him for "his brushwork being overly delicate, not matching his grand and elegant aspirations." This precisely demonstrates that beyond formal likeness, there existed a higher standard of qiyun. Through repeated application and debate, the writing of art history continuously reinforced and solidified the status of qiyun as the supreme criterion for figure painting. However, this classical paradigm harbored internal instabilities. Xie He placed qiyun shengdong alongside the other five principles, such as "bone method in the use of the brush", without clarifying their exact relationship to brush-and-ink technique, leaving ample room for later interpretation. When the focus of painting practice shifted from figures to landscape, this concept, derived from character appraisal, was bound to encounter a crisis of meaning and an opportunity for transformation. All this awaited the creative resolution of a gifted theorist of the next era.

3. Paradigm Revolution—The Vitality of Landscape: Qiyun from Object to Subject-Object Integration

As history entered the Tang and Song dynasties, the practice of Chinese painting underwent a fundamental transformation, with landscape painting gradually emerging from the background of figure narratives to become the mainstream. This shift in pictorial focus posed a serious challenge to the concept of qiyun, which originated in character appraisal. How could a standard originally used to

evaluate the spirit and demeanor of figures be applied to the realm of landscape? This profound transformation in artistic practice gave rise to an equally profound conceptual revolution. During this period, the connotation of qiyun was reshaped, achieving a landmark shift from objective depiction to the integration of subject and object.

3.1 Conceptual Site: The Infusion of Chan Buddhism and the Awakening of Landscape Spirit

During the Tang and Song, the Chan Buddhist ideal of "Brahma-self unity" and the Neo-Confucian pursuit of "investigating things to extend knowledge" jointly shaped the literati worldview and aesthetic sensibility. Nature was no longer viewed as an object of fear or conquest, but as a partner in spiritual communion embodying the Dao. Painters strove to realize Wang Wei's dictum, "to initiate the nature of the natural and accomplish the work of creation"⁸, aiming to reveal the inner vitality of landscape and the rhythms of the cosmos. Guo Xi, in his *Linquan Gaozhi*⁹, articulated the view that landscape "may be traversed, gazed upon, wandered through, and dwelt in," precisely elucidating the essence of landscape painting as a spiritual abode. Against this cultural background, traditional criteria of art criticism appeared inadequate. For theorists, the key question was how to elevate qiyun from the depiction of individual figures' spirit and demeanor to the expression of the life of nature as a whole. Meanwhile, they also confronted the core issues of where qiyun resided in landscape painting and how to achieve its vivid expression.

3.2 Theoretical Breakthrough: Jing Hao's Creative Reconfiguration and the Bifurcation of Qiyun

In response to these epochal issues, Jing Hao, a

⁷ Xie He, Yao Zui. *Guhua Pinlu Xuhua Pinlu* [M]. Beijing: People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 2016.

⁸ Wang Wei, in *Shanshui Jue* (Secrets of Landscape Painting), proposed: "To initiate the nature of the natural and accomplish the work of creation"—the

former emphasizes that painting must take nature as its fundamental basis, while the latter reveals how ink painting achieves the sublimation of nature through artistic transformation.

⁹ Guo Xi. *Linquan Gaozhi* [M]. Jiangsu: Jiangsu Phoenix Literature and Art Publishing House, 2015.

painter-theorist of the Five Dynasties, offered a landmark response. In his theoretical treatise *Bifa Ji*¹⁰, through the mouth of an old man in the Stone Drum Mountain, he undertook a critical creative misreading and reconfiguration of qiyun. Rather than simply inheriting Xie He's established theory, Jing Hao dismantled the concept into two components and endowed them with new meanings:

Qi means the mind moves with the brush, seizing the image without hesitation.

Yun means concealing traces to establish form, possessing dignity without vulgarity.

This division was revolutionary. First, the definition of qi was endowed with subjectivized and processual characteristics. "The mind moves with the brush" closely links the spiritual will and emotional impulse of the creative subject to the immediate dynamics of painting; "seizing the image without hesitation" highlights the decisive role of this mind-driven brush power in shaping the form of things. Here, qi was no longer the spirit of figures in the painting, but the subjective vitality and creativity manifested by the painter in the use of brush and ink. Second, the definition of yun was endowed with stylized and realm-oriented characteristics. "Concealing traces to establish form" required the elimination of deliberately crafted artisan marks, allowing the artistic form to appear naturally achieved; "possessing dignity without vulgarity" pointed to the overall elevated style and transcendent artistic conception presented by the work. Here, yun was the aesthetic effect and spiritual tonality created by the overall formal quality of the pictorial surface. Through this division, Jing Hao successfully resolved the theoretical difficulty of applying qiyun to landscape painting. The "vitality" of landscape was not an objective quality waiting to be depicted, but depended on the projective activity of the painter's subjective spirit and the active creation through brush and ink; the "artistic conception" of landscape was embodied in the level of spiritual attainment achieved by the work as a whole. At this

point, qiyun underwent a crucial trinitarian transformation—from "what is painted" to "how it is painted" to "what realm is achieved"—becoming a composite concept of subject-object integration.

