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A Study on the Historical Evolution and Imagistic Expression of Traditional Chinese Portraiture

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Abstract: As an important branch of figure painting, traditional Chinese portraiture embodies thousands of years of cultural accumulation and artistic spirit. Taking the historical development of portraiture as the thread, this paper sorts out its developmental trajectory from four dimensions: conceptual scope, typological classification, origin and evolution, and the influence of Western learning. It then delves into the philosophical connotation of imagery in traditional Chinese painting, and analyzes the core characteristics and artistic techniques of imagistic expression in traditional portraiture from four aspects: imagistic modeling, color imagery, spatial imagery, and aesthetic imagery. The research shows that traditional Chinese portraiture has always adhered to the creative tenet of "unity of form and spirit", and has formed a unique system integrating functionality and artistry in the long historical process. Its imagistic expression is not only rooted in the philosophical thoughts of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, but also constantly innovated through the collision and integration with Western painting, demonstrating distinctive national cultural characteristics and eternal artistic value.

Keywords: Historical Evolution; Imagistic Expression; Unity of Form and Spirit; Sino-Western Integration; Traditional Chinese Portraiture.

1. Introduction

As a painting genre centered on human figures, portraiture serves as a crucial carrier integrating documentary value and spiritual significance within the traditional Chinese painting system. From textual records in the Shang Dynasty to its heyday in the Ming and Qing dynasties, portraiture not only documents the social customs, class characteristics, and aesthetic orientations of different eras but also embodies the ancient Chinese understanding of "humanity" and their spiritual pursuits. Unlike the Western portrait tradition that emphasizes realistic representation, traditional Chinese portraiture has been permeated by the artistic thinking of "imagery" throughout its development, forming the creative principles of "conveying spirit through form" and "unity of form and spirit".

Existing academic research on traditional portraiture primarily focuses on chronicles of dynastic history, case studies of individual painters, or textual research on techniques, laying a foundation for subsequent studies. However, systematic integration of portraiture's historical evolution and imagistic expression remains insufficient in current scholarship, particularly lacking in-depth analysis of how imagistic thinking permeates portraiture in terms of modeling, color, and space. Based on this research gap, this paper adopts a combination of literature research and image analysis to trace the historical context of portraiture, interpret the philosophical connotations and artistic characteristics of imagery, and reveal the underlying logic of imagistic expression in traditional portraiture. It is hoped that this study will provide valuable insights for contemporary portrait creation and theoretical research.

2. The Scope and Historical Evolution of Traditional Chinese Portraiture

2.1. Definition and Typological Classification of Portraiture

2.1.1. Ancient and Modern Interpretations of Conceptual Connotations

The term "portraiture" originates from the West, referring to a painting genre centered on human figures as the primary objective subject, emphasizing physical resemblance and spiritual depiction. In ancient China, there was no unified designation for portraiture; instead, it was referred to by terms such as "xiezhen" (life-like portrait), "xiezhao" (depiction of appearance), and "chuanshen" (conveying spirit), with its connotation continuously enriched throughout historical evolution. Cihai (Sea of Words) defines portraiture as "painting that depicts specific human figures", which includes various forms such as head portraits, busts, and half-length portraits, clarifying its attribute as a branch of figure painting. Shuowen Jiezi (Explaining Simple and Analyzing Compound Characters) interprets "xiao" (resemble) as "similarity in flesh and bones"[1], and "xiang" (image) as "the unity of form and spirit". The combination of these two interpretations clarifies the dual pursuit of portraiture: "resemblance in form" and "resemblance in spirit".

As the core term for traditional portraiture, "xiezhen" embodies profound artistic concepts. "Xie" (to depict/write) not only refers to the transference of images through brush and ink media but also involves the expression of the painter's emotions. Shuowen Jiezi records: "All expressions of feelings are called 'xie'; hence, both writing characters and painting pictures are termed 'xie'"[2], reflecting the integration of subjective emotions and objective images in the creative process. "Zhen" (truth/authenticity), on the other hand, carries dual meanings of "objective reality" and "spiritual essence". Yupian (Jade Chapters) defines "zhen" as

"not false", emphasizing the faithful reproduction of real figures. In contrast, Zhuangzi·Yufu (Zhuangzi·The Fisherman) states: "Zhen (truth) is the acme of sincerity and earnestness"[3], elevating "zhen" to the level of spiritual life and laying the theoretical foundation for the portraiture principle of "conveying spirit through form". Shan Guoqiang proposes that portraiture should possess four core characteristics: objectivity, authenticity, vividness, and specificity. In essence, these can be summarized as the existential premise of "being based on an actual person" and the artistic pursuit of "unity of form and spirit". This aligns with the "shidui" (direct observation from a real subject) discourse in ancient portraiture theories, clearly distinguishing portraiture from other types of figure painting.

