

# The Spirit of Xieyi (Freehand) in Chinese Meticulous Painting

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**Abstract.** Contemporary Chinese-painting studies habitually treat “meticulous” (gongbi) and “freehand” (xieyi) as two opposing camps. The former is tagged as “realistic, minute, form-oriented, polychrome, crafted, decorative, objective”; the latter as “spontaneous, bold, spirit-oriented, ink-centred, calligraphic, expressive, subjective”. Textbooks map the Tang-Song academy peak to gongbi and Yuan-Ming-Qing literati painting to xieyi, constructing a value hierarchy that privileges meaning over craft. Modern critics import the Western “representation vs. expression” binary, equating gongbi with pre-modern “representation” and xieyi with modern “expression”, thereby widening their perceived temporal and qualitative gap. Exhibition systems reinforce the split: juried shows separate “gongbi” and “xieyi”; auction houses price the former as “decorative commodity” and the latter as “academic elite”; art academies run parallel studios, funnelling students into either “technique” or “expression” tracks. The result: gongbi is expelled from the mainstream narrative, stereotyped as mere pattern-making, while xieyi, trapped in “ink-centrism”, spins into empty convention. Recent “neo-gongbi” or “gongbi-xieyi” experiments challenge the divide, yet scholarship still frames them as “binary complementarity” rather than “homologous co-birth”, unable to shake the subconscious ranking of xieyi above gongbi. This obscures the Chinese tradition of “giving form to spirit” and “advancing from craft to Dao”, and blocks gongbi from releasing its spiritual energy in a contemporary context.

**Keywords:** Chinese Painting; Meticulous Painting (gongbi); Spirit of Xieyi.

## 1. “Xieyi” is not “Xieyi-painting”

### 1.1 As an Aesthetic Spirit, Xieyi is China’s Fundamental Stance on the “Object–Self” Relationship:

it privileges the subject, the image, the vital resonance, and “lets meaning command form”. It permeates polychrome, meticulous, ink, mural, garden, poetry and calligraphy alike, transcending any medium. As a technical school, however, “xieyi-painting” refers specifically to the reduced-brush, ink-heavy, calligraphic style that late-Ming literati painters coined to distinguish themselves from academic gongbi. In his *Hua-chan-shi sui-bi*, Dong Qichang writes: “Literati painting began with Wang Wei ... it is not what we should study” [1]. This spirit was thus fixed into a recognisable genre and market label. The former is “Dao”, the latter “utensil”; the former universal, the latter local; the former decides whether a work is “vital”, the latter merely offers one route. “To conflate them is to style-ise and commodify xieyi, stripping it of its ontological meaning in the Chinese tradition” [2].

### 1.2 Gu Kaizhi’s Formula “Give Form to Spirit” — “The Portrait’s Life is Right in Those Eyes” — First Injects Yi into the Physical, Demanding That the Painter Transfer Imagination to Turn the Objective into the Mental Image, Opening the Xieyi Voice

Xie He (Southern Qi) places “spirit-resonance” first among the Six Principles, extending “spirit” into an overall life that runs through brush, composition and colour, making yi the common measure of criticism and creation. Zhang Yanyuan (Tang) states: “meaning exists before the brush; when the painting ends, meaning remains”, establishing “establishing meaning” as the primary act, raising yi above technique. Song discussions of “untrammelled brush” and xieyi stress the direct out-pouring of the subject’s feelings, parallel to meticulous polychrome. Finally, Shi Tao (early Qing) proclaims the “One Stroke” method: “One stroke is the root of all existence and the source of the myriad images”, using one line to break all laws and letting laws arise from the self, elevating yi from aesthetic ideal

to cosmogony — mind meets heaven and earth, traces transform and Dao is born. Thus the history of painting theory is a history of yi’s awakening, expansion and ontologisation: first the spirit of the object, then the qi of heaven and earth, finally the Dao of the original mind, completing the Chinese pictorial cycle from “conveying spirit” to “xieyi” and establishing yi as the eternal co-ordinate of Chinese aesthetics.