3.3 The Expansion and Consolidation of Discursive Practice

Jing Hao's theoretical innovation quickly received response and consolidation in Song-dynasty painting theory and art-historical writing. Guo Ruoxu, in his *Tuhua Jianwen Zhi*¹¹, further bound qiyun to the painter's innate endowment and status, explicitly proposing the view that "qiyun cannot be transmitted by teaching" and asserting: "Observing the marvels of antiquity, they are mostly works of noble lords and worthies, reclusive masters, who abide in benevolence and roam in the arts, probing the profound and drawing forth the hidden, lodging their lofty sentiments entirely in painting." This greatly advanced the subjectivization and literati-ization of qiyun. Concurrently, the creative practices of Song painters such as Fan Kuan (Fig. 2), Dong Yuan, and Juran, with their styles ranging from monumental grandeur to moist density to profound obscurity, provided irrefutable visual models for this subject-object integrated qiyun. The writing of art history, by recording and extolling these models, institutionalized the new paradigm initiated by Jing Hao, establishing it as the unassailable criterion for evaluating landscape painting. In sum, during this profound paradigm revolution of the Tang-Song period, the concept of qiyun successfully bridged the chasm from figure to landscape. It was no longer merely a property of the object, but evolved into a complex theoretical system connecting the creative subject, artistic language, and the work's realm. This transformation not only provided the core theoretical support for the flourishing of landscape painting, but also paved the way for qiyun's further internalization and technicization in subsequent literati painting theory.

¹⁰ Jing Hao. *Bifa Ji* [M]. Beijing: People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 1963.

House, 2007.

¹¹ Guo Ruoxu. *Tuhua Jianwen Zhi* [M]. Jiangsu: Jiangsu Fine Arts Publishing



Fig. 2 Fan Kuan, Travelers among Streams and Mountains (hanging scroll), Northern Song Dynasty, ink and color on silk, 206.3 × 103.3 cm, National Palace Museum, Taipei.

4. Paradigm Consolidation—The Aura of Brush and Ink: Qiyun as a Marker of Literati Identity

During the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, the theoretical system of Chinese painting underwent systematic codification and paradigmatic establishment. After its revolutionary shift from figure to landscape painting, the concept of qiyun did not remain at the level of macro-level subject-object integration, but further deepened, becoming closely intertwined with the rising literati painting movement. During this historical phase, the concept of qiyun underwent a profound process of internalization and materialization: on the one hand, it was fully positioned as an external manifestation of the painter's personal cultivation and moral character, becoming a distinctive identity marker of the literati class; on the other, it was also concretized into operable, perceivable brush-and-ink techniques. Ultimately, in the art-historical narratives represented by Dong Qichang, qiyun was elevated

into an exclusionary aesthetic ideology.

4.1 Conceptual Site: The Ascendancy of the School of Mind and the Rise of Factional Consciousness

During this period, the Lu-Wang School of Mind advanced the proposition that "outside the mind there is no thing, outside the mind there is no principle," significantly elevating the status of subjectivity and providing a philosophical basis for attributing the source of qiyun entirely to the painter's original mind. Concurrently, factional consciousness in painting intensified unprecedentedly, with the boundaries and rivalries among literati painters, professional painters, and court painters becoming increasingly pronounced. In this context, the literati group urgently required a theoretically robust discourse system to establish its absolute dominance in the art world and to shape its own aesthetic taste as the sole orthodoxy.

4.2 Theoretical Breakthrough: Dong Qichang's Discursive Strategy and the Systematization of Qiyun

In response to this issue, Dong Qichang of the late Ming constructed a comprehensive theoretical system. His "Theory of the Northern and Southern Schools"¹² and its related painting theories essentially constituted a sophisticated discursive strategy. Within this theoretical framework, Dong Qichang fundamentally reshaped qiyun in the following ways:

First, the absolute correlation between qiyun and cultivation. Dong Qichang explicitly stated that "qiyun cannot be learned; it is known by birth," apparently inheriting Guo Ruoxu's view. However, the crux lay in his attributing this possibility of innate knowing almost entirely to the literati class, who possessed profound learning and noble character. "Reading ten thousand volumes and traveling ten thousand miles" was no longer merely an auxiliary means of creation, but became the sole source from which qiyun was nourished. Thus, qiyun underwent an ethical turn, becoming isomorphic with the literati's inner spiritual world.