2.1.2. Multiple Dimensions of Typological Classification

Based on the social class, social functions, and expressive techniques of the depicted subjects, traditional Chinese portraiture can be categorized into four major types.

First is historical figure portraiture, which takes sages, meritorious officials, and virtuous women recorded in documents as its subjects, serving the combined functions of commemoration, commendation, and moral education. A representative example is Yan Liben's Portraits of Emperors of Successive Dynasties (Figure 1). By portraying thirteen emperors, the painting conveys historical warnings about the rise and fall of dynasties and the order of governance. Since the depictions were mostly based on textual records and idealized imagination, the physical resemblance of these portraits cannot be verified.

Second is imperial and ministerial portraiture, which prevailed primarily in court settings and was created by professional court painters for the purpose of eulogizing merits and consolidating imperial rule. Works such as Seated Portrait of Emperor Taizu of Ming and Bust Portrait of Emperor Zhenzong of Song adopt a composition of figures sitting upright with meticulous and realistic brushwork, highlighting the dignity and authority of the emperors. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, influenced by Western painting, such portraits achieved greater precision in the representation of human proportions and three-dimensionality.

Third is scholar-official portraiture, which depicts literati and refined scholars with an emphasis on expressing emotions, aspirations, and personal temperament. These portraits are often set against landscapes or gardens to create an artistic conception where scenes and sentiments blend harmoniously. For instance, Portrait of Shen Zhou at Eighty combines the depiction of the figure's posture with self-inscribed calligraphy, revealing the refined elegance and inner world of the literati. Self-portraits and paintings of literati gatherings are common forms of this type.

Fourth is folk portraiture, which catered to the grassroots population and primarily served ritual and commemorative functions, including ancestral group portraits, life portraits, and couple portraits. A case in point is the anonymous Qing-dynasty work Ancestral Portrait, which prioritizes physical likeness and follows a standardized painting formula. Although artistically unremarkable, such works boast strong practicality and reflect the widespread popularity of portraiture among the folk society during the Ming and Qing dynasties.

In addition to the above classification based on subjects and functions, traditional Chinese portraiture can also be divided by expressive techniques into three categories—gongbi (fine-brush painting), xieyi (freehand brushwork), and jiangongdaixie (fine-freehand combined painting)—and by form into group portraits, contextualized portraits, self-portraits, etc. These multiple classification criteria collectively embody the diversity and functional specificity of traditional Chinese portraiture.



Figure 1. [Tang Dynasty] Yan Liben, Portraits of Emperors of Successive Dynasties (detail), ink and color on silk, 51.3 cm × 531 cm, Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Image source: Zhonghua Zhenbao Guan (China National Treasure Museum)

2.2. Historical Origin and Evolution of Portrait Painting

2.2.1. Emergence and Maturity Period

The origin of traditional Chinese portraiture can be traced back to the Shang Dynasty. Shangshu (Classic of History), "Charge to Yue I" records the story of King Wuding of Shang, who depicted the image of a talented minister based on his dream to seek out this assistant. Although tinged with mythological elements, the story already reflects the pursuit of physical resemblance in portraying human figures. Two silk paintings unearthed from Chu tombs of the Warring States Period—The Silk Painting Depicting Figures, Dragons, and Phoenixes (Figure 2) and The Silk Painting of a Figure Riding a Dragon—are the earliest existing physical examples of portraiture. Using lines to outline figures and adopting profile compositions, these works feature simplistic detail rendering resembling silhouette-like effects, marking the initial germination of portraiture.

During the Han and Wei dynasties, portraiture primarily existed in the form of palace and pavilion murals, depicting sages and meritorious officials from ancient times. These works aimed at promoting Confucianism and revering Confucius, serving the function of "fostering moral education and enhancing social ethics" . Portraiture of this period gradually moved toward realism from its primitive linear depiction, beginning to emphasize the expression of figures' spiritual demeanor. Representative painters included Mao Yanshou and Cai Yong. Though their original works have not survived, their artistic characteristics can be inferred from records of Han tomb murals and silk paintings.

The Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties represented a mature transitional period for portraiture. The prevalent trend of character appraisal prompted portraiture to shift from focusing on physical resemblance to pursuing spiritual essence. Gu Kaizhi's "theory of spirit-transmission" became the core creative principle of portraiture . His propositions of "conveying spirit through form" and "imaginative reflection and inspired realization" emphasized expressing figures'

inner spirit through depictions of their external appearance . His statement that "the key to conveying spirit in a portrait lies in the eyes" highlighted the crucial role of eye portrayal in capturing demeanor . Xie He created portraits through memory painting, as exemplified by his approach of "mentally visualizing every hair and thread without missing a single detail"[4], demonstrating superb realistic skills and the ability to capture spiritual essence, which promoted the maturity of portraiture techniques.

Against the backdrop of the flourishing figure painting, traditional Chinese portraiture continued to develop during the Tang Dynasty. A comprehensive system for the application of lines and colors took shape, and the subjects of portraiture expanded to include people from all social strata—ranging from documentary works to idealized portraits. Yan Liben's Bu Nian Tu (Portrait of Emperor Taizong Receiving the Tibetan Envoy) (Figure omitted) depicts the demeanor of Emperor Taizong and Lu Dongzan (the Tibetan envoy) with exquisite brushwork. The proportional differences between the figures reflect hierarchical distinctions, highlighting the emperor's supreme authority. Notably, Zhang Yanyuan emphasized in his Li Dai Ming Hua Ji (Record of Famous Paintings of All Dynasties) that portraiture should achieve "the unity of form and spirit" (xing shen jian bei), criticizing the creative tendency of "capturing only physical likeness without retaining the vital aura" (de qi xing si ze wu qi qi yun) [5]. This reflects the Tang Dynasty's emphasis on conveying the spiritual essence of figures.

During the Five Dynasties period, portraiture made innovations while inheriting the Tang Dynasty traditions. Gu Hongzhong's Han Xizai Ye Yan Tu (Night Revels of Han Xizai) recorded the night banquet scene through memory painting. The figures are portrayed with realistic precision, and their inner moods are depicted in subtle detail—demonstrating the progress of portraiture in narrative expression and spiritual conveyance.



Figure 2. [Warring States Period] Anonymous, The Silk Painting Depicting Figures, Dragons, and Phoenixes, silk (Chu Brocade), 31.2 cm × 23.2 cm, Collection of Hunan Provincial Museum

2.2.2. Period of Independence and Flourishing

During the Yuan Dynasty, the prosperity of literati painting elevated landscape and flower-and-bird painting to mainstream status, while portraiture gradually broke away from the category of figure painting and evolved into an independent artistic discipline. This period witnessed the emergence of China's first comprehensive theoretical monograph on portraiture—Wang Yi's Secret of Portrait Painting (Xie Xiang Mi Jue). The book systematically summarizes the creative process and spirit-capturing methods of portraiture, emphasizing the importance of "mental recollection and internalization" (mo shi xin ji) and "subtle observation in daily life" (an zhong guan cha) . His surviving work, Portrait of Yang Zhuxi (Yang Zhuxi Xiao Xiang) (Figure 3), outlines the facial features with delicate lines and renders the garment folds in a concise and generalized manner. The pine trees and rocks added by Ni Zan complement the figure harmoniously, forming the expressive technique of "setting off the figure through the scenery" (yi jing chen ren)—a approach that has exerted a profound influence on later generations of portraiture.

The Ming and Qing dynasties marked the heyday of traditional Chinese portraiture. The development of commercial economy and the growth of social demand promoted its popularization, expanding the ranks of court portrait painters and folk artists, and leading to the diversification of technical expressions and stylistic patterns. A pivotal innovation in portraiture techniques during the Ming Dynasty was the "ink-bone method" (mo gu fa) founded by Zeng Jing. This method involved shaping facial structures through light ink washes before applying colors, emphasizing both physical resemblance and spiritual essence. It gave rise to the "Bochen School" (Bo Chen Pai) centered on Zeng Jing, which dominated the portraiture scene throughout the Ming and Qing dynasties .

During the Qing Dynasty, court portraiture was profoundly influenced by Western Jesuit missionaries. Artists such as Giuseppe Castiglione (Lang Shining) and Ignaz Sichelbarth (Ai Qimeng) integrated Western painting techniques—including chiaroscuro and perspective—into traditional portraiture, enhancing the three-dimensionality of figures. For instance, Portrait of Emperor Qianlong during the Grand Military Review (Qianlong Huangdi Da Yue Tu) retained the spirit of traditional brush and ink while absorbing Western realistic techniques, presenting a unique artistic style .