## **2. The Spirit of Xieyi in Chinese Flower-and-Bird Painting**

### **2.1 Song flower-and-bird Works Take the “Broken-Branch” (Zhe-Zhi) Format as Their Norm**

within a hand-scroll’s span they excel at turning blank space into “empty stillness.” Zhao Chang’s *Butterflies Sketching Life* presents only one spray of wild flowers, with no supporting rock beneath, leaving a sheet of limpid emptiness so that the flutter of the wings can echo and return. Following the butterflies, the viewer slips into stillness and suddenly feels gentle wind and bright sun, the world opening wide; the blank becomes invisible qi, leading the spirit to roam. Lin Chun *Fruit Ripe, Bird Coming* shows a single branch of crab-apple, heavy fruit bending the twig, a small bird glancing back; all background is consigned to the empty silk. The white scene is no scene, yet it seems dawn dew has not dried and mountain breeze arrives softly; the bird’s timid start and the twig’s resilient spring gain resonance in the quiet void. Such blanks are not “nothingness”; they are “making white serve as black”: whiteness harbours emptiness, emptiness culminates in stillness, stillness generates life, life congeals into resonance. The Song masters knew “an empty room gives birth to white,” using blankness to filter out clamour so that every twig and leaf can commune with the spirit of heaven and earth. The viewer’s gaze is forced to pause in the emptiness, breath slows, and one enters the introspective state of “listening to fragrance” and “watching stillness.” Thus meticulous colour rendering and xieyi’s empty white join in one picture, both “exhausting the minute” and “reaching the vast,” completing a visual-to-mental transference and declaring the highest xieyi realm of Song flower-and-bird painting: an unmoored boat, empty yet holding ten-thousand scenes.

### **2.2 Zhao Mengfu’s Red-robed Luohan Portrays a Saffron-Robed Foreign Monk in Polychrome, Yet The Whole Surface Exhales “Scholar-Officer Aura,” Signalling The Yuan Turning-Point When Meticulous Figure Painting Slid from “Academy” to “Literati” [3]**

His method: linear contour in high-antique gossamer stroke, even and thin without cloying sweetness; pressure and lift reveal seal-script flavour, the brush path reserved, bookish air quietly turning. Colour—vermilion, azurite, malachite—is layered and glazed, rich yet mild; the red robe’s front is left blank with a slight wash, letting even saturated hue “breathe,” achieving “splendid but not vulgar.” Composition takes the half-side formula: the luohan leans sideways on rock, gaze empty; behind, plantain and bamboo are outlined and filled, yet scattered and spare, leaving great swathes of silk so that quiet air may flow by itself. Zhao’s own inscription “strange ancient Indian appearance” in fact borrows the foreign monk-shape to lodge the ideal of “high antiquity”; his “ancient” is not revivalism but using Jin-Tang brush intent to wash away the carved habits of Southern-Song academy, turning “craft-qi” into “scholar-qi.” Scholar-qi is the literati breast: pure mind contemplating Dao, calm and detached, therefore able to see ink-splendour within cinnabar and powder, to win leisure beyond precision. Later meticulous figures—Guan Daosheng’s Guanyin, Zhang Wo’s *Nine Songs*—follow this path of “bringing calligraphy into painting” and “using pale to command dense,” polychrome never veiling clear resonance, fine delineation further revealing open bosom; Yuan “scholar-qi” thus seeps from landscape and flower-and-bird into figure, letting the meticulous branch share the poetic triumph of xieyi.