Second, the complete sedimentation of qiyun into brush and ink. This was Dong Qichang's most revolutionary contribution. He concretized the abstruse qiyun into the specific, minute techniques of brush and ink. The qiyun of the Southern School painting he championed was embodied in the unpolished quality of maturity returning to naivety, the scholarly aura of dry brush texture strokes, and the profound, recondite conception of "obscurity" and "insubstantiality." To observe a painting's qiyun was to observe whether its brushwork was restrained, its ink use clear and moist, and its composition refined. Qiyun now found its material carrier; it no longer hovered in the metaphysical realm, but

resided in every specific line and every patch of ink, becoming the aura emitted by brush and ink themselves.

4.3 The Power Operation of Discursive Practice and Paradigm Consolidation

Dong Qichang's theory was not an isolated opinion but a successful operation of power. By compiling a genealogical history of painting, he constructed a lineage of Wang Wei, Dong Yuan, Juran (Fig. 3), and the Four Masters of the Yuan as the orthodox Southern Lineage, declaring that only this lineage had transmitted the true qiyun; simultaneously, he relegated professional painter schools such as the Zhe School to the Northern School, disparaging them as "even if possessing mannerisms," and "not what we should study." Through the advocacy and practice of his disciples and the dissemination of popular manuals such as the Jieziyuan Huazhuan, this narrative became an unshakable art-historical orthodoxy. Thus, the concept of qiyun was by this time thoroughly paradigmized and formalized. It was no longer an open goal accessible to all painters, but became a cultural label exclusive to literati, closely tied to specific brush-and-ink techniques and used to differentiate from other artistic groups. The pursuit of qiyun was transformed into the imitation and refinement of a given set of brush-and-ink formulas and aesthetic tastes. This consolidated paradigm dominated the Chinese painting world for nearly three centuries, pushing the expressive power of Chinese brush-and-ink to its zenith while simultaneously sowing the seeds of rigidity resulting from excessive formalization. The long evolution of qiyun thus arrived at another peak in its historical destiny, yet also stood at a critical juncture where it awaited reexamination and breakthrough by later generations.

¹² Dong Qichang, in Huazhi, proposed the Northern and Southern Schools theory: the Southern School, tracing its lineage to Wang Wei, championed ink wash, expressive brushwork, and lyrical spontaneity, belonging to the literati

painting system; the Northern School, represented by Li Sixun and his son, specialized in blue-green landscape with meticulous and rigorous craftsmanship, belonging to the professional painter system.

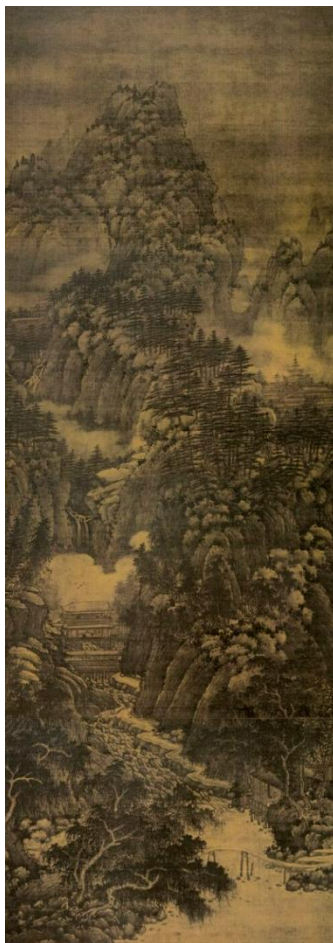


Fig. 3 Juran, Wind in the Pines among Ten Thousand Valleys (hanging scroll), Northern Song Dynasty, ink and color on silk, 200.7 × 70.5 cm, Shanghai Museum.

5. Synthesis: The Historical Logic and Theoretical Significance of the Conceptual Evolution of Qiyun

Through a conceptual-historical investigation of the generation and evolution of qiyun from the Wei-Jin to the Ming-Qing dynasties, one can clearly trace a dynamic trajectory of its shifting, enriching, and eventual canonization. This evolution was neither a disorderly accretion nor a simple linear progression, but a dialectical historical construction deeply embedded in the internal logic of Chinese art and culture. The historical logic and theoretical significance underlying this process provide key clues for understanding Chinese painting theory and the broader characteristics of traditional Chinese aesthetic thought.