Folk portraiture flourished particularly in the Ming and Qing dynasties, with ancestral portraits as the main type for ritual and commemorative purposes. Its painting methods formed stylized procedural graphic formulas, focusing on physical likeness and practicality. Literati portraiture, by contrast, exhibited an unsophisticated and exaggerated xieyi (freestyle) style. Painters like Luo Pin and Jin Nong broke free from traditional realistic constraints, expressing figures' personalities through generalized brushwork. Ren Bonian integrated Western sketching with traditional brush and ink, creating a portraiture style that combined realism and xieyi. His work Portrait of a Poverty-Stricken Official (Suan Han Wei Xiang) featured brisk lines, accurate structures, and blended ink tones, achieving the realm of "the unity of form and spirit" (xing shen jian bei) .

Furthermore, the Ming and Qing dynasties witnessed a wealth of theoretical works on portraiture. Books such as Ding Gao's Intuitive Grasp of Spirit Conveyance (Chuan Shen Xin Ling), Jiang Ji's Essentials of Conveying Spirit (Chuan Shen Mi Yao), and Shen Zongqian's Jie Zhou's Treatise on Painting (Jie Zhou Xue Hua Bian) systematically elaborated on the creative concepts, technical norms, and aesthetic pursuits of portraiture, improving its theoretical system.



Figure 3. [Yuan Dynasty] Wang Yi, Ni Zan, Portrait of Yang Zhuxi (Yang Zhuxi Xiao Xiang), Paper, 27.7cm×86.8cm, Collection of the National Palace Museum.

2.3. Transformation of Portraiture Under the Dissemination of Western Learning in the East

As early as the Eastern Han Dynasty, the exchange between Chinese and Western art can be traced to the introduction of Buddhism. Zhang Sengyao integrated the "concave-convex shading technique" (aotu fa)—a method from ancient Indian Buddhist painting—into Chinese painting. However, it was the arrival of Western missionaries in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties that truly exerted a profound influence on portraiture. In 1582 (the tenth year of the Wanli reign), Matteo Ricci (Li Madou) entered China with Catholic portraits. Though he did not directly teach Western painting techniques, he initiated the prelude to the exchange between Chinese and Western painting . The Japanese art historian Oomura Seigai wrote in his The History of Chinese Art: "In the tenth year of the Wanli reign, the Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci came to the Ming Dynasty. He was also an excellent painter, skilled at depicting portraits of Jesus and the Virgin Mary. Zeng Jing (Zeng Bochen) then adopted an eclectic approach to his techniques and created portraits" [6]. While scholars remain divided on this claim, the introduction of Western painting undoubtedly brought new expressive elements to Qing Dynasty portraiture.

During the Qing Dynasty, court portraiture took the lead in absorbing Western painting techniques. Missionary artists such as Giuseppe Castiglione (Lang Shining) adopted a style of "integration of Chinese and Western elements." They used Western techniques of chiaroscuro and perspective to convey the three-dimensionality and realism of figures, while preserving the spiritual core of traditional brush and ink. Their works were favored by emperors but criticized by some literati painters for "lacking the essence of brushwork." In Jie Zhou's Treatise on Painting (Jie Zhou Xue Hua Bian), Shen Zongqian pointed out that Western painting's ink application method—"using ink to render light areas white and shaded areas black according to sunlight exposure"—contradicts the concept of "bone method of brushwork" (gufa yongbi) in traditional Chinese ink painting [7], reflecting the differences in aesthetic standards between Chinese and Western painting.

In the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republic of China, Western painting spread widely in China, and portraiture entered a new stage of integration between Eastern and Western art. Painters such as Xu Beihong and Jiang Zhaohe combined the modeling system of Western sketching with traditional Chinese ink wash, forming a realist portraiture style. This style emphasizes the accuracy of human anatomical structure and the conveyance of spiritual connotations, and it is still used in art academy education today. Building on traditional brush and ink, Ren Bonian absorbed the modeling concepts and detailed depiction techniques of Western painting while abandoning light and shadow modeling. He expressed figures' form and spirit through the integration of lines and ink tones, and his works retained the overall artistic conception of traditional painting while achieving vivid detail representation—becoming a model of Sino-Western integration.