### **2.3 Chen Hongshou Adopts “High-Antique Gossamer” for Meticulous Painting, Yet Subverts Realism through Deformation, Turning “Ancient Flavour” into a Weapon Against the Vulgar.**

In his *Shen-an Wearing Flowers* the figure is elongated to seven head-lengths, skull large, forehead high; drapery folds are square-broken and abrupt, lines like seal and clerical stele-rubbings [4], strange and angular within finesse. Colour forsakes garish for sunken ochre and dark indigo glazes, turning rich beauty into archaic elegance. The album *Sixteen Views of Reclusion* even gives rocks and table-corners geometric twists, tree-branches circular yet outside natural ecology, showing the subjective power of “things turn with me.” Chen calls himself “follower of antiquity,” yet he copies not shape but distills the “awkward” and “plain” of Jin-Tang murals, enlarging contours and compressing space so images hover between likeness and unlikeness, creating a dramatic tension of “ancient yet weird.” His logic of deformation stems from the literati ideal of “high antiquity”: the farther from daily proportion, the more one escapes the cage of reality, letting the viewer move from visual surprise to historical meditation and taste the eternal after time’s sediment. This “anti-realism” does not negate truth but re-sets truth with “meaning”—borging archaic form to lodge personal lament, hiding individual loneliness and dynastic desolation within refined polychrome. Late-Ming meticulous painting thus turns from “exhausting the minute” to “writing the strange,” opening a unique path of “archaic deformation” within fine lines and heavy colour and proving that meticulous brush can also carry extreme subjectivity and critical spirit, arriving at the same destination as *xieyi* by a different route.

### **2.4 Yun Shouping Infused the “Boneless Method” with an “Untrammled Qi,” Turning Washes into Writing and Pigment Traces into Brush Traces**

His procedure: first shape the form with a pool of clear water; while still wet, crash in powder and inject colour so that the light-and-dark, front-and-back of petal and leaf are settled in one stroke—no outline to constrain them, yet random water-marks remain. Then, with a nearly dry brush, lightly sweep the veins; where no brush has passed a “flying-white” appears, like the press-and-lift of calligraphy, letting the surface breathe and never stiffen. Colour is applied by “soaking”: saturated yet never gummy, a pearly light glowing from within, as if dawn has just broken and dew still clings, so the whole sheet drifts in an “empty stillness” of ease. Composition delights in blankness: a single broken branch slanting out, or half-bloom and half-bud, the open silk left to breathe, halting the eye and letting the spirit roam. Yun himself said, “In sketching life, first sketch qi,” translating the Song ideal of “conveying spirit” into “conveying resonance.” The soaked traces of boneless preserve the instant gesture of the hand, sharing the same merit—though different material—with Bada and Shitao’s splashed ink: they display ease through ink play, he writes ease through colour soak, both alike dispelling the craftsman’s habit of “filling and tracing.” Thus meticulous polychrome is no longer only the slow labour of “three alums and nine washes,” but a spontaneous writing where water, colour, heart and hand forget one another; minute and expansive, rich and airy, are fused in boneless, opening a new path of “writability” for *gongbi* and proving that “untrammled qi” can win freedom through any medium.

## **3. Condensing Meaning in the Trace**

### **3.1 The Chinese Line Begins as the Boundary of a Thing and Ends as the Path of a Mind**

The iron-wire line lifts and closes evenly like seal script, with no pressure modulation, yet its single-thread “solemnity” evokes high antiquity; the orchid-leaf line rises and falls like running-script flying-white, releasing the chest’s turbulence in thick-to-thin shifts. Zhao Mengfu’s formula “stone like flying-white, tree like seal script” openly states the identity of brush and stroke: the speed of wrist, hidden or revealed, the turn, all follow the breath of calligraphy, therefore “writing” surpasses “tracing.” Chen Hongshou used iron-wire for *Luohan*, round and forceful, no smoke of fire, the

archaic “meaning” residing in this ripple-less “stillness”; Shitao used orchid-leaf for banana, heavy-light alternations like a sudden storm, the leaf not yet stirred but qi already born. The calligraphic nature of line frees contour from geometric fetters and makes it a temporal, emotional trace: when the point enters the silk it is like a bow, when lifted it is like a long cry, staying without stagnation, moving without slip, and in the union of flesh and bone the rhythm of “writing” is revealed. Hence the Chinese meticulous painting gains a calligraphic soul—even after three alums and nine washes the first line still hides strength like a building’s frame, deciding the whole direction of resonance. Thus “line” in Chinese painting is the main embodiment of “brush idea” and the spirit of xieyi.