First, from the perspective of historical logic, the

evolution of qiyun presents a dialectical developmental process from an object-oriented theory of spirit, to a subject-oriented theory of expression, and finally to a brush-ink ontology. In its Wei-Jin origin, qiyun primarily referred to the life-spirit and transcendent demeanor that the represented object should manifest, with its evaluative criteria derived from external social appraisal. The Tang-Song transition marked a turning point, as the scope of qiyun expanded from the realm of figures to that of landscape, and its connotation underwent a crucial shift: it required both the manifestation of the vitality and truth of natural landscape itself and began to associate with the subjective mind-heart of the painter in contemplating and experiencing nature—as in expressions like "partaking in the wondrous existence of nature" and "selecting the essentials,

concentrating on forms and things." By the height of literati painting theory in the Yuan, Ming, and Qing, the source of qiyun was explicitly internalized as the cultivation, character, and talent of the creative subject—as seen in discussions of "knowing by birth"—while its ultimate presentation and evaluative criteria were fully grounded in the materialized and formalized ontological language of brush and ink, that is, qiyun resides in brush and ink. This trajectory reveals how qiyun evolved from an evaluative category pointing to external objective standards into a comprehensive, core aesthetic concept that integrates object representation, subjective spirit, and medium-specific language.

Second, the primary driving force behind this conceptual evolution lay in the interaction and synergy among artistic practice, philosophical currents, and cultural power. The emergence and maturation of landscape painting as an independent genre provided the practical basis for qiyun to expand from figure painting discourse into a core aesthetic category; the Neo-Daoist exploration of life-spirit and the Neo-Confucian inquiries into mind-nature and the investigation of things furnished philosophical support for qiyun's turn from external demeanor to internal mind-heart. Crucially, after the Song dynasty, the literati class gradually assumed control over artistic discourse; through repeated interpretation and redefinition of qiyun, they shaped it into a core value scale marking their cultural identity and distinguishing the refined from the vulgar and the scholar from the artisan. Dong Qichang's "Theory of the Northern and Southern Schools" and his related discussions of qiyun epitomized this operation of cultural power, binding qiyun tightly to specific brush-and-ink styles, painterly identities, and art-historical narratives, thereby completing its canonization and exclusionary construction.

Finally, the theoretical significance revealed by this study manifests in two aspects. First, it demonstrates the historicity and dialogicity of the core categories of Chinese painting theory. Qiyun is not a static, essentialized concept, but a text continuously rewritten throughout history. Theorists of each era engaged in dialogue with their predecessors,

creatively interpreting and deploying the concept in response to the artistic issues and cultural needs of their own time. Therefore, understanding qiyun requires returning to its specific historical contexts and examining its Wirkungsgeschichte. Second, it highlights the active role of art-historical writing itself in conceptual formation. Theory does not merely reflect practice passively, but actively selects, interprets, and even prescribes the direction of practice. The canonization of qiyun exemplifies how art-historical discourse, through establishing orthodox lineages, distinguishing genealogies, and setting grades of rank, successfully elevated an artistic ideal born of a specific historical context into a transcendent, eternal supreme criterion. This mechanism suggests that the formation of the Chinese painting theoretical system is a dynamic process in which theoretical construction and practical creation intertwine and co-generate each other.

6. Conclusion: The Conceptual Dynamics of Qiyun

Examining the evolution of the concept of qiyun from the Wei-Jin period to the Ming and Qing dynasties, we can clearly delineate a dynamic trajectory of conceptual development: it originated in the Wei-Jin as an aesthetic standard for character appraisal, referring to the vitality and spirit of the object; expanded in the Tang-Song to landscape painting theory, transforming into a creative principle connecting the painter's inner emotions with the vitality of nature; and ultimately consolidated in the Yuan, Ming, and Qing as a symbol of literati inner cultivation and specific brush-and-ink techniques within literati painting discourse. This evolutionary process fully demonstrates that qiyun is not a fixed, essentialist aesthetic principle, but a discursive event continuously interpreted, contested, and reshaped through historical change. Driving this conceptual evolution is a series of tension-filled conceptual dynamics. Its core impetus derives from the sustained interaction and competition among three primary factors. First, shifts in the focus of artistic practice—from figure to landscape painting—

compelled theory to continually adapt to the core issues raised by new objects of representation. Second, the infusion of period philosophical currents—Neo-Daoist "emphasis on spirit," Chan Buddhist "contemplation," and the School of Mind's "original mind"—successively injected different spiritual connotations into qiyun. Third, and crucially, the discursive contestation of cultural power: literati theorists represented by Dong Qichang, through the writing of art history and the construction of painting lineages, shaped qiyun into an ideological instrument for distinguishing orthodoxy from heterodoxy, thereby achieving a monopoly over aesthetic taste and discursive authority. This conceptual-historical study does not aim to provide a final definition of qiyun, but rather, through historical deconstruction, to reveal its constructed nature. This investigation suggests that the theoretical system of Chinese painting itself is an open field formed in history and constituted by complex discursive practices. Research on qiyun and other core categories must move beyond static essentialist readings and penetrate their specific historical contexts and power structures. Only in this way can we, on the basis of a genuine understanding of tradition, engage in a vibrant modern dialogue with it, opening broader and more critical intellectual space for the advancement of Chinese painting scholarship and practice.

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