Notably, the integration of Chinese and Western painting was not a simple superposition of techniques but a collision and fusion at the spiritual level. There was an inherent difference between the aesthetic pursuit of traditional Chinese portraiture—"depicting yang (the illuminated side) without depicting yin (the shaded side)" (hua yang bu hua yin)—and Western painting's emphasis on scientific light and shadow representation. In Xiaoshan's Painting Manual (Xiao Shan Hua Pu), Zou Yigui openly stated that Western painting was "though technically skilled, they are merely craftlike and thus not included in the artistic hierarchy" [8], embodying the traditional literati's attitude of rejection toward Western painting. However, with the development of the times, some painters gradually broke free from aesthetic prejudices. On the basis of preserving the spirit of traditional brush and ink and imagistic thinking, they reasonably absorbed beneficial elements of Western painting, enriched the expressive methods of portraiture, and promoted the modern transformation of traditional Chinese portraiture.

3. Philosophical Connotations and Artistic Characteristics of Imagery in Chinese Painting

3.1. Philosophical Origin of Imagery

The concepts of "yi" (intention) and "xiang" (form/imagery) trace back to ancient Chinese philosophy. Philosophers understood "Tao" (the underlying cosmic principle) as the integration of yi and xiang—both intangible and tangible. Though "yi" (intention) lacks physical form, it can be manifested through "xiang" (form), laying the philosophical foundation for "yixiang" (artistic imagery). In Chinese painting theory, "yixiang" gradually evolved from a philosophical concept into an artistic one. Zhang Yanyuan

proposed in Record of Famous Paintings of All Dynasties: "The intention resides prior to the brushstroke; the painting ends, yet the intention lingers" and "The brush may not be exhaustive, but the intention is complete" [9]. He emphasized the dominant role of "yi" over brush and ink, arguing that brushwork serves as the carrier of "yi," with the two mutually transforming and interdependent. Liu Xie first used "yixiang" as an artistic concept in The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons·Spiritual Thought (Wen Xin Diao Long·Shen Si): "A craftsman with intuitive insight observes the artistic imagery and wields the axe" [10]. This passage reveals that the integration of subjective "yi" (intention) and objective "xiang" (form) constitutes the core of artistic creation—painters engage in creative conception through imagery, transforming their inner intentions into artistic forms.

"Yixiang" in Chinese painting is a fusion of the creator's inner emotional state and objective external forms, referring to "xiang" (form) that embodies "yi" (intention). Its essence lies in expressing infinite spiritual connotations through finite forms, guiding viewers from the phenomenal world (xing er xia) to the metaphysical realm (xing er shang). Unlike Western philosophy's logical thinking, which ascends from specific phenomena to abstract essence, traditional Chinese imagery thinking emphasizes the "interplay of emptiness and solidity" (xu shi xiang sheng) and "integration of emotion and scene" (qing jing jiao rong), pursuing the artistic realm of "imagery beyond imagery" (xiang wai zhi xiang) and "scenery beyond scenery" (jing wai zhi jing). Closely linked to Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism in traditional Chinese culture, this thinking shapes the unique aesthetic pursuit of Chinese painting.

3.2. Dialectical Relationship Between "Xiang" (Form/Likeness) and "Xiang" (Imagery/Essence)

In traditional portraiture, "xiang" (form/likeness) and "xiang" (imagery/essence) are two related yet distinct concepts. I Ching·Commentaries on the Appended Phrases (Zhou Yi·Xi Ci Xia) states: "Therefore, the I Ching is rooted in imagery; imagery is that which resembles" [11], indicating that the two terms were interchangeable in ancient times. However, their connotations gradually diverged with the development of artistic practice. "Xiang" (form/likeness) generally refers to the concrete, objectively existing image of a person—possessing materiality and perceptibility, it is the subject of portraiture, emphasizing physical resemblance. "Xiang" (imagery/essence), by contrast, is more abstract: it denotes the spiritual connotations and artistic implications embodied in "xiang" (form/likeness), featuring associativity and imaginative qualities, and constitutes the core pursuit of portraiture.

"Xiang" (form/likeness) is the foundation of "xiang" (imagery/essence)—without form, there can be no imagery. Portraiture must first satisfy the basic requirement of "physical resemblance" (xing si); without likeness, spiritual conveyance becomes impossible. "Xiang" (imagery/essence) is the sublimation of "xiang" (form/likeness) and the soul of portraiture. Through subjective processing and emotional infusion into "xiang" (form/likeness), painters transcend mere physical reproduction, achieving the realm of "the unity of form and spirit" (xing shen jian bei). Fang Xun emphasized in Comments on Painting from the Quiet Mountain Studio (Shan Jing Ju Hua Lun): "Ancient painters formulated their intention prior to picking up the brush" [12], noting that artists must "cultivate artistic imagery in their minds, envisioning the entire landscape beforehand" before creating. Through observing and comprehending objective forms, painters transform them into inner imagery, which is then expressed through brush and ink—this process precisely reflects the transformation from "xiang" (form/likeness) to "xiang" (imagery/essence).