### **3.2 Colour in Chinese Painting has Never Been Mechanical Copying of Natural Hue But an Image-Symbol of “Assign Colour According to Category,” Aiming at “Idea” not “Truth.”**

Li Sixun’s River Sails and Mountain Towers inaugurated the “gold-and-green landscape,” laying azurite, malachite and mud-gold over peaks; overlapping blue-green is not spring mountain realism but the emblem of an ideal “fairy mountain,” while gold contour turns earthly landscape into an eternally shining abode. The opacity and crystal refraction of mineral pigments give the surface a constant gloss beyond season or hour, matching the idea of “divine excellence of mountain and stream.” Wang Ximeng’s A Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains pushes blue-green to the extreme—near hills thick green, distant hills pale blue—colour steps leaping far beyond normal vision yet creating the vast idea of “a thousand li within a foot,” an extension of “idea” rather than scientific perspective.

### **3.3 “Wash” (ran) is not Simple Colouring But Planting the Flow of Breath on Silk Through Multi-Layer Veils of Water and Powder**

Each colour must wait for the previous layer to dry, then be swept with a lighter wash, repeated ten to a hundred times; the colour is locked by glue and alum yet leaves micro-pores for light, forming a semi-transparent membrane. In Songbitao the petals are first grounded with white powder, then veiled three times with carmine, finally edged with the faintest feiqing, the border washed away with clear water so the transition is micro-soft yet makes the corolla swell like dawn dew, almost releasing scent. Yun Shouping’s boneless method discards line and keeps water, injecting powder while wet so the powder seeps with the water and settles naturally into gradations; when dry a breath of huaqing is laid on the shaded side, only half a fen, yet the colours bite each other and leave air-slits, so from afar light seems to wander inside the petal. The sequence is light-to-deep, the densest area often diluted to half-strength by water, the brush dragged like flying-white in running script and stopped at once, naturally joining the blank silk, so thick does not clog and pale does not float, layer upon layer yet each layer breathes. What meets the eye is “living colour, born fragrance,” the overall brilliance startling the viewer—this is precisely the feeling of “spirit-resonance and life-movement.”

## **4. The “Mood” That Converges on the Same Path**

### **4.1 From its Very Birth Chinese Painting Theory has “Valued The Dao and Slighted Mere Skill.”**

The Book of Changes says: “Observing the patterns of heaven, we discern the seasons; observing the patterns of humanity, we transform the world.” Painting was thus enrolled in the task of “completing instruction and assisting human ethics”; technique is only the boat that ferries one toward the Dao. Gu Kaizhi proposed “conveying the spirit,” Xie He placed “spirit-resonance” first; both establish “meaning” before they speak of “brush.” Zhang Yanyuan states it even more bluntly: “Meaning lodges ahead of the brush; when the painting is finished, meaning remains.” Guo Xi of the Northern Song, in Lofty Forests and Springs, lists the four ranks of “walkable, viewable, habitable, roamable,” judging landscape by its “Dao”; in Shi Tao’s treatise, “The law is established by myself,” the “breaking of law” completes the “establishing of law,” placing every convention under the “source of the mind” and flatly denying that “skill” can tower above “Dao.” Traditional education also valued

“nourishing” above “drilling”: read ten-thousand volumes first, then take up the brush; first empty the mind and contemplate the Dao, then move ink to write form—hence “technique” is only the servant of meaning.

Today’s general-education art curricula in colleges should therefore honour the ancient and open the new, putting “Dao” above “skill.” Only then can Chinese painting show one subject with many faces: exalt skill and you sink into “craftsmanship”; attain the Dao and skill is spontaneously transformed. The contemporary “technique-determinism” that opposes meticulous and freehand, ranking them by medium or method, runs counter to China’s millennium-old tradition of “valuing Dao and slighting skill”; returning to the noumenon of “meaning” is the correct vein for inheriting and developing Chinese painting.