"Xiang wai zhi xiang" (imagery beyond imagery) in portraiture represents the highest realm of imagery expression. Though originating from poetic theory, it is equally applicable to portraiture, referring to the ability of specific character depictions and scene portrayals to evoke viewers' associations and resonance, allowing them to perceive spiritual implications beyond the canvas. This "imagery beyond imagery" is not a fantasy divorced from concrete forms but is built on the accurate grasp and profound understanding of "xiang" (form/likeness). It is the organic unity of objective forms, subjective emotions, and cultural connotations, embodying the aesthetic pursuit of traditional Chinese portraiture—"conveying spirit through form" (yi xing chuan shen) and "grasping the essence while transcending the form" (de yi wang xing).

4. Imagery Expression Dimensions of Traditional Chinese Portraiture

4.1. Dialectical Unity of Subjectivity and Objectivity in Imagistic Modeling

Imagistic modeling is the core modeling method of traditional Chinese portraiture, embodying the dialectical unity of subjectivity and objectivity. Unlike the objective and realistic representational modeling in Western painting, and distinct from the abstract modeling in modern art that is completely divorced from reality, the imagistic modeling of traditional portraiture is based on traditional Chinese aesthetic concepts. It pursues the artistic effect of "resembling yet not resembling" (si yu bu si), focusing more on the expression of subjective feelings and the exploration of the true essence of figures.

The imagistic modeling of portraiture is first based on the observation and grasp of objective objects. Traditional painters emphasized "mental recollection and internalization" (mo shi xin ji) and "subtle observation in daily life" (an zhong guan cha), capturing the essential characteristics of figures through careful perception of their demeanor, complexion, words, and deeds. For example, Su Shi emphasized that painters should observe objects in their natural state to avoid rigidity caused by deliberate imitation. Facial modeling is also closely linked to physiognomy—painters quickly grasp the characteristics of facial features through the analysis of facial types and structures in physiognomy, forming the basis of facial modeling. This stands in sharp contrast to the objective and realistic depiction of Western painting under fixed light sources.

On the basis of observation, painters conduct subjective processing and artistic refinement of objective images, infusing their own emotions and concepts. Gu Kaizhi's proposition of "imaginative perception and inspired realization" (qian xiang miao de) is the core principle of imagistic modeling. Painters transfer their own imagination and emotions to the object, grasp the inner spirit of the figure through empathy, and create an artistic image consistent with the imagery in their minds. The figure modeling in traditional portraiture often has certain stylized characteristics. For

instance, the frontal portrait formula created by Mu Gu—with the figure's sitting posture, standing posture, and hand gestures all containing specific cultural meanings and ritual norms—this stylization is not rigid replication, but a high-level generalization of the essential characteristics and cultural connotations of the figure by the painter, reflecting the subjectivity and symbolism of imagistic modeling.

Lines are an important expressive means of imagistic modeling, with the dual function of conveying emotions and meanings. Zhang Yanyuan emphasized the core role of lines in modeling in Record of Famous Paintings of All Dynasties. The lines in traditional portraiture are not only used to outline the external contours of figures and express the "form" of objects—through changes in thickness, length, density, and rigidity-flexibility, lines shape the physical structure and texture of figures—but also to convey the spiritual temperament of figures and the emotions of painters, embodying the imagery of lines and showing their rhythmic beauty and emotional tension. In portraiture creation, modeling is the foundation, spirit portrayal is the means, and free expression of intention is the result. The use of lines always revolves around the core pursuit of "the unity of form and spirit" (xing shen jian bei), making the figure images have both objective basis and subjective emotions, and realizing the artistic goal of imagistic modeling.



Figure 4. [Ming Dynasty] Xiang Shengmo, Self-Portrait in Vermilion (Zhu Se Zi Hua Xiang), Paper, 151.4cm×56.7cm, Former Collection of the Late Jiang Gusun, Taipei.

4.2. Subjective Symbolism and Philosophical Implications of Color Imagery

The color expression of traditional portraiture is not a faithful reproduction of objective objects, but has strong subjectivity, symbolism, and imagery, containing profound philosophical thoughts and cultural connotations. The ancient Chinese "five-color concept" is the theoretical basis of color imagery. Kaogong Ji (The Artificer's Record) states: "The east is called green, the south red, the west white, the north black, the sky dark, and the earth yellow" [13]. It connects the five colors (green, red, yellow, white, black) with the five directions (wu fang) and five elements (wu xing), endowing colors with specific cultural symbolic meanings. Confucianism combines colors with "ritual" (li), taking colors as ethical symbols to distinguish superiority-inferiority, hierarchy, and order. For example, yellow was the exclusive color of emperors, reflecting the supreme imperial power; Taoism, on the other hand, advocated a simple and understated color aesthetics, opposing the excessive use of gorgeous colors and holding that colors should return to their natural essence.

"Applying colors according to category" (sui lei fu cai) in Xie He's "Six Principles of Painting" is the color-setting criterion of traditional portraiture, whose core lies in "grasping the essence" (de yi) and "expressing emotions and conveying meanings" (shu qing da yi), rather than pursuing color realism. "Sui" (following) reflects the painter's subjective choice—when depicting objective objects, the painter will make subjective adjustments and refinements to colors according to their own emotional and aesthetic pursuits, instead of passively imitating natural colors; "lei" (category) refers to types or categories, not specific things—based on the classification of the five elements and five colors and their own emotional experiences, painters integrate the colors of objective objects into imagery color categories; "fu cai" (applying colors) is the process of color expression, conveying the painter's emotions and the implications of the work through the integration of brush and ink with colors. For example, Self-Portrait in Vermilion (Zhu Se Zi Hua Xiang) (Figure 4) by the Ming Dynasty painter Xiang Shengmo uses vermilion to outline and dye trees and mountains, implicitly referring to the Zhu surname of the Ming ruling family. It expresses nostalgia for the Ming Dynasty through colors, demonstrating the symbolism and emotionality of colors.

In the evolutionary process from "the five-color theory" to "applying colors according to category" to "five tones of ink" (mo fen wu se), traditional Chinese colors, while respecting objective things, give play to the subjective spiritual expression of colors—this also determines the imagery aesthetic pursuit of traditional Chinese color view. This color view of Taoism, which advocates dark color (xuan se), has become the philosophical basis for the development of ink wash painting in later generations.

4.3. Spatial Imagery: Interplay of Emptiness and Solidity, and Hierarchical Order

The spatial concept of traditional Chinese portraiture reflects both the value philosophy in composing the picture's layout and the unique artistic ideals of traditional Chinese painting. Imagistic space is a boundless, infinitely extensible temporal-spatial concept. For instance, Night Revels of Han Xizai juxtaposes figures from different time and space into a single frame—an expression of imagistic space in painting. The focus of imagistic space lies not in the appearance of natural space, but in reaching its essence through the appearance. The space in traditional portraiture does not merely refer to temporal-spatial dimensions, but more to a perceptual space beyond vision, which is embodied in ancestral group portraits of the Ming and Qing dynasties. The internal and external spaces in these portraits are characterized by imagery: the "internal" space usually

denotes the female, private sphere, while the "external" signifies the male, public sphere.

Analyzing the sense of relief on the human face, the undulations of facial features in portraiture can be understood as spatial relationships. By the Ming and Qing dynasties, as portraiture had evolved into an independent discipline, it became increasingly mature, with greater emphasis on facial representation—especially the popularization of techniques such as the "Jiangnan School method" and the "ink-bone method." During this period, the depiction of facial features became more three-dimensional. Unlike Western painting, which emphasizes the scientific handling of facial relief, traditional Chinese portraiture weakens such contrast, instead interpreting the sense of relief as a "relationship of opening and closing" (kai he guan xi). The "flat" areas of the face convey an imagery of outward extension and relaxation, while the "closed" areas (i.e., the three-dimensional contours) embody a sense of concentration and cohesion. Shen Zongqian of the Qing Dynasty recognized the importance of facial three-dimensionality and proposed in the chapter "On Facial Posture" (Xiang Shi): "How could one not know that although a painting depicts only one side of the face, the overlapping areas on both sides actually form a three-dimensional plane—how can they be omitted? Thus, once the brush is applied, there must be three dimensions to achieve complete spirit and rationale" [14]. Literally, this passage indicates a shift toward emphasizing three-dimensional modeling, yet it attributes the handling of facial relief to the "application of brushwork" (yong bi), aligning with traditional Chinese painting's core focus on brush spirit.