#### **4.2 Meticulous Painting is by No Means “Technical Realism”**

its spirit of xieyi runs through the ages, only veiled by the appearance of minute detail and misread by modern culture. Zhao Chang and Lin Chun’s “broken-branch” compositions preset an emotional vector through the curve of a twig or the backward glance of a bird; their colour is not objective reproduction but the imagined hue of “assign colour according to category.” The mineral blues and greens of landscape symbolise the ideal of “roamable and habitable” fairy mountains; Yun Shouping’s boneless washes create an aura of “cold ease.” Chen Hongshou uses exaggerated deformation and spatial dislocation to inscribe “high antiquity” into refined figures. Thus “gong” is likewise the embodiment of “meaning” within rigour.

Modern masters such as Yu Fei-an continue the tradition with surreal composition and symbolic imagery, turning “gong” into the depth of “meaning.” It can be seen that through “skill advancing to Dao” every wash and every glaze is transformed into a passage for the overall “spirit-resonance and life-movement” of the picture; its “xieyi” lies not in coarse brushwork but in the constructive strategy of “letting meaning command form,” ending in the same destination as freehand painting—both pointing to the core of Chinese aesthetics: “take the outward teacher of creation, gain the inward source of the mind.”

#### **4.3 Early Chinese Painting Theory—Gu Kaizhi’s “Give Form to Spirit”—Insists that Form Exists for the Spirit**

though seemingly neat, every nuance of brush-start, brush-move, turn and pause is calligraphic, the subtlest places showing broken brush yet unbroken meaning, no different from freehand painting, only neat on the surface. Zhao Mengfu’s formula:

“Stone like flying-white, tree like seal-script; to write bamboo one must also master the Eight Principles. If anyone can grasp this, know that calligraphy and painting have always been the same” [5]

therefore, in my own painting the press-and-lift of linear description is required to share the same source as calligraphy. My main aim is to borrow the random brushwork of freehand painting; I have long tried to use a “scattered-tip” manner—though the hairs spread, the traces are fine and dense, no different from today’s “meticulous painting.” Colour is washed in the manner of freehand painting; the moment the brush falls the outcome is fixed, with almost no repeated even-washing or over-glazing. Viewed in detail it is highly xieyi. In the subsidiary passages outside the main motif I pursue “rhythmic vitality” and “poetic entry”; Figure 1: Chinese fine-brush painting with freehand qualities. every stroke is placed with calculation of position, void and solid screening each other, the blank space offering the viewer a mental roaming ground of “meaning”-image. This is Chinese painting as I see it.

### **5. Conclusion**

At a moment when Western culture continues to batter the Chinese art-world, Chinese meticulous painting (gongbi) should renew itself through the “spirit of xieyi”: not copying outer shapes, but

painting the “mind-image,” allowing a trans-cendent “meaning” to precipitate out of the most painstaking “craft.”



**Figure 1.** Freehand-style Chinese fine-brush painting

**Title:** "Poised to Unleash"**Medium:** Chinese Painting**Artist:** Hou Qunshan**Support:** Gold-flecked paper**Year:** 2025**Size:** 33 × 33 cm

The “meaning” of a picture must first clarify its theme, then establish the motif, next unite heart and intention, and finally return to the “Dao-meaning.”

**Motif** = the choice of things: the Song “broken-branch” cuts away complexity and takes only one twig; beyond that “image” a whole forest is already implied.**Heart-meaning** = the subject’s feelings entrusted to the motif: Bada’s lonely, aloof images obtain their “feeling” outside the form.**Dao-meaning** = the sublimation of feeling into commerce with the spirit of Heaven-and-Earth, where “self and thing are both forgotten.”

At this point flower is not flower, thing is not thing; with one brush-hair we fathom the subtlest reaches of the universe, and “within a foot we glimpse ten-thousand li.” One blossom reveals spring and autumn; one stone discloses the Great Void.

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