4.4. Aesthetic Imagery: Symbolic Signs and Spiritual Pursuit

Aesthetic imagery originally emerged as a philosophical concept. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant proposed the notion of "aesthetic idea," stating: "An aesthetic idea is a figurative manifestation formed by imagination" [15]. In traditional Chinese portraiture, aesthetic imagery refers to artistic figures created by painters through integrating subjective emotions, cultural concepts, and objective objects—employing symbols, metaphors, and other techniques. It possesses ineffable artistic appeal, reaching the realm of "imagery beyond imagery" (xiang wai zhi xiang).

Taking ancestral portraits of the Ming and Qing dynasties as a research focus, we can explore their symbolic meanings. Ancestral portraits constituted the largest category of portraiture during this period; these posthumous or commemorative portraits primarily served ritual respect and remembrance. Wang Yuxiong pointed out in Origin of Imagery (Yi Xiang Tan Yuan): "The equivalent relationship between heaven and earth, and parents (husband and wife) constitutes the basic structure of the cultural symbol of 'valuing imagery' (shang xiang) in Chinese culture." In other words, parents (husband and wife) or ancestors can symbolize heaven and earth, and vice versa—allowing for mutual symbolic substitution. Ancestral portraits in the Ming and Qing dynasties thus carried typical symbolic significance: the appearance of ancestors transcended their limited individual form, embodying broader symbolic meanings. Heaven and earth can also be interpreted as representing hierarchy (superiority and inferiority). Typically, the subject of a portrait can be identified not only through facial features but also through labels and symbolic objects.

Ancestral portraits of the Ming and Qing dynasties are typical representatives of aesthetic imagery. Beyond their functions of remembrance and sacrifice, they embody the pursuit of family inheritance and cultural continuity. The image of ancestors transcended individual finiteness to become a symbol of family spirit; through depicting ancestral figures, painters expressed reverence for ancestors and aspirations for family prosperity. For example, in the anonymous Qing Dynasty work Ancestral Portrait, the ancestor is dressed in official robes, sitting upright with a solemn and simple background. Through the portrayal of the figure and the creation of space, the painting conveys the dignity of the family and the concept of inheritance. In Gao Fenghan's Self-Portrait, the painter leans against a rock on a cliff, gazing at pine trees, the sea, and white cranes below. Pines symbolize perseverance, while solitary cranes represent purity and transcendence—through the combination of these imagery, the painting expresses the painter's unyielding character and detached state of mind. The aesthetic imagery of portraiture is also reflected in the exploration and expression of the subject's spiritual world. By meticulously depicting the demeanor, posture, and expression of figures, painters reveal their personality, emotions, and spiritual temperament, allowing viewers to perceive the inner world through the canvas. For instance, Portrait of Wang Shizhen Releasing a Silver Pheasant (Wang Shizhen Fang Xian Tu) (Figure 5) by Yu Zhiding (1647-1716) is a portrait created in his later years, depicting the scene where Wang Shizhen, having lived in the capital for a long time and longing for his hometown, releases a silver pheasant from its cage. The painting adopts a slightly bird's-eye view to enhance the depth of the scene; the depiction of trees, pavilions, and distant mountains creates a serene atmosphere, while the white pheasant spreading its wings toward the distance symbolizes the subject's homesickness.



Figure 5. [Qing Dynasty] Yu Zhiding, Portrait of Wang Shizhen Releasing a Silver Pheasant (Wang Shizhen Fang Xian Tu), Paper, 26.1cm×110.7cm, National Palace Museum.

5. Conclusion

The core of this thesis lies in taking the artwork schema as the entry point to analyze the expression logic of imagery in paintings. What is depicted in the paintings is not merely the external appearance of the portrait subject, but more importantly, it is necessary to explore in depth the metaphorical and symbolic connotations contained therein. Tracing back to the origin of human art, both Chinese and Western art recorded life scenes through concrete and objective images, with many commonalities in expressive forms. However, with the extension of their respective cultural contexts, due to differences in life experiences and cultural orientations in terms of philosophical concepts, religious beliefs, and scientific cognition, Chinese and Western painting have gradually embarked on distinct developmental paths.

Deeply influenced by Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, Chinese painting takes "harmony between humans and nature" (tian ren he yi) as its ultimate pursuit, with "the unity of form and spirit" (xing shen jian bei) forming the

creative core, and imagery expression serving as the key that runs through it. Whether in figure, landscape, or flower-and-bird themes, imagery carries multiple meanings: it encompasses both the concrete, phenomenal "qi" (implement) and the intangible, metaphysical "Tao" (the underlying cosmic principle). The pursuit of Chinese painting is not the painting itself, but a state of mind—a cultural experience of truth, goodness, and beauty. Ultimately, aesthetic and artistic creation boils down to the creation of imagery.

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